Pan-Americanism and Diego Rivera

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This essay is intended as a brief background document for educators, to complement the slides entitled "Pan-Americanism and the Art of Diego Rivera." I envision the slides and this document as a self-contained lesson for high school and college students in History and Ethnic Studies courses, and the lesson could be used as preparation for a visit to Rivera's *Pan American Unity* mural. Any questions or feedback may be directed to delkan@ccsf.edu.

Pan-Americanism: Bolívar's Vision

In the early 19th century, the people of the Spanish Empire in the Americas were moving rapidly towards independence from the colonial rule of Spain. The histories of these independence movements vary from nation to nation, but their most notable leader is unquestionably Simón Bolívar. Indeed, Bolívar played key roles in the independence of six modern-day Latin American nations (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Perú, and Venezuela), serving executive and dictatorial roles in several states.[1] Ideologically, Bolívar's major contribution was his notion of Latin American unity which would come to be known as Pan-Americanism, which he articulated as early as 1814.

Bolívar's formulation of Pan-Americanism was formal in nature- he sought to unite the newly independent nations of Latin America under one government. The first summit meeting among the nations of the Americas was the Congress of Panama (1826), though the outcome of this gathering did not move in any substantial way in the direction of Bolívar's complete vision.[2] More broadly, though, Bolívar "strove for the unity and mutual defense of the new republics, goals to which were added, a short time later, the liberation of Cuba and Puerto Rico."[3] Between his direct military and political efforts to free Latin American nations from Spanish colonialism, and his later inclusion of the remaining nations of the Spanish Empire in his Pan-American vision, it is clear that his orientation was fundamentally anti-colonial (though not without faults of its own).

The United States attended all Pan-American conferences dating back to the Congress of Panama, even after the expansion of U.S. colonialism into Cuba and Puerto Rico following the Spanish-American War in 1898. This was a significant controversy for Latin American representatives at the meetings. Bolívar himself signaled his displeasure at the rising power's inclusion (along with that of England and the Netherlands) in the 1826 summit. The inclusion of these nations, as argued by Alonso Aguilar, was strategic in nature rather than rising out of an intent to include these nations as full participants in the Pan-American community.[4] The role of the United States, nonetheless, was and would continue to be a prominent one.

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[1] Gerhard Straussmann Masur, "Simón Bolívar," Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Simon-Bolivar.
[2] Alonso Aguilar, *Pan-Americanism from Monroe to the Present: A View from the Other Side* (New York: MR Press, 1968), 26-27.
[3] *Ibid*., 28.
[4] *Ibid*., 27-30.

Pan-Americanism from the U.S. Perspective

In parallel with Bolívar's hemispheric vision was one which was, in some respects, fundamentally contradictory. Its roots, too, were entirely different. Rather than rising out of a desire for freedom from European colonialism, the U.S. vision proceeded from the rising continental ambitions of the then-young republic. This perspective, in which the United States was the leading nation among states with well-aligned political interests, would come to be the dominant paradigm in inter-American relations.

The first formal declaration of the U.S. of its role in Pan-Americanism came with the Monroe Doctrine (1823). On its face, the Monroe Doctrine sought to exclude European nations from further colonizing the Americas. Whatever the intent of James Monroe and his eventual successor, secretary of state John Quincy Adams, the historical record is rife with examples of the U.S. exerting formal and informal control over the Americas, the most notable of which is the ongoing control of the island of Puerto Rico. Accordingly, some scholars argue that "the real motive behind Monroe's policy was that of laying down the foundations of United States hegemony on the continent."[5]

The second key development in U.S.-oriented Pan-Americanism, and the immediate backdrop for Rivera's engagement with the ideal, was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy." Though his predecessor Herbert Hoover had made moves in a similar direction, Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address was the first and clearest articulation of this foreign policy initiative. He called for an end to unilateral U.S. intervention (both political and military) in the region and heightened self-government for Latin American states, both in an effort to ease the historical tensions between the hegemonic U.S. and the broader Americas.[6]

As World War II began to come to a head, this move became all the more essential. Roosevelt went so far as to further strengthen relationships with Latin American dictators Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Anastasio Samoza of Nicaragua- though, to be clear, both had risen to power with U.S. support. The need to keep these leaders from developing alliances with the Axis Powers was thought to be of greater importance than encouraging democratic self-determination of the people of their respective nations.[7] This aside, the Good Neighbor Policy did lead to positive developments in U.S.-Latin American relations, and arguably complemented the shift in political perspective which Rivera was already undergoing leading into his work on the *Pan American Unity* mural.

Rivera's Politics, and his Turn to Pan-Americanism

Best known politically for his affiliation with global Communism, Diego Rivera in fact split from the party from about 1929 through the mid-1950s. During the 1930s, he sympathized with (and personally supported during his exile) Leon Trotsky, a former leader of the Bolshevik

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[5] Aguilar 25.
[6] Max Paul Friedman, "The Good Neighbor Policy," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, 24 Jan. 2018, https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-222.
[7] *Ibid.*

Revolution who came to oppose the rise of Joseph Stalin. The dominance of Stalin in Communist circles further isolated Rivera from the movement. Two attempts were made on Trotsky's life in 1940- the first, with the participation of fellow Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros. The second attempt, in August of 1940, was successful. Shortly before Trotsky's death, Rivera took up his long-planned commission in San Francisco which would result in the *Pan American Unity* mural.

Perhaps due to these significant political tensions and the threat of violence at the hands of Soviet agents, Rivera took arguably his strongest turn away from Communism during his time in San Francisco. In an essay published by the neighborhood paper the *Russian Hill Runt*, he declared his independence from the mainstream Communist movement since 1929. As for his then-current views, he declares "I stand for the Pan-American Union, to fight the inroads of Totalitarianism, Faschism, Natzism [*sic*.], Stalinism."[8] After enumerating the injustices he saw in Stalin's Soviet Union, he posits the Pan-American union as "a force able to stop the penetration of Stalin's agents into these American countries. It could also merge the creators of a great new American art and culture of our own."[9]

Rivera's work in San Francisco at this time, which was his second residency in the city, was done under the auspices of the Golden Gate International Exposition's "Art In Action" exhibit. It proceeded from the notion that art could be the basis for hemispheric solidarity. Rivera saw the importance of such unity in this particular historical context and the heightened need to "restore democratic ideals that inspired independence movements both north and south." Not only did he feature the contributions of both Latin American and U.S. civilization in the mural, but also the threats to that civilization in the forms of both Hitler's fascism and Stalin's authoritarian brand of communism.[10]

Rivera further argued that although his work portrayed the historical and primarily cultural contributions of Latin America, as juxtaposed with the contemporary technical and industrial contributions of the United States, this was not to say that there was not crossover. As argued by Richard Cándida Smith, "if modernization followed democratic principles, indigenous traditions would inform popular understanding of what Mexicans wanted from international organizations like the Pan American Union or, after 1945 the United Nations. In the most utopian sense, he wanted the United States to purify its deformed democratic life by uniting with other American nations, largely populated by very poor working people of color."[11] Put another way, Pan American unity would be a means of overcoming prejudices of race, citizenship, and so on, and would be of benefit to both cultures.

Art was, of course, central to Rivera's conception of how Pan-Americanism might be achieved, in part because it was a major expression of freedom. In a 1943 lecture, he argued that "everything that deserves to be called American art possesses the distinctive quality of being the

[8] Diego Rivera, "I Am Not A Communist," *Russian Hill Runt* 1, no. 9 (6 Dec 1940): 1-2.
[9] *Ibid*.
[10] Richard Cándida Smith, *Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 105.
[11] *Ibid*., 106.

work of free men, endowed with extraordinary vitality.[12] Pan-American unity, he argues, "is apparent within the variables created by the geographic and social environments of the region and by the links and ligaments that connect its various national and even tribal forms of expression."[13] Through the expression of freedom and cultural difference through art, Rivera argues that all will be impelled to seek democracy, and end bigotry and colonialism.

Conclusion

Diego Rivera's vision of Pan-Americanism thus confounds both the conceptions of Bolívar (who sought formal political unity within Latin America) and the early U.S. notions (which positioned itself as the hegemonic power of the Western Hemisphere). Arguably, it bears some similarity to the vision of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in that it sought a more equitable relationship between the Americas. Yet despite this, Rivera's Pan-Americanism was infused with his own political perspectives which could not be divided from his (albeit former) association with Communist ideals.

The recurring theme of all of Rivera's work is the transgressive and potentially revolutionary nature of true art- its ability to provoke thought, express controversial ideas, and pay tribute to history in a democratic and accessible way. Although *Pan American Unity* marks a slight deviation from his overall political trajectory, it cannot be divorced from this more fundamental idea. The mural pays tribute to many individuals, both well-known and unknown, who made their own distinct contributions to American society (broadly defined)- Mexican and (U.S.) American, immigrant and native citizen, from a whole host of different fields of innovation. In expressing the history of the Americas, he seeks to shape our understandings of that history, encourage U.S. appreciation for Latin American cultures, and the potential for a more equitable and democratic world.

[12] Diego Rivera, "Art and Pan Americanism (1943)," as quoted in *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino* (Critical Documents of 20th Century Latin American and Latino Art), eds. Héctor Olea and Melina Kervandjian (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 501.
[13] *Ibid*., 502.