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The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and '40s America and Mexico

Leonard Folgarait and Anthony Lee were both students of T.J. Clark; they both explore the relationship between the state and mural painters (in Mexico and America respectively); and they both supply sophisticated iconographic readings of the works in question in an attempt to determine their ideological significance vis-à-vis the social systems in which they were produced. Yet here the similarities end. Despite these apparent points of contact they pursue what are ultimately different methodological agendas that produce conflicting interpretations of the relationship between the state, radical artists, and the practice of mural painting. I will argue that these differences are as much theoretical as they are empirical, as much a product of the respective interpretative frameworks used as the result of fundamental differences between the nature of the American and Mexican states, and their respective patronage of mural painting in the 1930s and 40s. Whilst both writers claim to be working within the remit of a social history of art, Folgarait's rigid adherence to the theoretical work of Nicos Poulantzas and Michel Foucault produces a somewhat deterministic account of the relationship between the Mexican state and mural painting that largely negates any meaningful concept of human agency. Such overt theoreticism stands in stark contrast to Lee's study which instead pays close attention to the changing constellation of class forces in San Francisco as the context in which to read the shifting fortunes of radical mural artists during the politically turbulent years of the Depression.

Folgarait rightly begins with a political analysis of the Mexican Revolution. In exploring the relationship between the uprising of 1910 and the transfer of power from the autocratic Porfirio Díaz to Francisco Madero in 1911, and the subsequent presidencies of Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Eliás Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas, Folgarait writes that Mexico 'was living a post-Revolutionary reality and using Revolutionary rhetoric to express it, using a Revolutionary culture as a voice for post-Revolutionary society' (p. 6). The Revolution was the catalyst for the emergence of a modern capitalist state in Mexico, and as such the country remained 'a land of cheap labour, where no worker could claim ownership of the means of

production and toiled only to fatten the profit margins and dividends of usually absent owners' (p.120). In accordance with recent scholarship Folgarait argues that the Revolution ultimately benefited those who became the new elite during the post-Revolution. Political power remained centralised, although a regular change of leaders by election was presented as a greater sign of democracy. Economic power was shifted, but only away from an ageing Porfirian aristocracy to an opportunistic middle-class, and although removed from centre stage, capitalists returned to Mexico during 1920-4.¹ After providing this succinct analysis of the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent consolidation of bourgeois control over the state Folgarait then moves on to explore how successive post-Revolutionary governments 'would appropriate and engage, among other means of mass public rhetoric, large wall-paintings as advertisements for [their] policies' (p. 7). To do this he concentrates principally upon Rivera's History of Mexico (1929-30, 1934-35) in the National Palace and Siqueiros' Portrait of the Bourgeoisie (1939-40) in the headquarters of the Mexican Electrician's Union, although he also engages with certain earlier murals including Orozco's at the National Preparatory School (1923-26) and Rivera's at the Secretariat of Public Education (1923-29), all in Mexico City.

Folgarait's adherence to Poulantzas' theoretical work on the nature of the capitalist state is most explicit when he attempts to 'make a rough and purposefully simplified equivalence' (p. 121) between this theory and the composition/style/content of Rivera's National Palace stairway mural. For Folgarait the compressed 'massing together of portraits of historical players' (p. 121) who were pivotal in the making of modern Mexico deliberately emphasises a juridical relationship over and above any economic or political one, thereby eliding the actual realities of class domination that characterised the Calles regime, the period during which the mural was commissioned, conceived, and largely completed. This is a promising approach that takes Poulantzas' insights into how the capitalist state 'presents itself as embodying the general interest of the whole of society' by representing the 'people' not as 'agents of production distributed in social classes, but as an accumulation of individual citizens',² equal in their relation to the abstract and formal laws of the juridical system, to determine the ideological content of Rivera's mural. History is here reduced to an accumulation of portraits so that 'the disembodiment of the real, three-

dimensional, charismatic qualities of individuals and events into ciphers occupying a unified plane was being practised in politics and in art' (p. 117). Yet the theoretical implications of Poulantzas' work go far deeper than this 'simplified equivalence' to circumscribe the meanings that Folgarait finds in the other murals he analyses, and to understand the problematic implications of this we need to take a closer look at this theoretical model of the state.

Poulantzas' *Political Power and Social Classes* was published in France in 1968, but because it was not translated until 1973, his ideas on the nature of the capitalist state first emerged in English through his polemic with Ralph Miliband in *New Left Review* in the early 1970s.³ Poulantzas' critique of Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* was epistemological and centred upon the question of method.⁴ Writing from a structuralist perspective indebted to Louis Althusser, Poulantzas attacked Miliband for reducing the state and social classes to the 'inter-personal relations' of their constituents, so that 'the agents of a social formation, "men", are not considered the bearers of objective instances (as they are for Marx) but as the genetic principle of the level of the social whole'.⁵ Whilst Miliband later accepted these criticisms, he rightly pointed to the faults of what he termed 'hyperstructuralism': that 'which deprives "agents" of any freedom of choice and manoeuvre and turns them into "bearers" of objective forces which they are unable to affect'.⁶ By emphasising the structural dimension of the state, determined by the nature and requirements of the mode of production, Poulantzas seems to pass over the very specifics of class struggle, implicitly submitting the contingency of these forces to the more general structural necessities of capital accumulation. So if Miliband remained an 'instrumentalist' by virtue of his emphasis upon how the bourgeoisie 'almost physically "corners" the state',⁷ Poulantzas' account of the relative autonomy of the state is then similarly bound by a tendency to reduce those who run it to 'the merest functionaries and executants of policies imposed upon them by "the system"'.⁸ This type of sociological functionalism has much in common with the kind of Foucauldian project that attempts 'to create a history of the modes by which our culture, human beings are made into subjects',⁹ and Folgarait is clearly indebted to both.¹⁰

By effectively collapsing state and capital, and reducing the concept of class to ‘a genre of discourse’ (p. 12), Folgarait is precluded from making any meaningful distinction between the different post-Revolutionary governments that succeeded Obregón’s presidency, so that the radical pro-labour government of the socialist-agrarian Cárdenas becomes practically indistinguishable from the conservative and anti-labour government of Calles that preceded it. Likewise, the concept of artistic agency and its complicated relation to state patronage is elided at the outset by the assertion that ‘in the end there can be no autonomy between agents acting with purpose in the same arena’ (p.26).¹¹ From then on it simply becomes a matter of reading the imperatives of state ideology into the various murals sponsored by successive post-Revolutionary governments. As a consequence Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros become unreflexive agents of counter-revolution, the political differences between the three, and between them and the post-Revolutionary governments that patronised them, being largely insignificant.¹² Thus Siqueiros’ Portrait of the Bourgeoisie, produced under the more left-leaning presidency of Cárdenas, in a union headquarters rather than a government building, represents just more of the same. If the ideological content of Rivera’s National Palace mural fulfils the propagandistic requirements of the post-Revolutionary state in its emphasis upon abstract juridical relations of equality over and above existing exploitative relations of production, Siqueiros’ mural uncritically gives visual form to the process whereby ‘workers [were] pulled irresistibly into a final and static social slot, and subjected to the hub of official power’ (p. 189). Meaning is consumed rather than produced, and the ambivalent figure of the revolutionary on the final wall of the mural becomes a metaphor for the fate of labour in the late 1930s, ‘changed from a participant into a spectator of national economics and politics’ (p. 189). The fact that Siqueiros was a staunch Stalinist and Rivera had already been labelled as a Trotskyist by 1929 is seemingly irrelevant as political differences are swept aside.

Folgarait’s theoretical model can only account for these political transformations - and the state sponsored murals that, for him, passively register them - as emanating pure and simply from the structural requirements of the capitalist mode of production, now fully restored after the turbulent years of the Revolution. Politicians become the functionaries, and artists the propagandists, of policies that necessarily served the

longterm processes of capital accumulation. Yet this conflation of state and capital, and the subsequent emphasis upon the state as the exclusive source of all power effaces the actualities of real class conflict - the everyday struggles of Mexican workers and peasants who actively fought for the concessions made to them in the late 1930s. Furthermore, such an analysis necessarily sidelines the ways in which the seemingly monolithic and undialectical meanings ascribed to the murals may have been negotiated by the audiences that viewed them. Despite his claims to the contrary, Folgarait never adequately addresses this problem, rarely examining how the murals were looked at, talked about, attacked, defended, or engaged with. And when he does the details only seem to contradict his larger thesis. Thus, despite the unequivocal press reaction to Orozco's mural cycle in the National Preparatory School - the viewer would respond with 'an anarchistic fury if he is penniless or, if wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright' (p.62) - and the fact that they became a significant focal point for struggle between conservative and Communist students, any critical reading is undercut by the centrality of *The Trench*, which in its reference to revolutionary resurrection 'participates in the mythology of the post-revolution' (p.68). Likewise, the radical meaning of Rivera's work in the Secretariat of Public Education, in particular *Entrance into the Mine and Exit from the Mine*, may have been blunted by the removal of the revolutionary poem by Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz on the orders of José Vasconcelos, Obregón's Secretary for Public Education, yet these panels still remain a powerful visual statement against the abject humiliation of the Mexican working-class under capitalism. This is not to challenge the scale of the propaganda campaign launched by Vasconcelos, nor the necessity of the visual in a largely illiterate society, but merely to reassert the importance of human agency and experience in the production of meaning.¹³

For Folgarait the possibilities for artists north of the border to articulate a radical ideological position in opposition to the propagandistic requirements of a New Deal government attempting to stave off the perceived possibility of revolution during those critical years after the stock market crash of 1929 were, likewise, close to nothing. In his introduction he situates the Mexican murals within the global context of the interwar period and the emergence of strongly nationalistic state-sponsored cultural programs in Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Seemingly contradicting the totalising claims that he later goes on to make for the ideological content of the murals he looks at, he begins with the assertion that ‘the Mexicans were less tied to direct orders given by the national leader, worked more through ministerial intermediaries, and at times developed a message that was either cynical as to its subject matter or more directly critical’ (p. 4). Folgarait’s specific interpretation of the federal art projects in Depression America is clearly signalled by the fact that his only reference to them is Jonathan Harris’ *Federal Art and National Culture*.¹⁴ This study also employs the theoretical armoury of Althusser, Poulantzas, and Foucault to assimilate all government funded art to the propagandistic exigencies of the state, thereby foreclosing the possibility of any form of resistance, a space from which to create oppositional meanings that could potentially radicalise a working class audience.¹⁵ It is to Lee’s credit that he points to the fractures in such a simplistic equation, looking at an important moment when state sponsored art in the United States during the period of the New Deal conveyed political meanings beyond those sanctioned by government.

Here, mural painting becomes the contested site of competing claims made for it by different fractions of San Francisco’s patron class and radical Californian artists wishing to produce agitational propaganda for an insurgent working class whose militant strike action had brought local industry to a standstill. Although Lee’s account begins in 1915 with the murals produced for the San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exhibition (PPIE), these are clearly the decorative counterpoint to the main focus of his book: Rivera’s San Francisco mural commissions of the early 1930s and their subsequent influence upon the radical community of local artists who in 1934 had successfully secured government patronage from the newly created Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) to decorate the Coit Tower. This was the first of the New Deal federal art projects inaugurated during the harsh years of the Depression, when artists were still reeling from the collapse of the art market. Unlike Folgarait, Lee is ‘little concerned with politics when it appears in art as a vague tendency or lyrical effect, still less with it as an unconscious act or as a structuring but largely untheorised ideological point of view’, for this was the moment ‘when painting and politics could have a close, explicit relationship; when art - public art, no less - could pursue socially and politically revolutionary ambitions; and when painters could think

of themselves as workers who could make art part of a momentous historical transformation' (p. xviii).

This transformation from a public art of decoration, for Lee the substitute for public services, to a public art that was radically agitational, began with the arrival of Rivera in 1930. Courted by the US ambassador, Dwight Morrow, during a period when the cultural and political relations between Mexico and the US were in decline - Calles had threatened to expropriate American investments south of the border - Rivera's mural commissions in San Francisco were an attempt at 'solidifying a relationship between the US and Mexico that would secure and extend the investments of the industrialists that employed him' (p.56). Despite the seemingly unpropitious circumstances of their commission, the resulting *Allegory of California in the City Lunch Club* and *Making a Fresco: Showing the Building of a City in the San Francisco Art Institute*, both painted in 1931, nevertheless suggested a model of a politically engaged mural practice for local artists, many of whom had assisted him in his work. The first broke with the allegorical tradition of San Francisco mural painting to depict California's agricultural abundance as the product of intensive capitalist farming methods rather than 'some fantasy of an Edenic, unspoiled paradise' (p. 86), and the second, in the huge central figure of the skilled workman, provided the city with its first image for and about organised labour. Due to its location the latter mural was far more accessible to the public and the preferred reading of it by Rivera's corporate patrons was undercut by that of a working class audience with a newly found leisure time in the wake of the 1929 crash. They invested the mural with different meanings that were somewhat critical of the artist's wealthy donors. Rivera may have set the precedent for a radical public art, yet San Francisco's radical community of artists were still faced with the problem of where to paint, a problem that was solved in 1934 with the creation of the PWAP through which they received federal funds to decorate the Coit Tower.

Whilst Lee tracks the relationship between capital and mural painting through different fractions of San Francisco's business class - as direct patron with Rivera and then as intermediary for state sponsorship with the Coit Tower commission - he nevertheless rejects the top-down analysis of Folgarait to demonstrate the extent to

which mural painting remained a contested site of negotiation, shaped by the changing balance of class forces in the city. When Rivera arrived in San Francisco the Communist Party was still in relative disarray and the local workforce split along industrial/agricultural lines which only tended to reinforce ethnic divisions. By the time of the Coit Tower commission, however, the new Communist district organiser Sam Darcy had successfully integrated the various ethnic workers into relatively cohesive blocks and had broken with the ultra-leftist national line to pursue a united front agenda. This liberalisation of the local Communist Party coincided with Harry Bridges' radicalisation of the local International Longshoremen's Association, dormant since 1919, and it was their working relationship that helped create the political conditions for the Big Strike of 1934. If Rivera's emphasis upon labour in his murals depicting local history and industry had suggested a transgressive potential for public art in San Francisco, then the longshoremen's strike would shift it even further from its decorative origins at the PPIE of 1915.

The collective response of the Coit Tower artists was far from uniform, however, and they reacted in different ways to the pitched battles between striking workers and the National Guard in the bay area, clearly visible from the vantage point of the tower. Lee's methodology, unlike that of Folgarait, acknowledges the role of human agency in the production of meaning and can therefore account for ideological differences in the Coit Tower murals. Whilst certain artists fulfilled the brief imposed by PWAP committee for district 15 - composed of the old guard of local industrialists determined to break any link between mural painting and leftist politics - and painted San Francisco genre scenes, landscapes and seascapes of the bay region that were conspicuous for the absence of any references to the Big Strike, their more radical colleagues infused their work with allusions to the conflict on the waterfront. Inside the tower Victor Arnautoff, Bernard Zakheim, William Hesthal, Ralph Stackpole, and Clifford Wright signalled their solidarity with the striking workers via various iconographic details - radical literature, massed racially integrated workers, empty docks, disruption to city activities etc.- and an aesthetic that unmistakably recalled Rivera, whilst outside they joined demonstrations, marched with the strikers, and produced agitprop graphic work. This was the high point of artistic radicalism, 'the moment when their work entered into meaningful dialogue with widespread working-

class dissent' (p.xix), and the local magnates in District 15 reacted accordingly, whitewashing an objectionable panel in Wright's mural, blackening the windows, and closing the tower to artists and public with the erection of police barricades.

This censoring of the Coit Tower murals suggests that these artists successfully linked their murals, in a vivid and concrete way, to an actual moment of organised conflict. Yet whilst the tower was closed the murals within were being reinterpreted for its eventual reopening, and were subsequently subsumed within a decorative aesthetics that gave them a lineage back to the PPIE - more Puvis de Chavannes than Rivera. However, according to Lee, District 15 need not have bothered for 'although the developing vocabulary of artistic radicalism paralleled that of radical labour, the political and practical concerns of labour failed to include art' (p. 161), and the debates around these murals never went beyond the traditional discussants of public art. The opportunity to build upon the experience of the Coit Tower murals was quickly stifled by the collapse of the Darcy-Bridges alliance in the wake of the defeated Big Strike, and the subsequent adoption of the Popular Front in the summer of 1935 which shifted many activists from the Communist Party into support for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party at the same time as revelations about the Moscow Show Trials turned others towards Trotskyism. When Rivera returned in 1940 to paint his Pan American Unity mural at the Golden Gate International Exposition - the New Deal successor to the PPIE - the Communist Party had been further fractured by the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the pretence that there was a working class public ready to consume a leftist public mural art had all but evaporated. Almost as an epilogue, Lee finishes with Anton Refregier's twenty-seven panel mural cycle at the Rincon Annex Post Office, a Treasury Section commission that had been suspended due to the war, and then taken up again between 1946 and 48. Refregier was a Communist who had weathered the political vicissitudes of the 1930s, and his failed attempt at reviving the radical history painting of the 1930s serves as the final proof that the institutional, artistic, and political ingredients that had enabled the production of the Coit Tower murals had, by then, long since passed.

Lee's excellent study of the close relationship between mural painting and radical politics in San Francisco discards the cosy over-arching theoretical certainties of

Folgarait (and Harris) for the exigencies of a far messier and more complex history of active struggle - one in which class represents more than just a term of discourse. Lee fulfils his declared intention of demonstrating 'the inaccuracy of our received notion of "1930s public art" as issuing suddenly from an agency of the federal government and the efforts of reformist Democrats' (p.128), to argue instead that the New Deal programs intensified local battles over the perceived uses and abuses of public art. My only reservation to Lee's welcome contribution to the analysis of the complex relationship between the state and mural painting under the New Deal concerns his claims for Californian exceptionalism. The San Francisco Big Strike was just one of four important and violent strikes of that year - there were others by workers at the Electric Auto-Lite Company in Toledo, Ohio; by truckers' in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and by textile workers along the East Coast. What they had in common was the fact that they all involved unorganised workers encouraged by Section 7a of Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act to move against their powerful antiunion employers.¹⁶ It would be interesting to see if radical mural painters also had a part to play in these confrontations, whether this be real or imaginary. And although the subsequent WPA years seem to be 'a period of relative homogeneity, in the murals' iconography and style and in their general ideological tone' (p.161), there were nevertheless continuing battles over censorship as radical artists continued to challenge the restrictive administrative prescriptions for federal art. This is a story that has yet to be properly told.

¹ An argument made with particular reference to Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), and John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987).

² Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (NLB, London, 1973), p. 123.

³ See Nicos Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', *New Left Review*, no. 58, Nov/Dec 1969, pp. 67-78, and Ralph Miliband, 'The Capitalist State: Reply to Nicos Poulantzas', *New Left Review*, no. 59, Jan/Feb 1970, pp. 53-60, both reprinted in Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (Fontana, Suffolk, 1972), pp. 238-262.

⁴ Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1969).

⁵ Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', p. 70.

⁶ Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), p. 73.

⁷ Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', p. 74.

⁸ Miliband, 'The Capitalist State: Reply to Nicos Poulantzas', p. 57. For an attempt at extending the somewhat limiting 'relative autonomy' formulation of Poulantzas via an alternative framework that goes further in recognising the specificity of the state, while still acknowledging the determinant role of the relations production, thereby maintaining the valuable conceptual power of Marxism to determine the basic dynamics of a particular social formation, see Fred Block, 'The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State', *Socialist Revolution*, vol. 7, no. 3, May 1977, pp. 6-28, and 'Beyond Relative Autonomy: State Managers as Historical Subjects', *Socialist Register*, 1980, pp. 227-242. For an analysis of the Mexican Revolution that challenges the more recent state-centred studies of

social revolutions, in particular the work of Theda Skocpol, see Alan Knight, 'Social Revolution: A Latin American Perspective', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1990, pp. 175-202.

⁹ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1982), p. 208.

¹⁰ See Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution*, fn. 34, p. 207, for an acknowledgement of this debt to Foucault.

¹¹ Whilst Folgarait does at least acknowledge Miliband's critique of Poulantzas with a reference to his *Class Power and State Power* (Verso, London, 1983), in fn. 84, p. 225, Poulantzas' work on the nature of the capitalist state is otherwise used uncritically in the text.

¹² There is a continuity here with his earlier work such as when he states in his *So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' 'The March of Humanity' and Mexican Revolutionary Politics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987), p. 33, 'Neither in this nor in later chapters will I consider the subjective motives of the artist in the planning and execution of the mural. Rather, his work on the March and the nature of the patronage he worked under are explained as the mechanics by which the dominant ideology of the Mexican regime reproduced itself, through the making of a very particular representation of that very ideology', and in his earlier work on Rivera's History of Mexico, 'Revolution as Ritual: Diego Rivera's National Palace Mural', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, fn. 5, p. 31, 'This essay does not consider the role of the artist in its deliberations, partly for lack of space, but mostly for reasons of methodology. I want to explain the look and content of the mural as produced by extra-personal forces'.

¹³ For an excellent defence of the category of human agency against the extreme anti-humanism that is characteristic of both structuralism and poststructuralism, epitomised in turn by Althusser and Foucault, see Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987). Whilst Folgarait quotes this text on the subject of ideology (p. 11), he seemingly passes over the chapters on agency and structure.

¹⁴ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁵ For an incisive critique of Harris see Andrew Hemingway, 'Middlebrow: For and Against', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 166-176.

¹⁶ In exchange for their exemption from the antitrust laws under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, industry had grudgingly accepted Section 7a, which accorded employees the right to organise and bargain collectively, and the freedom to join a labour organisation.