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The Slow Fuse of the Revolutionary Mural: Diego Rivera, Historical Revisionism and Poststructuralism¹

Are the revolutionary Mexican paintings, the most vital and imposing art produced on this continent in the twentieth century, works pervaded by a sincere hatred of oppression and sympathy with the masses, to be interpreted then as politically reactionary?²

Diego Rivera was the foremost muralist in the period after the “armed phase” of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. Whilst he was known as one of *los tres grandes* (the big three) his output in terms of over six thousand painted square metres on walls in key public spaces was far greater than that of the elder José Clemente Orozco, or the younger David Alfaro Siqueiros – the other two members of this triumvirate. Indeed, it could be argued that in the interwar period he was the most important and recognised artist in the Americas, and eclipsed only by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso in Europe. Such a case is supported by the fact that he was awarded only the second one-person exhibition at the newly opened Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in late 1931; the first being given to Matisse, the third to Picasso. It was whilst there to promote his retrospective, which broke attendance records, that Rivera would broker the contracts for subsequent major corporate murals in the United States that would then further consolidate his reputation across the continent. Yet with the onset of the Cold War, and the ratcheting up of anti-communism in the United States, Rivera’s star waned, as did that of social realism more generally with the consolidation of modernist abstraction; MoMA playing a leading role as elite cultural tastemaker in this regard. Indeed, if Rivera is known at all nowadays, it is invariably as the husband of Frida Kahlo whose star has correspondingly risen in the wake of second generation feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, the heady mix of which has catapulted her reputation into the stratosphere.³ The sold-out exhibition of Kahlo’s recently discovered wardrobe at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in late 2018 being symptomatic of this shift in status.

Rivera’s reputation has fared little better within the scholarly literature in the intervening period. The first accounts of *los tres grandes* championed their differing and distinct commitments to Marxism and the corresponding socialist credentials of their murals. Such a reading was predicated upon an essential belief in the fact that the Mexican Revolution constituted a broad, popular and violent struggle to overthrow an autocratic pre-revolutionary Porfirian regime – installed with United States backing in 1876 – and usher in a government that represented the political and economic interests of the peasantry and an emergent urban working-class. Yet this particular reading of the Mexican Revolution has

¹ Terry Smith uses this term to describe Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* fresco series: “... an ideological time bomb, a revolutionary mural with a slow fuse”. Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 235.

² Meyer Schapiro, “The Patrons of Revolutionary Art”, in: *Marxist Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 3, October-December 1937, p. 464.

³ See Peter Wollen, “Fridamania”, in: *New Left Review* 22, July-August 2003, pp. 119–130.

been challenged since the late 1960s in an ever-expanding “revisionist” literature about the revolution and its impact upon postrevolutionary society. It is these new accounts that downplay the subaltern impact upon the revolutionary process to instead focus upon the bourgeois project of building a modern and centralised Mexican state that underpin more recent accounts of Mexican muralism. And here I am thinking in particular about Leonard Folgarait’s *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order*, and Mary K. Coffey’s *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*, published in 1998 and 2013 respectively.⁴ The references to art being of a “new order” in the postrevolutionary period of 1920–40 in the first book, or as constituting an “official culture” in the period afterwards in the second, clearly align these projects to the revisionist shift in the more recent historiography on the subject of the Mexican Revolution, and they accordingly relegate the murals to the category of state propaganda.⁵

The historian Alan Knight links this revisionist historiography of the revolution to the political repression of 1968 and specifically the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City when government forces fired upon and killed hundreds of student protesters assembled in Plaza de las Tres Culturas just ten days before the opening ceremony of the Mexican Olympics.⁶ As he says: “the standard interpretation of the Revolution, according to which the people’s will had been institutionalised in the government, made historical explanation of the repression impossible. For some young scholars the most tempting explanation was to argue [...] that the Revolution had been a ‘trick on the people’”.⁷ And for Knight this was part of a broader retreat from orthodox Marxism within Mexico in this period in terms of both theory and practice.⁸ Likewise, the theoretical anti-humanism and emphasis upon the discursive that is a marked component of both Folgarait’s and Coffey’s analyses of Mexican muralism can also be traced to 1968, more specifically the May events in France. For if the combined student and working-class action that brought Paris and other parts of the country to a standstill was duly crushed, or dispersed, then these radical impulses found a more durable expression in developments in contemporary French theory. As Perry Anderson makes clear: “structuralism proper [...] passed through the ordeal of May and re-

⁴ Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; and Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*, Durham, North Carolina, and London: Duke University Press, 2013.

⁵ For a longer and more sustained analysis of Folgarait’s book see Warren Carter, “Painting the Revolution: State Politics and Ideology in Mexican Muralism”, in: *Third Text* vol. 28, no. 3, May 2014, pp. 282–291. Examples of the revisionist literature used by Folgarait and Coffey include: Ramón Ruíz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1911–1924*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1980; Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución Mexicana*, Mexico City: Era, 1973; Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo*, Mexico City: Era, 1975; and Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución: Mexico’s Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2000.

⁶ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France”, in: *Past and Present* 134, February 1992, p. 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

emerged phoenix-like on the other side – extenuated and modulated”.⁹ If structuralism was sympathetic to Marxism, at least in its Althusserian manifestations, then poststructuralism was, by contrast, resolutely anti-Marxist; emphasised the discursive over and above the ideological; and was even more vociferously anti-humanist – these themes being exemplified particularly in the work of Michel Foucault. And it is these theoretical shifts, combined with the turn to a revisionist literature, that underpin the analytical framework of Folgarait’s and Coffey’s readings of Mexican muralism, if to different degrees.

What I want to do here is to plot the links between the revisionist historiography of the Mexican Revolution and – what David Craven has termed as – the “revisionist” literature on the Mexican murals, as well as the theoretical arguments that underpin both, before making the case for what I want to call a “post-revisionist” reading of the art.¹⁰ In doing so I want to restore the concept of human agency to the production of meaning by emphasising the often contingent nature of the revolutionary process and thereby clear a space for a radical reading of the art outside of the hegemonic project of state building on the part of a purportedly united bourgeoisie.¹¹ This was done as early as 1924 when Rivera’s critical champion, biographer, and friend, Bertram D. Wolfe, wrote an article titled: “Art and Revolution in Mexico”, published in the pages of *The Nation*.¹² He had helped to found the Communist Party of the United States of America in 1919 and during the next decade he was one of its leading intellectuals before he was eventually expelled in 1929, the same year as Rivera. Wolfe’s analysis of both the Mexican Revolution and the art of Rivera – the only artist he singled out for special mention – was sophisticated and nuanced. He described the revolution as “a very patchy and unsystematic affair”, with the government that it threw up as “a political power representing not a single class but an uncertain balance of power between the partially awakened workers and peasants on the one hand and the influence of foreign capital, especially that of the United States, on the other”.¹³ Declaring that “only in the work of the philosopher, the artist, and the poet have the effects of the revolution assumed system and unity”, he then claimed that “Rivera paints only for the Revolutionary Government, or rather for the more revolutionary departments of the Government, for [...] the Government is not a unit”.¹⁴

As Wolfe suggests, there were in fact three revolutions involving a complex interplay of competing class interests. The first was the peasant revolt led by Emiliano Zapata in the

⁹ Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 39.

¹⁰ David Craven, “Lineages of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940)”, in: *Third Text* vol. 28, no. 3, May 2014, pp. 223–234.

¹¹ For a preliminary attempt to do this in relation to certain murals produced by all of *los tres grandes*, in both Mexico and the United States, see Warren Carter, “Mexican Muralism Reconsidered”, in: *Art after Empire: From Colonialism to Globalisation*, Ed. Warren Carter, Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with The Open University, 2018, pp. 59–97.

¹² Bertram D. Wolfe, “Art and Revolution in Mexico”, in: *The Nation* vol. 119, no. 3086, 27 August 1934, pp. 207–208.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 207.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 208.

south and supported by the forces of Pancho Villa in the north. Mobilising guerrilla insurgency, they advocated – and implemented in the state of Morelos – a radical redistribution of land. It was this component of the revolution that provided the impetus for agrarian reform under the more progressive regime of Lázaro Cárdenas from the mid-1930s onwards. The second was the incipient proletarian revolution by urban workers in the modern factories with its power channelled through national self-governing unions and their armed “red battalions”. And lastly, there was the centralising and modernising bourgeois revolution of the enlightened middle class that championed constitutional reform under the banner of Mexican nationalism.¹⁵ As John Mason Hart has convincingly argued, the struggle for power between these contending classes was significantly shaped by the government of the United States, which intervened whenever it could to protect its corporate interests in Mexico. So much so in fact that he describes the Mexican Revolution as “the first Third World uprising against American economic penetration and control”.¹⁶

Knight has pointed out that this was similar to the interpretation of the revolution that was first penned by the revolutionary victors in Mexico, and sympathetic observers in the United States. Writers like Frank Tannenbaum gave substance to the idea of a popular nationalist revolution that emanated from the legitimate egalitarian hopes of a people, especially the agrarian poor, who were doubly exploited by the Porfirian elite at home, and the United States north of the border.¹⁷ These early histories of the revolution were then followed by those produced by a second generation of scholars in both Mexico and the United States in the 1950s. According to Knight these academic interpretations remained within the broad parameters of the existing orthodoxy because they “tended to accept the historical – not the mythical – Revolution as a popular, progressive, nationalist movement directed against an exploitative old regime”.¹⁸ In the period post-1968 there was a third generation of scholarship, and this is the one that Knight labels as revisionist, and for him they share a certain kinship – or what he describes in Weberian terms as “an elective affinity”. These include: 1) a critical stance in relation to the idea that the revolution was a popular, progressive or egalitarian movement; 2) the corresponding idea that it was in fact elites who were the true makers of the revolution with the masses reduced to being at best passive spectators; 3) an emphasis on the corrupt and self-serving nature of the revolutionaries themselves; 4) a stress on the revolution as a political undertaking rather than a social transformation; 5)

¹⁵ See Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹⁶ John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1989, p. 18.

¹⁷ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution”, p. 163. See Frank Tannenbaum, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution*, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1929; and Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: Mexico after 1910*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966 [1933].

¹⁸ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution”, p. 164. See Stanley R. Ross, *Francisco I. Madero: Apostle of Mexican Democracy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1955; and Charles C. Cumberland, *The Mexican Revolution: Genesis under Madero*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1952.

the insistence that the revolution was not in fact a genuine “social” revolution at all; and 6) a corresponding emphasis on historical continuity over historical rupture.¹⁹

As Coffey has pointed out in her book, the commentaries on Mexican muralism follow a similar trajectory. Contemporary chroniclers like Wolfe, Jean Charlot and Anita Brenner credited the Mexican mural renaissance with converting “the violent energies unleashed by the revolution into an ethical impulse to ‘socialise artistic expression’ and to place art in the service of building a new, more equitable society”.²⁰ These were followed by a second generation of academic scholars such as Laurence Hurlburt, Desmond Rochfort, and Raquel Tibol who, likewise, emphasised the radical efficacy of the murals in agitating for further revolutionary change.²¹ And, as with the historiography of the Mexican Revolution, there has been, what Coffey describes as, a post-1968 crystallisation of “a less heroic view” in which “mural art is neither revolutionary nor populist but rather a cultural technique in the formation of the postrevolutionary state and its authoritarian ruling party”.²² Coffey credits this critical reading to the work of Octavio Paz who broke with the ruling regime in 1968 after Tlatelolco massacre.²³ And whilst Coffey cites slight differences between her approach and that of Folgarait, it is quite clear that she includes his work within this later tendency alongside her own. She also traces this critical position right back to the 1930s when Siqueiros and other communists openly attacked Rivera for his political and economic interests i.e. his Trotskyism and his corporate commissions in the United States respectively.²⁴

It is clear that the “elective affinities” that Knight finds in the revisionist literature on the Mexican Revolution underpin this revisionist literature on Mexican muralism. For Folgarait, during the period from 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 Elías Calles, and Cárdenas, 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”.²⁵ The revolution was the catalyst for the emergence of a modern capitalist state in Mexico, and as such the

¹⁹ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution”, p. 166.

²⁰ Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, p. 1. See Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times*: New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939; Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920–1925*, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1979 [1963]; and Anita Brenner, *Idols behind Alters: Modern Mexican Art and its Cultural Roots*, New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1967 [1929].

²¹ See Laurence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1989; Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*, San Francisco: Chronicle, 1993; and Raquel Tibol, *Arte y política: Diego Rivera*, Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1979.

²² Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, p. 1. It is worth pointing out here that Craven’s own book on Rivera came out a year before Folgarait’s one, yet it has a closer affinity with second “heroic” wave of scholarship on Mexican muralism than to the revisionist accounts that followed it, even if it is more overtly theoretical. See David Craven, *Diego Rivera: As Epic Modernist*, New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997.

²³ See Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican Art*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993.

²⁴ Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, pp. 1–2; and David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road”, in: *New Masses*, 29 May 1934, pp. 16–19.

²⁵ Leonard Folgarait, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

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”.²⁶ In accordance with the revisionist historiography of the revolution, Folgarait argues that it ultimately benefited those who became the new elite during the postrevolutionary period. 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 1920–24.²⁷

Underpinning this revisionist interpretation of the Mexican Revolution is a theoretical agenda that, as both Anderson and Knight point out, is part and parcel of the same moment. Folgarait’s analysis of the Mexican state is predicated upon the work of Nicos Poulantzas which, in its Althusserian influenced 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”.²⁸ Both were students of Louis Althusser, and both are key to Folgarait’s interpretive model in which politicians become the functionaries, and artists the propagandists, of policies that necessarily served the long-term processes of capitalist accumulation.²⁹ Yet Coffey’s commitment to Foucault, or more specifically his theory of governmentality, is more pronounced and, as I have focused upon Folgarait’s book elsewhere, I will deal more closely with her argument here.³⁰ If, in her earlier work, she had attempted to keep certain Marxist theories of the state – such as that of Poulantzas – and a Foucauldian theory of governmentality in some kind of productive tension, by the time of the publication of her book the scales had tipped firmly in favour of the latter.³¹ As she writes, in his work on governmentality Foucault “sought to examine the intersections of power and subject formation through what he called ‘the production of truth’”.³² This theoretical prism, predicated again on a revisionist literature of the Mexican Revolution, allows Coffey to follow Folgarait in making deeply instrumentalist readings of the murals.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in: *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Sussex: Harvester, 1982, p. 208. On the Althusserianism in Folgarait’s analysis see David Craven, “Recent Literature on Diego Rivera and Mexican Muralism”, in: *Latin American Research Review* vol. 36, no. 3, 2001, pp. 224–225; and for a similar discussion of the theoretical problems with such a model see Warren Carter, “Painting the Revolution”, pp. 283–285.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 282–291.

³¹ Mary K. Coffey, “Representation, Institutionalization, and the State: Marxist and Post-Structural Approaches to Mexican Muralism and the Popular”, in: *As Radical as Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century*, Eds. Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts, Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 67–103.

³² Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, p. 17.

The similarities between the two of them can be seen in their respective interpretations of Rivera's monumental *History of Mexico* mural painted in the National Palace in Mexico City in the period between 1929 and 1935. Folgarait uses Poulantzas most explicitly here when he makes "a rough and purposefully simplified equivalence" between this theory and the composition, style and content of the mural.³³ In this way the "massing together of historical players", in the upper registers of the main wall, emphasise a juridical relationship, over and above any economic or political one, to erase the class domination that characterised the Calles regime, the period in which the mural was largely produced [Ill. 1].³⁴ Similarly, for Coffey – and she references Folgarait here – when the viewer moves away from the relatively three-dimensional depiction of nearly life-size combatants at the base of the main wall, and the flattened montage of revolutionary leaders proffering their decrees above them, to the final floor to overlook the mural scheme as a whole, their stance "approximates that of the peasants shown facing the politicians as though reading their decrees".³⁵ For Coffey, "Rivera thereby forges an identification between the revolutionary popular classes and the postrevolutionary viewing subject", and "both are asked to leave behind armed struggle en route to becoming law-abiding citizens".³⁶ The conflation of the state and capital that informs this view of the revolution, and of the state and the artist that allows for such readings of the mural, assume that the postrevolutionary bourgeois government was the exclusive source of all power. In this way the actualities of real class conflict i.e. the everyday struggles of the Mexican peasants and workers who actually fought for the concessions made to them in terms of the redistribution of land in the late 1930s under Cárdenas, are simply written out of the picture.

Unlike Folgarait who deals with, what Knight has characterised as, the "formative" period of the revolution from 1920–40, Coffey is ostensibly interested in the "classic" period that followed it.³⁷ It was in these years that the development of "a federally subsidised and administered system of public museums dedicated to the fine arts, national and regional history, and the vast archaeological and ethnographic wealth produced by ancient and living indigenous groups", served as "a crucial mechanism for the instrumentalization of mural art" through which it was "incrementally incorporated into a governmental program for the codification, protection, and dissemination of

³³ Leonard Folgarait, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Mary K. Coffey, "State Ritual, Mass Politics, or Mythopoesis? The Many Modalities of Mexican Muralism, 1929–1950", in: *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910–1950*, Eds. Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini and Renato González Mello, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 349. A similar point is made by Folgarait in that viewers "'assume' the place of the peasants by virtue of the subliminal absorption of the viewer into figures facing the same direction and 'seeing' the same sights". Leonard Folgarait, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

³⁶ Mary K. Coffey, "State Ritual, Mass Politics, or Mythopoesis? The Many Modalities of Mexican Muralism, 1929–1950", p. 349.

³⁷ Alan Knight, "The Myth of the Mexican Revolution", in: *Past and Present* 209, November 2010, pp. 260–261.

national culture”.³⁸ Yet, whereas Folgarait actually makes the point that the first few years of mural production in the 1920s were not quite as administratively tight as they might have been later, Coffey actually draws her analysis back into this earlier “heroic phase” to argue “that insofar as mural art was complicit with the governmental agenda of the state, it was so from its very inception”.³⁹ This can be seen in her reading of Rivera’s vast mural scheme at the Ministry of Public Education, painted between 1923 and 1928. She sees his depiction of the diverse geographical areas of Mexico and its indigenous population as part of the same postrevolutionary drive to incorporate the Mexican Indian into a modern national culture, as exemplified by José Vasconcelos’ efforts at the Ministry of Education and those of Manuel Gamio in the Department of Anthropology – both of which are correctly characterised as being paternalistic, if not insidiously racist, in their attitude towards the Mexican Indian.⁴⁰ This Foucauldian emphasis elides the differences between Rivera’s project, what Alberto Híjar has correctly identified as an alternative form of dissident *indigenismo*, and the “official” concept of *mestizaje* promoted by Vasconcelos and Gamio which was exemplified in their description of teachers as *misioneros*.⁴¹

Craven characterises these revisionist interpretations as either structuralist or poststructuralist, depending on the extent to which they are indebted to either Althusserian or Foucauldian theoretical models. As such they “can only imagine the state, any state, in Cold War or totalitarian terms, as unrelievedly repressive and utterly inhospitable for a dissenting subaltern culture”.⁴² In this way the revisionist literature on the murals “denies the existence of any self-directed popular movement in Mexico”.⁴³ He picks out Coffey in particular for her “fundamentalist” invocation of Foucault with her claim that Mexican muralism was nothing more than a “disciplinary program for public education” by which viewers were merely shaped by the state.⁴⁴ Yet if, as the self-declared “post-revisionist” historian Alan Knight has argued, the postrevolutionary history of Mexico prior to 1940 “was not a simple saga of state-building and capital accumulation”, but more “a sustained struggle for the Revolutionary inheritance, the continuation of the armed revolution by other means” then the government could not necessarily control the outcome.⁴⁵ Unlike the revisionist interpretations of the revolution that essentially underpin Folgarait’s analysis of key murals done between 1920 and 1940, and Coffey’s in this period and afterwards, Knight’s interpretation of the revolution

³⁸ Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Mary K. Coffey, “The ‘Mexican Problem’: Nation and ‘Native’ in Mexican Muralism and Cultural Discourse”, in: *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, Eds. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden and Jonathan Weinberg, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2005, pp. 43–70.

⁴¹ Alberto Híjar, *Diego Rivera: Contribución política*, Mexico City: UNAM, 2004, pp. 37–72.

⁴² David Craven, “Lineages of the Mexican Revolution”, p. 225.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226; and Mary K. Coffey, “The ‘Mexican Problem’”, p. 70. For Craven’s more ambivalent assessment of Folgarait’s book see David Craven, “Recent Literature on Diego Rivera and Mexican Muralism”, pp. 223–229.

⁴⁵ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution”, p. 175.

opens up a space for resistant cultures that, whilst they may never have actually taken state power, nevertheless exerted certain pressures upon those that did. Was it not at least possible that these subaltern groups may have had some form of influence over the Mexican muralists in the period under discussion, or in turn that *los tres grandes* might have used and abused government patronage to produce murals that were intended to directly appeal to such an audience?

To prove that this was in fact the case I will proffer a different interpretation of Rivera's *History of Mexico* mural to that proposed by Folgarait and Coffey, a post-revisionist one that restores the concept of artistic agency to instead highlight the extent to which the murals produced in the postrevolutionary period could have acted as propaganda to the left of the bourgeois governments that commissioned them.⁴⁶ The iconography of the main wall, *From the Conquest to the Present* (1929-30), the first that the viewer sees when ascending the stairs, is framed within a depiction of the two major nineteenth-century invasions of Mexico: by the United States in 1847 in the upper part of the bay on the far right; and by the French in 1862–67 in the bay on the far left [Ill. 1]. In the upper portion of the three central bays, Rivera depicted, from left to right, *The Porfirian Era* (1876–1911), *The Legacy of Independence* (1810–1930) and *Reform and the Era of Benito Juárez* (1855–76). Although each section includes a cast of historical figures, Rivera does not focus upon anyone in particular. Instead, the Mexican people are themselves represented as the anonymous agents of social change, painted in what Craven has described as a “post-heroic” way.⁴⁷ A significant exception to this emphasis upon the non-hierarchical is the depiction of the revolutionary peasant leader Zapata, who appears twice in the central wall. Below the upper register of these five bays, Rivera painted a kaleidoscopic arrangement of scenes and figures from the conquest through to the early colonial period. Importantly, he neither idealised pre-Columbian Indians nor represented them as mere victims of history, and added scenes of human sacrifice as well as resistance to the invading Spanish forces between 1519 and 1521.

These themes tie the iconography of the main wall to the one on its right, which depicts *The Aztec World* (1929) [Ill. 2]. Here, the central iconographic feature is Quetzalcóatl – the important Meso-American mythological figure – in front of an Aztec pyramid. Arranged around him are a seated group of white-robed admirers as well as other figure groups that, taken together, depict the productivity and sophistication of pre-Columbian civilisation. Again, any idea that the pre-Hispanic world was some sort of Edenic paradise is offset by the inclusion of certain iconographic elements. On the left, Rivera painted a scene which shows figures from conquered tribes climbing a pyramid with loaded woven

⁴⁶ To see a film in which I also make this argument access the free course *Art and the Mexican Revolution* on OpenLearn and go to activity 1 at the end of section 4: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-the-mexican-revolution/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

⁴⁷ David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America*, New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 55.

baskets on their backs as tribute to an Aztec priest, and, below this, armed resistance to Aztec warriors dressed in military costumes. The conflict depicted here, and the ensuing one between the Aztecs and the Spanish conquistadores, is portended above in the detail of Quetzalcóatl fleeing eastwards on a huge feathered serpent. This provides another useful thematic link to the central wall in that, according to certain accounts, Quetzalcóatl vowed to return on the anniversary of his birth in 1519, the very year that Cortés arrived, thereby ironically facilitating a welcome reception for the Spanish invaders.

Directly opposite this depiction of the Aztec world is *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* (1934-35) [Ill. 3]. Employing a grid-like system, this wall is the most tendentious. In the bottom right corner it depicts: *campesinos*, or tenant farmers, labouring in a field under the watchful eyes of armed overseers; two murdered *campesinos* above them, one hanged for being a communist and the other for being an agrarian reformer; fascist-looking police suppressing a strike; above that a worker addressing a crowd; and at the top there is a pitched battle in the Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City on the east side of which the National Palace is sited. In the compartmentalised middle section, just left of centre, Rivera portrays the forces of reaction: top left, corporate barons in the United States hunched around a ticker tape; to their right, Calles surrounded by reactionary representatives of the army and the clergy; below them, corrupt journalists; and then, to their left, figures representing decadent high society. Socialist education is a key theme on this wall, with the two Kahlo sisters – Frida and Cristina – instructing children in the writings of Karl Marx at the bottom centre; a figure on the far left holding a copy of *Capital* and ridiculing a university lecturer espousing reactionary ideas; and, at the top in the centre, the figure of Marx holding a scroll with passages from the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*. He is instructing the triad of soldier, worker and peasant while pointing out of the mural to the left, over a utopian landscape with fully harmonised industrial and agricultural scenes.

The nationalism that shaped the Mexican Revolution was also an important component of Rivera's iconographic scheme. The passages on the top right and top left in *From the Conquest to the Present* that depict the nineteenth-century invasions by the United States and the French respectively are triangulated by the scenes of conquest at the bottom middle led by Cortés on his horse. Folgarait has rightly pointed out that the significance of these details is underscored by the fact that the departing eagles in both side scenes are repeated by the central motif of the eagle in the middle of the composition, an obvious nationalist reference to the Mexican flag, which also has an eagle at its centre.⁴⁸ The eagles all fly in the same direction, which strengthens this visual symmetry, and hence their iconographic and narrative importance. Immediately below the central eagle is the figure of Cortés on horseback in combat with an Aztec warrior, which, according to Rochfort, can be read as "the first great struggle against foreign domination".⁴⁹ This fight against

⁴⁸ Leonard Folgarait, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁴⁹ Desmond Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, London: Journeyman Press, 1987, p. 60.

colonialism is taken up again, above the eagle, in the figures of the two priests Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, nationalist leaders who played a pivotal role in the build-up to the overthrow of Spanish rule in 1821. The fight against imperialism is then brought up to the present with the depiction of Zapata, at the very top of the central bay, with the banner proclaiming “*Tierra y Libertad*” (land and liberty). This was Zapata’s revolutionary slogan and was adopted by the peasantry, who appropriated many of the great estates owned by landed interests in the United States after 1910.⁵⁰

These nationalist iconographic details in the central wall of the mural match the ideological needs of the postrevolutionary state emphasised in the interpretations of Folgarait and Coffey. Yet it is the focus upon class conflict in the two side walls of Rivera’s mural that undercuts this focus on nationalism in the main one which is so central to these revisionist readings. Several commentators have agreed that the detail of pre-Columbian Indians fighting in the bottom left section of *The Aztec World* is a symbol of aboriginal class struggle.⁵¹ This emphasis upon class conflict as the motor of human history, central to Rivera’s Marxist analysis of Mexican society, becomes even more explicit in the details that I have sketched out in the opposite wall, depicting *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*. This was painted in 1934–35, after Rivera had returned from producing important murals for corporate patrons north of the border, and after Calles’s domination of the executive had finally been supplanted by the more progressive regime of Cárdenas. Here Calles is surrounded by the army and the clergy, and, to the right, Rivera painted the pitched battles between the conservative forces of Calles and the supporters of the newly elected Cárdenas that were taking place in the Zócalo as Rivera painted. Indeed, Cárdenas’s redistribution of land to the peasantry in line with what Zapata and Villa had fought for, and the nationalisation of Mexican subsoil resources in 1938, were achieved on the back of this grass roots popular support. For Rivera, the Mexican Revolution was far from finished and it was the job of his mural to signal this to the more radicalised sectors of the workers and peasantry, and thereby agitate for further political and economic gains. The side walls are linked iconographically as well as thematically. The departing figure of Quetzalcóatl, who rides out of the Aztec world on a feathered serpent to the right, thereby setting the scene for the Spanish invasion beginning in the bottom right of the main wall, has a visual symmetry in the opposite wall with the figure of Marx. He is pointing out of the mural scheme to the left, beyond the idealised utopia, to a classless future, which for Rivera was the desired outcome of the yet to be completed revolutionary process.⁵²

⁵⁰ John Mason Hart, *op. cit.*, pp. 159 and 243.

⁵¹ Stanton L. Caitlin, “Mural Census”, in: *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, Ed. Cynthia Newman Helms, New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986, p. 262; Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America*, p. 56; Folgarait, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

⁵² Folgarait refers to such a reading of *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* when he writes: “... Rivera, the communist artist, shows the gross social injustices suffered by the peasant; that class consciousness and the attainment of a revolutionary program will free the oppressed; and that the sympathies of the viewer are clearly implied as siding with the peasant”, yet with a sleight of hand he calls this a “superficial” and “misleading” interpretation

Despite his criticisms of revisionist accounts of the Mexican Revolution, Knight claims that they were useful in that they compelled post-revisionists like himself to produce more sophisticated analyses of the Revolution, ones that patiently recovered the role that the peasantry and an emergent working-class actually played in shaping the outcome of political events.⁵³ In the same way, Craven calls for a “post-revisionist analytical shift” to describe the kind of work that now needs to be done on the murals: “to locate previously undetected spaces for manoeuvre during the period of 1920–1940”.⁵⁴ Hence my attempt here to demonstrate how subaltern pressures from below may have emboldened radical artists like Rivera to include their struggles within state-sponsored murals within an iconography seemingly in keeping with the ideological needs of the postrevolutionary state. This is not to look again for “heroes”, as I am not sure that we need them. And even if we did, I seriously doubt that Rivera should serve as a model for one. Neither is this an attempt to argue for the significance of a particular kind of art, whether this be a high-point in the trajectory of modernism (as valuable as that might be), or for an originary moment in an alternative avant-garde tradition (as useful as this could be), but instead to make a claim for an artistic intervention into an historical struggle when everything seemed for the taking. Or at least when the making of a monumental art seemingly offered something to contribute to an active struggle when the outcome was still up for grabs. In this respect, to instrumentally reduce the function of Rivera’s murals to “a technique of governance” on the basis that the fate of the revolution had already been determined, seems somewhat misconceived, and ultimately belittles the role of individual agency, and the capacity for that agency to contribute to any sense of meaningful social change.⁵⁵ And as the radical art historian Meyer Schapiro wrote in answer to his own question with which I began: “Although produced in a semi-colonial country, with an extremely weak and politically undeveloped proletariat, the paintings were regarded as the first and outstanding monuments of a revolutionary art in a bourgeois society”.⁵⁶ It is for these reasons that I want to argue that we should put our post-revisionist hats on and reconsider the slow fuse of the revolutionary mural.

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which is ultimately undercut by the naturalisation of the peasant as a beast who is thereby supposedly declassified. Leonard Folgarait, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

⁵³ Alan Knight, “Revisionism and Revolution”, pp. 198–199.

⁵⁴ David Craven, “Lineages of the Mexican Revolution”, p. 226.

⁵⁵ Mary K. Coffey, “The ‘Mexican Problem’”, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Meyer Schapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 466.

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Image Captions

[Ill. 1] Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Present*, 1929-30, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 9 x 21.5 m, National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: © Diego Grandi/Alamy Stock Photo 2016.

[Ill. 2] Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico: The Aztec World*, 1929, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 7.5 x 9 m, National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: © Magdalena Mayo/Alamy Stock Photo 2006.

[Ill. 3] Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico: Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, 1934-35, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 7.5 x 9 m, National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: © Education and Exploration 4/Alamy Stock Photo 2018.