AMERICAN COMMUNISTS VIEW MEXICAN MURALISM: CRITICAL AND ARTISTIC RESPONSES[1]

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A basic presupposition of this essay is that the influence of Mexican muralism

[1] My thanks to Jay Oles for his helpful criticisms of an earlier version of this essay.

on some American artists of the inter-war period was fundamentally related to the attraction many of these same artists felt towards Communism. I do not intend to imply some simple necessary correlation here, but, given the revolutionary connotations of the best-known murals and the well-publicized Marxist views of two of *Los Tres Grandes*, it was likely that the appeal of this new artistic model would be most profound among leftists and aspirant revolutionaries.[2] To map the full impact of Mexican muralism among such artists would be a major task, and one I can not undertake in a brief essay such as this. Here, my aims are more modest, namely to trace changing attitudes towards *Los Tres Grandes* in the American Communist press to establish the ideological framework within which their example was received, and to indicate something of the artists' responses.

My concern is with both the mythologies of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros as individual agents, and with the perceived qualities of their works. That these two things were understood to be inextricably related is only to be expected given that Romantic concepts of expression were still such common currency in this period. The character (moral qualities, social and political outlook) of the artists thus became inseparable from their art. Whether or not this assumption –moulded as it was in part by political exigencies– invalidated all critical judgements is another question.

While the influence of Communism among American writers of the so-called "Red Decade" of the 1930s is well-known and has been analysed in a succession of major studies, its impact on workers in the visual arts is less well understood and still underestimated.[3] This is partly because the

[2] I do not, of course, mean to discount the influence of Mexican muralism on non-leftists such as George Biddle and James Michael Newell. For Biddle on the Mexican example, see his 'Mural Painting in America', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 27, no. 7, July 1934, pp.366-8; *An American Artist's Story*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1939, pp. 263-7. Newell's *The Evolution of Western Civilization* for Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, New York, executed under the WPA Federal Art Project in 1938, is clearly indebted thematically and formally to Orozco's American Civilization cycle at Dartmouth College (1932), although the style of the individual figures is more Riveraesque. See James Michael Newell, 'The Evolution of Western Civilization', in Francis V. O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1973, pp.60-63, 287; and also 'Field Notes', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 24, no. 4, April 1932, p.303.

[3] The phrase "Red Decade" comes from Eugene Lyons's anti-Communist tract *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America,* Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1941. The classic study of American writers and Communism is Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961), New York, Columbia University Press, 1992. Among recent books on the subject, see especially Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction*, 1929-1941, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1993.

In relation to the visual arts, the main literature includes: David Shapiro, *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, New York, Ungar, 1973; and Boston University & Bread and Roses, *Social*

historiography of twentieth-century American art has been so skewed by the ideological promotion of Abstract Expressionism and later avant-garde tendencies as exemplars of cultural freedom during the Cold War that the very different kinds of art that dominated in the United States during the interwar years (and particularly those associated with the left) have been relegated to the functions of a prologue to the great drama enacted after 1940 when American art (supposedly) first achieved global significance -fortuitously at the same time as the nation's pretensions to global hegemony began to be realized.

The presumed lack of quality of most art of the twenties and thirties made it not worth taking seriously, and consequently interest in Mexican artistic influence in the United States was confined to figures validated by the dominant institutions such as Pollock and Guston. The palpable effects of Mexican muralism on some of the work produced under the New Deal arts programmes could not be ignored, but then these programmes of state support were seen as a great detour from the historically ordained route to individual artistic achievement that had produced a vast body of art almost uniformly without aesthetic consequence.[4] Anthony Lee's *Painting on the Left* (1999) is the first study to offer a sustained and nuanced analysis of what the example of Mexican muralism (in one of its aspects) meant to Communist and fellow-travelling artists in thirties America.[5] However, this focuses on one city (San Francisco), where, Lee argues, Communist cultural politics was in some degree exceptional, and the general picture thus still needs to be established.

Before addressing the historical record, the question begs to be asked as to why Mexican muralism appealed so strongly to artists of the American left when it was the Bolshevik state rather than the Mexican one they looked to as a political model. And particularly so, since Communist and fellow-travel-

Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s (exhibition catalogue by Patricia Hills et. al.), Boston: Boston University & Bread and Roses, 1983. Cécile Whiting's *Antifascism in American Art*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1989, is erroneous in important respects – see Andrew Hemingway, 'Fictional Unities: "Antifascism" and "Antifascist Art" in 30s America', *Oxford Art Journal,* vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, pp. 107-17.

[4]E.g., see Francis V. O'Connor, 'The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States During the 1930s and After', in Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1986, pp. 156-83.

[5]Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999. On the broader vogue for Mexican culture, see James Oles et. al., *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination,* 1914-1947, Washington & London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993; for American artists working in Mexico, see James Oles, 'Walls to Paint On: American Muralists in Mexico, 1933-1936', PhD thesis, Yale University, 1995.

ling artists were no less organized than writers through the John Reed Clubs (1929-35) and other Party organizations. Indeed, formally speaking, John Reed Club members were members of an international Communist organization, the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, which did not hesitate to give injunctions to its affiliates.

Such directives could extend to the visual arts, and the main organ of the IURW, *International Literature*, carried reports on the painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts, as well as literary matters.[6] However, just as Max Eastman's contemporary characterization of Communist writers as "a corps of obedient pen-pushers dressed up in blue blouses and ready to write whatever any Russian politician tells them to" does not work for the Party's novelists and poets, neither does it match with the experiences of its artists.[7] In fact, internal Party documents and other reports indicate that the John Reed Clubs were fractious and undisciplined. Moreover, Party authorities had a limited understanding of what was at stake in Soviet cultural debates, and the pace of change in the USSR meant that characterization of the situation there was always provisional.[8] In brief, while there were general slogans such as "Art is a Weapon in the Class Struggle", there was no clear Party line in cultural matters.

Although Socialist Realism was a term that was in currency by 1932, it did not become the official Soviet aesthetic until the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, and even then its implications for writers and artists outside the USSR were unclear.[9] If Communist writers and artists did not feel any compulsion to model their work on Soviet

[6]For instance, A. Elistratova was sharply critical of the graphics in *New Masses* in her appraisal of the magazine's work in 'New Masses', *International Literature*, no. 2, 1932, pp. 107-14. Thereafter, however, reporting of American Revolutionary Art in the pages of *International Literature* was affirmative. (In fact, the artists and writers of the New York John Reed Club both rejected Elistratova's critique, –see Joseph Freeman to Alexander Trachtenberg, 10 August 1933 [copy], Freeman Papers, Hoover Institution, 39-1). Correspondence between the John Reed Clubs and the IURW and the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists is preserved in the papers of Louis Lozowick (International Secretary to the New York John Reed Club), Archives of American Art, unfilmed and AAA1333.

[7]Max Eastman, *Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism*, New York, Knopf, 1934, p. 21. For writers and the Soviet example, see Foley, *Radical Representations*, pp. 63-85, and James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1991. For the Reed Clubs, see Eric Homberger, *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39: Equivocal Commitments*, Basingstoke & London, Macmillan, 1986, chapter 5.

[8]As Joseph Freeman acknowledged in the main account of Soviet culture published from within the American Communist movement - see Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, and Louis Lozowick, *Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia*, New York, Vanguard Press, 1930, p. 58.

[9]See, for instance, Louis Lozowick, 'Aspects of Soviet Art', *New Masses*, vol. 14, no. 5, 29 January 1935, pp. 16-19.

examples during the phase of the Comintern's Third Period line (1928-35) when proletarian internationalism was at its height, still less did they feel that imperative during the Popular Front, when national cultural traditions –providing they could be interpreted as in some sense popular and progressive– were given a new value in Communist criticism. In any case, for the most part American Communist artists do not seem to have been much impressed by what they saw in the three major exhibitions of Soviet art in the United States in the interwar period, or by the works shown at the Carnegie International or seen in reproduction.[10] Representative was probably the frank observation of the cartoonist and printmaker Russell Limbach, writing in *New Masses* in 1935, that Soviet paintings were either painted in the "illustrative style familiar to readers of the Saturday Evening Post and other slick paper publication", or were works "no better or worse than the usual bourgeois art found in the galleries of this country and Europe".[11]

Conversely, if Soviet art was not of high standing among Communist artists in the United States or among their artworld compatriots more generally, that of modern Mexico most certainly was. Orozco and Rivera received extensive coverage in magazines such as *The Arts and Creative Art* from the mid 1920s on, and in 1932 a writer in the prestigious *Magazine of Art* asserted that "the greatest native paintings in America today are in Mexico City."[12] Whereas Soviet art was increasingly associated with formal conservatism, Orozco and Rivera –and especially the former– stood as exemplary moderns, who combined a modernist approach to form with commitment to an art of common public meaning. One of the factors that made their example pertinent was the quite widespread interest in the decorative possibilities of the new commercial buildings that had sprung up in cities across the United States during the construction boom of the 1920s. Liberal critics who dominated in the art press (such as Lloyd Goodrich) were looking for a modern mural style that would supercede "the frigid pomposities of the average academic decorator", epitomized by Edwin Blashfield and Kenyon Cox.[13]

Although the commissions awarded to Orozco and Rivera would pro-

[10]There were exhibitions at Grand Central Palace in New York in 1924 and 1929, and a travelling show organized by the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, College Art Association, and American Russian Institute for Cultural lations with the Soviet Union in 1934-6.

[11]Russell T. Limbach, 'Soviet Art', *New Masses*, vol. 17, no. 9, 26 November 1935, p.25 (review of Studio Publications Inc., *Art in the USSR*).

[12]George J. Cox, 'Modern Art and this Matter of Taste', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 25, no. 2, August 1932, p. 82. See also the special Mexican art number of *Creative Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, January 1929.

[13]E.g., Lloyd Goodrich, 'Mural Paintings by Boardman Robinson', *The Arts*, vol. 16, no. 6, February 1930, pp. 391-3.

voke a certain amount of controversy because of claims that their work had an un-American "racial" quality, none the less, they demonstrated triumphantly that public art in a modern style was possible.[14] Thus the significance of Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural lay not only in the political controversy ignited by its iconography, but also in the challenge it offered of a style of muralism that claimed to be "American", at a time when the nature of Americanism in the arts was hotly debated.[15] Symptomatic of this climate was the putting on of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition Murals by *American Painters and Photographers* of May 1932, five months after the same museum's Rivera retrospective.

By contrast with the praise they regularly showered on the main Mexican painters, the most authoritative art magazines regarded this as a "debacle".[16] However, the controversial works by Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Ben Kopman, Ben Shahn and others included in the exhibition announced that the American left had adopted the mural form as its own –had accepted the logic of Orozco's claim that the mural "is for the people... is for ALL".[17] (It was probably as a counterblast to the MoMA exhibition that in 1933 the John Reed Club organized a mural competition, which seems to have taken as its focus decorations for a Workers Club.) In an article of 1935, the *New Masses* art critics Stephen Alexander argued that "during the last few years of American capitalism" the "public character of the mural" had been perverted by the demands

[14]For instance, see the responses to Orozco's Dartmouth College murals: Peyton Boswell, 'An Alien Art', and 'Orozco's "American Epic" at Dartmouth Starts a Controversy', *Art Digest*, vol. 8, no. 19, 1 August 1934, pp. 3, 5; and to Rivera's Detroit Industry in 'Misconceptions' and 'Men, Machines, and Murals - Detroit', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 26, no. 5, May 1933, pp. 221, 254-5. Cf. Goodrich's contrast of the Americanism of Benton's murals at the New School for Social Research with the "plastic sense" of Orozco's, "part of his blood and racial heritage". (I should stress that this contrast is not an invidious one.) Lloyd Goodrich, 'The Murals of the New School', *The Arts*, vol. 17, no. 6, March 1931, pp. 399-403, 442-3. For a claim as to the relevance of Orozco's "Americanness", see Dr. Stacy May of Dartmouth, quoted in Alma Reed, José Clemente Orozco (Delphic Studios, 1932), New York, *Hacker Art Books*, 1985, pp. 11-12.

[15]For Rivera on the Americanism of his work, see 'Dynamic Detroit - an Interpretation', *Creative Art*, vol. 12, no. 4, April 1933, p. 295, and quoted in Anita Brenner, 'Diego Rivera: Fiery Crusader on the Paint Brush', *New York Times Magazine*, 2 April 1933, p. 11.I analyse the critical discourse of Americanism in this period in my article: '".To personalize the rainpipe": The Critical Mythology of Edward Hopper', *Prospects*, vol.17, 1992, 379-404.

[16]Dorothy Grafly, ''Murals at the Museum of Modern Art', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 25, no. 2, August 1932, pp. 93-102,James Johnson Sweeney, 'Murals by American Painters and Photograflhers', *Creative Art*, vol. 10, no. 6, June 1932. Cf. 'Critics Unanimously Condemn Modern Museum's Mural Show', *Art Digest*, vol. 6, 15 May 1932, p. 7.

[17]José Clemente Orozco, 'New World, New Races and New Art', *Creative Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, January 1929, p. XLVI; Hugo Gellert, 'We Capture the Walls!: The Museum of Modern Art Episode', *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 9, June 1932, pp. 28-9.

placed on it by wealthy patrons and the "capitalist class' utilization of the mural for its own propaganda in public and semi-public places". By contrast, the "recent Mexican mural movement was almost entirely a public institution, devoted to the dissemination of social ideas".[18] But how were American artists to interpret the Mexican example given the manifest differences between the works of *Los Tres Grandes* and their very different relations with the international Communist movement?

Critical Responses: Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco

The first published response to Mexico's new mural art by an American Communist seems to have been Bertram D. Wolfe's article 'Art and Revolution in Mexico', published in the liberal magazine *The Nation* in August 1924. Although Wolfe was to be expelled from the CPUSA in 1929, he had helped to found the party in 1919 and during the 1920s was one of its leading intellectuals. He also played an important role in the PCM over the years 1923-5, and represented it at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924. Wolfe opens his article by describing the Mexican Revolution as "a very patchy and unsystematic affair", and the government 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 American interests on the other." This quite acute characterization of the situation is followed by the assertion: "only in the work of the philosopher, the artist, and the poet have the effects of the revolution assumed system and unity". No later Communist writer was to register so incisively the potentially mythical functions of the murals. Although Wolfe referred to the activities of the "Communist Union of Painters and Sculptors" (as he called the Revolutionary Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors) and quoted from its 'Statement of Principles', the only artist he mentioned by name was Rivera, "Mexico's greatest painter", who, he claimed, "paints only for the Revolutionary Government, or, rather, for the more revolutionary departments of the Government".[19]

As the qualifying clause here suggests, given that Mexican muralism was primarily the fruit of state patronage, its status as Revolutionary Art among Communists was going to depend heavily on their understanding of the character of the Mexican regime. As

[18] Stephen Alexander, 'Art: Mural Painting in America', *New Masses*, vol. 14, no. 9, 26 February 1935, p. 28.

[19] Bertram D. Wolfe, 'Art and Revolution in Mexico', *The Nation*, Vol. 119, No. 3086, p. 207-8. For Wolfe in Mexico, see Karl M. Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico: A Study in*

relations between the PCM and the regime deteriorated at the end of the decade, Rivera's success as an official painter would make him increasingly compromized in their eyes. This is not of course to say that the state as patron did not determine the character and significance of the art it commissioned in important ways,[20] but given the instrumentalism of the dominant Com-

Political Frustration, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1965, pp. 10-12; Robert J. Alexander, *Communism in Latin America*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1957, pp. 322-4; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (1960), New York, *Vintage Books*, 1986, pp. 170, 178, 234. According to Draper (whose account was partly based on interviews with Wolfe), Wolfe spen in México than Schmitt implies - namely three and a half years.

[20]This assumption, of course, underpins the argument of Leonard Folgarait's major study: *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998. See also the critique by Warren Carter, in 'The Public

Hideo Noda, central, left and right panels of mural for Piedmont High School, California, 1937, fresco, Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art, Kumamoto, Japan. Photograph courtesy of Kumamoto Prefectural Museum.

munist view of art in this period, there was no real space for more nuanced interpretations of agency or meaning for those thinking within the framework of Party discourse. In relation to such thinking, the very complexity and philosophical pretensions of Rivera's imaging of history were likely to prompt critique.

In 1926, a group of left-leaning American artists and writers established the magazine *New Masses*, which quickly became the flagship publication of the Communist cultural movement in the United States.[21] Having said this it is important to note that Communists were initially only a small minority on the editorial board, and that many who wrote for the magazine –including some who concern us here such as Anita Brenner and John Dos Passos– were not party members but fellow travellers. Perhaps partly as a result of Carleton Beals's presence among its Advisory Editors, in the late 1920s *New Masses* gave quite extensive coverage to Mexican culture. In addition to the various illustrations of Mexican art it printed, it featured images by Guerrero, Tamayo and Tina Modotti on its covers, and in May 1927 published a text by Guerrero defining Revolutionary Art.[22]

The first report on Mexican Muralism to appear in the magazine came in March 1927 in the form of Dos Passos's essay 'Paint the Revolution!'.[23] The novelist stayed in Mexico from

(Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2000, pp. 163-71.

[21] For *New Masses*, see Aaron, Writers on the Left; David Peck, '"The Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature": *The Monthly New Masses*, 1926-1933', *Science and Society*, vol. 42, No. 2, Winter 1978-9.

[22] Xavier Guerrero, 'A Mexican Painter', *New Masses*, vol. 3, no. 1, May 1927, p.18. For cover images by Modotti, see vol. 4, no. 5, October 1928; vol. 4, no. 7, December 1928; vol. 5, no. 1, June 1929; vol. 5, no. 3, August 1929; vol. 5, no. 4, September 1929. For cover images by Guerrero, see vol. 4, no. 8, January 1929; and by Tamayo, see vol. 2, no. 3, January 1927; vol. 5, no. 3, August 1929.

[23] The only reports to precede this in the art press (to the best of my knowledge) are: José Juan Tablada, 'Diego Rivera - Mexican Painter', *The Arts*, vol. 4, no. 4, October 1923, pp. 221-33; Anita Brenner, 'A Mexican Renaissance', *The Arts*, vol. 8, no. 3, September 1925, pp. 127-50.

December 1926 through to mid March of the following year, partly as a vacation, but also because he wanted to see the art of the Revolution. In the course of his visit he became a good friend of Guerrero, who travelled with him in the mountain villages behind Toluca.[24] Dos Passos's account focussed on Rivera, Orozco, and Roberto Montenegro, but did not mention Siqueiros, who was in Jalisco at the time of his visit, and had temporarily abandoned painting for union organizing. The essay's characterization of the murals partly centres around a contrast between the art of the New York galleries, full of "little pictures", "stuff a man's afraid to be looking at", "a few private sensations and experiments framed and exhibited"; and what the author describes as "a challenge shouted in the face of the rest of the world".

This contrast is premised not just on the difference between an essentially private and an essentially public art, but also between the non-virile and the virile.[25] Although "a work of real talent" might occasionally get exhibited in New York: "what's the good of it? Who sees it? A lot of male and female old women chattering around an exhibition; and then, if the snob-market has been properly manipulated, some damn fool buys it and puts it away in the attic". Rivera's murals in the Ministry of Education did contain some "pretty hasty" painting, and some of them were "garlanded tropical bombast", but overall they were "passionate hieroglyphics of every phase of the revolution". The sheer scale of the paintings raised them to the dimensions of public works and also helped to make them securely virile and heterosexual (by implication). Dos Passos acknowledged the Communism of some of the Syndicate's members (although he doesn't discriminate their politics), but he also stressed that both the revolution and its art are an "organic necessity" of Mexican circumstances, "no more imported from Russia than the petate hats the soldiers wore".[26] The article was accompanied by a double-page illustration of Rivera's *Dividing the Land* panel in the Administrative Building of the National Autonomous University of Chapingo (1924) - an appropriately revolutionary motif, and one that would have corresponded to the author's enthusiasm for Zapata.[27]

[24] Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1980, pp. 248-52. See also Carleton Beals, *Glass Houses: Ten Years of Free-Lancing*, Philadelphia & New York, J.B. Lippincott, 1938, pp. 245-9.

[25] Comparably, Dr. Stacy May described Orozco's Dartmouth cycle as "completely masculine. It is forthright and unmannered and contemporary." - quoted in Alma Reed, *José Clemente Orozco* (1932), New York, Hacker Art Books, 1985, p. 11.

[26] John Dos Passos, 'Paint the Revolution!', *New Masses*, vol. 2, no. 5, March 1927, p. 15. This interpretation parallels that of Anita Brenner in its emphasis on "Mexicanness" and nationalism - see 'A Mexican Renaissance'.

[27] According to Dos Passos's friend Carleton Beals, "Diego has never surpassed this early work in Chapingo." - Beals, *Glass Houses,* p. 181.

Two years later the same magazine printed a free verse tribute to Rivera by one of its regular poets, Porter Myron Chaffee, which claimed that he painted "the living principle" of the "mighty word ... REVOLUTION!":

> Baudelaire grew sick tulips from the socket of skulls But Diego Rivera paints life. He is life-sweet. There is about the man the wholesomeness of a bachantic wind, May-crazy, and dancing in the fields that grow grain for bread.[28]

But such views were soon to become untenable. Rivera's visit to Moscow in 1927-8 had revealed a fundamental divergence between his conception of Revolutionary Art and the dominant tendencies in Soviet painting, and in 1929 he became Director of the Academy of San Carlos and began work on the stairway of the National Palace just as the PCM's relations with the Gil government were reaching a crisis point, leading to the banning of the Party in May of that year.[29] Rivera was finally expelled from the PCM in September, and at the 1930 Conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers at Kharkov in the Ukraine he was condemned for "advocating a right-wing program".[30] The artist's sins were compounded by his willingness to work for American capitalist patrons, and his association with both Trotskyism and the Lovestoneite Communist Party Majority Opposition in the United States, for which he made a sequence of mural panels on American history to decorate the New Workers School in New York in 1933.[31]

In addition, he published statements in the *Modern Quarterly* of the independent Marxist V.F. Calverton, a figure who was repeatedly denounced by Communist theoreticians from 1929 on, and labelled a "fascist" by the Party's chairman, William Z. Foster. It was in the *Modern Quarterly* in 1932-3 that Rivera articulated an independent theory of Revolutionary Art for a North American readership. But already in March 1932, Rivera had argued in

[28] Porter Myron Chaffee, 'Diego Rivera (Mexican Revolutionary Artist)', *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 3, August 1929, p. 16.

[29] Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico*, pp. 14-15; William Richardson, 'The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 1987.

[30] 'The Charkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers', *New Masses*, vol. 6, no. 9, February 1931, p. 6. By May 1930 the New York *Daily Worker* was descending to racist slang to characterize the artist, describing him as a "grease-ball". See 'A renegade on parade', *Daily Worker*, 17 May, 1930.

[31] On Lovestone's passage through the Communist Party, see Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. On the New Workers School murals, see Diego Rivera, *Portrai of America* (text by Bertram Wolfe), New York, Covici, Friede, 1934); Laurence P. Hurlburt, The Mexican Muralist in the United States, Alburquerque: University of New México Press, 1989, pp. 175-93. For a contemporary response, see E.M. Benson, 'Fied Notes', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 27, no. 2, February 1934, pp. 97-8.

the pages of *Arts Weekly* that in the USSR the remnants of "*petit-bourgeois* culture", "easel-painting and pedestal sculpture", were retarding the development of a truly Revolutionary Art, that is "the typically collective forms of architectonic, mural, and monumental painting and sculpture". And this was the one effect of the "transitory degeneration" of the "Russian bureaucratized communist party, against which the sane revolutionary forces of the entire world are struggling".[32]

To begin with, however, Rivera seems to have sought friendly relations with American Communist artists, and he agreed to address a public meeting under the auspices of the John Reed Club on 1st January 1932. If the club's leadership had expected him to make a *mea culpa* on this occasion as they later implied,[33] they were disappointed. His speech, translated from the French by the painter Louis Lozowick, who also chaired the meeting, was violently heckled by *Daily Worker* editors William Dunne and Harrison George among others. According to one report, Frida Kahlo –the artist's "petite but peppery little wife"– almost got into a fist fight with the hecklers before Lozowick could restore order.[34] The following month, a four-page appraisal of Rivera's work by "Robert Evans" appeared in *New Masses*. In actuality this was written by the Communist poet and critic Joseph Freeman, who had been Tass correspondent in Mexico in 1929, and whose first wife, Ione Robinson, worked as an assistant on Rivera's National Palace murals and was for a while the artist's mistress.[35]

Freeman's article was not dismissive, but it argued that the qualities in Rivera's better work derived from the energies of the Mexican Revolution rather than from any special personal capacity: "The stupendous frescoes in the Secretariat live with the power of the Mexican masses" - yet at the same time they are "vast caricatures" that are "intellectual, remote, and devoid of feeling". However, as Rivera aligned himself with "the bankruptcy of petit bourgeois agrarianism" and began to sell his talents to "Chicago

[32]Diego Rivera: 'The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art', *Modern Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 3, Autumn 1932, pp. 51-7 (I suspect this is the text of Rivera's lecture to the John Reed Club); 'What is Art For?', *Modern Monthly*, vol. 7, no. 5, June 1933, pp. 275-8; 'The Position of the Artist in Russia Today', *Arts Weekly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 11 March 1932, pp. 6-7. Rivera became Art Director of the *Modern Monthly* in 1934. For Calverton and the *Modern Quarterly*, see Leonard Wilcox, *V.F. Calverton: Radical in the American Grain*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992.

[33]John Reed Club, 'Diego Rivera and the John Reed Club', *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 12, February 1932, p. 31.

[34]Walter Gutman, 'News and Gossip', *Creative Art*, vol. 10, no. 2, February 1932, p. 159. There is evidence that the John Reed Club members objected to this heavy-handed intervention by Party figures - see 'memo' on the 'NM-JRC situation' (Freeman Papers, Hoover Institution, 177:1).

[35]Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*, London, Bloomsbury, 1998, p. 230.

and California millionaires" his work had gone into decline. "Cut off from the revolutionary workers and peasants", he could only "regain the motive power of his art" by returning to the Communist fold.[36]

Perhaps as a result of some genuine confusion, Freeman accused Rivera of making changes to his National Palace mural to accommodate his governmental patrons –changes he had not in fact made. It was thus easy for Rivera to discredit the charge by reproducing the relevant portion of the mural together with the preliminary sketch in the Lovestoneite *Workers Age*.[37] But Freeman's article also represented the larger failings of a current Communist aesthetic, according to which healthy art only arose from contact with the masses, and the sole route to that necessary source was through the Party. The upshot of this was that Rivera's Detroit Industry murals of 1932-3, arguably the greatest socialist art of the period in the Western hemisphere outside Mexico, were virtually passed over in silence in the Communist press. In the most sustained critique of them I have found, the artist Jacob Burck repeated the familiar refrain that Rivera's American murals were formally and expressively inferior to his Mexican works –"[h]is post-revolutionary paintings are jig-saw puzzles of isolated scenes arbitrarily drawn together by purely artistic tricks of composition"– and claimed that Detroit Industry looked like a tribute to Ford:

> In Detroit he painted the Ford plant and symbols of the various industries necessary for the manufacture of the automobile. But nothing to expose the vicious Ford system - the flower of capitalism. Just a picture of men at work in a setting of beautiful machinery. No wonder Edsel Ford was well pleased with the job...[38]

Predictably, in the latter half of the decade Rivera's work was to be interpreted most sympathetically by independent leftists such as Meyer Schapiro and the Lovestoneite Bertram Wolfe.[39] The Party's phobia of Trotskyism, which

[36]Robert Evans [Joseph Freeman], 'Painting and Politics: The Case of Diego Rivera', *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 9, February 1932, pp. 22-5. Cf. the article Freeman published contemporaneously in *Literatura mirovoi revoliutsii*, quoted in Richardson, 'The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist', p. 66.

[37]'A Shameless Fraud', *Workers Age*, vol. 2, no. 15, 15 June 1933 - Rivera Supplement, np. See also Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times*, New York & London, Knopf, 1939, pp. 302-06. For Freeman's notes and correspondence on this episode, see Freeman Papers, Hoover Institution, 69:8, 69:34, 180:3, 180:4. Freeman reportedly presided at the meeting that expelled Rivera and his belief that changes in the conception of the mural reflected Rivera's betrayal of the Revolution went back to 1929. Ione Robinson gave her own account of the relationship between Freeman and Rivera in her autobiographical narrative: *A Wall to Paint On*, New York, Dutton, 1946, pp.110-16, 197-201.

[38]Jacob Burck, 'A Portrait of Diego Rivera - The Story of a Bird in a Gold Frame' (review of Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America*), *Daily Worker*, 19 May 1934. Cf. Charmion

was essentially an insensible reflex of struggles in the USSR, meant that it was unable to offer any measured appraisal of the most controversial political artist of the time, and the confusions the situation caused are illustrated by the fact that at the same time as it ostracized the artist, the John Reed Club organized meetings and picketing to protest against the destruction of his Rockefeller Center Mural.[40]

If artistic role models were to be gauged in terms of ostensive commitment to the Communist Party, then the Mexican artist most worthy of emulation was Siqueiros. Yet although Siqueiros had certainly made an impact on some West Coast artists through the three murals he organized and his two solo exhibitions in Los Angeles in 1932, no major article was devoted to him in the American art press until 1934, when the artist visited New York at the time of his exhibition at Alma Reed's Delphic Studios.[41] This fact is doubtless partly a register of the centrality of New York within the U.S. artistic field. Particularly since in *Idols Behind Altars* (1929) Brenner gave a significantly different account of the "Mexican Renaissance" from that she had lain out in her pathbreaking 1925 article in *The Arts*. Then she had been emphatic that Rivera was the leader of the new art, although Orozco was in some ways more "Mexican". But by 1929, Siqueiros was said to have "plotted the painters' revolution and foretold its artistic results a year before it occurred".

von Wiegand: "During his American visits, he began the production of marketable commodities and murals of compromise, such as those in Detroit." - 'Portrait of an Artist', *New Masses*, vol. 23, no. 6, 27 April 1937, p.26. The denunciation of Rivera by Mary Randolph published in Art Front (magazine of the Communist dominated New York Artists Union) in 1935 confuses Rivera's mural in the National Preparatory School with the cycle in the Ministry of Education, describes the fresco of *Man at the Crossroads* in the Palace of Fine Arts as "hung" (sic) in the National Theatre, and refers to the Cardenas government as the Calles government. See 'Rivera's Monopoly', parts 1 and 2, *Art Front*, Vol. 1, no. 7, November 1935, and Vol. 1, no. 8, December 1935.

[39] Bertram D. Wolfe, 'Diego Rivera on Trial', *Modern Monthly*, vol. 8, no. 6, July 1934, pp. 337-40; Meyer Schapiro, 'The Patrons of Revolutionary Art', *Marxist Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, October/December 1937, pp. 462-6. See also: 'The Diego Rivera Rockefeller Center and Detroit Museum of Art Murals', *Modern Monthly*, vol. 7, no. 5, June 1933; and Elie Faure, 'Diego Rivera', *Modern Monthly*, vol. 8, no. 9, October 1934.

[40] 'Support for Rivera Protest is Urged by John Reed Club', *Daily Worker*, 16 May 1933; 'Workers, Artists Protest Ban on Lenin Mural Today', *Daily Worker*, 17 May 1933.

[41] Elsa Rogo, 'David Alfaro Siqueiros', *Parnassus*, 6, no. 4, April 1934, pp. 5-7. For Rogo, see Museo Nacional de Arte, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, *Portrait of a Decade*, 1930-1940: *David Alfaro Siqueiros* (English version), Mexico City, 1997, p. 163. This publication contains a full bibliography. On Siqueiros in the United States, see Hurlburt: *Mexican Muralists in the United States*, chapter 3, and 'The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936', *Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3, Spring 1976, pp.237-46; Shifra M. Goldman, 'Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles', *Art Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4, Summer 1974, pp. 321-27.

Moreover, although his surviving works amounted to only "[t]hree scarred walls, an almost hidden ceiling arch, a trunkful of sketches and paintings largely unfinished, drawings and woodcuts lost in old numbers of *El Machete*", "his achievement is much greater, for the entire mood of modern artistic Mexico is shot through with the national wishes and abilities crystallized by him".[42] Brenner's eloquent book –illustrated with wonderful photographs by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti–[43] was not only the most authoritative and comprehensive account of modern Mexican artistic culture available in English in the period, it also offered a compelling myth of the "essence of Mexican life", in which Mexican art, culture, and history were welded into an organic and historically transcendent whole that was aesthetic through and through:

> nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the national longings, fully the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for the nation and for the unit.

Brenner characterized Siqueiros as a kind of demiurge of Mexican culture, as a national figure, rather than as an international Revolutionary Artist. For Communists he would have to be both.

In keeping with his messianic status, Brenner's Siqueiros was also a figure of immense personal charm and beauty. But at the same time she acknowledged that his "gift of speech and mental agility make him a political figure of consequence" (even if "his position is by conviction not political"), and this quality, too, would inevitably affect his reception by American Communists.[44] For in contrast to Rivera's hostile reception, in the course of his 1934 visit Siqueiros spoke at at least three John Reed Club events, and also lectured to the Film and Photo League.[45]

Siqueiros's 1934 exhibition was the occasion of a lengthy and well-informed essay on the artist in *New Masses* by Joseph Freeman's second wife, Charmion von Wiegand, who stressed that

[42]Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1929, pp. 240, 266.

[43]Sarah M. Lowe, *Tina Modotti Photographs*, New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1995, pp. 30-1.

[44]Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, pp. 32-3, 265. Cf. p. 240. Brenner's position was that of a fellow-traveller at this time. For Brenner, see Susan Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism*, New York, Midmarch Arts Press, 1999, chapter 8; Susannah Joel Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1998.

[45]'Siqueiros Will Speak on Future of the Film at Symposium Tonite', *Daily Worker*, 24 February 1934. 'Siqueiros to Lecture on Art this Sunday Afternoon', *Daily Worker*, 27 April 1934. (This latter was a John Reed Club event at the Irving Plaze at which Siqueiros was to speak on 'The Artist and the Class Struggle' according to the *Daily Worker*, and 'The Technique of Revolutionary Art' according to *New Masses*, vol. 11, no. 4, 24 April 1934, p. 2.) 'Siqueiros to Speak at the Opening of JRC Exhibit May 11', *Daily Worker*, 10 May 1934. (The exhibition was of sketches for

for Siqueiros art was only "one form of revolutionary agitation" among others, and that his commitment to the revolutionary movement was constant.[46] That May, *New Masses* published a long attack on Rivera by Siqueiros, which charged him with being a "Saboteur of... Collective Work", "An Agent of the Government", and an "Aesthete of Imperialism" among other things. The Detroit Industry murals were "ideologically obscure" works in an "opportunistic technique", effectively determined by their patron.[47] Siqueiros's own technical experiments were described in some detail and with considerable sympathy by von Wiegand, who argued that "[m]ore than any of the Mexican painters, perhaps Siqueiros has managed to fuse the revolutionary content and form in his art", and contrasting his work with the "painfully academic" technique of "many Soviet painters". (Elsewhere, she described the Revolutionary Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors as having "initiated the greatest movement of revolutionary painting in the contemporary world").[48] Siqueiros, however, insisted upon being judged on his outdoor murals, and the three he had executed in the United States in 1932 were all in California and were represented at the Delphic Studios show only by photographs. For von Wiegand, one picture alone in the exhibition "gave some indication of the artist's powers in this direction", and that was the *Proletarian Victim* (Museum of Modern Art, New York),[49] in fact an image of a woman martyr of the Chinese Revolution painted in Duco

murals to decorate the walls of working-class organizations.) 'Farewell Meeting for Siqueiros to be Held at JRC on Thursday', Daily Worker, Wednesday 30 May. (Siqueiros was to speak on 'The Road the American Artist Should Follow').

Philip Reisman later recalled Siqueiros speaking at the John Reed Club before "an overflow audience". See Martin H. Bush, *Philip Reisman: People Are His Passion*, Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, 1986, p. 35.

[46]Charmion von Wiegand, 'David Alfaro Siqueiros', *New Masses*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1 May 1934, pp. 16-21. For von Wiegand, see Susan C. Larsen, 'Charmion von Wiegand: Walking on a Road with Milestones', *Arts Magazine*, vo. 60, no. 3, November 1985, pp. 29-31; Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s,* chapter 7.

[47]David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Rivera's Counter-Revolutionary Road', *New Masses*, vol. 11, no. 9, 29 May 1934, pp. 16-19. The essay was occasioned by the publication of Rivera's *Portrait of America*, but has the character of a generalized denunciation. Wolfe responded to both this and Burck's 'A Portrait of Diego Rivera' in 'Diego Rivera on Trial', asserting, by contrast, that "Diego Rivera is, by fairly common consent, the greatest mural artist of our times. He is also the greatest, perhaps so far the only truly great revolutionary artist" (p. 337).

[48]Von Wiegand, 'David Alfaro Siqueiros', 16. In an article published in the following month, von Wiegand argued that Mexican influence in American art was there to stay: "[t]hey are at present a more creative influence in American painting than the modernist French masters." "The supreme achievement of the Mexican group as a whole is their reuniting of technique and idea in a new and splendid synthesis. They have brought painting back to its vital function in society." –Charmion von Wiegand, 'Mural Painting in America', *Yale Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, June 1934, pp. 788-99.

[49]Museo Nacional de Arte, *Portrait of a Decade*, pp.156-7. (Illustrated in *New Masses*, vol.

Walter Quirt, *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread*, 1935, oil on masonite, 31.8 x 52.6 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museumof Art, Hartford. Gift of Mr. And Mrs. Leopold Godowsky.

enamel on burlap. Further, although his theories were "highly suggestive" and might "possibly mark a turning point in art", she complained of a "romanticism" and "a certain lack of discipline" in his approach that needed to be restrained.

It was this "romanticism" and the artist's direct participation in the revolutionary movement that helps to explain Siqueiros's appeal to the veteran Communist critic Michael Gold.[50] Gold rarely addressed the visual arts, but under the impact of the Delphic Studios exhibition he devoted his *Daily Worker* column to an assessment of Mexican art. Although he was an ardent Russophile, Gold implies here that it was the Mexicans rather than the Soviet artists who had revolutionized painting:

> What the Soviet Union has done in the moving pictures, the revolutionary artists of Mexico have done in painting.

11, no. 4, 24 April 1934, p. 17.) The suggestion here that the wound on the woman's head is from a gunshot and that she has already been executed is entirely plausible. However, the pose with bowed head is also likely to have brought to mind to contemporaries the public beheadings inflicted on Chinese prisoners by the Japanese, which served in the Communist press to illustrate fascist barbarism. For the catalogue to the Delphic Studios exhibition, see *ibid*., pp. 219-20.

[50] Gold had been in Mexico in 1918-19 to escape the draft. See Beals, *Glass Houses*, pp. 35-7.

Gold notoriously belonged to that category of Communist critic that tended to see a relatively direct correlation between the aesthetic quality of works and the political stance of their makers, so that artists who embraced Trotskyism, for instance, almost invariably produced bad art. This makes exceptional his readiness to acknowledge the "gigantic importance to revolutionary art of Diego Rivera's murals", despite the fact the artist was politically "unreliable", and his equally favourable judgement on Orozco.

However, at the same time as asserting that "[i]t is always futile to compare artists" because each "has his own chemistry and his very faults are often indispensable ingredients of his genius", the article in the end elevates Siqueiros above the other two. In his literary criticism, Gold was notably unsympathetic to modernist formal experiments for the most part, tending to associate them with an over-intellectual approach to art that distanced works from a proletarian readership and almost inavariably led to bourgeois aestheticism. Yet he showed himself surprisingly open to Siqueiros's attempts to revitalize the "backward and medieval world of painting" through the application of industrial techniques, attempts he saw as a result of the artist's immersion in proletarian life, which "forced him to find new forms for a new world content". These qualities made Siqueiros into something like a Lenin or Stalin of painting:

> Here is a painter, I believe, who is destined to be the leader of proletarian painting - a new field still undiscovered and unexplored.[51]
>
> Siqueiros talks like a Biblical prophet interpreting some divine message, wrote Ione Robinson, describing a visit from the artist in November 1935. After seeing the Siqueiros Workshop in 1936 she observed that he had "organized his own WPA".
>
> His ideas are forceful, and he is clever in projecting them into the imagination of other artists, making them feel that they conceived them.[52]

It was doubtless Siqueiros's powers of persuasion and his organizing drive that impressed Gold, as well as his art. However, these were also qualities that could sit uneasily with Communist Party discipline when they were linked with an overpowering individual vision, and it is notable that the account of the public debate between Rivera and Siqueiros in August 1935 published in *New Masses* implies that

[51] Michael Gold, 'Change the World!', *Daily Worker*, 7 April 1934. For Gold, see Michael Folsom (ed.), *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, New York, International Publishers, 1972; and Michael Folsom, 'The Education of Michael Gold', in David Madden (ed.), *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, Carbondale & Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1968, pp. 222-51.

[52] Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, pp.247, 250. Cf. the account of Siqueiros in New York in Steven Naifeh & Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, 1989, chapter 19.

both had contributed equally to the pantomime, and that one is as bad as the other in their publicity-seeking antics, concluding:

> Finally, Siqueiros has reminded people with fresh intensity that he represents the peak of *caudillaje* of the *petty-bourgeois* revolution, that his unquestionably brilliant talent has been wasted to épater le bourgeois for too many years now, that he has indulged in his own brand of opportunism (...) and is almost completely incapable of joining in any solidly collective work with any continuity.[53]

The terms of this criticism almost certainly refer to Siqueiros's call for a "red *caudillo*" at the 1929 meeting of Latin American Communists in Buenos Aires, a call that had been rejected as out of line with Comintern policy.[54] While these doctrinal deviations did not prevent Siqueiros establishing a following when he returned to New York in 1936, an artist with such an intransigent view of easel painting and such a challenging and doctrinaire mural aesthetic was a difficult model.[55]

Ironically, it was Orozco, the most politically equivocal and pessimistic of the muralists,[56] who offered the least problematic exemplar. The strength of his appeal may have been partly to do with the sheer impact and accessibility of his work relative to the United States's cultural metropolis: the murals at the New School of Social Research (1930-1) and Dartmouth College (1932-4), the solo exhibitions in New York, and the publications of his prints. Further, Orozco was understood as a "modern", because –as a writer in the magazine Parnassus put it in 1930– "direct technique, high color, primary forms best express his intense emotion".[57]

From the beginning, the image of Orozco in the American art press was that of an artist of profound originality. In Anita Brenner's early essay on the artist for *The Arts* he appears as one who "has served no apprenticeship in Italy or in Paris. He never has painted with one eye on the connoisseur, the art-critic, the dealer, or the museum." Rather, his art was an organic product of the nationalism of the Revolution, and had an essentially intuitive charac-

[53] Emanuel Eisenberg: 'Battle of the Century', *New Masses*, vol. 17, no. 11, 10 December 1935, pp. 18-20; Museo Nacional de Arte, *Portrait of a Decade*, pp. 50-53.

[54] See Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico*, pp. 186-7.

[55] "Siqueiros laughs at the WPA Art Projects", Robinson recorded - *A Wall to Paint On*, p. 251.

[56] "He would never explain what political or social doctrine he meant to expound by all this [his murals in the National Preparatory School], and he titles his pictures if pressed, 'Whatever You Like.'" Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, p.270.

[57] 'Current Art Activities', *Parnassus*, vol. 2, no. 2, February 1930, p. 6. Sheldon Cheney insistently contrasts Orozco's modernism with Thomas Hart Benton's non-modernist approach to the mural in *Expressionism in Art*, New York, Liveright, 1934, pp. 186-9, 296-8.

ter: "[h]is work is very uneven, since it is a wholly emotional thing." His striking contrasts of black and white, his "quivering lines and sudden splashes" came out of an "instinctive wisdom". These judgements were not directed only at its "plastic" aspects but also at its meaning, which was equally individualistic: "[h]e will not attach himself, to a class, a movement, or a school".[58] Not only was Orozco's art attributed a quality of overwhelming authenticity, its simplicity and directness were said to guarantee its truth as record. Responding to his exhibit of 'Mexico in Revolution' at the Art Sudents' League in 1929, *The Arts*' reviewer asserted: "his pictures are entirely without bravura or surface charm. But everything that he paints exists; it carries conviction".[59]

Part of Orozco's appeal to the Communist left may have lain in the fact that he was a first-hand witness ever ready to confirm the moral and aesthetic backslidings of his great rival Rivera. Moreover, despite the nightmarish and seemingly apocalyptic symbolism of some of his work, he was also an ally, showing at John Reed Club exhibitions in 1933-4 and making occasional contributions to New Masses.[60] In February 1936 he read the report of the delegation from the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers of mexico at the First American Artists Congress in New York.[61] Indeed, Orozco's reputation among Communists was such that a series of monographs on revolutionary artists planned by the Moscow-based International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists in 1935 was to have included him. The names of Jacob Burck, Sergei Eisenstein, and Lewis Mumford were initially proposed as possible authors, although eventually Meyer Schapiro agreed to take it on, apparently with the artist's

[58]Anita Brenner, 'A Mexican Rebel', *The Arts*, vol. 12, no. 4, October 1927, pp. 207-9. (Alma Reed gives a similar characterization of the artist in 'Orozco and Mexican Painting', *Creative Art*, vol. 9, no. 3, September 1931, pp.190-207.) Despite this, Orozco was convinced that *Idols Behind Altars* would only add to the Rivera cult, and made acid comments on Brenner in his letters to Charlot. See José Clemente Orozco, *The Artist in New York: Letters to Jean Charlot and Unpublished Writings (1925-1929)* (tr. Ruth L.C. Simms), Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1974, pp.35, 38, 40, 53, 55.

[59]D[orothy] L[efferts] M[oore], 'Exhibitions in New York', *The Arts*, vol. 15, no. 5, May 1929, p. 328. The contrast between Rivera's "Machiavellian shrewdeness and ruthless intrigue" and Orozco's authenticity and personal kindliness is also made by Beals, who nonethe-less gives an acute assessment of the relative merits of their art in the period. See Beals, *Glass Houses*, pp. 180-4.

[60]In 1936 Orozco wrote to Freeman from Guadalajara: "You know that I like black and white as much as big walls, and you may be sure that I will send you something for the 'New Masses' especially because the magnificent printing of perfect black on dull paper." (*sic*) José Clemente Orozco to Joseph Freeman, 22 March 1936, Joseph Freeman Collection, Box 32-16, Hoover Institution Archives, copyright Stanford University.

[61]Matthew Baigell & Julia Williams (ed.), *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists Congress*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1986, pp. 203-7.

consent. Given the shift to the Popular Front it is not surprizing perhaps that the series was unrealized, and in 1936 the IBRA was dissolved.[62]

Anita Brenner's 1933 article on Orozco for *New Masses* described him as "wholly a revolutionary" in that he did not "espouse any liberal or reformist cause", and "all the forces of his nature set him squarely against the *status quo*". At the same time, she acknowledged that the artist saw himself as a free agent who was not committed to either side of the struggle. However, by contrast with her 1925 essay for The Arts, Brenner now depicted Rivera as an opportunist, and implied that his work glossed over the unfinished business of the Mexican Revolution:

> While Rivera depicts a republic in the hands of workers and peasants as a fait accompli, Orozco cuts sharply into immediate realities ...[63]

When von Wiegand reviewed the Dartmouth cycle for *New Masses* two years later, she conceded that the artist's viewpoint appeared to be "humanitarian" and "semi-anarchist": the murals were critical of "bourgeois civilization" without showing any way for the proletariat to move beyond it, and their symbols were "literary, legendary, oblique, static". But this, she reasoned, was an effect of the "frozen ivory tower" where they were located. Orozco had been "unconsciously" influenced by the environment, and as a result his frescoes were "iconoclastic rather than revolutionary". None-the-less, it was "no exaggeration to say that ... in regard to color, composition, organic relation to architecture, and grandeur of concept", they "surpass by far any other

[62]This account is based on the correspondence from Alfred Durus of the IBRA to Louis Lozowick (Corresponding Secretary for the New York John Reed Club). See Alfred Durus to Louis Lozowick, 13 October 1935, 5 November 1935, 4 March 1936, 28 June 1936, 16 January 1937, 14 February 1937, 1 August 1937 (Archives of American Art, 1333: 738, 741, 755, 811, 885-6, 895-6, 920-1); and Meyer Schapiro to Lozowick, 19 June 1936 (1333: 805). See also Durus to Lozowick, 26 July 1936, and 5 August 1936 (Lozowick Papers, AAA, unfilmed). The Hugo Gellert Papers (AAA, unfilmed, Box 1) contain three letters from Durus to Gellert relating to this project, dated 3 October 1935, 23 November 1935, and 9 December 1936. The last of these includes a list of the proposed series, for which von Wiegand was to have written on Siqueiros. For Meyer Schapiro's political trajectory, see Andrew Hemingway, 'Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s', *Oxford Art Journal,* Vol. 17, No. 1, 1994, pp. 13-29.

[63]Anita Brenner, 'Orozco', *New Masses*, vol. 8, no. 7, February 1933, pp. 22-3. Although in Idols Behind Altars (p.278) Brenner, attributed to Rivera "[a]ll the poise, the social agility, the plausible facade lacking which Orozco suffers", she did not fundamentally question his integrity.

Another American fellow traveller recorded that Rivera himself acknowledged "no Mexican government can be really revolutionary; the Americans are too strong." Mexico's leaders "make even my pictures a cover for compromises." - Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remarking of an American*, New York, Garden City Publishing Co., 1937, pp. 244-π. Strong was in Mexico in 1927.

frescoes in this country".[64] In a review of Orozco's lithographs of November 1935, Stephen Alexander described him as "the greatest artist of our time in the Western hemisphere", contrasting him with that "cheaply opportunistic business man" Rivera:

> Terrifying in their explosive violence, these drawings are full of the hatred born of despair... With a heightened intensity and bitterness, he gives us his feelings about the degradation of women into prostitution; the sham picturesqueness which is commonly presented as Mexico to smug, wealthy tourists; the murder, starvation and chaos which are continuing facts in the lives of the Mexican working class.

Orozco, it seemed, appealled because his works looked so angry and uncompromising. Alexander dwelt at some length on the ambiguities of meaning in the prints, but found the violence of their style in itself revolutionary. This was an interesting perception – something like a valorization of Orozco in terms of an ostronanie effect.[65]

The contrast between Orozco and Rivera was developed most fully in von Wiegand's review of the latter's *Portrait of Mexico* of 1937, which had a text by the Lovestoneite Wolfe. While she could not gainsay the quality of Rivera's murals in the Ministry of Education and Chapingo, von Wiegand asserted –as her husband had five years before– that his talent declined when he "separated himself from the mainstream of revolutionary labor". However, she also argued that the limitations of his work were were an effect of the conjunction between his innate gifts of "*decorative lyricism*" and his embrace of the principle of "modernistic simplification", learnt during his period in the "Paris ateliers". This aesthetic outlook, while it could express the "age-old, voiceless, non-resistant struggle of the Indian", could not articulate "the progressive movement towards freedom through modern methods of struggle" represented by the Communist Party, to the principles of which Rivera had never really given plastic expression:

> Rivera's form, never infused with the directive energy of struggle as is Orozco's, deals with the surface pageantry of revolution –the lacquer red of clustered workers' flags bright as poinsettias in the sun; the depersonalized egg-shaped heads of workers under white sombreros; the ornamental rhythm of cartridge belts beautiful as Roman garlands.

By contrast, despite Orozco's lack of political commitment, he had produced a:

[64] Charmion von Wiegand, 'Our Greatest Mural Art', *New Masses*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2 April 1935, p. 34.

[65] Stephen Alexander, 'Orozco's Lithographs', *New Masses*, vol. 17, no. 8, 19 November 1935, p. 29.

> Mexican revolutionary art, totally different from European art, condensing the violence and struggle of civil war, the faith and tenderness of a people, into calligraphs of such naked simplicity that the most illiterate peon can read them, yet expressed in terms of pure plastic.[66]

While the larger political claims of this critique are implausible, it should not be interpreted simply as an aesthetic reflex of Stalinism. For what is striking about criticisms of Rivera from within the Communist movement in the 1930s is that they focus on what were perceived as the retardataire features and expressive limitations of his style. Orzoco and Siqueiros were hailed as his superiors not just for political reasons, but because they were more fully moderns, and in Orozco's case also more fully Mexican. Indeed, von Wiegand's affirmation of the qualities of Orozco's work matches up precisely with the endorsement of Expressionist tendencies in U.S. art that appears elsewhere in her writings for the left-wing press.[67] The idea that the artists of the left would have to draw on the formal resources of modernism to build a truly revolutionary art was a commonplace of Communist criticism in the 1930s, and although how exactly this was to be done remained unclear, the model of Expressionism was generally seen as key. It should also be noted that these judgements were in line with those in the mainstream art press in which Orozco's modernity and essential Mexicanness were, as we have seen, recurrent themes. Interestingly, this second characteristic of his work was accorded a positive value even before the shift in Communist thinking on nationalism and national cultures that accompanied the Popular Front. Having said this, at the end of the decade Orozco's work was judged to be in decline in the Communist press, whereas Siqueiros's 1940 exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York effectively revealed him as the only one of the big three whose work remained vital.[68]

[66] Charmion von Wiegand, 'Portrait of an Artist', *New Masses*, vol. 23 no. 6, 27 April 1937, pp. 24-26. Cf. Charmion von Wiegand to Joseph Freeman, 14 September 1933, Joseph Freeman Collection, Box 39-23, Hoover Institution Archives, copyright Stanford University. In this letter she reports Orozco saying of Rivera: "He gains no knowledge, he doesn't know the real principles of painting. He hides it by controversery [*sic*] -Believe me, when I say, no painter is a communist or any other kind of politician. He has other problems. Politics is not his business."

[67] Charmion von Wiegand: 'Fine Arts', *New Masses*, vol. 23, no. 9, 18 May 1937, pp. 32-3; 'Expressionism and Social Change', *Art Front*, vol. 2, no. 10, November 1936, pp. 10-13.

[68] "He [Orozco] is still the greatest artist of the Western Hemisphere although he has become a hater of humanity of late and his art is beginning to turn sick". Ray King, 'Fine Exhibit of Siqueiros Paintings', *Daily Worker*, 24 January 1940. Cf. Walt Anderson, 'The Vital Art of Mexico', *Daily Worker*, 23 May 1940. For the catalogue to the exhibition, see Museo Nacional de Arte, *Portrait of a Decade*, p. 220.

Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943, egg tempera, 352.5 x 517.5 cm, Hampton University's Archival and Museum Collection, Hampton University, Hampton, VA.

Artistic responses

Finally, the question remains: what did the artists make of all this? That is, did the status of Los Tres Grandes in Communist art criticism have a significant bearing on the ways in which Communist and fellow-travelling artists responded to their work? At the level of opinions adopted/positions taken, it certainly seems that the continuous disparagement of Rivera's North American murals represented a consensus that extended to key artists. We have already discussed Jacob Burck's critique of Rivera, which represented the viewpoint of one of the model proletarian artists of the Third Period, a powerful voice in the John Reed Club, and a painter whose own

murals were shipped to Moscow for exhibition.[69]

The Midwestern artist, Joe Jones, another exemplar of proletarianism, also proclaimed his disdain for the *Detroit Industry murals*, rubbing them with a wet finger to test if they were true fresco (!), and sneering at what he perceived to be their glorification of "mechanized men". He also made the rather odd comment that the clean-shaven Rivera was "babbling through his beard".[70] Even so, it is important to remember that Rivera's early murals did remain in high esteem, and indeed one might find formal affinities between the simple statuesque figure groupings and shallow space of some of his Ministry of Education panels and Jones's lost oil mural *Roustabouts* of 1935, in so far as we can know this from the sketch in the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts, and contemporary reproductions (fig. p. 13).[71]

Moreover, whatever the abuse heaped on him, Rivera seems to have maintained friendly relations with individual communists such as Hideo Noda and Philip Reisman. The Japanese-American Noda, who had studied at the California School of Fine Art and assisted Rivera at Rockefeller Center, later became active in the Communist underground and seems to have been a committed Stalinist –to the extent that he reportedly denounced Whittaker Chambers as a Trotskyite to his Party superior in late 1935. None the less, the influence of Rivera's *Making of a Fresco* (San Francisco Art Institute, 1931) on Noda's Piedmont High School fresco in California of 1937 is clearcut, both in terms of the motiv of a painting within a painting, and formally in terms of the stacking of the figures.[72] Reisman, one of the leading players in the New York John Reed Club, was still on sufficiently amicable terms with Rivera in 1933 to solicit a recommendation from him for a Guggenheim Fellowship, despite the fiasco of the artist's presentation to the club in January of the previous year (figs. pp. 20-21).[73]

[69]For Burck, see Andrew Hemingway, "*The Social Viewpoint in Art*": *American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-56*, Yale University Press, forthcoming, chapter 2. For his murals, see 'Five American Murals on the Soviet Union - by Jacob Burck', International Literature, no. 3, 1935, pp. 84-8.

[70]'Provincetown Makes Artist a Communist', undated clipping from *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 1933, Dr. John Green Papers, Missouri Historical Society.

[71]'American Murals by Joe Jones', *Interngtional Literature*, no. 2, 1934, p. 97.

[72]For Noda's secret work, see Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1978, pp. 128-30, 309. Kumamoto Prefectural Museum, *Hideo Benjamin Noda and Chuzo Tamotzu*, 1992, pp.12, 17-20. My thanks to Makiko Yamanashi for her translations from the Japanese and other assistence.

[73]See Diego Rivera to Philip Reisman, 25 October 1933 (Philip Reisman Papers, Syracuse University Library). Although some of Reisman's paintings and prints of the early thirties (such as tempera panel *The Negro in American History* and the etching *South*) testify to the artist's interest in the mural form, and he contributed a study on The *Post-War World* to MoMA's 1932 mural exhibition, his

There is, in any case, a kind of absurdity to the exponents of American proletarianism bombastically damning a muralist of Rivera's achievement at a time when their own efforts at monumental painting were not true murals but for the most part large oil paintings painted on canvas or pressed wood board. This was one cost of producing murals for truly proletarian environments such as the Communist Party Workers Center in New York, or an independent labour college in Arkansas –although arguably Rivera himself had demonstrated how such constraints could be surmounted in his much criticized portable fresco panels for the New Workers School of 1933.[74] In the event, the main opportunities for Communist artists to paint murals in public spaces came not through working-class and Communist organizations, but through the various patronage initiatives of the New Deal administration,[75] and most such murals were again not in fresco –let alone buon fresco– they were painted in oil or tempera on canvas or panel.

Despite all the lip service paid to Orozco's example, it was not that easy to follow. Two of the John Reed Club artists known to have been interested in his work, the Social Surrealists James Guy and Walter Quirt, drove up to Dartmouth to watch the murals in progress, and were greatly impressed, according to Guy's recollection. Perhaps something of the violence of Orozco's images got into the tempera sketches Quirt made for the club's 1933 mural competition –although to judge from photographs these had more diffuse and less hieratic compositions than either the Dartmouth or New School for Social Research murals. Closer in this latter regard are some of Quirt's contemporary panel paintings such as *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread* (1935, Wadsworth Athenauem, Hartford, Connecticut) –which were connected with Orozco by the *Daily Worker*'s art critic, the painter Jacob Kainen, in a review of Quirt's solo show at the Julien Levy gallery in early 1936.[76] But by the

only actual mural seems to have been the tempera panels on industrial themes he painted for the Occupational Therapy Ward of Bellevue Hospital, New York, in 1936-7 under the auspices of the WPA. (See Bush, *Philip Reisman*, pp.21-3, 45.) These do not suggest any significant engagement with the Mexican example.

[74]Jones's main mural sequence of the Third Period were painted for Commonwealth College at Mena, Arkansas, and are presumed destroyed. See Al Lehman, 'Brilliant Murals by Joe Jones Decorate Labor College Walls', *Daily Worker,* 31 August 1935. The Workers Center murals were by Phil Bard - see Walt Carmon, 'Phil Bard: American Artist', *International Literature*, no. 5, 1934, pp. 80-83.

[75]For a significant attempt by Communists and fellow travellers to use the WPA Federal Art Project to serve labour organizations, see Helen A. Harrison, 'Subway Art and the Public Use of Art Committee', *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2. 1981, pp. 3-11.

[76]University Gallery, University of Minnesota, *Walter Quirt: A Retrospective*, Minneapolis, 1980, pp.12, 19, 35. For repro-

time Quirt found the opportunity to paint a major mural on *The Growth of Medicine from Primitive Times* for the Bellevue Hospital Psychiatric Pavilion under WPA in 1937, his interest in the Mexican example seems to have waned, and in a lecture of 1939 he would recommend his contemporary muralists to found their style on the example of modernist easel painters such as Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Max Weber (fig. p. 29).[77]

The Coit Tower decorations in San Francisco apart,[78] the main corpus of frescoes produced by artists of the U.S. thirties left were the work of the Chicago-based muralists Edgar Britton, Edward Millman, and Mitchell Siporin, which I have discussed elsewhere. To judge from their recorded statements, Orozco was certainly the key figure for Millman and Siporin, and Millman's frescoes in the Post Office at Decatur, Illinois, clearly suggest the influence of the Dartmouth murals in their montage of sequential motivs, their shallow space, and sombre expressions. By contrast, the panels by Britton and Siporin at Decatur resemble more the clear hieratic groupings of Rivera's Ministry of Education or Chapingo murals than they do Orozco's work. The later murals by Millman and Siporin in the Saint Louis Post Office –the most important fresco cycle commissioned under the New Deal– probably come closest to Orozco of any monumental painting produced in the United States in this period, but they have a more naturalistic space and modelling of figures, and correspondingly depend less on expressionistic colour and caricatural types than his.

While one explanation for these differences may lie in the constraints of working for the Treasury Section of Fine Arts –and certainly Siporin's contemporary prints and tempera paintings for the Federal Art Project are less naturalistic– it may be that the expressionist elements in Orozco's mural style were too associated with pessimism and notions of the artist's inner torment for them to be adaptable to the progressive vision of the Democratic Front. In any case, given what was perceived as the emphatic 'Mexicanness' of his work, any more direct pastiche would have been inappropriate to artists of the Democratic

ductions of three of Quirt's mural sketches, see 'American Revolutionary Paintings by Walter Quirt', *International Literature*, no. 4, 1934, pp. 66-8. For Social Surrealism, see Ilene Susan Fort, 'American Social Surrealism', *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1982, pp. 8-20.

77 'On Mural Painting' (typescript), Walter Quirt Papers, AAA571:371-7. Cf. Walter Quirt, 'On Mural Painting', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, pp.78-81. By the early 1940s, Quirt's commitment to Marxism seems to have eroded, and he had also become a committed modernist. For his later largely negative view of Orozco, see the two letters he wrote from Guadalajara to Leila Purcell (20 December 1962) and Eleanor Quirt (23 December 1962), AAA570:35-8, 227-9.

78 See Lee, Painting on the Left, chapter.

Front seeking to produce an art geared to the "native tradition" of North American culture.[79]

Millman and Siporin had a formative influence on the young African American painter Charles White, who studied in their studios while working on the Federal Art Project in Chicago, under which he painted his first murals, such as *Five Great American Negroes* (1939, Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). Presumably they reinforced his already established interest in Mexican art. In 1946, White and his then wife, the sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, travelled to Mexico with a letter of introduction to Siqueiros, spending a year in the country, and studying at the Taller de Grafica Popular.[80] In its focus on 'Negro History', that is on the active struggles of African Americans, White's worked served as a corrective to that of Millman and Siporin, which only went as far as depicting struggles on their behalf. White was a longterm communist, and although he was clear that "all working class people have a common interest and that there is a common solution for their problems",.[81] his conception of African Americans –in line with the Communist Party's– was of a subject nationality engaged in a struggle for national liberation that was one component within the larger class and anti-imperialist struggle. The example of Mexican muralism would thus have been relevant to White not just as a stylistic exemplar of revolutionary art, but as a modern 'national style' produced by a non-white people. The distinctive stylized physiognomies that he developed for representing African Americans in the 1940s should probably be understood as an attempt to produce something equivalent.[82]

[79] Andrew Hemingway, '"An Unbroken Lugubrious Quality": Mexican Muralism and the Style of the Democratic Front in the Midwest', *Crónicas*, forthcoming.

[80] Benjamin Horowitz, *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White*, Los Angeles, Ward Ritchie Press, 1967, pp. 14-15. Cf. White's biographical statement in his application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Charles White Papers, AAA3191:1177-1240; his statement on Mexican art quoted in Walter Christmas, 'Artist Seeks Life of Man on Street', *Daily Compass*, 10 February 1950 (AAA3194:320); and Charles White, 'Path of a Negro Artist', *Masses & Mainstream*, Vol. 8, No. 4, April 1955, p. 40. See also Lizetta LeFalle-Collins & Shifra M. Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School*, New York, American Federation of Arts, 1996, pp. 55-6.

[81] Robert A. Davis, 'The Art Notebook', *Chicago Sunday Bee*, 6 October 1940.

[82] Interest in Siqueiros's influence on American artists has inevitably focussed on Pollock, although the function he plays in this regard seems confined to that of a catalyst for Pollock's technical experiments, rather than as a formal or iconographic model. (See especially Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, *Siqueiros/Pollock, Pollock/Siqueiros*, 1995). Among the Abstract Expressionists to be, some of Guston's work of the 1930s is closer in spirit, most notably *Bombardment* (1937-8, Private

White's debts to Mexican art were evident to reviewers at least as early as 1940, when a critic in the Chicago Daily News compared the figures in his mural History of the Negro Press and another work at the American Negro Exposition of that year with Rivera's.[83] And in reviews of the postwar period, rather generalized comparisons between White's style and that of Orozco and Rivera are commonplace.[84] However, it may be that Siqueiros was just as important a source. Thus while White's major tempera mural T*he Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (1943, Hampton University Museum, Hampton Virginia) can not match the dynamism of Siqueiros's *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* in its use of stairwell space and the style does not reference documentary photography, the melée of overlapping motivs and the central image of the machine press are distinctly reminiscent of it. Although he had not yet been to Mexico, White may well have seen photographs of the Electricians' Union mural (fig. p. 36).

Moreover, the heavily modelled stylized heads that feature in White's drawings, lithographs and paintings throughout the 1940s have a significant resemblance to the stark chiaroscuro modelling and arbitrary lighting of Siqueiros's portraits of the early 1930s, which White may have known through lithographs, if not the paintings, before his Mexican sojourn. It is perhaps symptomatic that in a review of White's exhibition at the ACA Gallery in New York of 1950, the *Daily Worker*'s Charles Corwin described the artist as "a disciple of the Mexican school of social art", but criticized his stylized forms for failing to achieve the "coordinated" overall effects that made Siqueiros's works such as Proletarian Victim, The Sob, and Echo of a Scream signify so powerfully. His monumental, richly modeled heads" were, in themselves, usually the most satisfactory part of his work.[85]

In 1935 the Communist Party's General Secretary, Earl Browder, observed that while the Party aimed "to give political guidance directly to its members in all fields of work, including the arts", there was "no fixed 'Party line' by which works of art can automatically be separated into sheeps and goats".[86] This was certainly true, and while the Party press was the forum for fierce

Collection), which suggests the influence of Siqueiros's New York paintings of 1936-7 in its careening perspective effect and apoclayptic imagery of fascist violence - as Patricia Hills has noted in Boston University & Bread and Roses, *Social Concern and Urban Realism*, p. 55.

[83] 'Around the Galleries', *Chicago Daily News*, 13 July 1940.

[84] E.g., 'Charles White', *Art News*, vol. 49, no. 1, March 1950, p. 52.

[85] Charles Corwin, 'Charles White's Exhibit an Important Event in the Art World', *Daily Worker*, 20 February 1950.

[86] Earl Browder, 'Communism in Literature' (address to opening session of the American Writers' Congress, 26 April 1935), in his *Communism in the United States,* New York, International Publishers, 1935, p. 313.

and sometimes vitriolic exchanges on culture, it did not enunciate any single coercive consensus on Mexican muralism, or any other significant matter. As we have seen, there does seem to have been a broad measure of agreement as to the relative merits and demerits of *Los Tres Grandes*, but even so, how their different examples could be adapted to U.S. circumstances was far from clearcut. This was a problem individual artists were left to struggle with for themselves. In the end, Mexican muralism stood for a somewhat ill –defined grouping of features that made up a generic idiom rather than a clearly defined set of alternatives– and this despite the heavy moral and ideological connotations that Communist critical discourse sought to attach to the work of each of its main exponents.

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