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## State, Politics and Ideology in Mexican Muralism

Warren Carter

*The practical meaning of militant art should be judged with recourse to its positive effects within the social movement that generates it. For this reason, the work of the Mexican muralists, when freed from party judgements and placed in the context of the social movements that conceived it, and owing to its expression of a sincere hatred of oppression and a fundamental sympathy towards the masses, has achieved its ultimate end by serving as a constant stimulus to mobilise on behalf of change. This remains a possibility, Schapiro pointed out, because the artist who is identified with the popular struggle and who finds his principle [sic] source of inspiration in the people's lives along with their struggle, contributes to the acquisition of greater class-consciousness and also to the building of faith in that struggle.<sup>1</sup>*

Diego 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* in August 1924.<sup>2</sup> 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. He also played an important role in the Partido Comunista Mexicano (Mexican Communist Party or PCM) in the years 1923–1925 and he represented it at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern (Communist International) in 1924. Wolfe's analysis of both the Mexican Revolution and the art of Rivera – the only artist he singled out for special mention – proved to be extremely prescient. 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 American interests, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

1. Alicia Azuela, 'Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 17, no 1, 1994, p 59

2. Bertram D Wolfe, 'Art and Revolution in Mexico', *The Nation*, vol 119, no 3086, 27 August 1924, pp 207–208

3. *Ibid*, p 207

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’.<sup>4</sup> And, as Andrew Hemingway has made clear, ‘no Communist writer was to register so incisively the potentially mythical function of the murals’.<sup>5</sup>

It is this ‘potentially mythical function’ of Mexican Muralism that Leonard Folgarait focuses upon in his *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order*, published in 1998.<sup>6</sup> Whilst *los tres grandes* or ‘three great ones’ – Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros – have all been the subject of popular biographies, numerous critical texts and more serious scholarly essays focusing upon particular works, Folgarait is the first, and the only scholar to date, to attempt to produce an overarching synthesis of Mexican Muralism in the years 1920–1940. In doing this he employs a diverse and kaleidoscopic range of theoretical resources including the work of Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, Stuart Hall, Alex Callinicos and Terry Eagleton – to name just a few – to produce highly sophisticated interpretations of certain works. Yet I want to argue here that, despite these strengths, it is ultimately his indebtedness to the theoretical work of Nicos Poulantzas and Michel Foucault – both students of Louis Althusser – that produces a somewhat deterministic account of the relationship between the Mexican state and mural painting in the period that largely negates any meaningful concept of human agency. And the resulting reductive and largely pessimistic reading of the murals is only reinforced by a dependence upon revisionist histories of the Mexican Revolution that downplay the role of popular subaltern forces to interpret it as little more than an exercise in state-building on behalf of a cynical and calculating bourgeoisie wishing to maintain their control over governmental power.

Folgarait rightly begins with a political analysis of the Mexican Revolution. In exploring the relationship between the uprising of 1910 and the transfer of power from the autocratic Porfirio Díaz to Francisco Madero in 1911, and the subsequent presidencies of Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas, Folgarait writes that Mexico ‘was living a post-Revolutionary reality and using Revolutionary rhetoric to express it, using a Revolutionary culture as a voice for post-Revolutionary society’.<sup>7</sup> The Revolution was the catalyst for the emergence of a modern capitalist state in Mexico and as such the country remained:

... a land of cheap labour, where no worker could claim ownership of the means of production and toiled only to fatten the profit margins and dividends of usually absent owners.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with recent revisionist scholarship Folgarait argues that the Revolution ultimately benefited those who became the new elite during the post-Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Political power remained centralized, 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 the years 1920–1924. After providing this succinct revisionist

4. Ibid, p 208

5. Andrew Hemingway, ‘American Communists View Mexican Muralism: Critical and Artistic Responses’, in *Crónicas: El muralismo, producto de la revolución mexicana, en América*, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, 2002, p 19

6. Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: Art of the New Order*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998

7. Ibid, p 6

8. Ibid, p 120

9. This scholarship includes Jean Meyer, Enrique Krauze and Cayetano Reyes, ‘Historia de la revolución Mexicana, período 1924–1928’, *Estado y sociedad con Calles*, Vol 11, Colegio de México, Mexico City, 1978, Ramón Ruíz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1911–1924*, W W Norton, New York, 1980, Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución Mexicana*, Era, Mexico City, 1973; and Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo*, Era, Mexico City, 1975.

analysis of the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent consolidation of bourgeois control over the state Folgarait then moves on to explore how successive post-revolutionary governments ‘would appropriate and engage, among other means of mass public rhetoric, large wall-paintings as advertisements for [their] policies’.<sup>10</sup> To do this he concentrates principally upon Rivera’s *History of Mexico*, painted in 1929–1930 and 1934–1935 in the National Palace, and Siqueiros’ *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, executed in 1939–1940 in the headquarters of the Mexican Electricians Union, although he also engages with certain earlier murals including Orozco’s at the National Preparatory School, painted in 1923–1926, and Rivera’s at the Secretariat of Public Education, begun in 1923 and completed in 1929, all in Mexico City.

Folgarait’s adherence to Poulantzas’ theoretical work on the nature of the capitalist state is most explicit when he attempts to ‘make a rough and purposefully simplified equivalence’ between this theory and the composition/style/content of Rivera’s National Palace stairway mural.<sup>11</sup> For Folgarait the compressed ‘massing together of portraits of historical players’ who were pivotal in the making of modern Mexico deliberately emphasizes a juridical relationship over and above any economic or political one, thereby eliding the actual realities of class domination that characterized the Calles regime, the period during which the mural was commissioned, conceived and largely completed.<sup>12</sup> This is a promising approach that takes Poulantzas’ insights into how the capitalist state ‘presents itself as embodying the general interest of the whole of society’ by representing the ‘people’ not as ‘agents of production distributed in social classes, but as an accumulation of individual citizens’, equal in their relation to the abstract and formal laws of the juridical system, to determine the ideological content of Rivera’s mural.<sup>13</sup> History is here reduced to an accumulation of portraits so that ‘the disembodiment of the real, three-dimensional, charismatic qualities of individuals and events into ciphers occupying a unified plane was being practised in politics and in art’.<sup>14</sup> Yet the theoretical implications of Poulantzas’ work go far deeper than this ‘simplified equivalence’ to circumscribe the meanings that Folgarait finds in the other murals that he analyses, and to understand the problematic implications of this we need to take a closer look at this theoretical model of the state.<sup>15</sup>

Poulantzas’ *Political Power and Social Classes* was published in France in 1968 but, because it was not translated until 1973, his ideas on the nature of the capitalist state first emerged in English through his polemic with Ralph Miliband in the *New Left Review* in the early 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Poulantzas’ critique of Miliband’s *The State in Capitalist Society* was epistemological and centred on the question of method.<sup>17</sup> Writing from a structuralist perspective indebted to Louis Althusser, Poulantzas attacked Miliband for reducing the state and social classes to the ‘inter-personal relations’ of their constituents, so that

... the agents of a social formation, ‘men’, are not considered the bearers of objective instances (as they are for Marx) but as the genetic principle of the level of the social whole.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst Miliband later accepted these criticisms, he rightly pointed to the faults of what he termed ‘hyperstructuralism’: that ‘which deprives “agents” of any freedom of choice and manoeuvre and turns them into

10. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 7

11. Ibid, p 121

12. Ibid

13. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, New Left, London, 1973, p 123

14. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 117

15. Ibid, p 121

16. See Nicos Poulantzas, ‘The Problem of the Capitalist State’, *New Left Review* 58, November/December 1969, pp 67–78; and Ralph Miliband, ‘The Capitalist State: Reply to Nicos Poulantzas’, *New Left Review* 59, January/February 1970, pp 53–60, both reprinted in Robin Blackburn, ed, *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory*, Fontana, Suffolk, 1972, pp 238–262.

17. Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1969

18. Poulantzas, ‘The Problem of the Capitalist State’, op cit, p 70

19. Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p 73
20. Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', op cit, p 74; and Miliband, 'The Capitalist State: Reply to Nicos Poulantzas', op cit, p 57. For an attempt at extending the somewhat limiting 'relative autonomy' formulation of Poulantzas via an alternative framework that goes further in recognizing the specificity of the state, while still acknowledging the determinant role of the relations production, thereby maintaining the valuable conceptual power of Marxism to determine the basic dynamics of a particular social formation, see Fred Block, 'The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State', *Socialist Revolution*, vol 7, no 3, May 1977, pp 6–28, and 'Beyond Relative Autonomy: State Managers as Historical Subjects', *Socialist Register*, 1980, pp 227–242. For an analysis of the Mexican Revolution that challenges the more recent state-centred studies of social revolutions, in particular the work of Theda Skocpol, see Alan Knight, 'Social Revolution: A Latin American Perspective', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol 9, no 2, 1990, pp 175–202.
21. Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Harvester, Sussex, 1982, p 208. See Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, footnote 34, p 207, for an acknowledgement of this debt to Foucault.
22. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, footnote 21, p 206. Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986; and John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico:*

'bearers' of objective forces which they are unable to affect'.<sup>19</sup> By emphasizing the structural dimension of the state, determined by the nature and requirements of the mode of production, Poulantzas seems to pass over the very specifics of class struggle, implicitly submitting the contingency of these forces to the more general structural necessities of capital accumulation. So if Miliband remained an 'instrumentalist' by virtue of his emphasis on how the bourgeoisie 'almost physically "corners" the state', Poulantzas' account of the relative autonomy of the state is then similarly bound by a tendency to reduce those who run it to 'the merest functionaries and executants of policies imposed upon them by "the system"'.<sup>20</sup> This type of sociological functionalism has much in common with the kind of Foucauldian project that attempts 'to create a history of the modes by which our culture, human beings are made into subjects', and Folgarait is clearly indebted to both.<sup>21</sup>

As I mentioned at the outset, these theoretical problems are only compounded by historiographical ones. At the beginning of his book Folgarait asserts that the 'most useful' recent revisionist accounts of the Mexican Revolution are Alan Knight's two-volume *The Mexican Revolution* and John Mason Hart's *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, published in 1986 and 1987 respectively, and he refers to them intermittently throughout his text.<sup>22</sup> Yet these two authors quite clearly and self-consciously set themselves squarely against revisionist accounts. Whereas the latter, including the work of Jean Meyer, Ramón Ruiz, Arnaldo Córdova and Arturo Anguiano, amongst others – all of whom Folgarait references – have challenged the very existence of a Mexican Revolution by downplaying the role of popular forces in shaping the political agenda of successive governments in the period that Folgarait looks at, Knight and Hart have instead asserted the importance of the Mexican peasantry and industrial working class in determining the political agenda.<sup>23</sup> In this they are in fact 'post-revisionist' and Knight is clear in connecting his and Hart's work to the earlier scholarship of John Womack and Frank Tannenbaum, whose accounts of the Revolution did much to shape its interpretation as an essentially popular, agrarian and peasant one that preceded such critiques.<sup>24</sup> According to Knight, what revisionist accounts tend to share is: (1) a critical stance towards claims that the Revolution was progressive or egalitarian in any way; (2) an assertion that the true makers of the 'Revolution' were in fact political elites with the masses being merely 'indifferent spectators, malleable clients or miserable victims'; (3) an emphasis on the corrupt and self-serving nature of the Revolution; (4) a consequent stress on the Revolution as a political rather than social transformation; (5) a denial of any claims that the Revolution may have had anything resembling any meaningful socialist component; (6) a corresponding stress on historical continuity over historical rupture; (7) a rehabilitation of the pre-revolutionary Porfirian period; and (8) a reassessment of Adolfo de la Huerta's regime of 1913–1914, whose counter-revolutionary character is questioned, or even denied.<sup>25</sup> So, despite Folgarait's insistence that Knight and Hart's work is the 'most useful', on the basis of his dependence on the revisionist historiography, he consistently emphasizes all but the last two of these points throughout his text.

Whilst there are important differences between the approaches of Knight and Hart to the Mexican Revolution – the former focuses

*The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1987

23. See note 9.

24. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, vol 1, p xi; and 'Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France', *Past and Present* 134, February 1992, p 174. Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1933 and John Womack Jr, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, Vintage, New York, 1969

25. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, pp 166–167

26. Wolfe, 'Art and Revolution in Mexico', op cit, p 207

27. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, p 173

28. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 12

29. *Ibid*, p 16. Whilst Folgarait does at least acknowledge Miliband's critique of Poulantzas with a reference to his *Class Power and State Power*, Verso, London, 1983, in footnote 84, p 225, Poulantzas' work on the nature of the capitalist state is otherwise used uncritically in the text.

almost exclusively upon internal forces and places an emphasis upon the revolutionary agency of the peasantry; the latter sees it more through the lens of anti-imperialism and the impact of North American capital, and looks more to the role played by the urban working class as agents of revolutionary change – they nevertheless share a bottom-up approach to events that stresses the importance of archival research and a focus upon local and popular pressures. And if Wolfe was one of the first to write about the 'mythical' component of Mexican Muralism, he also importantly 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', and in this sense it is important to talk of not one but in fact three revolutions involving a complex interplay of class forces.<sup>26</sup> The first was the agrarian-based insurrection led by Emilio Zapata and supported by the forces of Pancho Villa in the south. Mobilizing guerrilla insurgency they advocated – and implemented in Morelos – a radical redistribution of land to the Mexican peasantry, and it was this component of the Revolution that provided the impetus for the Cárdenas government's radical policy of agrarian reform from the mid-1930s onwards. The second was the incipient proletarian revolution by urban workers in the modern factories – its power was channelled through national unions such as Casa del Obrero Mundial (COM, or House of the World Worker), and the Confederación Regional de Trabajadores de México (CROM, or Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers) – alliances of self-governing unions which exercised considerable power through their armed 'red batallions'. And lastly, there was the centralizing and modernizing bourgeois revolution of the enlightened middle class that championed constitutional reform – the one that Folgarait focuses upon in his analysis of the state-funded mural programme from 1920 to 1940. And whilst the post-revisionist histories stop before 1920 – the period preceding the state-funded mural programme directed by Jose Vasconcelos in his capacity as Secretary for Education – Knight is clear that, although the state may have attempted to manipulate the political agenda for its own ends, in the 'post-revolutionary period' of the 1920s and 1930s subaltern groups such as the nascent peasant leagues and trade unions nevertheless exerted enough pressure to challenge the revisionist stress on the unfettered power of bourgeois politicians to force agrarian reforms that 'went beyond the mere consolidation of neo-Porfirian elites, or the construction of a cynical, centralising state'.<sup>27</sup>

By effectively collapsing state and capital, and reducing the concept of class to 'a genre of discourse', Folgarait is precluded from making any meaningful distinction between the different post-revolutionary governments that succeeded Obregón's presidency, so that the radical pro-labour government of the socialist-agrarian Cárdenas becomes practically indistinguishable from the conservative and anti-labour government of Calles that preceded it.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the concept of artistic agency and its complicated relationship to state patronage is elided at the outset by the assertion that 'in the end there can be no autonomy between agents acting with purpose in the same arena'.<sup>29</sup> From then on it simply becomes a matter of reading the imperatives of state ideology into the various murals sponsored by successive post-revolutionary governments. As a consequence Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros become

30. There is a continuity here with his earlier work such as when he states in his *So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' 'The March of Humanity' and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p 33, 'Neither in this nor in later chapters will I consider the subjective motives of the artist in the planning and execution of the mural. Rather, his work on the *March* and the nature of the patronage he worked under are explained as the mechanics by which the dominant ideology of the Mexican regime reproduced itself, through the making of a very particular representation of that very ideology', and in his earlier work on Rivera's *History of Mexico*, 'Revolution as Ritual: Diego Rivera's National Palace Mural', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 14, no 1, 1991, footnote 5, p 31, 'This essay does not consider the role of the artist in its deliberations, partly for lack of space, but mostly for reasons of methodology. I want to explain the look and content of the mural as produced by extra-personal forces.'
31. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 189
32. *Ibid*, p 189
33. Such an analysis is essentially precluded by the nature of Folgarait's argument as when he asserts that: 'the finding and tracing of strong, documented effects by the murals upon their audience [is] impossible because such effects were simply not part of the program'. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 196.
34. *Ibid*, pp 62, 68

unreflexive agents of counter-revolution, the political differences between the three, and between them and the post-revolutionary governments that patronized them, being largely insignificant.<sup>30</sup> Thus Siqueiros' *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, produced under the more left-leaning presidency of Cárdenas, in a union headquarters rather than a government building, represents just more of the same. If the ideological content of Rivera's National Palace mural fulfils the propagandistic requirements of the post-revolutionary state in its emphasis on abstract juridical relations of equality over and above existing exploitative relations of production, Siqueiros' mural uncritically gives visual form to the process whereby 'workers [were] pulled irresistibly into a final and static social slot, and subjected to the hub of official power'.<sup>31</sup> Meaning is consumed rather than produced, and the ambivalent figure of the revolutionary on the final wall of the mural becomes a metaphor for the fate of labour in the late 1930s, 'changed from a participant into a spectator of national economics and politics'.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Siqueiros was a staunch Stalinist and Rivera had already been labelled a Trotskyist by 1929 is seemingly irrelevant as political differences are swept aside.

Folgarait's theoretical model, predicated upon revisionist histories, can only account for these political transformations – and the state-sponsored murals that, for him, passively register them – as emanating purely and simply from the structural requirements of the capitalist mode of production, now fully restored after the turbulent years of the Revolution. Politicians become the functionaries, and artists the propagandists, of policies that necessarily served the long-term processes of capital accumulation. Yet this conflation of state and capital, and the subsequent emphasis upon the state as the exclusive source of all power, effaces the actualities of real class conflict – the everyday struggles of Mexican peasants and workers who actively fought for the concessions made to them in the late 1930s. Furthermore, such an analysis necessarily sidelines the ways in which the seemingly monolithic and undialectical meanings ascribed to the murals may have been negotiated by the audiences that viewed them. Despite his claims to the contrary, Folgarait never adequately addresses this problem, rarely examining how the murals were looked at, talked about, attacked, defended or engaged with. And when he does the details only seem to contradict his larger thesis.<sup>33</sup> Thus, despite the unequivocal press reaction to Orozco's mural cycle in the National Preparatory School – the viewer would respond with 'an anarchistic fury if he is penniless or, if wealthy [his knees would] buckle with fright' – and the fact that they became a significant focal point for struggle between conservative and Communist students, any critical reading is undercut by the centrality of *The Trench*, which in its reference to revolutionary resurrection 'participates in the mythology of the post-revolution'.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the radical meaning of Rivera's work in the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico City, in particular *Entrance into the Mine* and *Exit from the Mine*, may have been blunted by the removal of the revolutionary poem by Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz on the orders of Vasconcelos, yet these panels remain a powerful visual statement against the abject humiliation of the Mexican working class under capitalism. This is not to challenge the scale of the propaganda campaign launched by Vasconcelos, or the necessity of the visual in a

largely illiterate society, but merely to reassert the importance of human agency and experience in the production of meaning.<sup>35</sup>

A useful counterpoint in this respect can be found in Mary Kay Vaughan's analysis of the state-sponsored educational programme that opened new schools in the countryside in post-revolutionary Mexico, another of Obregón's directives charged to Vasconcelos.<sup>36</sup> Folgarait refers to her work in his analysis of one of Rivera's murals on the western side of the Courtyard of Labour in the Secretariat, entitled *The Rural Teacher*. For him, this image is 'a visual equivalent of the Secretary's unbounded arrogance towards his charges' in that 'they were basically unformed, incapable, and unworthy without his program. Soon they will be transformed [or read interpellated in the Althusserian sense] by the ritual of official education into newborn, vital, and productive citizens'.<sup>37</sup>

The period in which Rivera was working on these murals in the Secretariat was that of the already-mentioned counter-revolutionary de la Huerta rebellion under which the newly founded state-sponsored schools in the countryside were attacked as overt symbols of revolutionary policy. Whereas Folgarait quotes Vaughan's interpretation of the new texts taught in these schools as a form of 'benevolent authoritarianism' that 'legitimised social stratification and ... characteristics of the dominant class', this claim is tempered elsewhere when she claims that

The school became the arena for intense, often violent negotiations over power, culture, knowledge, and rights ... If the school functioned to inculcate a state ideology for purpose of rule, it also served communities when they needed to contest state policies. It provided ideological, technical, and organisational tools to do so ...<sup>38</sup>

If, as Knight asserts, the post-revolutionary 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, as he argues, the government could not necessarily control the outcome.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the revisionist interpretations that essentially underpin Folgarait's analysis of political events between 1920 and 1940, the post-revisionism of the likes of Knight and Hart 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? Or, following Vaughan's more nuanced analysis of the state-sponsored educational programme, that such groups may have appropriated the murals for their own ideological ends? These questions were addressed by the radical art historian Meyer Schapiro in a review of Wolfe and Rivera's *Portrait of America* that was published in the pages of the journal *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937.<sup>40</sup> Written during the period of the left-leaning presidency of Cárdenas, Schapiro asks the all-important question, and one that clearly goes to the heart of Folgarait's account:

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

36. Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico, 1880–1928*, Northern Illinois University Press, Illinois, 1982

37. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, p 79

38. Ibid, p 80, and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940*, University of Arizona Press, Tuscon, Arizona, 1997, p 7

39. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, p 175

40. Meyer Schapiro, 'The Patrons of Revolutionary Art', *Marxist Quarterly*, vol 1, no 3, October–December 1937, pp 463, 465–466. Bertram Wolfe and Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America*, Covici-Friede, New York, 1937. Whilst Folgarait mentions Schapiro's review in his conclusion, he never really successfully answers the questions that it poses in relation to the argument, and the interpretation of the murals, that he constructs. Folgarait, *Mural Painting*, op cit, pp 191–203.

If Mr Wolfe is correct in attributing the official socialism of the regime to a counter-revolutionary intention, what shall we say of the mural paintings ... nearly all of them on the walls of public buildings and created under the patronage of this regime?<sup>41</sup>

Put more pointedly, Schapiro asks, ‘what are the criteria of the revolutionary or even liberal character of a work of art or of its admittedly political content?’<sup>42</sup> And, ‘Are these criteria to be found in the intentions of the artist or in the interests of the group which pays for the work?’<sup>43</sup> For Schapiro it was not necessarily either group that determined meaning in the work of art, but instead the intended audience, ie ‘in the momentary effects on those to whom the work is addressed’ and moreover, ‘effects which largely depend on changing circumstances’.<sup>44</sup> Following Schapiro then, a properly materialist account of Mexican Muralism would need to discard the cosy overarching theoretical certainties of Poulantzas and Foucault for the exigencies of a far messier and more complex history of active struggle – one in which class represents more than just a term of discourse in its more limited Althusserian sense. Or as Schapiro suggested:

... to resolve these questions of the political character of Mexican art, it would be necessary to analyse the conditions of its creation, its effect on popular sentiment, its place in the whole cultural and social movement of the time.<sup>45</sup>

These important questions are taken up in relation to Rivera’s state-sponsored murals by David Craven.<sup>46</sup> Building on Schapiro he asserts that

The meaning of an artwork is a site of contestation, and never more so than when popular forces are mobilised, as they often were in the 1920s and 1930s, against the policies of the government responsible for commissioning the public artworks.<sup>47</sup>

And like Schapiro he argues that ‘the informal response by the public to the work and the artist’s avowed political position’ are just as important ‘as the official line of the government patron’, and, as such, the meaning of the monumental public murals painted by Rivera cannot simply ‘be reduced to the ideological needs of the Mexican state’.<sup>48</sup> For Craven, Rivera’s murals in the Secretariat of Public Education ‘ideologically coupled’ a representation of the agrarian revolution of Zapata with the proletarian revolution of the ‘red battalions’, during a period in which the post-revolutionary government had to pull upon these more radical forces to combat the threat posed by a resurgent Porfirian army in the mid-1920s and the rise of religious reaction during the Cristiada from 1927–1929.<sup>49</sup> And if the patronage of Obregón and Calles was a direct consequence of this greater need to orchestrate a new united front at such a critical juncture in the early life of the post-revolutionary state then it also permitted an opening up of the public sphere so that the left had a certain degree of room for manoeuvre, even to the extent of being able to criticize leaders of the very same government that commissioned art in these years. For as Craven makes clear, if in the lower sections of the far left, and last to be completed, panel of the National Palace mural Rivera painted the roots of social conflict, ie martyred campesinos and exploited labourers, then in the top section – below

41. Schapiro, ‘The Patrons of Revolutionary Art’, op cit, p 464

42. Ibid, p 464

43. Ibid

44. Ibid, pp 464–465

45. Ibid, p 466

46. David Craven, *Diego Rivera: As Epic Modernist*, G K Hall and Co, New York, 1997

47. Ibid, p 62

48. Ibid

49. Ibid, p 74. The Cristiada was an attempted counter-revolution against the anti-clericalism enshrined within the Mexican Constitution of 1917 and enforced by Calles from 1927 onwards.

the all-important figure of Karl Marx – he painted the causes of this conflict, ie the role of foreign capital; corrupt journalists; and the triad of reactionary forces leading the country in 1934–1935: military leaders, conservative clergy and traitorous politicians, including a portrait of Calles.<sup>50</sup> And at the top, to the right of Marx, Rivera shows workers being repressed, above which they are shown rising up in armed revolt in Mexico City. As Craven makes explicit, Rivera painted these scenes at the exact same moment when these subaltern forces were actually mobilizing in the streets in support of the Cárdenas administration against those reactionary forces loyal to Calles.<sup>51</sup> By situating the production of Rivera’s murals within the moments of actual political struggle in which they were produced Craven can convincingly argue, contra Folgarait, that Rivera

... knew that the meaning of his art was situated at the unsettled intersection of broadly contested interest both within a contradictory, nonmonolithic state and between this federal government and various popular movements periodically mobilized to influence its direction, sometimes with undeniable success.<sup>52</sup>

Knight links the 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 La Plaza de las Tres Culturas just ten days before the opening ceremony of the Mexico Olympics.<sup>53</sup> 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’.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, the theoretical anti-humanism and emphasis upon the discursive that is a marked component of Folgarait’s analysis 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. Just as the publication of Poulantzas’ *Political Power and Social Classes* that year quite clearly demonstrated the author’s embrace of Althusserianism, as Perry Anderson makes clear: ‘structuralism proper ... passed through the ordeal of May and re-emerged phoenix-like on the other side – extenuated and modulated’.<sup>56</sup> If structuralism was sympathetic to Marxism, at least in its Althusserian manifestations, then poststructuralism was, by contrast, resolutely anti-Marxist; emphasized the discursive over and above the ideological; and was even more vociferously anti-humanist – these themes being exemplified particularly in the work of Foucault. And, if for Knight the revisionist accounts of the Mexican Revolution were useful in that they compelled post-revisionists like himself and Hart to produce more sophisticated analyses of the Revolution, ones that patiently recovered the role that the peasantry and an emergent

50. *Ibid*, p 116

51. *Ibid*

52. *Ibid*, p 62

53. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, p 189. John Womack Jr, ‘The Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920’, in Leslie Bethell, ed, *Cambridge History of Latin America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p 81

54. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, op cit, p 189

55. *Ibid*, p 196

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

proletariat actually played in shaping the outcome of political events, then, in the same way, any attempt at rehabilitating the revolutionary claims for the art of *los tres grandes* within the social history of art will have to come to terms with Folgarait's account. For despite its many problems – in terms of both the theoretical and the historiographical questions that I have enumerated here – in its close attention to archival research and its sustained visual analysis of certain works it still remains the most sophisticated interpretation of Mexican Muralism that we have to date.

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Some of the ideas set forth here were initially thought about in relation to an extended book review, 'The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico', published in the *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 23, no 2, 2000; I would like to thank the editors of the *OAJ* for their kind permission to reproduce some of that material in a different form here.

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