

NIETZSCHE CONTRA MARX IN MEXICO

*The Contemporáneos, Muralism, and Debates
over "Revolutionary" Art in 1930s Mexico*

Robin Adèle Greeley

I'll tell you why the devil and the work of art are inseparable, why revolution and poetry are inseparable. There is no poetry other than revolutionary. That is to say, there is none without the collaboration of the devil.

—JORGE CUESTA, "EL DIABLO EN LA POESÍA" (1934)¹

In June 1928, a new journal titled *Contemporáneos* opened its first issue with a convoluted but urgent call for a new "hero" for the new post-Revolutionary era at hand in Mexico. "The hero can be . . . a warrior, a man of science, a writer, artist, or politician," but had to aim for a "new ethical sensibility."² In a period full of military, populist, and cultural heroes, such a call was a calculated challenge to the status quo. Indeed, that same issue of *Contemporáneos* published a long attack by Gabriel García Maroto on the premier icon of Mexico's developing state culture: Diego Rivera. It so infuriated the painter that he publicly threatened the magazine's editors, setting the tone for a face-off between the *Contemporáneos* and Mexican muralism that would last more than a decade.³ While praising Rivera as a masterful "técnico," García Maroto damned his work for its "facile melody," arguing that Rivera sacrificed true Mexican feeling, reducing "art [to] a political-social instrument, a mechanical instrument, mechanizing, unrefined."⁴

In 1928 Rivera was just completing his murals for the Ministry of Public Education (the Secretaría de Educación Pública) and had already begun to define a standard for judging state-sponsored cultural nationalism. In attacking the most famous cultural avatar of the state, the *Contemporáneos*—the famous "*grupo sin grupo*" ("group without a group") that coalesced around the journal—had two intentions.⁵ The first was to resist what they perceived as increasing political, religious, and—especially—artistic inflex-

ibility at the national level. Citing a range of writers—from Gide, Benda, and Bergson to Ortega y Gasset and Nietzsche—the *Contemporáneos* criticized what seemed to them to be the reductivism of muralism's socialist realist premises, as well as its nationalist focus on the popular classes. They argued, moreover, that muralism's interpretations of indigenous culture were propagandistic and had little to do with the reality of rural existence. And in light of Mexico's long European heritage, they criticized as ludicrous and unrealistic the muralists' bombastic rejection of European aesthetic influences. In defining a modern Mexican identity, the *Contemporáneos* by contrast sought to mediate between a politicized art and a more autonomous *arte puro*. In sponsoring artists such as Agustín Lazo, María Izquierdo, Julio Castellanos, and Rufino Tamayo they supported powerful alternatives to the muralists' efforts, and sought to eliminate "all picturesque, decorative and . . . folkloric elements" in favor of a more complex, "universal" vision of the Mexican "race and spirit."⁶

In response, the muralists reviled the *Contemporáneos* as unmanly "foreignizing" queers—a telling, if odd, mix of slanders. José Clemente Orozco caricatured their fey dandyism; Rivera, while at the Ministry of Public Education, painted himself as a soldier kicking a prostrate Salvador Novo, with donkey ears, who personified the effete influence of foreign cultures. (Novo responded with a long satirical poem, "La Diegada.") The journal's editors were repeatedly condemned as anti-muralist, anti-nationalist, anti-Mexican sissies. In 1924, Julio Jiménez Rueda of *El Universal* ridiculed the *Contemporáneos* as "effeminate," equating patriotism with masculine virility.⁷ In 1928, *El Universal Ilustrado* continued the moral lynching of the "*artepuristas*," violently attacking the *Contemporáneos* for the "antinaturalist," cryptic language of their writing.⁸ In 1932, Jorge Cuesta and others faced spurious legal charges of "outrage to public morality" for having published "pornographic" chapters of a novel; the scandal that ensued forced all the *Contemporáneos* out of their government posts in education.⁹ In 1937, they were again attacked, this time from within Cárdenas' leftist government.¹⁰

The *Contemporáneos* were nonetheless fervent patriots, passionately concerned about the nation's future. Thus their second, more general, concern was to enter the pool of intellectuals attempting to use their official positions to shape state policy on *mexicanidad*.¹¹ Octavio Paz remarked that it was wrong to accuse the *Contemporáneos*—as many did—of indifference to public affairs.¹² Torres Bodet served as Minister of Education (twice) and Director of UNESCO; José Gorostiza served as Minister of Foreign Relations; Novo was prominent in efforts by the Ministry of Public Education to bring education to the Mexican countryside (hiring Villaurrutia to help him), and later emerged as Mexico's foremost public chronicler.¹³ And so on. Thus to call the *Contemporáneos* reactionary anti-nationalists is to misunderstand their project and to misrepresent their profound influence on both arts and public life in Mexico.

Indeed, the ferocity of the debates between the two camps raises questions about the construction and function of nationalism in Mexico's post-Revolution period. On the one hand, it reveals the utopian conviction of an emerging intellectual elite—includ-

ing both muralists and the Contemporáneos—that it could instigate an authentically Mexican culture. Works of art would provide alternatives to older historical narratives, thereby initiating a new historical period. This new national culture, an “aesthetic statism” forged in alliances between intellectuals and the state,¹⁴ would function as a model for the political and social life of the nation at all levels. On the other hand, the debates point up the lack of consensus during the 1920s and early 1930s on what *mexicanidad* would entail or how alliances of intellectual and the state were to be managed.

This chapter treats three broad elements of the debates between the Contemporáneos and muralists. First, the Contemporáneos, like the muralists, were situated at the heart of the crisis of formulating Mexico as a modern nation state in the 1920s and 1930s. They astutely interrogated the state’s efforts to align itself with the concept of “nation,” believing that these efforts flirted dangerously with fascism. Second, against muralism’s tendency to racialize and masculinize national identity around tropes of the indio-campesino and the worker-soldier, the Contemporáneos promoted a national identity based on melding cosmopolitan modernism with the national, the avant-garde with the traditional, and the urban with the rural to effect a “universalism.”¹⁵ They further attacked the gendered concept of the political that equated revolution with virility. And third, the Contemporáneos advocated a deliberately depoliticized *arte puro* as a bulwark against the excesses of art in the service of politics, particularly muralism. In so doing, they offered a psychological, existentialist definition of *mexicanidad* that had strong repercussions throughout the rest of the century.¹⁶

THE CONTEMPORÁNEOS: A CRITICAL NATIONALISM

The Contemporáneos, too young to have participated in the Revolution, did not share the idealism of first-generation muralists.¹⁷ Indeed, in Cuesta’s assessment, what held the *grupo sin grupo* together was precisely their “critical attitude,” their “distrust (and) skepticism.”¹⁸ They came of age in the late 1920s and 1930s, during a time of fragile hope but also of great national and cultural instability. They watched firsthand both the rise of a nationalist discourse and the coincident failure of José Vasconcelos and the Ateneo de la Juventud intellectuals to impose Vasconcelos’ model, inspired by Uruguayan philosopher José Enrique Rodó, of a continental, pan-Latin American culture.¹⁹ The journal itself was founded under the shadow of the multiple political shocks of 1928–29: the assassination of General Obregón as he tried to return to the presidency; the subsequent rigged presidential elections that resulted in the defeat of Vasconcelos; and Calles’ formation of Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), which obviated the need to negotiate political alliances and gave Calles personal control over key state decisions.²⁰ In this period, moreover, the government failed to quell widespread peasant rebellion (the Cristiada); the country also faced an economic shock following the crash of Wall Street in 1929. The Contemporáneos, while still young, observed the corruption

of former revolutionaries and their transformation into what Paz called “a greedy and crude plutocracy”²¹—an experience that prompted them to begin defining a crucial separation between nation and state.²² Opportunities for doing so at the national level were increasingly limited. The state had co-opted many of the means needed to establish such a distinction; in the later 1930s, President Cárdenas would further corporatize the relationship among the state, intellectuals, and the masses by institutionalizing ties that subordinated peasant and labor unions, along with intellectuals as their spokespeople, to state control.²³

Nevertheless, the Contemporáneos, recognizing the lack of a developed civil sector from which to launch their platform, chose to remain tied to the state. From this position, they made a three-pronged attack on the growing entrenchment of the nationalist model and its cultural component: first, against social realism and its ethos of revolutionary masculine virility; second, against indigenismo as a basis for *mexicanidad*; and third, against Marxism, especially as embodied in the Cardenista state (1934–40). Each part of the attack critiqued the dangerous collapse of nation into state.

In 1924, the Contemporáneos were shocked by the wild popularity of Mariano Azuela’s realist novel of the Mexican Revolution, *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*). Enthusiastic critics equated Azuela’s realist style with transparent legibility aimed at the uneducated masses; here was “revolutionary” art that produced a direct “reflection of reality” and conjured up an “exact” picture “made of the flesh, the pain and the calamitous destiny of the Revolution.”²⁴ *Los de abajo*, along with muralism, helped cement the Mexican Revolution as the “privileged horizon” by which all social and cultural achievements and all historical progress were judged,²⁵ and confirmed the realist narrative as the revolution’s appropriate cultural embodiment. “Revolutionary” realism was interwoven with calls from prominent intellectuals, such as anthropologist Manuel Gamio, for a “national” culture that would “reflect . . . in intensified and beautified form the pleasures, pains, life, and soul of the people.”²⁶ For Gamio, “the people” meant the rural and indigenous populations, and if Mexico was to develop a superior national culture, artists needed to reject Europeanized “elitist tastes” in favor of home-grown aesthetic sources “forged” out of Mexico’s complex racial heritage.²⁷ No truly national culture would “flourish so long as we continue to cultivate only foreign modalities of art in place of creating from what is ours.”²⁸

The emphasis on Mexico’s popular classes—the indigenous as well as the peasant and working classes—as the site of national cultural renovation (and the concomitant rejection of European models) was central to the *Manifiesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors*, published the same year as Azuela’s *Los de abajo*.²⁹ Written by Siqueiros and signed by Rivera, Orozco, Xavier Guerrero, Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Germán Cueto, and Carlos Mérida, the *Manifiesto* associated the national “soul” with the Indian and the popular. The Revolution replaced the nineteenth-century Reforma and Porfiriato as the nation’s key historical event, while Aztec

replaced colonial as Mexico's primary cultural heritage. The *Manifiesto* also exhibited the stridently militant attitude adopted by the muralists to elaborate their connections with the popular classes; this was the concept of artist as heroic proletarian/campesino/soldier that not only worked well with Azuela's realist narrative style, which so alarmed the Contemporáneos, but also fueled the condemnation of the Contemporáneos as Frenchified "*mariquitas*" for their insistence on recognizing Mexico's European heritage.³⁰ Anti-Contemporáneos often couched their hostility in gendered and moralistic terms. The polemic of 1925 equated "escapist" literature with "sexual eccentricity" and covertly linked "feminization" to a suspicion of anti-nationalist foreign influence in veiled accusations of homosexuality against Salvador Novo and others. They identified "revolutionary" literature and art, by analogy, with virility.³¹

The Contemporáneos, in turn, criticized muralism for rejecting Mexico's European heritage, and for conceiving modernity solely in relation to a politics of the masses. This critique, however, stemmed less from an anti-nationalist Eurocentrism than from a concern about the dangers hidden in the "facile path" of constructing a national identity from "picturesque, decorative, even folkloric" legacies.³² Against what they saw as the muralists' parochial nationalism, the Contemporáneos argued that national culture should serve as a means of entry into the world community. In addition, they recognized that to elaborate Mexico purely as a rejection of Europe was, in effect, to reinstall Europe as the arbiter of Mexico's destiny by placing it at the center of the endeavor—something all the more dangerous for being unacknowledged rather than out in the open. Furthermore, muralism risked the danger of subordinating aesthetic issues to politics to the point of lapsing into propaganda. "Painting finds itself here," wrote Villaurrutia with refined irony, "as Rivera wishes, at the service of social and political ideas."³³

The Contemporáneos also criticized the politics of class hidden in the aesthetics of "revolutionary nationalism."³⁴ The country's elite, they argued, deployed the concepts of nationalism and anti-imperialism to obscure power inequalities in Mexico. Gorostiza criticized social realist art for hiding class conflict under a veneer of national unity, and the urban elite's enthusiasm for it as narcissistic charity to relieve bourgeois guilt over the despicable conditions of the poor.³⁵ And against muralism's—especially Rivera's—powerful denial that the *indio* as a nationalist symbol differed from the *indio* as a historical entity, Tamayo would remark acidly that "the only place where the peasants and Indians ever triumphed was in the scenario of Mexican muralism."³⁶

Yet this harsh criticism was calculated not to offend nationalist sensibilities but to respond to the social complexity of the period. The Contemporáneos recognized that the Revolution had not shifted power relations nearly as much as the idealized worker-peasant aesthetic of Rivera's late 1920s murals proclaimed.³⁷ Samuel Ramos, in his influential 1931 essay "La cultura criolla," argued that, like it or not, high culture remained largely in the hands of the elite minority. Nevertheless, the Revolution had forced that minority to recognize the need for wider cultural inclusion. Because of historical circumstances, Ramos contended, Mexico could neither reject its European

heritage outright (as hardline nationalists wanted) nor indulge in "artificial Europeanism" that ignored local histories (as the Porfiriato had done). "What has been lacking," he wrote, "is the wisdom to develop that European spirit in harmony with the new conditions in which it finds itself."³⁸

Ramos' 1930 essay on Rivera applies these theories to Mexico's premier artist.³⁹ Rivera, according to Ramos, represented the highest achievements of Mexican national culture, but not for the reasons most (including Rivera himself) claimed. Ramos argued that Rivera's genius lay in his absorption of European influences—especially cubism—and his use of them to revitalize an authentically Mexican indigenous culture long marginalized and moribund: "Diego discovered an important aspect of our reality, which no one had seen before even though it was in plain sight. The primitive existence of Mexico, of which the Indian is the protagonist, appears suddenly in the painter's frescoes as if emerging from the depths of the earth." Yet Rivera produced this "new vision of Mexican life" not because he repudiated all things European, but because he united "cultivated European man with the barbarous man of the Mexican jungle" to construct a "universal" aesthetics. For both Ramos and the Contemporáneos, Rivera's modernist universalism gained its power from the painter's close attention to "the plastic form of things"⁴⁰—that is to say, to the formal procedures of modernist painting, not from subordinating aesthetics to a political message, and not from a fidelity to an imagined pre-Conquest past.

Ramos' critique belonged to the Contemporáneos' condemnation of rigid political positions, whether right or left. This critique was most acute in Cuesta's 1935 harangue against Marxism: "Marx was not intelligent or revolutionary; neither was he socialist, but rather counter-revolutionary and mystical."⁴¹ The ranting title of the essay, published the year of the famous Rivera-Siqueiros debates, echoes Cuesta's frustration with the failure of post-revolutionary Marxism as it came increasingly under the combined influence of Stalinism and the Cardenista state. It also reveals Cuesta's perceptive insights into Mexican Marxism's distinctive relationship to Catholicism.⁴² Particularly alarming, Cuesta argued, were Marxism's totalizing vision and its religious, anti-rational character: "Marxism wants a world founded in Marxism, not in objective evidence; it wants an ethics founded in Marxism, not in objective moral judgment; it wants an education founded in Marxism, not in the nature of objective understanding."⁴³ Far from rejecting either Christianity's ritualized character or its doctrine of blind faith in a supreme power, Cuesta argued, Marxism merely transferred those sentiments to the concept of proletarian revolution. In his view, Marxism was merely religious mysticism disguised as secular rationalism; rather than liberating the populace from the binds of irrational thinking and superstition, Marxism reinforced them.

To comprehend Cuesta's fears, it is important to recognize how much he was interpreting Marx through the lens of Cardenismo and its attempts to corporatize the masses. Rather than foster political discourse independent of the state, Cárdenas institutionalized policies—from the implementation of socialist education and the restructuring

of PNR to the subordination of peasant and worker unions to the state—to tie public life and discourse to the state.⁴⁴ These policies helped the state to wrest many of the ritual functions away from the church and, in turn, ritualize political life in Mexico.⁴⁵ It was this “religious consecration of power,” promoted by the Cardenista state through influential Marxists such as powerful union leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, that alarmed Cuesta.⁴⁶ He thus identified three interconnected dangers in Mexican Marxism: the rise of a national socialism disturbingly similar to that of the Nazis; a continuation of Christianity’s emphasis on blind faith, shifted in attachment from God to the Mexican state; and the subjugation of cultural production to the exigencies of the state. Cardenista Marxism seemed to threaten the concept of individual creativity at the heart of the Contemporáneos’ ideology; in Cuesta’s view, Cardenismo’s “*política de las masas*” served only to institutionalize this anti-individualism, reinforce the ritual nature of public politics, and diminish the separation between nation and state.⁴⁷

Although historians have shown that Cárdenas Mexico was far from following the Nazi example,⁴⁸ Cuesta’s fears, at the time he expressed them, might have seemed justified. He was responding in part to the polarizing effects in Mexico of heated international debates about socially committed art by proponents of fascism, communism, and liberal capitalism. This polarization was evident not only in the 1935 Rivera-Siqueiros debates and the vagaries of Vasconcelos’ right-wing politics, but also in the growing ideological dogmatism of cultural organizations such as the Soviet-influenced League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (LEAR), composed of artists and intellectuals such as Siqueiros and the second-generation muralist Pablo O’Higgins.⁴⁹ And in the wake of the polemic against the Contemporáneos in 1932, a Committee of Public Health was proposed to make sure no one of “dubious” revolutionary quality was given a government post.⁵⁰ The proposal—a further step in the widespread leftist equation of revolution with heterosexual virility that the Contemporáneos heavily criticized—eventually resulted in the founding, under Cárdenas, of the Autonomous Department of Publicity and Propaganda (DAPP), a Mussolini-inspired shadow institution to the Ministry of Public Education, charged with overseeing all forms of “social communication,” from the mass media to public events and the arts.⁵¹ In DAPP’s homophobic tendencies, aimed at the Contemporáneos, the state dangerously mimicked Charles Maurras’ proto-fascist dictum: “It is nationalism’s obligation to defend the nation from *foreigners of the interior*.”⁵²

Yet while Cuesta and the Contemporáneos rejected Cardenista Marxism, they did not advocate any return to the Ateneo de la Juventud’s elitist repudiation of the popular.⁵³ They realized that the Ateneo, despite its historical importance, had missed its mark. Vasconcelos was criticized for his irrational mysticism; Alfonso Caso for his outmoded and aristocratic academicism; and even their mentor, Alfonso Reyes, for stagnating.⁵⁴ The Ateneo (particularly Vasconcelos) was also criticized for its superficial—and thus right-wing—reading of Nietzsche.⁵⁵ As Horacio Legrás has argued, the Ateneo read

Nietzsche for solutions to the urgent question of “incorporat(ing) the politically volatile and inexperienced masses into the representational logic of the modern state.”⁵⁶ In sharp contrast to the Contemporáneos, the Ateneo intellectuals interpreted the German philosopher according to their interest in using art to integrate Mexico’s diverse cultures into a unified state project. As Minister of Public Education, Vasconcelos institutionalized the Ateneo commitment to using art—most notably muralism—as a means of educating the masses in the values of citizenship. Indeed, despite their claims to be above politics, the Ateneo intellectuals sided with the state, seeking to bring to it their conviction about the unifying function of culture.⁵⁷

NATION VERSUS STATE: THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS

Against both muralism and the Ateneo models, the Contemporáneos proposed a third paradigm for the nation—one that separated the concept of nation from that of state.⁵⁸ In this model, the nation was the repository of complex and ambiguous moral, spiritual, psychological, and cultural values, whereas the state was the pragmatic, institutional structure subject to the laws of history. “Unlike Caso and Vasconcelos,” Christopher Domínguez argues, “Cuesta could separate history from morality (and morality from philosophy)” and thus could critique the politics of the state without confusing this with the “nation.”⁵⁹ The Contemporáneos—especially Cuesta and Ramos—elaborated this paradigm in part from reading Nietzsche for his philosophical investigations of the morality of ambiguity, rather than (like the Ateneo intellectuals) reading him as an apologist for totalitarianism.⁶⁰ Cuesta saw that, for Nietzsche, human thought “lives in search of its opposite; not to annihilate it, but rather to reconcile with it,” and Nietzsche “deliberately inspired himself with opposing passions” so as to investigate a moral philosophy of uncertainty and doubt.⁶¹ Nietzsche showed the Contemporáneos how to characterize truth and knowledge as provisional rather than absolute—an understanding that shaped their concept of statecraft. For them, Nietzsche served as a counterpoint to the authoritarianism the Contemporáneos detected in the political program of the Mexican state. They were particularly impressed by the German philosopher’s deliberate avoidance of instrumental reason. Cuesta, writing to retrieve Nietzsche from the Nazis in 1939, noted approvingly that “Reason, for (Nietzsche), is not man, but rather that which triumphs over man.”⁶² Ramos expounded upon the Apollonian-Dionysian paradigm of Nietzsche as analogous to social and aesthetic organization; Dionysian emotional “deliriums” provided a necessary counterbalance to Apollonian rationalist “imagination.”⁶³

Nietzsche thus gave Cuesta, Ramos, and the Contemporáneos tools with which they could confront the deep-seated problems of Mexican national culture. Like Vasconcelos and the early muralists, the Contemporáneos conceived artistic creation as a model for the political will of the nation. But unlike either the Ateneo or the muralists, the

Contemporáneos argued that the national spirit, like art, would result not from confusing nation with the pragmatics of state governance, but rather from a "momentary liberation from the imperatives of reality and logic" that would give rise to new concepts of being.⁶⁴ Reading Nietzsche allowed the Contemporáneos to think how artistic form-giving might be brought together with political will to strengthen the public sphere as a space for vigorous political debate.⁶⁵ In this way, the Contemporáneos used Nietzsche to appropriate the concept of virility embodied in revolutionary nationalism, redirecting it away from ideological dogmatism toward rigorous independent thinking. Rather than emphasizing Nietzsche's authoritarian *übermensch*, the Contemporáneos stressed his "will to power" as aggressively mobilizing the human will against conformity to break down existing homogeneous structures of power.

This mobilization would take place, the Contemporáneos contended, primarily in the realm of aesthetics. To this end, they conceived aesthetics as a deeply *moral* enterprise, a militant antidote to the ideological insensitivity of revolutionary nationalism. Gorostiza, for example, argued that the only way to produce literature that "analyzed" rather than simply "recounted" the profundity of Mexico's history was through rigorous attention to the "resolution of aesthetic problems." The "severe discipline" such an exercise required built a strength of character that could subvert the masculinist rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism and resist the "false nationalists" who produced "Mexico for exportation" to write a truly *Mexican* literature.⁶⁶

But aesthetics for the Contemporáneos was more than simply an answer to the cultural dogmatism of the muralists and other revolutionary nationalists. It was, in and of itself, political—not in the sense of the mechanics of governing, but in the sense of an ethical practice. In this regard, Pellicer and Cuesta were especially perceptive. Unlike Villaurrutia (who professed to shun politics altogether),⁶⁷ Cuesta recognized the Faustian nature of aesthetics conceptualized as an ethical—and therefore political—venture. Art itself was resolutely political, fostering an "ethics of responsibility" born of the intellectual endeavor.⁶⁸ Yet Cuesta realized the impossibility of disentangling the mechanics of politics from ethics, and he regarded political engagement as the "devil" that dragged all artists and intellectuals away from that ethics. Art subsumed under the rhetoric of nationalist politics, the Contemporáneos maintained, lost its essential freedom of expression.

The Contemporáneos instead upheld artistic and intellectual freedom as a universal value, and their cosmopolitanism—often falsely labeled Eurocentrism—must be understood in this framework. Gorostiza, for example, advocated a vigorous literary movement that would consolidate national and universal values, integrate popular culture with avant-garde modernity, and consider art to be an end in itself rather than a means of justifying other ends.⁶⁹ Thus the Contemporáneos' strong commitment to French avant-garde culture, evinced in the journal's repeated references to such examples as Proust, Gide, Picasso, and the surrealists, signified their search for a universal aesthetics rather than a singular attachment to France. "What indeed is indisputable," writes

Paz, siding with the Contemporáneos, "is that for them Frenchness was a profession of universalist faith. For this reason it could coexist with their patriotism."⁷⁰

MURALISMS COMPARED: CONTEMPORÁNEOS VERSUS MURALISTS

Yet relations between the two camps over time were far from static, and the Contemporáneos took care to recognize tensions and differences within muralism. Villaurrutia praised Siqueiros and Orozco for their "discontent" with the "externalizing model that Mexican painters, from Diego Rivera to the most humble, have so abused."⁷¹ Novo, in his capacity as Undersecretary of Education in 1932, helped organize Siqueiros' first solo exhibition.⁷² Siqueiros, in return, soft-pedaled his standard productionist rhetoric, claiming at the exhibition's conference:

I am a partisan of the idea that [the arts] serve the proletariat in its revolutionary class struggle; but I consider the theory of "arte puro" as the supreme aesthetic goal. . . . I fight for the advent of [communist society] because in doing so I fight for pure art. Equally, I am of the opinion that [the artist] must not subordinate his aesthetic sense to the tastes of the revolutionary proletarian masses, as [those masses] have been poisoned by the degraded aesthetic sensibilities of the capitalist class.⁷³

The following month, the Frente Único de Lucha Contra la Reacción Estética (FULCRE) published a manifesto, written by Siqueiros, against academicism in painting.⁷⁴ Among FULCRE's members were Contemporáneos affiliates Novo, Villaurrutia, Tamayo, and Castellanos.

The Contemporáneos thus continually sought support on a variety of fronts for their notion of *arte puro*—a concept that linked aesthetic individualism to national political freedom. Against art or intellectual production subordinated to political engagement, the Contemporáneos collectively argued a different relationship between aesthetics and liberatory politics: "Art is not revolutionary simply because it speaks or exhibits material phenomena of the Revolution: art is revolutionary in and of itself."⁷⁵ Artistic practice, uncompromised by subservience to any other medium, thus became an allegory for political freedom.⁷⁶ Yet the Contemporáneos insisted on this model as more than a personal one guaranteeing an individual's liberty; it needed to be instituted at the state level, to produce an aesthetic statism different from what the Contemporáneos saw developing around them.⁷⁷

In seeking to define this relationship of art and politics, Cuesta tackled muralism's conundrum head-on in his essay on Rivera. Here he attempted to separate the muralist from the aura surrounding him in order to open a serious dialogue on the nationalist aesthetics being institutionalized by state. Cuesta argued that Rivera marked a new Mexican "academy" born of the revolution. Yet Rivera's "classicism" was the result not

of his bolshevism, according to Cuesta, but of his use of French cubist forms. Indeed, Cuesta continued, Rivera's bolshevism was irrelevant, a mere "convention," a trap into which both Rivera's supporters and detractors fell. The real power of Rivera's work lay in its essential "skepticism," derived from his immersion in cubism. Cuesta defined this as "a skepticism of painting," understood as "a precise consciousness of the relativity of all perspective, whether moral, political, or religious."⁷⁸ Cuesta thus saw in Rivera's work an effort, like that of cubism, to interrogate the ethics of Western pictorial convention. For Cuesta, what legitimated this "skepticism" as ethical critique was its firm basis in a uniquely modernist attention to an autonomous, self-referential artistic practice; only such a rigorous self-critique could stand as a model for ethical conduct in the socio-political realm. Cuesta called up the works of Picasso and Stravinsky as examples of this model of avant-garde cultural production, which, familiar to us now, found itself embattled in 1930s Mexico. The meaning of their works, he wrote, "does not depend on certain local and temporal conditions [. . .]; their value does not depend on the political and religious convictions of those who contemplate or listen." Instead, he argued, they generate a meaning that registers the same for anyone from an "Israelite" to a "Mason."⁷⁹

Cuesta reserved his most insightful analysis for Orozco, a favorite of the Contemporáneos. In his essay of 1934 he detected certain similarities between Orozco and the Contemporáneos, arguing that both chose the most difficult route, the "most sterile of territories," in order to move beyond facile political ideologies.⁸⁰ Cuesta's "Nietzschean" Orozco (like Cuesta himself) used art to expose dilemmas or contradictions, to elaborate them, to push them to their limits.⁸¹ In 1938, while Orozco was in the midst of producing his most existentially anguished work—the Hospicio de Cabañas murals (figure 8.1), Cuesta described Orozco's painting as encompassing the very essence of art itself, the ability to embody humanity's essential moral torment: "Man carries within himself the enemy of man. And what must be discerned is the art and effect of that rivalry. It must be noted that there is as much ruin for art in the suppression of an enemy as in [the suppression of] the other. The ruin of art is in the suspension of this struggle. Art needs its enemy."⁸²

Nevertheless, Cuesta's fascination with Orozco was double-edged. The artist's powerful reliance on mysticism and symbolism ran against Cuesta's preference for classicism and threatened to undo his concept of aesthetic modernism. "The originality of Orozco [unlike that of Picasso] does not correspond to the modern concept of originality, based in an idea of progress according to which each era is accompanied by a fatal expression of its . . . gradual unraveling." Rather, his genius was an "absolute radicalism" but "barren," so that the younger generation of painters could not assimilate it. Orozco, in Cuesta's eyes, belonged more to Quattrocento Italy than to post-revolution Mexico, where he was forced to live "artificially." Yet this internal tension was precisely the source of Orozco's greatness, in that it mirrored history's "internal conflicts."⁸³

Tamayo also figured centrally in the Contemporáneos' effort to address those "inter-



FIGURE 8.1

José Clemente Orozco. *Man of Fire*, Hospicio de Cabañas, Guadalajara (1938–39). © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photograph: Art Resource

nal conflicts" of history that gave rise to Mexico's crisis of identity. Foreshadowing Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* (and his key 1951 text on Tamayo), the Contemporáneos returned to the long-standing problem of how *mexicanidad* might, in Benedict Anderson's term, be "imagined" so as to confront—rather than deny—the inherent instability wrought upon Mexican identity by the Conquest. The Contemporáneos strove to counteract the adoption after the revolution of a triumphalist ideology of *indigenismo*, which they felt ignored, rather than resolved, the recurrent existential crisis of a nation continually torn between its indigenous and European heritages.⁸⁴ To this end, Tamayo offered a psychic model, different from muralism's socialist realism, of how to suture Mexico's ancient

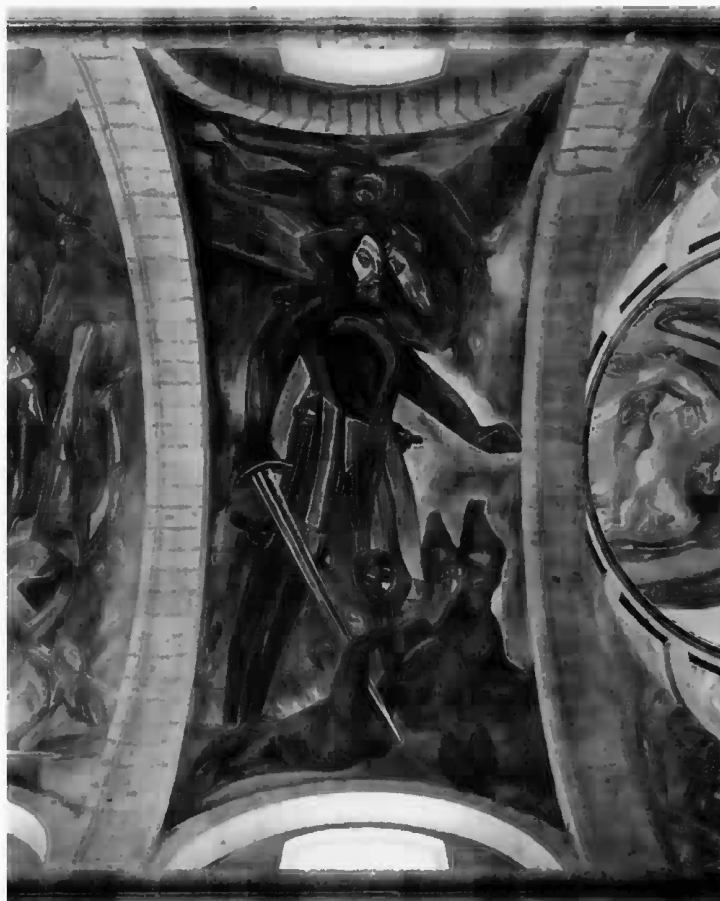


FIGURE 8.2

José Clemente Orozco. *Cortés*, Hospicio de Cabañas, Guadalajara (1939).
© 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City.
Photograph: Art Resource

past to its modern present. Capitalizing on the Oaxacan painter's purported indigenous status, the Contemporáneos framed Tamayo as simultaneously primitive and modern in a public image that emphasized his "instinctual," psychological *mexicanidad*.⁸⁵ He was able, they argued, to conjure visually the aura of the past, not as revival but rather as a mode of confronting the uncertainty of the present.⁸⁶ Tamayo's primitivism rejected Rivera's anecdotal, folkloric pre-Conquest arcadias as well as the European avant-garde's penchant for alien cultures. Instead, he envisioned the past and its recurrence in the present as terrifying symptoms of a culture-wide psychic anguish. Mexico's crisis of modernity, unlike that of Europe, was not the terror of the new unhinged from the past,



FIGURE 8.3

Rufino Tamayo. *Landscape in the Night* (1933). © D. R. Rufino Tamayo/Herederos/México/2009/
Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

but rather the pathological resurgence of the ancient in the guise of the modern.⁸⁷ What Orozco, throughout the 1930s, envisioned as apocalyptic histories (figure 8.2), Tamayo imaged as psychic dramas, "at once refined and savage,"⁸⁸ in which the modern turned on the uneasy dream memories of previous historical trauma (figure 8.3).

By choosing a psychic, rather than historical, model, Tamayo allied himself with the Contemporáneos against the muralists, to claim a pure, "universal" attention to aesthetic practice.⁸⁹ *Arte puro*, for Tamayo and the Contemporáneos, was thus a practice analogous to, but separate from, politics for exploring the dilemmas and contradictions of modernity.⁹⁰ This is evident in Tamayo's first mural, *Song and Music*, of 1933 (plate 6 and figure 8.4). Painted both to enter into debates on muralism and to influence the direction of public arts, it is situated in the stairwell of the former National School of Music.⁹¹ In it, Tamayo amplified the somber color palette, archaizing stiffness, and psychic aura of his easel paintings to monumental scale, to picture a set of massive female allegories. In the center panel, a statuesque, white-robed Music plucks a mandolin, surrounded by soaring figures of Intelligence and Intuition and the seated figure of Humanity. Music, staring solemnly, ignores her surroundings, engrossed in inward contemplation. Song, on the left wall, concentrates on her métier, her rounded mouth mimicked by the cherub floating above her. Two muses of lyric and dramatic song ani-



FIGURE 8.4
Rufino Tamayo. *Song and Music*, right wall, National School of Music (now the Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología), Mexico City (1933).
© D. R. Rufino Tamayo/Herederos/México/2009/Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

mate the shallow space above her head. On the right wall, allegories of stringed, wind, and percussive instruments float in a compressed, airless space, organized visually by the moon's full white orb.

Song and Music deliberately distinguishes itself from the principal mural models on offer in 1933. Although Tamayo, like Rivera at Chapingo, takes up the monumental female body as national allegory, his archaizing style deliberately challenges both Rivera's political narratives and the luxuriant bodies he uses to embody them (figure 8.5). Tamayo's figures have none of Rivera's sensuality, nor do they take up Orozco's mystical anguish. Instead, their monolithic forms suggest a solemn grandeur, while the dark, earthy tones (offset by the cool white of Music's classical drapery or the mandolin paired



FIGURE 8.5
Diego Rivera. *Liberated Earth with the Natural Forces Controlled by Man*, Autonomous University of Chapingo (1926). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk/Art Resource

with the full moon above) evoke the traditional and the ancient. And while Tamayo's references to pre-Conquest visual forms might remind us of an early work by Siqueiros, *Burial of a Worker*, the Oaxacan painter's figures carry none of the references to contemporary social conflict that we see in the Siqueiros (figure 8.6). Nor does Tamayo indulge in Siqueiros' growing propensity for defying the restrictions of the architectural surround (see figure 11.4). *Song and Music* presents a flat, condensed space that adheres to the spatial dictates of the wall with a starkly modernist concentration. Tamayo combines a pre-Conquest visual vocabulary of self-contained, sculptural monumentality with a



FIGURE 8.6

David Alfaro Siqueiros. *Burial of a Worker*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso (formerly Escuela Nacional Preparatoria) (1923–24). © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photograph: Art Resource

stringent economy of form that is entirely modernist, to produce weighty, hieratic figures that bring the severe stylization of Aztec sculpture into the modern era.

THE LEGACY OF THE CONTEMPORÁNEOS

Both Orozco and Tamayo were key figures for the Contemporáneos as they elaborated their ethics of individual creative freedom as essential to the modern Mexican nation. Against the state's conception of the nation as a collective defined by a pragmatic logic, into which the individual was subsumed, the Contemporáneos insisted on an aesthetic of the intuitive, the melancholy, and the solitary inner experience of the individual that Villaurrutia would famously describe as a "nostalgia for death."⁹²

Despite persecution of the Contemporáneos in the 1920s and 1930s, this existentialist model of the national soul would have repercussions after World War II. Paz's enormously influential book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* adapted this paradigm to the anxieties of a world seeking explanation for the horrors of the holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the

gulag. Writing in 1950, Paz extended the Contemporáneos' concept of anguish, arguing that modern Mexico carried a burden of psychic trauma and repressed rage as a legacy of the Conquest.⁹³ History, rather than offer a means of transcending the emasculation of rape and colonial subjugation, is only repeated endlessly as national destiny, forcing the Mexican male continually to oscillate between despondency and outbursts of rage and random violence. In this model, the political violence of the Revolution and its aftermath resulted from the cyclical psychic violence imposed centuries before, not from social relations, as muralism would have it. Paz, by articulating national identity as a pathology of violence, took the Contemporáneos' rejection of muralism's Marxism further, arguing that individual solitude and anguish were more profoundly Mexican than the realm of social conflict. In 1951, Paz linked this view of Mexico's afflicted nature to the aftermath of world war, when he commented that Tamayo "opens for us the doors of the old sacred universe of myth and images that reveal to us the double condition of man: his atrocious reality and, simultaneously, his no less atrocious irreality. Twentieth-century man suddenly discovers what, by other routes, was already known by all those who had lived a crisis, an end of the world."⁹⁴ Paz argued that Tamayo, unlike the muralists, could embody the chaos of the modern precisely because of his intuitive, individualist ability aesthetically to conjure up Mexico's cataclysmic past.⁹⁵

The sophistication, impact, and valid criticisms of Paz's powerful formulation are too complex to analyze fully here. But whereas post-Revolution socialism forced the Contemporáneos into an embattled minority position, Paz's thoughts took hold after the global failure of socialism's utopian project. His model reverberated in post-war Mexico as the state "institutionalized" the Revolution, forsaking all but the superficial rhetoric of socialism for a capitalist model of economic growth. In the atmosphere of the cold war, the cultural stereotypes Paz had elaborated entrenched themselves so that even today they remain powerful.

NOTES

1. Jorge Cuesta, *Obras reunidas v. II: Ensayos y prosas varias*, eds. Jesús R. Martínez Malo, Víctor Peláez Cuesta, and Francisco Segovia (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), p. 245. All translations by author except where noted.
2. Bernardo J. Gastélum, "Espíritu del héroe," *Contemporáneos* V. 1. No. 1 (June 1928):2.
3. See Ermilo Abreu Gómez in *Las revistas literarias de México* (Mexico: Ediciones del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1963), p. 171, cited in E. J. Mullen, "Critical Reactions to the Review *Contemporáneos*," *Hispania*, V. 54, No. 1 (March 1971):146.
4. Gabriel García Maroto, "La pintura de Diego Rivera," *Contemporáneos*, V. 1, No. 1 (June, 1928):65.
5. Xavier Villaurrutia, "Carta a un joven (Edmundo Valadés)" *Los Contemporáneos por sí mismos*, pp. xi–xii. Quoted in Guillermo Sheridan, *Los Contemporáneos ayer* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), p. 13–14. The core group, which had been publishing and working together since the early 1920s, included Jorge Cuesta, Enrique González Rojo,

José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Jaime Torres Bodet, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Gilberto Owen. Tangentially affiliated were Samuel Ramos, Bernardo J. Gastélum, and Carlos Pellicer.

6. Xavier Villaurrutia, *Obras: poesía, teatro, prosas varias, crítica*, ed. Miguel Capistrán, Alí Chumacero, and Luis Mario Schneider (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966), pp. 1035, 1036. Karen Cordero Reiman, "Ensueños artísticos: tres estrategias plásticas para configurar la modernidad en México, 1920-1930," *Modernidad y modernización en el arte mexicano, 1920-1960* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1991), p. 62.

7. Julio Jiménez Rueda, "El afeminamiento en la literatura mexicana," *El Universal* (December 21, 1924), n.p. See Víctor Díaz Arciniega, *Querrela por la cultura "revolucionaria"* (1925) (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) for documentation.

8. See Carlos Monsiváis, "La persecución y la mexicanidad viril," *Salvador Novo: Lo marginal en el centro* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2000), pp. 73-84, for documentation. See also Christopher Domínguez Michael, "Prólogo. La crítica del demonio," in Cuesta, *Obras reunidas v. II*.

9. This was Rubén Salazar Mallén's novel, *Cariátide*, which contained rough vernacular language. See Guillermo Sheridan, *México en 1932: la polémica nacionalista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), pp. 105-6.

10. Sheridan, *México en 1932*, p. 106.

11. Gastélum indicated this in the first issue of *Contemporáneos*, stating "Hagamos un nuevo país dándole, junto a la conciencia de su articulación, el programa de su existencia." ["Let us make a new country, giving it, together with a consciousness of its articulation, the program of its existence."] "Espíritu del héroe," *Contemporáneos* V. 1, No. 1 (June 1928): 14.

12. Octavio Paz, "Contemporáneos: Primer Encuentro," in Paz and Luis Mario Schneider, eds., *México en la obra de Octavio Paz v. II: Generaciones y semblanzas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), p. 94.

13. Novo was the first editor of *El Maestro Rural*, a journal central to the Ministry of Public Education's rural education program, which sought to bring literacy as well as technical and cultural education to rural peoples. Forced to quit because of the October 1932 polemic, Novo nevertheless remained a powerful public figure, writing his famous chronicles of Mexican life.

14. David A. Kaiser, *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) defines the term "aesthetic statism," via Schiller, as the unification of the political state with the aesthetic realm, universal rationalism with the individual, and a universal canon with a national culture. See Ana María Alonso, "Conforming Disconformity: 'Mezclaje, Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism,'" *Cultural Anthropology* V. 19, No. 4 (2004): 459-90 for an investigation of aesthetic statism in 1920s Mexico.

15. My use of the term "cosmopolitan" here and below refers not to the strict political sense of abolishing all existing states, or to the Kantian sense of a moral and legal obligation, or to economic cosmopolitanism, which advocates a single global market. Rather, I use it in a looser cultural sense to indicate the Contemporáneos' conviction that national culture should serve as a means of entry into the world community. As I argue below, the Contemporáneos saw both a slavish devotion to European models and an exclusive adhesion

to parochial culture as detrimental. While this concept of national culture as a means to full and equal participation in the world community had its contradictions, it still can usefully be characterized as cosmopolitan. My thanks to Joaquín Terrones and José Falconi for help in articulating this point. See also Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2006 edition) Edward N. Zalta, ed., URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/>>; and Timothy Brennan, "Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism," in Daniele Archibugi, ed., *Debating Cosmopolitanism* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 41-42.

16. As will become clear below, I use the term "existentialist" here not in the full Sartrean sense of freedom as the "dislocation of consciousness from its object," but in the more limited sense of "the estrangement of the self both from the world and from itself," that sense of alienation and precarity prompted by the "modern experience of a meaningless universe." Nevertheless, the Contemporáneos' invocation of Nietzsche, which I discuss below, resonates strongly with existentialism's understanding of Nietzschean nihilism as potentially liberating. Steven Crowell, "Existentialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 edition) Edward N. Zalta, ed., URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>>.

17. Carlos Monsiváis, *Jorge Cuesta* (Mexico City: Crea, 1985), p. 11; Paz, "Contemporáneos," p. 94.

18. Jorge Cuesta, "¿Existe una crisis en nuestra literatura de vanguardia?" quoted in Sheridan, *Los Contemporáneos ayer*, p. 12.

19. Before becoming Minister of Public Education under Obregón, Vasconcelos was a prominent member of the influential *Ateneo de la Juventud*. On Vasconcelos and pan-Latinamericanism, see Rick López, "Institutionalizing the Cultural Nationalist Project" in *Crafters of Nationhood: How Intellectuals, Artisans and the State Created an Ethnicized Mexican National Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

20. The PNR, changing its name in 1946 to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), would remain in power until the end of the century. See Nora Hamilton on the successes and failures of Calles to centralize control under his command. Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

21. Paz, "Contemporáneos," p. 94.

22. Nicola Miller, *In the Shadow of the State: Intellectuals and the Quest for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Spanish America* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 151.

23. On Cárdenas' corporatization of the masses, see Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 26 (1994): 73-107.

24. Carlos Noriega Hope, "'Los de abajo': El Doctor Mariano Azuela y la crítica del punto y coma," *El Universal* (February 10, 1925), quoted in Díaz Arciniega, *Querrela*, p. 90. That *Los de abajo* was co-opted for use against the Contemporáneos in these debates is ironic, given Azuela's long history of trenchant criticism of the hypocrisy of politicians who used the Revolution to gain personal power. See Jorge Ruffinelli, "La recepción crítica de *Los de abajo*," in Mariano Azuela, *Los de abajo*, Edición crítica, coordinador, J. Ruffinelli (Mexico City: Colección Archivos, 1988), especially pp. 204-9.

25. Sheridan, *México en 1932*, p. 28.

26. Manuel Gamio, "The Education of the Indo-Hispanic Peoples," in *Aspects of Mexican*

Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), p. 52. Translation modified from López, *Crafters of Nationhood*, Chapter 4.

27. Gamio, "The Education of the Indo-Hispanic Peoples," p. 52, quoted in López, *Crafters of Nationhood*; Manuel Gamio, *Forjando patria* (Mexico City: Porrúa Hermanos, 1916). As Basave Benítez and Ana María Alonso note, Gamio represented the "indigenist pole" of mestizo nationalism (Basave Benítez, paraphrased in, "Conforming Disconformity," p. 465). That is to say, Gamio argued not for a purely *indio* nation, but for a national ethos that "forged" both the Latin and the indigenous races into one.

28. Gamio, "The Education of the Indo-Hispanic Peoples," p. 52, quoted in López, *Crafters of Nationhood*.

29. See the appendix in this volume.

30. Sheridan paraphrasing the position of *El Universal Ilustrado* during the 1925 polemic. Sheridan, *México en 1932*, p. 36.

31. *El Universal Ilustrado*, quoted in Sheridan, *México en 1932*, p. 35.

32. Villaurrutia, *Obras*, p. 1035. "Folkloric" in this sense refers to the traditional, rural, and local, or regional (versus the modern, urban, international, and cosmopolitan).

33. Villaurrutia, *Obras*, p. 1025.

34. On "revolutionary nationalism," see my chapter, "Muralism and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920–1970," this volume.

35. José Gorostiza, "Clásicos para niños," *Excelsior* (March 22, 1925), quoted in Díaz Arciniega, *Querella*, p. 92.

36. Rufino Tamayo, paraphrased in Rita Eder, "El muralismo mexicano: modernismo y modernidad," in *Modernidad y modernización en el arte mexicano, 1920–1960* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 1991), p. 70.

37. In this regard, it should be noted that the Contemporáneos distinguished Orozco and early Siqueiros from Rivera's utopian idealism, at least until events of 1932.

38. Samuel Ramos, "La cultura criolla," *Contemporáneos* Nos. 38–39 (July–August, 1931): 64, 63.

39. Samuel Ramos, "El sueño de México–Diego," *Contemporáneos* V. VI, No. 21 (February 1930): 113–26.

40. Ramos, "Diego," pp. 118, 119, 121, 124.

41. Cuesta, "Marx no era inteligente, ni revolucionario; tampoco socialista, sino contrarrevolucionario y místico," (1935), in Cuesta, *Obras*, pp. 324–40.

42. Mexican Marxism's relationship to Catholicism is a complex issue deeply entwined with Mexico's colonial past, its contemporary nationalism, and the development of its party politics throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps most compelling in this regard is the communist militant and writer, José Revueltas, whose conflicts with the Mexican Communist Party in the 1940s, belief in the revolutionary potential of the common man, and rejection of Leninism for a more existentialist Marxism were intimately bound up with his Catholicism. To a degree, Revueltas could be said to have bridged the opposition between the muralists and the Contemporáneos; he criticized the Party's dogmatism and its willingness to participate in the Mexican state's "institutionalization" of the revolution, but without forsaking Marxism. In turn, he emphasized the importance of inner experience to any concept of social revolution, often couching this experience in religious symbolism.

Octavio Paz sympathetically described the "paradoxical character" of Revueltas' writing as "a vision of Christianity within his Marxist atheism. Revueltas lived Marxism as a Christian and because of that he lived it . . . as agony, doubt and negation." Paz, "Cristianismo y revolución: José Revueltas," in Paz and Luis Mario Schneider, eds., *México en la obra de Octavio Paz* v. II: *Generaciones y semblanzas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), p. 575. Nevertheless, against the Contemporáneos' Nietzscheanism, Revueltas was clearly committed to the young Marx's Hegelian emphasis on alienation and reappropriation of our human essence. See Bruno Bosteels, "Hegel in Mexico: Memory and Alienation in the Posthumous Writings by José Revueltas," *South Central Review* 21.3 (Fall 2004): 48–49. The uproar caused by the 1949 publication of Revueltas' *Los días terrenales*, a severe critique of the Mexican Communist Party, reveals how contentious the Marxism-Catholicism issue is not just in Mexico, but throughout Latin America. See Edith Negrín, "Los días terrenales a través del prisma intertextual," and "Recepción crítica y polémica en torno a *Los días terrenales* y *El cuadrante de la soledad*," in José Revueltas, *Los días terrenales*, edición crítica de Evodio Escalante (Nanterre: ALLCA XX, 1991), pp. 276–91; Roger Bartra, "¿Lombardo o Revueltas?" *Nexos* No. 54 (Mexico, June 1982). I thank José Falconi for helping me articulate this issue.

43. Cuesta, "Marx no era inteligente . . ." p. 325.

44. How successful Cárdenas was, and the degree of independent agency allowed workers and peasants, is an open debate. See Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy*; Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); Kevin J. Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) for a variety of assessments.

45. Claudio Lomnitz, "Ritual, Rumor, and Corruption in the Formation of Mexican Politics," in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico. An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 151.

46. Cuesta, "El marxismo en el poder," *Obras reunidas* v. II, p. 342. A Marxist intellectual, Lombardo Toledano was leader of the powerful Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), closely allied with Cárdenas. Although never a member of the Mexican Communist Party, he was nevertheless a strong supporter of Stalin, especially after his 1935 visit to the Soviet Union. Bartra notes "the almost religious" character of Lombardo's nationalist adherence to the state, which differed so dramatically both from the Contemporáneos and from Revueltas' faith in the redemptive power of Marxism as an expression of popular will. Bartra, "¿Lombardo o Revueltas?" n.p.

47. Domínguez, "Prólogo," p. 31.

48. See Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 26 (1994): 73–107. When Cuesta was writing, the Spanish Civil War had not yet started, and Cárdenas had not yet embarked on his pronounced anti-fascist foreign policy, which included aid to Republican Spain.

49. On Vasconcelos' fascism, see Claude Fell, *José Vasconcelos: Los años del águila* (Mexico: UNAM, 1989) and Nicolás Cárdenas and Mauricio Tenorio, "Mexico 1920s–1940s: Revolutionary Government, Reactionary Politics," in *Fascism outside Europe: The European Impulse against Domestic Conditions in the Diffusion of Global Fascism*, Stein Ugelvik Larsen,

ed., (Boulder: Social Science Monographs; New York: Distributed by Columbia University Press, 2001). On LEAR, see Lourdes Quintanilla, *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1980).

50. The 30-30! group, quoted in Carlos Monsiváis, *Salvador Novo. Lo marginal en el centro* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2000), pp. 75-76.

51. Sheridan, *México en 1932*, p. 62.

52. Charles Maurras, quoted in Sheridan, *México en 1932*, pp. 71-72. Italics in the original.

53. On the Ateneo de la Juventud, see Horacio Legrás, "El Ateneo y los orígenes del estado ético en México," *Latin American Research Review*, V. 38, No. 2, (2003):34-60; Juan Hernández Luna, ed. *Conferencias del Ateneo de la Juventud* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984).

54. See Cuesta, "Ulises criollo," "Réplica a Ifegenia cruel," and "La enseñanza de Ulises," collected in Cuesta, *Obras* vols. I and II. See also Domínguez, "Prólogo," pp. 16-17. Despite Cuesta's criticism, however, Reyes continued to act as mentor and collaborator with the Contemporáneos, publishing important essays in the journal. See Sheridan, *México en 1932*, pp. 49-55.

55. For example, see Cuesta's critique, "Nietzsche y las psicología," *Obras*, p. 484. Vasconcelos' unnuanced reading of Nietzsche's concept of the "übermensch" affected both his deprecation of indigenous and popular culture and his later turn toward fascism.

56. Legrás, "El Ateneo y los orígenes del estado ético en México," pp. 49-50.

57. Carlos Monsiváis, "La toma de partido de Alfonso Reyes," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 37, No. 2 (1989):516, quoted in Legrás, "El Ateneo y los orígenes del estado ético en México," p. 51.

58. Sheridan, in *México en 1932*, p. 76, argues that Cuesta proposes differentiating between a "national sentiment" and a "national conscience," the first being romantic and reductive, the second being open to the exterior and congruent with Mexico's mestizo and pluralistic culture. See also José Emilio Pacheco, "Jorge Cuesta y el clasicismo mexicano," *Revista de la Universidad de México* (April, 1965); Domínguez, "Prólogo."

59. Domínguez, "Prólogo," p. 19.

60. Jorge Cuesta, "Nietzsche y el nazismo" (1939), *Obras*. I am indebted to Domínguez, "Prólogo," for this argument. See also Samuel Ramos' discussion of the Apollonian and Dionysian in Nietzsche. Ramos, *Filosofía de la vida artística* (Mexico City: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1950).

61. Cuesta, "Nietzsche y el nazismo," p. 481; "Nietzsche y la psicología" (1939), *Obras*, p. 484.

62. Cuesta, "Nietzsche y el nazismo," p. 481.

63. Ramos, *Filosofía de la vida artística*, p. 27.

64. Ramos, *Filosofía de la vida artística*, p. 28. Stated this way, the Contemporáneos would seem to have much in common with André Breton's surrealism and also with aspects of existentialism. The Contemporáneos certainly read Breton (and indeed, in his *Filosofía* Ramos ties liberatory release from logic to two surrealist favorites: dreams and drunkenness); nevertheless, their notion of human psychology was based much more in Ortega y Gasset, Bergson, and Nietzsche than in Freud; and, in contrast to the surrealists, they

resolutely separated all these from Marx. On existentialism in the context of this chapter, see note 15 above.

65. The Contemporáneos' reading of Nietzsche, of course, brings up the notorious problem of the "aestheticization of politics" in which Nietzsche has constantly been linked by critics to Nazism. Martin Jay teases out some of the pros and cons of this issue in "The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology: Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique* N. 21 (Spring, 1992):41-61. It should be said that Cuesta and Ramos were by far the most sophisticated of the Contemporáneos in understanding both the benefits and the dangers of Nietzsche's thought. See also note 14 above, especially Kaiser, *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism*, on the concept of aesthetic statism.

66. José Gorostiza, "Morfología de La rueda de aire," *Contemporáneos*, No. 25, (June 1930): 243, 245, 242, 247, 248.

67. Paz, "Contemporáneos," p. 101.

68. Domínguez, "Prólogo," p. 27.

69. My paraphrase of Díaz Arciniega, *Querella*, p. 92, note 114. Cuesta also attacked nationalism predicated not on "Man, but on the Mexican; not on Nature, but on Mexico; not on History, but on its local anecdote." He further argued for the necessity of cultural graft and transplant as a necessary part of any strengthening of national character. "La literatura y el nacionalismo," *Obras*, p. 135.

70. Paz, "Contemporáneos," p. 100.

71. Villaurrutia, *Obras*, p. 1032.

72. In the Galería del Casino Español. Siqueiros, *Palabras de Siqueiros*, ed. Raquel Tibol, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 48.

73. Siqueiros, "Rectificaciones sobre las artes plásticas en México," in *Palabras de Siqueiros*, p. 61. In this somewhat convoluted argument, Siqueiros used this opportunity to court the Contemporáneos for support in his growing differences with Rivera.

74. Published as an unsigned document: "Intelectuales de vanguardia invitan a los retrógrados a una lucha ideológica a campo raso," *El Nacional* (March 26, 1932):6. Other FULCRE members included Silvestre Revueltas, Germán List Arzubide, Carlos Chávez, and Luis Sandi. Ortiz de Montellano, Héctor Pérez Martínez, Agustín Yáñez, Gorostiza, Pellicer, Barreda, and Cuesta also expressed support of FULCRE's manifesto.

75. Marcial Rojas [a pseudonym used by various members of the Contemporáneos] "Notas de conversación," *Contemporáneos*, 18 (November 1929):335. Quoted in Sheridan, *Los Contemporáneos ayer*, p. 353.

76. Tamayo, in particular, would capitalize on this equation of *arte puro* with individual freedom during the cold war, in which he allied himself with the anti-communist rhetoric surrounding the abstract expressionists. See James Oles, "The Howl and the Flame: Tamayo's Wartime Allegories," in Diana Du Pont, ed., *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007), pp. 291-315. By the cold war, however, Tamayo had drifted very far from any (doubtful) attachment he may earlier have had to the Contemporáneos aesthetic statism project. See Olivier Debrouse, "Reaching Out to the Audience: Tamayo and the Debate on Modernism," in Du Pont, *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, pp. 379-91, for a sharp assessment of the artist's fashioning of his reputation.

77. Ignacio Sánchez Prado argues similarly that the Contemporáneos sought to "articulate a cultural practice that could simultaneously operate from an institutionalized structure and claim intellectual autonomy." Sánchez Prado, "Claiming Liberalism: Enrique Krauze, *Vuelta*, *Letras Libres*, and the Reconfigurations of the Mexican Intellectual Class," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* V. 26, No. 1 (Winter, 2010):52.

78. Cuesta, "Un mural de Diego Rivera" (no date), *Obras*, pp. 549–51. Domínguez ("Prólogo," p. 57) notes that the essay was not published during Cuesta's lifetime.

79. Cuesta, "Un mural de Diego Rivera," p. 549.

80. Cuesta, "La pintura de José Clemente Orozco" (1934), *Obras*, p. 230.

81. Domínguez argues that Cuesta viewed Orozco as closest to his own Nietzschean paradigm. Domínguez, "Prólogo," p. 60.

82. Cuesta, "José Clemente Orozco: ¿clásico o romántico?" (no date), *Obras*, p. 556.

83. Cuesta, "La pintura de José Clemente Orozco," pp. 229, 230.

84. As is well known, this problem had already produced a century of political and cultural turmoil, as Mexico tried to define itself after its independence from Spain. See, for example, Tomás Pérez Vejo, *España en el debate público mexicano (1836–1867): Aportaciones para una historia de la nación* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2008). On my use of "existential," see note 16 above.

85. Xavier Villaurrutia, "La pintura mexicana actual," *Nuestro México* (November 1932): 76. Only in 1985 did Tamayo finally refute the myth of his indigenous origins. See Diana Du Pont, "'Realistic, Never Descriptive': Tamayo and the Art of Abstract Figuration," in Du Pont, ed., *Tamayo. A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, pp. 48–50.

86. Xavier Villaurrutia, "Un cuadro de la pintura mexicana," *Ulises* V. 1, No. 6 (February, 1928):5–12; Celestino Gorostiza, "Una exposición de pintura moderna," *Revista de revistas* (27 October 1929):n.p.; Ortiz de Montellano, "La obra expresiva de Rufino Tamayo," *Revista de revistas* (1926).

87. Cuauhtémoc Medina argues this point in relation to both Tamayo and Octavio Paz, although he doesn't mention the influence of the Contemporáneos. Medina, "'La oscilación entre el mito y la crítica': Octavio Paz entre Duchamp y Tamayo," unpublished paper delivered at The Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio (November 2003):8.

88. Paz, "Repaso en forma de preámbulo" (1986) in Paz and Luis Mario Schneider, eds., *México en la obra de Octavio Paz* v. III: *Los privilegios de la vista*, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), p. 28.

89. See Tamayo "El nacionalismo y el movimiento pictórico," *Crisol* V. 9, No. 53 (May 1, 1933):275–81.

90. See Anthony Stanton, "Los Contemporáneos y el debate en torno a la poesía pura," in Rafael Olea Franco and Anthony Stanton, eds., *Los Contemporáneos en el laberinto de la crítica* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994), pp 27–44.

91. Juan Carlos Pereda, "Rufino Tamayo: *El canto y la música*, 1933," in Miguel Angel Echegaray, ed., *La pintura mural en los centros de educación de México* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2003): 83. Pereda documents the discontent Tamayo's mural at first provoked among the students of the National School of Music (now the Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología).

92. Xavier Villaurrutia, *Nostalgia de la muerte* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1938).

93. Literary scholar Joaquín Terrones argues, however, for a fundamental distinction between Paz and the Contemporáneos; unlike Paz, the latter almost always resolve anguish through melancholy and humor. Gorostiza's *Muerte sin fin*, for example, begins with existential angst and the anxiety of drowning within one's skin but ends with a biting "Oh well, let's all go to hell then!" Author's personal communication with Terrones, July 5, 2010.

94. Paz, "Rufino Tamayo en la pintura mexicana," *México en la cultura* No. 103 (January 21, 1951), quoted in Medina, "Octavio Paz entre Duchamp y Tamayo," pp. 6–7.

95. As Cuauhtémoc Medina notes, however, for Paz, reactivation of the "sacred" in art was not an invitation to restore ancient civilizations, but rather a chance to share in the sense of abandonment provoked by the failure of the communist project. Medina, "Octavio Paz entre Duchamp y Tamayo," p. 7.



THE AHMANSON FOUNDATION
has endowed this imprint
to honor the memory of
FRANKLIN D. MURPHY
who for half a century
served arts and letters,
beauty and learning, in
equal measure by shaping
with a brilliant devotion
those institutions upon
which they rely.

MEXICAN MURALISM

A Critical History

EDITED BY

Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait,
and Robin Adèle Greeley



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley Los Angeles London

Aragón-LC
ND
2644
.M4925
2012

PUBLISHED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE GETTY FOUNDATION.

THE PUBLISHER GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE GENEROUS
SUPPORT OF THE ART ENDOWMENT FUND OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA PRESS FOUNDATION, WHICH WAS ESTABLISHED BY A
MAJOR GIFT FROM THE AHMANSON FOUNDATION.

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university
presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing
scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its
activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic
contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information,
visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

ISBN 978-0-520-27161-6 (cloth; alk. paper)

© 2012 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012019225

Manufactured in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of
ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).®

*To the memory of Luis Cardoza y Aragón (1901–92) and
Olivier Debvoise (1952–2008), scholars of Mexican Art.*