INTRODUCTION

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Latin America, it has long been recognized, has experienced modernity differently from Europe or the United States.[1] In the region, twentieth-century Mexican mural painting holds a unique place in the search for an aesthetic form capable of encompassing that experience at both the national and the hemispheric levels. Through a monumental narrative art, epic in scope and size, the artists of the mural movement aimed to make art a weapon in the political struggles of Mexico's peasants and workers during the crucial decades of national renovation after the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution. In their search for a project of national renewal in the Revolution's aftermath, those mural artists deployed a leftist realism that stressed the fundamental importance of popular agency to the functioning of the nation. They not only posited mestizo workers and indigenous peasants as the true essence of modern Mexican culture, thereby incorporating into modernity those elements previously excluded as uncivilized and archaic, but they also proposed both new forms of social organization to overcome modernity's crisis of meaning and new ideas about the structure of the nation-state implementing those forms. The mural movement thus linked a Marxist-inspired populism to an aesthetic critique of modernity, so that art would serve simultaneously to regenerate society and to inaugurate the utopian promise of modernity.

In this way, mural painting was central to envisioning both the distinctiveness of Mexican modernity and the restructuring of Mexican society from the 1920s onward, as newly enfranchised groups of peasants, workers, and indigenous peoples grappled with the state and its intellectuals over how to constitute the nation and its citizens. The

epic sweep of muralism—its resolutely grand and utopian ethos—derived from the impassioned attempts of mural artists to forge a unified national project out of Mexico's diverse experiences of modernity, one that could link in common cause all the nation's inhabitants from the most rustic farmer to the most powerful military and political leaders. As such, mural painters aspired to bring the critical energies and utopian aspirations of the aesthetic realm to bear on the realm of the political in order to prompt public debate on interpretations of the nation and the contours of citizenship.

How and to what extent mural painting provided a forum for public dialogue throughout the Western hemisphere on issues of socially committed art, modernity, and the modern nation-state is the subject of this book. The men and women who participated in the mural movement, who claimed a central role in constructing a national culture, we argue, proposed a model for the social and political life of the nation and, by extension, of the Americas as a whole. In positing a monumental *public* art in the decades following 1920, in an overwhelmingly rural country that lacked both a developed bourgeoisie and a strong civil society, these mural artists acted in a moment when older forms of national cohesion were exhausted but new ones had not yet taken shape, and when the need for public debate about the form of that new national identity was greatest.

By invoking the concept of the public sphere vis-à-vis muralism, this book raises the wider issue of civil society in relation to the state in modern society. Habermas, Peter Uwe Hohendahl notes, posited that "the development of political freedom in modern Western societies depends on the constitution of a space between the realm of the state and the private sphere of its subjects or citizens. This is precisely the space where critical discussion of cultural and political matters can take place."[2] The Habermasian Enlightenment ideal may have been one of disinterested individuals democratically engaged in rational debate, but post-Revolution Mexico was deeply suspicious of European Enlightenment's imperialist foundations—a suspicion that affected Mexico's reception of the democratic ideal. Furthermore, during this period Mexico lacked many of the classical mechanisms for open civic discussion at the national level.[3] Whereas nineteenth-century Mexican politicians and intellectuals adhered (at least in theory) to a liberal Enlightenment definition of the nation as a "rational polity composed of free and autonomous individuals,"[4] in the 1920s and 1930s a sharply different attitude toward the nation and national culture developed that rejected liberalism in favor of an official policy of "revolutionary nationalism" embodied visually in the mural movement.[5] In part, this policy reflected the ruling elite's aggressive efforts to centralize political control by discouraging individual or regional initiatives while simultaneously promoting mass participation in worker unions and peasant cooperatives under state jurisdiction. Thus Mexico's political leaders sought both to stave off the dual threat of invasion by the United States and Mexico's fragmentation into regional fiefdoms, and to tie the masses to the state. But the official strategy also denoted concessions to popular, non-Habermasian forms of community—rural political communities such as the Zapatistas based on ancient forms of territoriality, religious communities such as the Cristeros,

or ethnic communities based on long-standing indigenous kinship ties and traditions, for example—that had erupted into national consciousness because of the Revolution.

The history of Mexican mural painting's envisioning the national polity exhibits a continual tension between the murals' ability to foster an unfettered civic dialogue that legitimates the public sphere at the national level and the increasingly authoritarian state's gradual co-optation of the movement as part of the nationalist mythology to underwrite its own grasp on political culture. Several chapters in this book study this dynamic in the 1920s and 1930s, when mural practices were the most innovative and the state-led program of modernization seemed the most likely to deliver its promise of full citizenship and economic equality for all. Other chapters investigate the effects on the mural movement of the cold war and subsequent entrenchment of neoliberalism, when the state ramped up its use of mass media and control of the burgeoning culture industry (especially film and radio), and exploited the prestige of murals as a socially committed art form toward new and different political ends.[6] As several authors here argue, this produced an ominous schism between official and civic attitudes toward mural painting that had deep repercussions for mural practices themselves and for public debate and civil society. After the 1950s, a new generation of artists realized that the only way to recuperate muralism for public debate was to sever its long-standing ties to the state. This is what Tepito Arte Acá did, moving into outright conflict with the party that had maintained national political power since 1929, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In so doing, Tepito Arte Acá became a model for a renewed contract between art and leftist politics, one that was forced, however, to forfeit (at least temporarily) its claim to represent the "nation" and to accept the role of representing the "local" rather than the idea of the nation, which had been effectively co-opted by the state.

In light of such evolutions, shifts, and reversals in mural painting's long history, the essays in this book account for the actual function of muralism as a public art, less through a Habermasian lens than as a set of competing discourses embedded in conditions of social fragmentation and differentiated, unequal access to public discourse. They aim to do this, moreover, without losing sight of the real power of the mural movement's combination of aesthetics and social commitment as a model for civic organization and national renovation—a model that proved extraordinarily persuasive in the Western hemisphere for decades and that posited an experience of modernity altogether different from that of Anglo-Eurocentric culture, which many in Latin America perceived as bankrupt.[7]

Key to this dynamic was the mural artists' use of visual aesthetics to construct that space of open, public debate between the state and the heterogeneous citizens newly mobilized by the Revolution, even as the movement relied on state patronage. Muralists, at their best, sought to use the semi-autonomous status of art—its aesthetic appropriation of the world such that the image stands in productive contradistinction to reality—as an allegory for political conduct. That is to say, they linked an aesthetic imagining to a political critique of modernity, in which the visual shaped the view of reality and

reconfigured what was thought possible.[8] A foremost objective of these artists was to overcome the divide between the indeterminacy of the aesthetic realm and the determinacy of the political realm.[9] This problematic issue was at the heart of the famous Rivera-Siqueiros debates of 1935 about the concepts of "collectivity" put forward over time by different muralist groups, and of the close—if often contentious—relationship between many artists and the Mexican state. It was also at the center of debates about aesthetic autonomy itself. The muralists, for example, were deeply suspicious of the arguments of the Contemporáneos for an *arte puro* as a metaphor for political freedom, viewing this concept of art as a self-contained, self-reflexive experience as being too close to the ideology of bourgeois individuality at the center of both Mexico's failed nineteenth-century national project and Western imperialism. Yet, as several of the book's chapters show, in practice (if not always in theory) mural artists often prioritized the autonomous aesthetic experience as a space of social critique, and thus could hypothesize new links between that aesthetic experience and indigenous, peasant, and proletarian agency.

The examination of these arguments and others about the relationship between art and politics is a core element of this book, and its chapters attend closely to the nature of visual art as a medium uniquely able to hold conflicting attitudes toward the public sphere, the modern nation, and the political in productive tension. Nevertheless, these essays also stress the fragility of the dialectic of art and politics, as demonstrated by the loss of muralism's early dynamism and its rigidification after World War II. The politically pragmatic Mexican state eventually absorbed the movement's critical attitude. The essays further explore alternative mural practices—such as those of Tepito Arte Acá and the Chicano/a murals—that originated in efforts to rethink the utopian aspirations of early muralism in light of economic and political shifts imposed by the cold war and neoliberalism.

Our book thus reassesses the relationship between art and politics as it played out in post-Revolution Mexico and beyond. We tie this to two further goals: first, illuminating the mural movement's negotiation of the dynamic between national and international politics and culture, and second, elucidating the larger critique of modernity offered by the movement.

The question of the nation in the twentieth century, along with the related questions of citizenship and subjectivity, must be formulated in terms of tension with international and global pressures, particularly those of capitalism. This book explores this tension vis-à-vis Mexican muralism. The most overt pressures in post-Revolution Mexico were the perceived threat of US invasion and the contingent reaction against Eurocentrism, which led to a strategy of economic modernization and independence combined with efforts to give the nation a mestizo or indigenous cultural character. The muralists' Marxist-based critique of capitalism, along with their emphasis on popular agency, proved crucial to this strategy. Their diverse and even contradictory interpretations of Marxism were formed in response not only to the worldwide effects of the Stalinization

of the Communist Party, but also to the regionally distinct development of Marxism in Mexico and Latin America.[10] Mural artists thus operated at the point of friction between utopian Marxist internationalism (which emphasized the proletariat as a class across national borders) and the configuring of class within the paradigm of the nation-state in Latin America and Mexico.

Tension between the national and the international also frames muralism's status as an avant-garde movement. The mural movement participated in the critique of modernity by the European avant-garde, but we cannot simply superimpose Europe and the developments there onto Mexico. Unlike the European avant-garde, for example, the muralists were not marginalized by society. Their central position meant that they could reformulate the European avant-garde's critique of modernity to address the project of national revitalization in Mexico and the Americas. That is to say, rather than interrogating Eurocentrism from within (thus producing a necessarily negative critique, as did the European avant-garde), the muralists' avant-gardism attacked Eurocentrism from outside and posited the Americas as a positive counter-modernity, a utopian space of socio-political and cultural renewal against Europe's degenerated modernity.[11]

The Mexican response to these global forces fostered anti-imperialist nationalisms across Latin America. This anti-imperialism was both a reaction to the region's long experience of foreign invasions and a progressive force for cultural unification of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas. Muralists articulated the distinctiveness of the Mexican nation from its counterparts, the United States and Europe, as well as a model for Latin American unification.

This regional dynamic, however, was by no means straightforward.[12] Several essays in this book explore the link between a social realist aesthetics and political revolution in other countries in the hemisphere where social and historical conditions differed from those in Mexico. Debates about transplanting muralism intact to other countries—to Argentina, for example, which had not experienced a revolution and had no strong indigenous culture, or to Cuba, with different forms of patronage, state structures, and political cultures—shaped muralist aesthetics outside Mexico.[13] So, too, did debates about realism versus abstraction as paradigmatic expressions of Latin America's uneven relationship to modernity. These debates at times figured as international confrontations (as between Siqueiros and Uruguay's influential abstract modernist, Joaquín Torres García), and as national disputes with hemispheric implications (as was the case with Rufino Tamayo, the Contemporáneos, and Isamu Noguchi). This book further treats the flip side of the nationalist coin by examining the diaspora that took muralism to the United States, with the sojourns of *los tres grandes* in *el Norte* during the 1930s, and the Chicano movement's later reformulation of muralism's precepts during the US civil rights era.

All these concerns form muralism's larger critique of modernity. In investigating this critique, the chapters of this book approach the movement's historical and aesthetic particulars with questions about modernity. How (and to what degree), for example,

did mural artists give visual form to an emergent historical consciousness in Mexico of the country's uneven modernization under the increasingly globalized onslaught of capitalism? To what extent did they expose Western imperialism as the spatial precondition for modernity? How did these artists link that critique of imperialism to modernity's hierarchical differentiation between European and non-European cultures? This book's chapters further investigate muralism's critique of the commodification of social space under capitalism and the resulting alienated subjectivity of modern life. They also explore what the mural movement can tell us about the relationship between that Western imperialist project and modernity's abstract temporality of the eternal "new" in which an ephemeral present exists only in a state of "perpetual transition between a constantly changing past and an as yet indeterminate future."[14] In treating these issues, we argue neither for the outdated model of a singular Eurocentric modernity imposed on non-modern regions, nor for the alternative modernities model that, despite its welcome anti-Eurocentrism, too often fails to account for the *universalizing* aspect of modernity's project. Instead, we follow Timothy Mitchell in "acknowleg[ing] the singularity and universalism of the project of modernity, a universalism of which imperialism is the most powerful expression and effective means" while at the same time attending to the ways in which that universalism remains incomplete. Indeed, modernity's universalizing logic "can be produced only by displacing and discounting what remains heterogeneous to it," yet this repressed heterogeneity constantly returns both to define and to rupture that logic.[15] The Mexican mural movement's greatness, as well as its failures, is at the heart of its efforts to overcome this conundrum.

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We have grouped the chapters of this book into four parts. Essays in Parts 1, 2, and 3 address the national and hemispheric impact of Mexican mural painting, while Part 4 offers a detailed chronology and a set of primary texts, several of them translated here for the first time. The chapters move from wide-frame overviews to intensive case studies and back again and include different readings of significant murals and events, thus putting the various parts of the book into dialogue.

Part 1 looks at the beginnings and development of the mural movement in Mexico, examining the ideologies of the images and their producers, and situating them in the national context. In Chapter 1, Robin Greeley considers the muralists' claim that they act as mediators between the Mexican people and the state. Contextualizing this claim in the years from the Revolution to the 1970s, she dissects the tensions in muralism's response to the official policy of "revolutionary nationalism." The state courted muralism in a series of often *ad hoc* responses to social and political situations. By examining muralism's relationship to the state, she argues, we can learn much about the interweavings of the muralists and their production with Mexico's state formation and modernization. In the second chapter, Alejandro Anreus places José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros in their ideological trajectories (anarchist,

heretical Marxist, and Marxist-Leninist) and analyzes how these ideologies manifest themselves in depictions of revolution. A section of this essay focuses on the Rivera-Siqueiros polemic of 1935 and its effects on the politics of muralism. In the next chapter, Mary Coffey analyzes the stylistic eclecticism of Rivera's murals at the Ministry of Public Education (1923–28). She argues that Rivera at the Ministry created an art rooted in indigenous traditions that reflected the struggles of peasant, worker, and soldier in Mexico's social revolution.

Next, Jennifer Jolly investigates Siqueiros' avant-garde attempt to revise muralism in the 1930s, in the artistic culture of the international Popular Front, and subsequently in the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate mural (1939–40). While Siqueiros' original proposal for the mural argued for collective artistic practice, new technologies, and perspective theory to revitalize art's production and reception, the mural's transformation by collaborator Josep Renau suggests the limits of his vision. In Chapter 5, Leonard Folgarait poses questions about the architecture rendered in Orozco's murals and easel paintings and speculates about how it guided the work the artist completed in the United States. He argues that Orozco, in approaching architecture as an agent of expressive content, ultimately changed the look and meaning of his imagery. Indeed, the metadiscourse of painting buildings *on* buildings allowed Orozco to recast architecture so that it was no longer a scene-setting background but an active agent in the narrative. Tatiana Flores examines the relationship between the avant-garde movement *Estridentismo* and the launch of muralism in Mexico City in Chapter 6. Highlighting artists who worked in both, she argues that murals by Leal, Charlot, and Revueltas engaged in a critical dialogue with *Estridentismo* as these artists developed a visual language suited to post-Revolutionary Mexico.

Esther Acevedo examines the extraordinary murals painted by a second generation of muralists at the Abelardo Rodríguez Market in one of Mexico City's central working-class neighborhoods in Chapter 7. She details how these young muralists were caught up in the Rivera/Siqueiros polemic of 1934–35, debates about how to formulate a "revolutionary" aesthetic, and investigates the tension between realism and abstraction in formulating a politicized art. In the final essay of Part 1, Robin Greeley looks at the most influential critics of muralism, the Contemporáneos, to raise questions about the structure and function of nationalism in Mexico. The Contemporáneos, noting the propagandistic tendencies of muralism's Marxist ideologies—which they felt flirted with fascism by dangerously collapsing "nation" into "state"—posited an alternative view of national identity. Their Nietzschean version of "aesthetic statism" delineated a psychological, existentialist approach to *mexicanidad* that had strong repercussions afterward.

Part 2 takes up the hemispheric contexts and influences of muralism, re-examining well-known histories such as those of *los tres grandes* in the United States as well as exploring episodes little known outside Latin America. In Chapter 9, Alejandro Anreus argues that Siqueiros' proselytizing trips through the Americas promoted a muralist agenda that ranged from critical to opportunistic. Anreus' chapter focuses on Siqueiros' travels to Argentina (1933) and Cuba (1943); the work he produced in these countries;

and his contact with two artists, Antonio Berni and Mario Carreño, along with the work they produced in response to Siqueiros' challenge. Gabriel Peluffo Linari, in Chapter 10, takes up the vibrant dialogue between social realism and abstraction in the form of Brazilian muralist Cândido Portinari's response to the famous Siqueiros–Torres García debates in Uruguay. Portinari, Peluffo argues, defined a third vector that challenged both Siqueiros' trenchant militant realism and Torres García's ahistorical universalist abstraction. Formulated around a "realist aesthetics of sacrifice," Portinari's mural production in Montevideo defined a new art of public painting that responded to the distinct social and political circumstances of the Río de la Plata region. In the final chapter of Part 2, Anna Indych-López analyzes the controversies surrounding murals by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States. Rather than satisfy social consensus, she argues, the murals expressed the mutability of relations and the communicative inefficacy of realism in the urban sphere, as well as a misapprehension of imagery that was not necessarily shared by the artists, patrons, critics, and viewers.

Part 3 examines contemporary responses to muralism, both in Mexico and elsewhere. The three essays examine particular histories of mural painting as it changed dramatically during the cold war, the civil rights era, and as a result of neoliberalism. In Chapter 12, Leonard Folgarait examines the artists' collective Tepito Arte Acá, which began producing mural paintings in Mexico City in the 1970s. Tepito Arte Acá is noteworthy for working outside established institutions of patronage and locating its paintings on the walls of residences and commercial buildings far removed from "official" or high-culture venues. In the next chapter, Holly Barnet-Sanchez argues that Chicano/a murals painted across the United States from the mid-1960s onward embody and formulate multiple simultaneous and shifting positions of Chicano/a culture. A reading of four early murals demonstrates the strategies of what Rafael Pérez-Torrez termed a "radical *mestizaje*" that facilitated the incorporation, integration, and transformation of numerous, varied sources in a specifically Chicano/a mural tradition. And finally, Bruce Campbell provides an overview of mural production since the 1960s. Post–Mexican School mural production, he argues, responds to social movements challenging state power, conflict over control of urban space, and critical interventions in the mass cultural environment. The mural art of this period has also been unevenly documented, or simply ignored in favor of the officially sponsored Mexican School.

Part 4 of the book presents a chronology of Mexican muralism, providing a context for the movement by including political as well as artistic events. The section ends with six primary texts.

NOTES

1. The literature on this is vast. Some key texts include Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Néstor García

Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity,* trans. Christopher Chiappari and Silvia López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Miguel Angel Centeno and Fernando López-Alves, eds., *The Other Mirror: Grand Theory through the Lens of Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores, eds., *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); and John Beverly, José Oviedo, Michael Aronna, eds., *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

2. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Recasting the Public Sphere," *October,* Vol. 73 (Summer 1995): 31.

3. In this regard, Mexico's post-Revolution public sphere presents less a *decline* (à la Habermas) of an Enlightenment ideal (and the subsequent rise of, first, a proletariat public sphere and then a mass culture public sphere) than a long-term *result* of the Enlightenment's imperialist underpinnings. See Claudio Lomnitz, "Ritual, Rumor, and Corruption in the Formation of Mexican Polities," in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico. An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 145–64.

4. Ricardo Roque-Baldovinos, "The 'Epic Novel': Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-Garde in Latin America," *Cultural Critique,* No. 49 (Autumn, 2001): 61. On the nineteenth century and the Liberal Reforma, see Jan Bazant, "From independence to the Liberal Republic, 1821–1867," and Friedrich Katz, "The Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato, 1867–1910," both in Leslie Bethell, ed., *Mexico Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Charles Hale, "José María Luis Mora and the Structure of Mexican Liberalism," *The Hispanic American Historical Review,* Vol. 45, No. 2 (May, 1965): 196–227.

5. On the term "revolutionary nationalism," see note 8 in Greeley, "Muralism and the State in Post-Revolution Mexico, 1920–1970," this volume.

6. See Carlos Monsiváis, "Persistencia de la memoria," in Julio Scherer García and Carlos Monsiváis, *Parte de guerra II: Los rostros del '68* (Mexico City: Nuevo Siglo/Editorial Aguilar, 2002): 31–32.

7. The purported decline of European civilization was a theme taken up by a wide variety of European and Latin American intellectuals, especially after World War I.

8. In arguing thus, we seek to position the movement between the pessimism of Theodor Adorno and the optimism of Jacques Rancière by tracking muralism's continual negotiation of the art-politics issue.

9. I take the term "aesthetic indeterminacy" from David Aram Kaiser, *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

10. In the 1920s, for instance, the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) had three leading painters (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Xavier Guerrero) serving on its central committee; like the theorist José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru and the avant-garde poet Rubén Martínez Villena in Cuba, these artists were not receiving party dictums but rather formulating social and cultural policies.

11. For a general treatment of this phenomenon in Latin American literature, see Roque-Baldovinos, "The 'Epic Novel': Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-Garde in Latin America," *Cultural Critique,* No. 49 (Autumn, 2001): 58–83.

12. On the ideological repercussions of the Mexican Revolution in Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s, see Pablo Yankelevich, "La Revolución Mexicana en el debate político latinoamericano," *Cuadernos americanos,* Vol. 19, No. 111 (2005): 161–86.

13. Space limitations have meant that all manifestations of muralism's hemispheric influence could not be treated here. Some, such as the murals of revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua, have received documentation—see David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910–1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)—others, such as the influence of Orozco on Venezuela's realism/abstraction debates of the 1940s and 1950s, remain to be fully investigated; see the catalog, *Taller Libre de Arte, 1948–1952* (Caracas: Museo Jacobo Borges, 1997).

14. Peter Osborne, "Modernity," in Michael Payne, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 348.

15. Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity,* pp. xii–xiii. Mitchell pertinently goes on to argue that "representation" or "the world-as-picture . . . is the source of modernity's enormous capacity for replication and expansion, and at the same time the origin of its instability" (pp. xiii–xiv).