

# DESEMPEÑANDO EL PAPEL REVOLUCIONARIO: NATIONALISM AND CULTURE IN MEXICO, 1920-1940

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## ABSTRACT

Some scholars suggest that Mexican culture in the wake of its bloody Mexican Revolution was completely manufactured by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and scholar José Vasconcelos for the sole purpose of creating a Gramscian political hegemony and a cultural “common sense.” This article offers a different, more pluralistic, understanding of the creation of Mexican national identity in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, average Mexicans created a cultural milieu that existed outside the bounds set by the state. State-employed muralists disputed politics and the appropriate role of state power in the new Mexican culture, while films of the Mexican Golden Age, beginning in the 1930s, reflected conservative ideologies inconsistent with more progressive, state-favored philosophies. Tourist materials and cookbooks, created for American audiences, also tempered the cultural norms favored the PRI by casting them as quaint or as kitsch, rather than as the full-fledged expression of an organizing ideology.

In 1934, the Mexican thinker Samuel Ramos published a text entitled *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. Ramos, like many of his contemporary intellectuals, had dedicated the last decade to exploring, probing, and challenging “Mexicanity.” In his new text, Ramos aimed to explore the rationale for the recent embrace of a new quintessentially Mexican self-concept at a time when there was much for Mexicans to be insecure about. The nation had plunged in and out of a decade-long revolution that wracked the country with violence and instability. It was from the ruins of this conflagration that had consumed the *ancien régime* that the new Mexican state would have to rise. The 1920s and 1930s whirred with the work of national rebuilding and reconstruction; a new constitution needed to be implemented, infrastructure had to be rebuilt, and commerce needed to flow once again. Yet the work of the state was not limited to physical changes. A new political culture would also be needed to reify the victorious ideology with a rich system of myths, murals, ideologies, and, above all, performances. For it would be through performance, a great national pageant, that the “truth” could be formed in the midst of so much uncertainty.

This post-Revolutionary performance lies at the heart of this study. Specifically, the goal is to explore where culture and politics intersected during

the decades immediately following the Revolution, from about 1920 to the end of the Cárdenas administration in 1940. In those twenty years, the state was hard at work composing a new national drama. This drama was for the benefit of Mexican citizens, who had been through a decade of hell, as well as for the world, which looked with expectation and trepidation at the new regime.

There exists much scholarship on the topic of post-revolutionary nationalism in Mexico that describes this process in depth. By contrast, this study aims to synthesize these voices into a resonant, more complete, whole. Those who ascribe to traditional views of cultural hegemony describe the process of “playing the Revolutionary role” as decidedly monolithic or elite-spurred and sculpted. In fact, as will be shown by explorations of murals and prints, films, postcards, and cookbooks, that reading of the post-Revolutionary project is decidedly simplistic. In casting the post-Revolutionary drama, the state inherently lost monopoly over the national narrative. Rather than being the one-note work of elites, as is sometimes argued, the new Mexican political culture was in fact a polyphonic, diverse patchwork of individual conceptions of the state project, some directly opposed to “orthodox” *Mexicanity*.

The same processes of state formation persist today in Mexico. Certainly, given the 2012

reelection of the traditionally dominant political party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), the concept of “institutional revolution” figures prominently in the minds of many. The PRI obviously has its roots in this period. Its political messaging was inherited from the Sonoran dynasty as the PNR (National Revolutionary Party), and it was more formally coalesced by Lázaro Cárdenas as the PRM (Party of the Mexican Revolution). As such, an exploration of the ways in which the Mexican state was created out of the chorus of different conceptions of state will clarify the overall arc of the past century, as well as the political fortunes and failures of the PRI.

But the present study also has a more general relevance. Politics and culture have an intimate connection, one that ought to be understood by citizens from around the world. It is through everyday experiences, such as reading a newspaper, watching a film, or even planning a vacation, that citizens are steeped in, and inculcated with, certain civil and political values. The object of this study is to awaken a critical eye that can discern propagandizing, but that can also see that individual creativity can have power beyond pure aesthetic or commercial appeal.

There is a great deal of scholarship that must be synthesized to satisfy these goals. It will be useful to offer the arc of the argument before embarking, which is shown by exploring the central theory of cultural hegemony as conceived of by Antonio Gramsci.<sup>1</sup> Then, we will explore the erection of the Revolutionary Pantheon as a Gramscian exemplar. Thomas Benjamin’s recent book will support this exploration and demonstrate the extent to which it was a concerted effort by those in power.<sup>2</sup> The second theoretical section, however, will challenge Gramscian cultural hegemony. Resting on classic texts, this section will problematize Gramsci’s theory and offer an alternative model.<sup>3</sup> With this alternative reading, I endeavor to tear down the most staged of cultural projects. An analysis of the mural work of the “Big Three” (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco) will show the diversity of these contractors of Mexican nationalism, with assistance from the model text on cultural nationalism in Mexico in this period, *The Eagle and the Virgin*.<sup>4</sup> The Revolutionary message will be shown to be decidedly contentious by doing

a close reading of a major film of the period, *Allá en el rancho grande*.<sup>5</sup> The final section will turn to both food and tourist materials; supported by texts from Pilcher and Berger, we will analyze cultural materials produced for U.S. audiences.<sup>6</sup>

“*Desempeñando el papel revolucionario*,” or “Playing the Revolutionary Role,” the title of this study was carefully chosen to best convey the type of cultural exploration as detailed above. The great political drama being performed in Mexico beginning in 1920 relied on many actors, for the process of national reconstruction was not one that could be undertaken alone. It is the *portrayal* of national ideologies that remains today, for the interpretations that average citizens made of state ideology formed modern Mexico. Every Mexican had to play his or her role in the revolutionary drama, in order to fulfill the ideological underpinnings of a movement for which so many had perished.

#### FORGING A NATION: CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND MEXICANIST IDEOLOGY

To engage with the cultural materials of the post-Revolutionary years, we must first understand classical cultural history theory. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, wrote extensively on the use of culture as a tool for political domination and hegemony creation. Through cultural hegemony, a polity’s hegemonic bloc is able to create a new “common sense” for the population at large. The hegemonic bloc is the group that at any given time wields power and is able to exercise that power to affect political change: the elite, ruling class. It does not consist of all citizens, for many remain subaltern, subject to the will of the political bloc. This hegemonic bloc that holds power attempts to create cultural hegemony, which ideally encompasses all members of the polity. The broadness of the “common sense” of the cultural hegemony ensures the continued dominance of the elite, for it discourages challenges to the existing political culture.

Cultural hegemony is not widely integrated simply because the hegemonic bloc orchestrates it. The elite origin of ideology is not sufficient to create hegemony. As Stuart Hall writes, “Rather, the effective coupling of dominant ideas to the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological

struggle is *intended to secure*. It is the object of the exercise—not the playing out of an already written and concluded script.”<sup>7</sup> As such, the goal of the ruling class is not simply to conceive of a new “truth” for the state; it is not a *fait accompli* merely by virtue of its etiology. Rather, the ruling class must invest in the process of tying its brand of truth to the supposed contemporary hegemonic bloc. Once these ideas are strongly tied to the hegemonic bloc, the suggestion is that the ideological struggle fades away. These new ideas become an inextricable part of the “common sense” that the ruling class advances, and subaltern groups accept them as integral to political culture. A cultural hegemony is thus generated and sustained.<sup>8</sup>

The process of formulating new truths, then, falls to those members of the ruling class best suited for the fixation of ideologies to the hegemonic bloc: intellectuals. Through their formulations of new national ideologies, particularly ones that support the work of the existing hegemonic bloc and are followed by propagandizing to ensure the lasting linkage of these ideologies to the dominant political culture, intellectuals are critical to hegemony formation. Many see themselves as independent of the state project, however, “Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals experience through an *esprit de corps* their uninterrupted historical continuity, and their special qualifications, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.”<sup>9</sup> They are critical in creating a new national ideology on behalf of elites. At the same time, due to their historical status, they frequently represent their ideological formulations to be free of the taint of mere partisanship. With this veneer of impartiality, it is made all the more likely that ideology may be associated with the contemporary hegemonic bloc. The elite-domination of the ideological struggle becomes ever stronger given that subaltern groups do not create or integrate intellectuals into their social group. When an intellectual does arise from the peasantry, he is immediately assimilated into the dominant social class. As such, elites may monopolize the ideological struggle and impose political culture.<sup>10</sup>

Gramscian cultural hegemony theory, then, suggests a powerful and near-monolithic sense of nationalism. This stems from the fact that intellectuals, the key agents in the creation of hegemonic ideologies, are always associated with

ruling class motivations, despite intellectuals’ supposedly inviolate impartiality. Subaltern intellectuals do not exist to advance an alternative ideology to “traditional” elite intellectuals. The ruling class dominates the ideological struggle, and through cultural media, is able to reify the Revolution. Utilizing the above theoretical discussion of cultural hegemony, we may now employ it in the specific case study at hand. The post-Revolutionary milieu we now explore is that of Mexico beginning in 1920, with its ambitious projects of nationalism.

Gramsci’s theory on intellectual participation emerges vividly in this specific case. Perhaps the intellectual figure that best captured the role of the state in creating and advancing Mexican national ideology is José Vasconcelos. Appointed as the head of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) in 1921, Vasconcelos was an important voice in the casting of a new, state-sponsored ideological project. In 1925, he published *La raza cósmica*, arguably his most influential essay. In it, Vasconcelos embraced an Americanist ideology, highlighting the conception of *mestizaje*, or ethnic mixing, as the critical element that would redeem the Mexican nation: “We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race.”<sup>11</sup> In general, Mexicanist ideology rested on an appropriation of old-style racial stereotypes that had been pervasive in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the *Porfiriato*, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century regime of President Porfirio Díaz, had been oriented toward “whitening,” or the Europeanization of the Mexican national culture, *La raza cósmica* explicitly rejected whitening in favor of *mestizaje*. It would be through the amalgamation of all of the races of the Old World that Mexico would emerge as the transcendent leader of the New World. There was a value to the indigenous element of Mexican culture; it was essential to creating *Mexicanity*.

But that is not to say that the new ideological regime was devoted to the edification of traditional indigenous values per se. Certainly, Vasconcelos underscored the importance of Mexican self-awareness of the indigenous contributions for contemporary Mexican sensibilities. That said, there were many elements of indigenous culture that needed to be redeemed, for native culture was still seen as backward, weak, and uncivilized. It was for

these reasons that subaltern Mexicans had suffered under the *Porfiriato*, (exploitation by *hacienda* owners, priests, and capitalists). Old-World European elements had corrupted the Mexican spirit. As such, it was the role of the post-Revolutionary state to “transform a ‘backward, degenerate, diseased’ people into healthy, scientific patriots mobilized for development” without the manipulations of Europeans or Americans.<sup>12</sup>

How would this project materialize? Vasconcelos’s ideas were indeed rather contradictory. He embraced both the inherent value of the indigenous elements of the Mexican national heritage as spiritually redemptive, and at the same time, believed that indigenous culture was inherently uncivilized and needed to be redeemed. The key was embracing that inherent contradiction and using it to the state’s advantage. The new ideology of *La raza cósmica* would appropriate the cultural lexicon of the nation’s indigenous history to preach the gospel of progress and development.

As the head of the SEP, Vasconcelos devoted himself to this goal through a variety of projects. At the forefront lay his socialist educational program, devoted to educating schoolchildren about the moral rightness of the new Revolutionary regime. To better educate the populace, Vasconcelos devoted himself to a variety of cultural projects, engaging in the processes of co-optation of the folkloric elements of Mexican culture in order to form a new national narrative. This was accomplished by the development of *Misiones Culturales*, a program launched in 1923 in which teachers assigned to rural, heavily indigenous communities would appropriate, collate, and redeploy cultural material for mass dissemination.<sup>13</sup> This process of cultural *mestizaje* was also exemplified by the SEP’s approaches to hygiene projects, family education, and combat against social diseases, which presented campaigns advocating Western-style social systems expressed in visual and verbal terms that the people could understand, such as prints depicting animate skeletons and appeals to the rural familial unit. This reveals a desire to modernize the populace by utilizing a lexicon influenced by *indigenism*.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, Vasconcelos and his cohort were drafting a new national identity. They were *forjando la patria*, forging and formulating the nation and creating a new culture. That is not to say they were

doing this simply because that is what intellectuals do. The stakes were very high. The Revolution had been filled with instances where leaders lacked support from the people, and it had cost them and their supporters their lives. Based on Mexicanist ideology and ideas regarding *La raza cósmica*, intellectuals such as Vasconcelos and his peers were attempting to win that revolutionary struggle to which Gramsci refers. As intellectuals of the Revolution, of the emergent hegemonic bloc, these Mexicanists were tying a platform to the ruling class, to prevent further instability and bloodshed. In formulating a new national discourse that upheld both the value of *indigenism* and that of modernization of backward populations, these men were offering politicians the chance to tie the nation more closely together to create a hegemonic coalition. Vasconcelos was a self-described “child of the people,” urging fellow intellectuals to leave their ivory towers and join *La Revolución*.<sup>15</sup> Just as Gramsci suggested, the adaptation of subaltern intellectual currents, such as the notion of “the people” and agitation for land redistribution, gave the ruling class greater ballast, a wider scope, and appeal. Thereby, they hoped that the bloody tide of Revolution could subside after ten years of cataclysm.

Vasconcelos and his fellow Mexicanists wrote a myth to support the post-Revolutionary state. The cosmic spirit would pervade all elements of the new nation, as the harbinger for a Mexican renaissance. The state would tie every Mexican to the necessary agenda, calling on the fulfillment of the national political project, because it was inherent to Mexican blood and spirit. The Revolutionary state could be trusted, for through the redemption of the *indio* without European intervention, the road would be paved for a “Mexican rebirth into innocence and utopia” from the misery of the previous 500 years.<sup>16</sup> Though directed by the spirit of the great Revolutionary heroes who had died to divine the path to Mexico’s cosmic destiny, all were to perform in this Revolutionary drama by virtue of their ethnic heritage. In terms of forging cultural hegemony, blood is thicker than water.

## BLOCK-PRINTING THE REVOLUTIONARY FAMILY

Consequently, Gramscians have a fairly persuasive case for their theoretical model.

Mythologizing of the nation by intellectuals promised progress and stability, *La raza* could leave the bloodshed of the previous decade behind and turn its eyes toward the shining future. The new ruling clique had cemented its power; its new quest was translating raw power into hegemony. Politically, one can see its goals clearly. The most prominent articles of the Constitution of 1917 are fairly explicit in their rejection of Porfirian principles and an embrace of Revolutionary future. Article 27 supports the redistribution of lands by the state for public utility. Article 123 supports broad radical workers' rights. Article 3 offers a more explicit sense of Gramscian strategizing at work: "The education imparted by the Federal State shall be designed to develop harmoniously all the faculties of the human being and shall foster in him at the same time a love of country and a consciousness of international solidarity, in independence and justice."<sup>17</sup> These political goals were explicitly expressed by Obregón and then by Calles, and formed the planks of the new *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* in 1929. From Vasconcelos' appointment in 1921, however, it had been clear that intellectuals were critical in tying policies to the ruling class through cultural projects, as an extension of mandatory Federal education

Defenders of Gramscian analysis certainly have several prominent cultural examples to support their theoretical framework. The best illustration of nationalist culture being utilized to support the political aims of the Mexican state is the trope of the Revolutionary Family. This theme manifested itself in prints of the era, a critical tool in Vasconcelos's project of civic education. Through a simple image and slogan, the aims of the state could be readily diffused and digested by the people. The central aim of many prints of the era was ostensibly to integrate the new post-Revolutionary cultural hegemony, both horizontally and vertically. They sought to tie various subaltern groups together as Mexicans, and to tie them closer to the post-Revolutionary hegemonic bloc. In his book *La Revolución*, Thomas Benjamin shows how the new hegemonic bloc used mythology and official history to create this integrated political culture. Following the end of explicit hostilities by 1920, the new political apparatus returned to governance, under the watchful eye of the new President Obregón. As General Obregón was "Caudillo of the Revolution," however, he did

not need to lean on a myth of the Revolution to effectively tie ideology to his rule; as Benjamin states, "Obregón represented the unity of history and biography: the legitimacy of his authority and his government, therefore, was self evident."<sup>18</sup> In other words, Obregón had no need for a great ideological superstructure to make his regime hegemonic. Instead, he established a cult of personality, the *modus operandi* of most *caudillos*. Obregón's departure from a revolutionary justification for power was, however, an aberration.

As time wore on, according to a Gramscian analysis, there was a marked shift toward seeing the power of crafting an external history to give ballast to future "Revolutionary" agendas. There was thus a marked push to unify disparate Revolutionary groups in order to heal divisions within the nation.<sup>19</sup> To unify these subaltern groups, the *Taller de gráfica popular* (TGP) was established in 1937 as a propaganda arm of the Mexican state. In one of its introductory prints, its aims are made explicit. The group announced that it was formed from a group of painters "like you,"

In the country and in the city and they know your problems. They offer you their assistance in the form of illustrated education sheets, fliers that we will publish monthly, and they will deal with themes of immediate interest for you and for your community. This will help you form a conscientious community, and it will improve the morale in your school.<sup>20</sup>

The TGP seemingly aimed for a horizontal integration of the post-Revolutionary state, fusing together of the various out-groups and social classes that did not wield power, to create a consciousness of national issues.

TGP prints underscored this organized society. A print entitled "*Unidad en tus filas*" ("Unity in Your Columns") shows horizontal integration of distinct interest groups.<sup>21</sup> A peasant and his wife, a student, a soldier, and a worker are clustered together, hands supportively on shoulders. Under this scene of mutual regard, the reader is exhorted to conserve and increase the power of their *Gran Central Sindical*, their individual labor group. In concept, then, the collective membership of these various labor groups would constitute a larger, unified social body under the state. The TGP urged readers to guard the Revolution by vigilance within their groups: "Don't allow enemies to infiltrate.

Choose the most conscientious revolutionary elements for posts of responsibility. And help create the great communal unity against individual passions and betrayals. WE CAN HELP YOU WITH OUR GRAPHIC SUPPORT.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the printmakers, and their handlers in the government, ensured that the Revolutionary family, “the people,” remained intact against counterrevolutionary forces, namely anyone who threatened the hegemonic bloc’s ability to wield power. Granted, this poster emerged during the late 1930s, when fears of fascism were rampant. Correcting for some of the alarm, the poster nevertheless captures the mechanism by which the state aimed to join disparate social groups together as “the people” to protect the Revolution from its enemies.

In addition to creating “the people,” a Gramscian state needed to tie these out-groups to the state. Building subaltern unity could be dangerous if this subaltern coalition was not loyal to the ruling class. The *Cristero* revolt, the primary opposition to Revolutionary anticlericalism, showed that challenges to the hegemonic bloc were costly in terms of blood, treasure, and political capital.<sup>1</sup> Thus, vertical integration was vital. Within the fully integrated regime, “virile leaders joined forces to lead a glorified peasantry and working class to victory against a common enemy (that is, the old regime and imperialism).”<sup>23</sup>

This is best represented by depictions of the Revolutionary Pantheon in prints. A 1935 cartoon shows Carranza, Zapata, Angeles, Calles, Obregón, and Cárdenas, astride horses, as guardians protecting an embracing peasant and worker in the foreground.<sup>24</sup> No longer would Carranza and Villa be intractable ideological enemies, but rather allies in the larger struggle of national liberation; Madero and Zapata could peacefully coexist in prints and on Revolutionary calendars, as they could not in 1911. With this mythology of the Revolution, a hegemonic coalition could be coalesced. A cultural hegemony could embrace various Revolutionary cliques, like the followers of Pancho Villa or Emiliano Zapata, even if these cliques did not hold the central political power. By erasing the inherent “dissensus” of the Revolution and mythologizing its consensus, the ruling elite was better positioned to suggest that its political vision best coincided with larger Revolutionary aims.

As time went on, and fewer leaders had the Revolutionary résumés that leaders like Calles and Obregón did, it was important to lean on this Pantheon for credibility. Most important, however, was the sense that the current president had assumed a political mandate from those glorified heroes. President Lázaro Cárdenas attempted to demonstrate that he had lived up to the spirit of his predecessors, continuing their consecrated project. A 1938 print celebrates Cárdenas’s nationalization of the oil industry.<sup>25</sup> Cárdenas sits signing documents, surrounded by ragged peasants. The improbability of the cartoon is emblematic of the aim of the print: to demonstrate that President Cárdenas had not shut himself up in the *Palacio Nacional*, but that he went throughout the “countryside, workshops, and all the places where the workers, peasants, women, and children call him.” Further, Cárdenas’s policy successes are enumerated; namely his defeat of the *Maximato*, his *ejidal* project, his support for labor, his support for education, and most importantly, the nationalization of oil companies. Through this act, Cárdenas had challenged the exploitation of the nation by foreign capitalists. He had protected the Revolutionary family from the foreign intriguing that had flourished during the *Porfiriato*. Cárdenas fostered a paternalist public image as a leader who would protect subaltern groups from the enemies of “the people.” As Eric Zolov writes, “The Mexican case achieved... the institutionalization of the president as patriarch... and the official party as domestic council.”<sup>26</sup> A 1942 print is more explicit in its intent to tie the presidential father to the glory of the Pantheon. Under portraits of Madero, Zapata, Cárdenas, and the new president Manuel Ávila Camacho, a Mexican flag serves as a background for an illustrative Camacho quote: “Here are we all. Those of today and yesterday; the absent and the present, those that are and those that were, constituting a sacred union that no enemy attack will divide.”<sup>27</sup> The quote explicitly speaks to the continuing spirit of Mexican resiliency and nationalism thirty-two years after the Revolution. Implicitly, however, the print speaks to the goal of using the President as the intermediary between the Revolutionary Pantheon and “the people,” who were expected to unite behind the regime. What was at stake was the creation of an indivisible political culture, and thus, a hegemonic bloc that could rule

i For more on the *Cristero* revolt, see Jean Meyer, “An Idea of Mexico: Catholics in the Revolution” in *The Eagle and the Virgin*.

without dissent.

Reading with Gramscian lenses, we see the arc of Mexican political and cultural institutions inherently tied to an intellectual elite. With the creation of a Revolutionary “people,” consisting of various subaltern interest groups, as well as the creation of the Revolutionary Pantheon, the politicians and intellectuals of the new hegemonic bloc were able to fix new ideas about *Mexicanity* and the role of the state. In this exploration of prints and propaganda, it is clear that Gramsci’s theoretical model of elite-mediated political culture is supported by the efforts of the state. Through its language, its policies, and above all, by its cultural patronage of *indigenism* and Revolutionary mythology, the state did all it could to ensure that the country would neither revert to the *ancien régime* nor spin out of control and plunge back into chaos.

#### EVERYDAY FORMS OF POLITICAL CULTURE

To simply accept, however, that Mexican national self-concept was orchestrated, executed, and dominated entirely by the state is simplistic and misguided. Gramsci’s theory suggests that subaltern groups, the peasantry or proletariat, and non-intellectuals, are incapable of utilizing intellectualism to graft values onto a hegemonic coalition. In other words, without intellectuals, it is impossible to create a political common sense. This interpretation is problematic in its portrayal of the majority of the population as powerless victims lacking any political agency. The remainder of this study will be devoted to showing that this victimhood is certainly not the entire picture. State “contractors,” namely those responsible for creating this cultural material, and non-state actors, those who consumed cultural materials, were both instrumental in creating national culture. To that end, there are two prominent texts that have staked out positions against traditional Gramscian historiography: *The Paradox of Revolution* and *Everyday Forms of State Formation*. Using both of these studies, a third position will be staked out. With this alternative theoretical model, we may then explore three primary forms of cultural expression (murals, films, and folkloric/tourist materials) and read them from this alternative historiographical perspective.

Joseph and Nugent criticize the inconsequential role assigned to popular participation by the

so-called “revisionist” studies of the Mexican Revolution. Revisionists are those who take a quasi-Marxist line, seeing the Revolution as the cementation of a bourgeois authority over subalterns. In their challenge to this revisionist current, Joseph and Nugent aim to “bring the state back in without leaving the people out.” In other words, the goal is to understand the elite-spurred political culture, that popular culture is not “a thoroughly autonomous domain,” but also to recognize that “popular culture is contradictory since it embodies and elaborates dominant symbols and meanings, but also contests, challenges, rejects, revalues... and presents alternatives to them.”<sup>28</sup> The authors in Joseph and Nugent’s volume support this analysis by exploring projects at the state level. From *ejidal* politics in Chihuahua to the local politics of Mayan villages in Chiapas, these historians show that the centralizing tendencies of Mexicanist ideologies were challenged by the demographic and geographic diversity of Mexico itself.

Kevin Middlebrook’s book offers a reading of the post-Revolutionary project that shows how the Mexican state’s corporatism created a diverse ideological patchwork. Middlebrook underscores the high stakes associated with the project of the new Mexican state: state policies, through which the elite-dominated bloc preserves its power, must respond to, harness, and co-opt the “political and programmatic imperatives posed by revolutionary mass mobilization.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike the purely Gramscian reading of post-Revolutionary cultural nationalism, Middlebrook sees the post-Revolutionary hegemonic bloc as constrained by a variety of features of the Mexican nation. As in Joseph and Nugent, geography and local *caciques* feature prominently in Middlebrook’s presentation of the formation of this diverse national identity. Middlebrook sees the primary limitation to the erection of a monolithic Gramscian hegemony as stemming from the corporatist nature of the new regime. Leaning on labor unions and peasant groups, the state, by its very nature, had to sample and stitch together an ideology to please the entire Revolutionary Family.

This reading is consistent with Vasconcelos’s vision of *indigenism* as a tool for political modernization, as well as the edification of the Revolutionary family. The state would interact with its citizens as discrete groups: *campesinos*, *obreros*,

*indígenos*, and others. As Middlebrook suggests, “The very heterogeneity of this governing ‘revolutionary coalition’ symbolized the established regime’s commitment to the political representation of diverse elements.”<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps an overstatement of the regime’s desire to integrate separate interests. Certainly, the SEP was committed to the eradication of certain “backward” aspects of indigenous life. As seen by Cárdenas’s nationalization of oil, capitalists, particularly those who held sway during the *Porfiriato*, were also not, in concept, meant to be represented. Middlebrook’s point is nonetheless well taken: the state’s sampling from diverse sociopolitical groups allowed it to fix post-Revolutionary hegemony more easily.

These two studies support the notion that the post-Revolutionary state was unable to fully dominate the ideological struggle, simply due to the fact that it relied on too many disparate elements in order to fully control the messaging. For Joseph and Nugent, the geographic diversity of the nation meant Mexico City was unable to exert continuous control; for Middlebrook, the state’s corporate patronage of labor groups required modification of Revolutionary elite preferences. Both studies place importance on those with an explicit political agenda and political mobilization that exists outside of the watchful eyes and silver tongues of the governing bloc. But their readings neglect the sheer political power of the cultural. The remainder of this study will show that those who operated in the aesthetic and cultural realm were as responsible for ideological diversity as those involved in post-Revolutionary political mobilization per se.

### CONTESTED UTOPIAS: THE MEXICOS OF THE BIG THREE

Even given their best efforts to diffuse Revolutionary propaganda, the TGP needed assistance from prominent citizens throughout the country. One early poster exhorts “teachers that work in the country” to use their services: “Help yourself with our propaganda and help us make it better. Revolutionary propaganda should rain over our whole country. Our sheets are weapons. The weapon is forged, wield it!”<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note the use of the formal *usted* being used in this print. While other prints that used *tú* seem

to be directly communicating with “the people,”<sup>ii</sup> this one addressed those operators in the localities who understood the value of using propaganda to tie communities closer to the state. While this grammatical difference could certainly be coincidental, it does offer an interesting insight into the expected audiences of these two posters. It also speaks to the state’s acknowledgement that it was unable to create cultural hegemony without elements that existed outside of the hegemonic bloc per se. That SEP teachers were hundreds of miles from Mexico City meant they had autonomy in what they taught and how they taught it. Vasconcelos’s hegemony could not be everywhere.

This use of Revolutionary “contractors” ultimately led to a diversity of messaging about what truly constituted *lo mexicano*. Even the most centralized of cultural projects, the creation of murals, was subject to a differential interpretation of the state project. Murals are frequently held as the best example of Gramscian cultural hegemony at work, and strongly support the traditional vision of post-revolutionary nationalism as dictated by elite political actors. The “Big Three” muralists (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco) are supposed to have played their roles loyally in the reification of *La Revolución*. An examination of three of their famous murals, however, shows they had different conceptions of what truly constituted a Mexican utopia.

The murals of Diego Rivera are perhaps the most instantly recognizable of the Big Three, and the most explicit in the defense of *indigenism* and the Revolutionary family. To cement the connection between the muralist project and the new nationalist education, Rivera painted 235 individual frescoes throughout the Ministry of Education, covering over 15,000 square feet.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the murals of the SEP, Rivera’s murals evidently support a *Mexicanity* based on post-Revolutionary *indigenism*. In *Mechanization of the Countryside*, a goddess wrapped in Revolutionary red shoots a lightning bolt at a hacienda owner and his foremen.<sup>33</sup> Freed from their exploitation, an Indian woman sits with legs crossed, her lap overflowing with maize, and wheat surrounding her. Behind her is the evidence of modernization: a peasant rides a tractor and an airplane flies over a hydroelectric dam, which gives

ii See endnote 21, “Unidad en tus filas,” for one example.



electricity to “the people.” Guarding this new agrarian prosperity are three familiar armed Revolutionary figures: a worker, a peasant, and a soldier. The message is plain: the Revolution has allowed for the liberation of the indigenous people from exploitation, and as such, abundance and technological progress have created a civilized and prosperous nation. This is but one of many examples of Rivera’s advocacy for post-Revolutionary nationalism on the basis of *indigenism*.

Unlike Rivera, however, José Clemente Orozco was critical of the course that the Revolution had taken. In *Political and Ideological Exploitation*, Orozco depicts emaciated creatures against a backdrop of flames.<sup>34</sup> The creatures rage at the “ideologues of modern social revolution” for their false leadership, demagoguery, and failed ideals. Desmond Rochfort suggests the figures resemble prominent Communists Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, and David Alfaro Siquieros.<sup>35</sup> To the left, three beastly *caudillos* wielding sledgehammers, rifles, and polemical pamphlets demonstrate how the false prophet’s ideologies get translated into Revolution. Ultimately, the *caudillos* expose their ability to oppress, as seen in the wretched, miserable figures to the right. States Rochfort, “For Orozco, the struggle for ideals and their betrayal by the fallibility of human beings that leads to greed, power, exploitation, and superstition dichotomized the human character, dooming it to tragic repetitions of failure.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the mural, rather than supporting a utopian vision of post-Revolutionary Mexico as Rivera did, warns against the demagoguery of false prophets speaking the words of national liberation, for Mexico and for all nations.

Clearly, there was no ideological love lost between David Alfaro Siquieros and Orozco, if Rochfort’s assertion is to be believed. Siquieros’s reputation as an ardent supporter of revolutionary radicalism was too much for Orozco. In *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, Siquieros attacked both fascists and capitalists alike. In the central panel, a machine spits out coins, ostensibly to support the gas-masked drones that surround it. To the left, a giant parrot creature addresses faceless Nazi legions, and has set fire to a revolutionary temple emblazoned with “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.” The armed worker, whose rifle is poised at the reactionary forces, is the only one who can stop the dystopian future.<sup>37</sup>

Siquieros was evidently a great supporter of Revolutionary mobilization against fascism and capitalism. Nevertheless, he had a contentious relationship with Diego Rivera, the great *indigenist* muralist. In 1935, *El Universal* ran a front page story about their ideological conflict at a meeting at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*: “There was almost a real fist-fight between the followers of Rivera and Siquieros.”<sup>38</sup> Siquieros accused Rivera of advancing an art of the *petite bourgeois*, as his work depicted a reductionist nationalism based on *indigenism*. Rivera was a counterrevolutionary, a shill for the state. Essentially, Rivera’s support for Trotsky was a betrayal for the global revolutionary cause. For Rivera, Siquieros was a political opportunist. Having been expelled from the Mexican Communist Party, Siquieros had to prove his own unflinching Stalinist credentials. Thus, despite the ideological congruence of their work at first glance, the two artists had distinct political visions regarding the appropriate role of the state.<sup>39</sup>

The “Big Three,” then, are not a monolithic group. The moniker is applied to three very different men who all happened to paint political murals. In style, in content, in political orientation, and in utopian vision, the artists held different ideas about the appropriate role of art in the post-Revolutionary era, and indeed about the scope of the Revolution itself. Far from being an art form that advanced cultural hegemony, murals, due to their artist’s personal political and artistic differences, served as lightning rods for debate and dissent regarding the post-Revolutionary project.

## CELLULOID IDEOLOGIES: HISPANICISM VERSUS INDIGENISM IN FILM

The incongruity of the utopian visions of the various muralists was also manifested on the Silver Screen. By the mid-1930s, the Cárdenas regime had taken to sponsoring film production. Cárdenas offered tax exemptions to domestic filmmakers and formed the *Financiadora de Películas*, which fielded grant proposals for private investment in film. As a result of these innovations, production grew from six films in 1932 to 57 films in 1938, greatly increasing Mexicans’ share of the domestic film market.<sup>40</sup> Given these financial and organizational modifications, the Mexican film industry was poised to embark upon a Golden Age. Within this new film industry,

three prominent strands emerged: state-sponsored “educational” film, which was supported by state-intellectuals; experimental film; and commercial film, which looked to Hollywood for inspiration. With experimental film’s small audience, state-sponsored films and commercial films competed for largest market share. Those with control over the largest share of the film industry could also exercise a large degree of influence over the dissemination of Revolutionary ideas.<sup>41</sup>

Cárdenas’s government was clearly committed to fulfilling the remaining goals of the Revolution, and that goal manifested itself in politics as well as state-sponsored film. Unequivocally breaking the dominance of the *Maximato*, a cabal becoming perilously addicted to power, Cárdenas returned to a distilled set of Revolutionary principles. Oil companies were nationalized and *ejidal* redistribution, as guaranteed under Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, was undertaken to a greater extent than previously.

The ensuing political conflict over the redoubled Revolutionary efforts, was, as is consistent with cultural history theory, also manifested in film. Aurelio de los Reyes spoke to the two nationalistic tendencies, one conservative, the other liberal: “Both tendencies must have polarized with the arrival of Lazaro Cárdenas to the government, with his agrarian policies, which appear in the *comedia ranchera*, which leads to the Porfirian nostalgia.”<sup>42</sup> In general, state-sponsored cinema defended Revolutionary *indigenism*, while commercial film advocated a return to Porfirian “order and progress” through the genre of the *comedia ranchera*, or rural comedy.

The SEP, now under Narciso Bassols, was intimately involved in the new national *indigenist* cinema. For members of the governmental hegemonic bloc, cinema offered an important opportunity to use Revolutionary ideology to integrate society horizontally: “educational film is the only plan possible to publicize the awareness of our proletariat that our economic situation allows, as its cost is lower than any other scheme of proletarian university that may be implemented, which also has the disadvantage of being slower and with worse results.”<sup>43</sup> Film, with its ease and efficacy, would be the best medium to create a post-Revolutionary consensus. To this end, the SEP

sponsored its first “talkie” in 1935, *Redes*, which told the story of indigenous fishermen who opposed exploitation by a local monopolist.<sup>44</sup> Joanne Hershfield describes the film as an epic of class struggle, meant to teach *Mexicanity* to Mexicans and to challenge commercial film’s aesthetics. She states, “the cinematography... romanticizes their lives by emphasizing the beauty of the landscape and the people and promoting an ‘intimate’ and mythical connection between people and nature.”<sup>45</sup> With this transcendent cinematography, the *raza cósmica* message could be understood; the indigenous had a spiritual connection to the land, and once freed from oppressors they would be able to create a utopia. Life would hopefully imitate art.

Despite the SEP’s hopes to make these films popular, the films were unable to compete with commercial releases. For example, following his limited success with *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*, which aimed to glorify post-Revolutionary *indigenism*, Fernando de Fuentes scored a major hit with his 1936 film, *Allá en el rancho grande*. This film best represents commercial releases at the time, as well as the conservative nationalism described by de los Reyes. It supported an alternative, competing vision of horizontal integration. Rather than favoring the coalescence of a Revolutionary family that consisted of the various subaltern groups (like workers and peasants) tied together by their commitment to the Revolutionary project, the film advocated a paternalistic vision of social relations, where peasants were united by their loyalty to their hacienda owner. The film was thus ideologically at odds with everything the Revolution, and the post-Revolutionary state, stood for. The great heroes of the Revolutionary pantheon had mobilized against the *Porfirian* elites and desired to topple the *hacienda* system in favor of communal plots. Glorification of this archaic system was anathema.

Life on the *Rancho Grande* does not look as bleak as Zapata and Villa may have suggested, however. Despite the trite plot and simplistic resolution, the film’s depictions of life on the ranch are entertaining and convey a folkloric utopia: guitar playing, cock fighting, and hat dancing. Frequent songs and physical humor give the sense that on the ranch, the boss is less of a taskmaster than the benevolent facilitator of the good life. The film is a melodramatic romance. As a consequence of a

misunderstanding, José Francisco must defend his fiancée, Cruz against the advances of the hacienda owner, or *hacendado*, Felipe. Despite the conflict, the figure of the *hacendado* is consistently shown to be a good man. Rather than isolating himself from his peasants, the old *hacendado* greets them as they come in from the fields. It is due to his care that José Francisco is able to live at *Rancho Grande*, and he made a companion to Felipe, the future inheritor of the *hacienda*. Felipe, like his father before him, is a dutiful patriarch. He is taught that a *hacendado* must be the father, mother, doctor, judge, and sometime sexton for his peasants. As a result of his kindness, his peasants pray that the Virgin of Guadalupe bless him. The *hacienda* is a place of generosity, ease, and bucolic pleasure, not abjectness or exploitation.<sup>46</sup>

A different philosophical paradigm undergirds and explains this fundamentally different vision of the social state in Mexico. As noted above, the official state ideology was *indigenism*, which held the racial mixture of the nation in high esteem and saw the state as the necessary agent of liberation and redemption for a people oppressed and exploited by Europeans and Americans. Clearly, from this point of view, any *hacienda* had to be a horrible legacy of colonial cruelty: how could it ever serve as the setting for a romantic comedy? *Allá en el rancho grande*, however, supports a competing ideology, *hispanicism*. According to *hispanicism*, Spanish blood, culture, and Catholicism had redeemed the Indians from barbarity and backwardness. Employed by an alliance between conservative Catholic peasants and wealthy landowners in the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Jalisco, *hispanicism* offered a powerful alternative vision to Revolutionary *indigenism* in the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> In the film, the *hacendados* are clearly Spanish—the old boss's lisp and use of “*vosotros*” indicate his European origin. José Francisco is the heroic, Hispanic *charro*, which, as Joanne Hershfield describes, “was a symbol of Hispanic masculinity—light-skinned, handsome, and respectful of the ‘inherent’ divisions within Mexican society... the charro's role was to maintain the patriarchal system that kept classes, races, and genders in their places.”<sup>48</sup> The hero, therefore, is heroic not because he opposes the current status quo, but because he defends its historically Hispanic customs and cultural traditions.

Indeed, there is a conflict in the film between José Francisco and Felipe. But the disagreement

has nothing to do with exploitation. The conflict in the story is emphatically not due to malfeasance, intrigue, or exploitation on the part of the *hacendado*; rather than exploiting his peasants, Felipe is one of the victims of intrigue. The central villain of the film is Ángela, the woman who had taken José Francisco in at the beginning of the story. As a result of her lack of morality, her greed, and her machinations, she nearly topples the entire *rancho*. Ángela's desire for money and to rid herself of Cruz led her to instigate the fight between the two men. Early in the film, the old *patrón* chastises Ángela for not being married to Florentino. By the film's end, Florentino understands that he must become Ángela's husband and he beats her aggressively. Without a husband to beat her into submission, Ángela was capable of intrigue. The film then cuts to Florentino and Ángela emerging from the Church on their wedding day, with Felipe and his new wife, and José Francisco and Cruz. Florentino now is the rightful head of the household; the *rancho* is redeemed, and the film ends against a Mexican sunset.<sup>49</sup>

Commercial films were successful because people enjoyed these happy endings, colorful cinematography, and compelling characters. Unlike the austere didacticism of Soviet-inspired revolutionary cinema, the ambiance, sounds, and customs of the *comedia ranchera* were familiar, and the simple depictions of social life were comfortable for the film's audience. This film was so popular that de Fuentes remade the film in 1948. De los Reyes suggests that audience's enthusiasm stemmed from the “public's identification with the characters... by the idealization that they made of the [characters] (they were all ‘good’ and they knew how to dress and wear with dignity national costumes).”<sup>50</sup> The *charro* was an idealized, honorable man, protecting the social state from decay. This conservative sensibility, rather than appearing merely reactionary, is consistent with modernity and progress. Rather, commercial films such as *Allá en el rancho grande* may have been popular partly because they gestured to a non-statist version of progress and modernity. The *charro* can be seen as a redeemer of the past, creating modernity based on the salvation of an older model.

Further, the medium itself afforded audiences a chance to take part in the modern world. Eric Zolov attributes the success of rock ‘n’ roll films of

the 1950s to their embodiment of “a modern lifestyle that appealed to many adults’ sense of progress and prosperity, especially the desire to be viewed by the outside world as advanced.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the fact that *Allá en el rancho grande* was a Hollywood-style commercial film led many to feel that they were taking part in American-style progress. In other words, the medium of Hollywood film signified modernity, especially when the characters were proud leaders that created stability. In content and presentation, *Allá en el rancho grande* was a chance for Mexicans to look with anticipation toward a brighter future.

Thus, the success of this *comedia ranchera* suggests that a conservative, Porfirian vision of society had not been totally erased by the Revolution. Through a reworking of the underlying principles, “order and progress” were realized. This vision opposed the wholesale alteration of social relations, which the Revolutionary state promoted. Modernity was not the exclusive property of the Revolutionary hegemonic bloc. The film industry, and indeed the state project, was subject to the whims of the market and its consumers; the very people the state desperately targeted with its Revolutionary “common sense” had an alternative vision of Mexican identity and the way toward modernity.

#### SERAPE CANAPÉS: A MEXICO FOR FOREIGN CONSUMPTION

*Allá en el rancho grande* was popular not only among Mexican audiences; Americans flocked to enjoy the folkloric *comedia ranchera*. An advertisement from *Billboard* magazine noted Guízar’s visit to the (ironically named) Cervantes Theatre in New York, where he met a crowd of 50,000 people. Quotes from reviewers from local papers spoke to the quality of Guízar’s singing voice and his “looks and sure-fire stage personality.”<sup>52</sup> Americans even had a role in the film itself. During a cockfight, an obvious gringo places a bet on the “*gallo colorado*” because he is from Denver, Colorado, which causes everyone in the club to cringe. The gringo emerges again to defend the *hacendado* against a charge of exploitation of the peasants, and he is promptly knocked unconscious. In other words, the gringo is a joke; while he is obviously interested in quasi-imperialistic economic enrichment, he does not represent an imminent threat. Additionally, the

gringo doesn’t understand the culture in the least. He shouts “Whoopie!” when his cock wins, another cringe-worthy moment.<sup>53</sup>

The film speaks to the contemporary relationship between Mexico and the United States. Mexico and the United States had a contentious relationship since the Mexican-American War, in which the United States was perceived as an imperialistic power. This idea certainly had not vanished by the time of the Revolution, as the *Porfiriato* had seen a massive increase in the size and scope of U.S. investment and business development in the nation. Therefore, a key element of Revolutionary rhetoric was that the United States was the new Spain, exploiting the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Relations, at least in terms of commercial interactions, were at an all-time low with Cárdenas’s nationalization of oil, which included several U.S. interests. As the TGP prints above demonstrated, there was great national chest beating following that event, for Mexico had finally overpowered the United States.

At the same time, however, the Mexican elites sensed that the United States needed to be pacified in some regard, so that they would support the Mexican state economically. In 1929, President Portes Gil, undoubtedly at the behest of the *jefe maximo* Calles, announced the nation’s commitment to the expansion of the tourism industry in Mexico. To that end, he created the Mixed Pro-Tourism Commission and declared that Mexico would be made safe and comfortable for travelers from the United States. States Berger: “Amid broader efforts to define *lo mexicano* during the 1920s through education, art, archaeology, and music, tourism emerged as another opportunity for revolutionary leaders to define, negotiate, and preserve national identity.”<sup>54</sup> Tourism was another area where the state could preach *indigenism*.<sup>55</sup>

This project was not entirely in Mexican hands, however. Sociologists have indicated that tourists aim to experience something “distinct from everyday life—a process mediated through an artificial, protected environment developed for and demanded by the tourist. Ironically, tourists nevertheless set out in search of ‘the authentic.’”<sup>56</sup> Thus, when the Mexican government facilitated tourism projects based on *indigenism*, they were actively catering to the desires of their American visitors to see Mexican

identity. They could not take this ideology to its extreme portrayal, however. Claiming that Europeans had oppressed Mexicans for centuries would not be appealing to Americans, so the more extreme aspects of post-Revolutionary *indigenism* had to be toned down when presenting to foreign audiences. In this manner, the official Revolutionary line became distorted.

In order to make Americans comfortable by creating that “artificial, protected environment,” Mexico had to demonstrate its cosmopolitan, European character. In a tourist guide for Americans, *Touring Mexico*, the traces of this conflicted ideology are fully evident. One advertisement for beer reads, “Cerveceria Moctezuma: The beer that made Milwaukee jealous.” This text is set against the lithographed backdrop of a hacienda and other European-style buildings. In the foreground are simple peasant cottages—a coexistence of the two ideals at the same time.<sup>57</sup> Milwaukee evoked home, as well as European methods of beer making, but the exotic setting of the factory allowed the tourist to feel just far enough away from home. The advertisement demonstrates the authentic and the comfortable

*Indigenism* does make an appearance in the booklet, for the only informational section of the brochure is about indigenous groups. The author writes, “It is recognized that much of the charm, individuality and strength of the present Mexican nation lies in the fact that her roots are buried deep in ancient and glorious Mexican civilizations.”<sup>58</sup> Here one sees a line explicitly expressing Revolutionary state *indigenism*. The tourist pamphlet also expresses the goal of modernizing the Indians; the Tarahumaras [of Northwestern Mexico] are said to have lived in misery for centuries, but “the present Mexican government is making strong efforts to aid them economically, and to educate their children.”<sup>59</sup> There is even a subtle jab at the United States, consistent with the view that the United States was the new imperial oppressor. Elsewhere in the guide, a lithographed cartoon road map of the border crossing shows an angry Uncle Sam, his arms crossed in irritation.<sup>60</sup> Various cartoons that depict Mexican industriousness appear throughout the lithographed pages: glass blowing, factories, and agricultural work. These images underscore the idea that Mexico was a land of modernity and progress.

At the same time, however, there are several

quasi-racist stereotypes, including a Mexican sleeping under his *sombrero* and a palm tree, Mexicans fishing, and a Mexican getting into trouble at his work. The internal conflict in the booklet is best captured by one spread in particular. Next to an ad for Native Arts and Antiques, there is an ad for the Hotel Reforma stating, “250 rooms and bathrooms; charmingly appointed; air conditioned; purifying water plant; all modern conveniences.” The ad for the hotel lacks any indigenous adornment. Clearly, *indigenism* should not factor into conversations about lodgings or the comfort of their foreign visitors. Tourists need not be overwhelmed or challenged too greatly.<sup>61</sup>

Evidently, many feared that for the tourists, *indigenism* would transition from a folkloric whimsy to a bald indication of backwardness. *Indigenism* was a “fun” element that could be experienced during the day, but it would not follow tourists into their hotel rooms or their restaurants beyond their own comfort level. The food of the era also captured this ambivalent attitude, particularly when presented for foreign audiences. Jeffery Pilcher notes, “Foreign recipes continued to dominate Mexican culinary literature throughout the 1920s and 1930s, an ironic continuation of Porfirian tastes through the revolutionary period.”<sup>62</sup> One English-language cookbook contains Pilcher’s assessment, as well as Berger’s. In *Mexico Through My Kitchen Window*, María de Carbia dedicated her recipes to the “nice English-speaking people that have visited and liked Mexico,” and the recipes she selects capture this ambivalence toward indigenous cooking.<sup>63</sup> She thus describes tortillas: “Just as in Africa, [where] the ‘tom-tom’ greets the ear of the wandering stranger, in Mexico the sound of the clapping hands of the Indian woman greets the ear of the wandering tourist, especially through the country roads and small villages.”<sup>64</sup> De Carbia invokes Africa to give her readers a sense that Mexican food is indeed exotic, perpetuating the folkloric mystique. Mexico is indelibly influenced by its indigenous past.

De Carbia does not wish to suggest that all Mexicans constantly eat these Indian pancakes cooked on a piece of sheet metal, lest they be thought of as uncouth. The reader can rest assured that, “The middle and high class people eat tortillas instead of bread once in a while ‘for a change’ specially accompanying some chili dishes, but they use them

mainly for the confection of some fancy dishes as ‘enchiladas.’”<sup>65</sup> Just as in *Touring Mexico*, there is the explicit indication that the folkloric exists for those who want to immerse themselves in it “for a change,” but that it by no means is pervasive or anything more than whimsy. Based upon de Carbia’s recipe selection, it seems that Mexican food is unequivocally Spanish in character: the author includes recipes for gazpacho, veal Valencia style, and Spanish *menestra*. Here, there is an attempt to depict Mexico as truly Spanish, with some indigenous flourishes. Ideologically speaking, the text is much more *hispanicist* than *indigenist*, much more Porfirian than Revolutionary.

The Mexican state’s experience with the creation of a Mexico for international consumption can best be described by one recipe in de Carbia’s text, “Serape Canapé,” a dish consisting of toast, cream cheese, pimento, green pepper, or “any other food that can give color and taste to the canapé.”<sup>66</sup> The dish, invented for this text, captures the challenges associated with the creation of *lo mexicano* for foreigners. While the canapé looks like a serape, an *indigenista* icon, in fact it is made from white bread and cream cheese, ingredients that gringos could feel comfortable cooking with and serving to their friends. As in the films, the market dictated the appropriate ideological line to take. Clearly, some elements of *indigenism* made it through the censorship. But as the primary motivation for producing these materials was to get Americans to pay a visit, *indigenism* needed to be toned down and stripped of its Revolutionary radicalism.<sup>67</sup> Once ideology, it was transformed into kitsch.

### INFERIORITY COMPLEX OR EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY?

To conclude, we return to Samuel Ramos’ text, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en Mexico*. Ramos views Mexican culture as emanating from an inferiority complex on the part of the Mexican people. Oppressed for so long, told to modernize and Europeanize for centuries, the Mexican people have a deep-seated insecurity about the value of *la raza*. Writes Ramos, “One should suppose the existence of an inferiority complex in all individuals that demonstrate an exaggerated concern with the affirmation of their personality, that have vital interest in all things and situations that signify power, and that have an

immoderate eagerness to excel, to be the first in everything.”<sup>68</sup>

This reading is seemingly consistent with the ways in which the post-Revolutionary state desperately desired to create a cultural hegemony based upon *indigenist* nationalism. Vasconcelos’s conception of the *raza cósmica*, one which valued Indian roots over Hispanic customs, can be read as a “psychological” attempt to appropriate that which had historically made Mexicans insecure, to turn a perceived roadblock to modernity into an existential benefit. This ideology would create a Revolutionary Family, an indelible ethnic bond between all Mexicans. The current ruling bloc, then, could begin the work of modernizing and civilizing the people who had suffered hardship and exploitation for so long; the Revolution, and the path toward the ascendancy of *la raza*, could begin in earnest. Education would be the key, for culture needed to change in order to create a new common sense for the Mexican people that could bring them out of the bloody terrors of Revolution and 500 years of exploitation.

To assume an inferiority complex does not give sufficient credit to the Mexicans who desperately believed that the Revolution, and its accompanying *indigenism*, was the true path to peace and security. That is, rather than attempting to conceal their own inferiority, Mexican cultural projects between 1920 and 1940 were a clear admission that power was indeed tenuous. Armchair psychology is not the primary goal of this paper, despite the invocation of Samuel Ramos. However, I would venture to offer the following diagnosis, based upon the evidence presented above: existential anxiety.

Those involved in the creation of the new state were extremely concerned with power for the mere reason that it was contested. The experience of the previous decade indicated that power was ephemeral; when it evaporated, a violent end came quickly. Personal self-interest, and anxiety about the lack of control over one’s world and future, was only part of it. These figures were indeed concerned about the future of Mexico. In establishing these cultural projects, they hoped to integrate society and tie it to their particular vision of ascendancy. That these cultural projects were rife with dissensus merely reinforced these anxieties: Siquieros and Rivera took pot-shots at each other over who was the better revolutionary. The people disdained Revolutionary film in favor of a

glorification of the *ancien régime*. A tourism industry had to appeal to the supposed exploiters by declaring Mexico's ultimately European character.

Indeed, *indigenism* was a cultural trapping, rather than the way of the future. Mexico was no longer in the midst of a military upheaval, but instead, an ideological struggle. As during the Revolution, with its many factions and massive mobilization, the period of post-Revolutionary nation building saw a broad polyphony of voices emerge that represented those previously disenfranchised from developing a concept of the nation. To claim that there existed a great National Culture revealed from on high is the same type of mythmaking done by men like Vasconcelos. "How much of the truth can one man endure?" enquired Nietzsche. Sometimes, the very lack of control, and the great amount of individual free will, creates the most powerful myths about the universe's divine destiny.

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