

MURALS

# RADICAL AMERICA

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*Cover: Adapted from murals under the freeway spanning Chicano Park in San Diego, California. The pillar on the front cover is by C. W. Felix; the back cover pillar is by Pablo de la Rosa, Filipe Barbossa, Coyote, Mario Torero, and C.A.C.A.*

### **Note to pamphlet subscribers:**

With this issue we are forced to suspend our "pamphlet subscriptions." We simply do not have the laborpower to continue this program without seriously detracting from the energy we can put into our magazine, and our income from the undertaking has been far too small to pay for help. Current pamphlet subscribers will receive one last mailing within a month. Unfortunately we simply cannot afford to give refunds. We will, however, automatically give those of you who have unexpired pamphlet subscriptions extensions of your magazine subscriptions to the equivalent value.

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# **RADICAL AMERICA**

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**March-April 1978**

**Volume 12, Number 2**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PEOPLE'S ART &amp; SOCIAL CHANGE:</b> The Community Mural Movement James D. & Eva S. Cockcroft	<b>7</b>
<b>RECENT RAZA MURALS IN THE U.S.</b> Tim Drescher & Rupert Garcia	<b>15</b>
<b>THE WONDERFUL WHITE PAPER</b> Ruth Domino	<b>33</b>
<b>"THE CLERKING SISTERHOOD"</b> Rationalization and the Work Culture of Saleswomen Susan Porter Benson	<b>41</b>
<b>FROM THE MOVEMENT</b> Frank Ackerman on Reformism & Sectarianism Judy Syfers on organizing paraprofessionals	<b>56</b>
<b>LETTER FROM THE EHRENREICHS</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>LETTERS</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>GOOD READING</b>	<b>78</b>

# INTRODUCTION

Images have power. They give shape to our understanding of who we are and what is possible. Art makes tangible our visions of the future and our interpretations of history. It can give concrete sensual form to our experience of everyday life. In building a socialist movement, we need to take responsibility for creating images of ourselves and of our potential. A task for the left today, too often forgotten, is to make it possible to dream of a socialist future and to help people believe they can effect change. Art is a way of seeing and touching that possibility.

Artists on the left have struggled with ways of integrating their esthetic concerns with political practice. They are often caught between their politics and their art. When defined as private vision and experienced as an isolated lonely activity, making art feels at odds with collective social purpose. In the bourgeois view, art is seen as being both intense personal experience and as historically transcendent. To “reduce” art to political statement is equated with “selling out” to commercial interests. Our society celebrates high art for its intrinsic — and timeless — value; to give it usefulness, to connect it to the fabric of political struggle, is to degrade it. People on the left, however, have too often written off artistic expression as elitist and have asked that art serve immediate strategic aims.

In each case, the choices for an artist with radical politics seem a compromise. Some have felt that a concern for esthetic standards is elitist and choose to “lower” standards to make the surface political content of a pamphlet, banner or poster accessible to the working class. This reflects a simplistic notion of both art and politics and is condescending



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to the working class. Other artists have retreated to their studios and express their politics in terms of abstract and self-conscious theorizing. A critical perspective has become fashionable in the art world. Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimal Art and Conceptual Art all had at their inception elements of social critique: attacks on consumer society, mass culture, media imagery, on the sanctity of the art commodity and criticism of the elitism of the museum. But this work remains esoteric and within the art world, the artist isolated from political struggle and community.

The civil rights struggles, anti-imperialist movement and, later, the women's movement have changed socialists' conceptions of what political activity can be. The 1960's and 1970's have given rise to a new generation of artists whose identification with these movements informs their art. Many of these artists are women, blacks and Latins who understand their oppression in cultural as well as in class terms. The claiming of space for self-expression or for collective imagery is understood as a political act. This cultural-political work is taking many forms. One of them is the community mural movement; the claiming of community space for community expression. Community murals are one of the political art forms that allow artists to struggle with some of the contradictions in practice. Because they are done in public, the isolation of the artist is broken down. Individualism is countered by a process of collaboration, more or less successful, between artists and neighborhood people in the choice of place, the selection of images, and in some cases in the actual execution of the mural and even the financing. Many of these murals combine the highest of esthetic standards, sophisticated imagery and artistic integrity with deep political understanding.

The contemporary movement had its

acknowledged beginnings in Chicago in 1967 when a group of twenty-odd black artists took a wall and painted on it. The building was in an area slated for urban renewal and *The Wall of Respect* no longer stands. But the statement was powerful and echoed in other cities — black people have a right to define their own experience publicly. Like graffiti, it was made by members of the community and directed at the community. This distinguishes the contemporary grassroots movement from earlier mural traditions. The murals of the Mexican Revolution, those coming out of the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, and even some of the WPA murals of the 1930's had socialist (or at least populist) political imagery. But as state supported efforts, they were made in celebration of the potential of the people within the established state.

This issue of *Radical America* features two articles about the community mural movement. In each, the authors argue for the role of murals as catalysts for community action and consciousness raising. The murals may articulate local issues facing the community: urban renewal, police brutality, drug abuse, busing, gang wars. They also speak to issues of racism, sexism and cultural oppression.

Much of their power comes from the positive *imagery* they plant in the community. As Tim Drescher and Rupert Garcia show in their history of Raza murals, contemporary muralists have reached into many traditions for sources of imagery. In style and content, the murals are eclectic and inventive. Raza murals draw on the Mexican tradition in particular, but combine this with many other sources. These murals introduce into the community concrete images of a powerful people and an interpretation of their history. The term *La Raza* includes Latino and Chicano peoples; peoples with individual histories who share a history of oppression. The

creation of images expressing a history of strength allows for the projection of a future in which this strength can be realized. The mural imagery has a liberating effect as it instills pride in place, in origin and in lives that have been denied expression in the dominant American culture. The images themselves are energizing.

The *place* becomes politically important, too. In this, community murals must be differentiated from most highbrow murals sponsored by art institutions or commissioned by banks and glamor merchants. The latter are attempts to soften the oppressive nature of the institutions or the barrenness of the urban landscape. Community murals, on the other hand, affirm their place, shouting down the signs and clutter that surround them by the force of their color, energy and scale. A mural in East Los Angeles on police brutality depicts the Chicano community being sliced in half by highways that divide the city. The imagery in the mural then reaffirms the presence of the community over and against the threats of destruction. The celebration of community and of place in the murals is also a weapon against those forces trying to wrest turf from neighborhood people. Struggles around urban renewal, housing, schools, health clinics, playgrounds, day care centers, etc. are visually expressed. And in themselves, the murals graphically represent the taking of public space in the community *for* the community.

In the *process* of their creation, the murals are perhaps most politically significant. Involvement in community struggles is often frustrating and seemingly endless, with a lot of effort and few victories. The painting of a mural can be a political act with a visible and immediate result for the neighborhood people who work on it, and in its creation the possibility is posed of making revolutionary politics a concrete act.

Eva and James Cockcroft, in "People's Art and Social Change", look at the relations between three groups of people in the community who interact around the making of the murals: the neighborhood people, the local artists, and the organizers on the left. Eva Cockcroft, herself a community muralist, draws on her own experience and that of others. The article shows that the collaboration between artists and neighborhood people is not a matter of "side-walk superintendence" — people dictating fully formulated images for artists to transmit into paint on bricks — but rather a complex synthesis of the political and aesthetic sense of each. The article describes some of the different types of collaboration



*"Wall of Respect for Women" Cityarts Workshop, Tomie Arau, Director. New York. Photo by Came Homann.*

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that have occurred around the country. They see in the role the artist plays the role of an organizer: someone who helps people articulate their political understandings and in turn affects them. The artist shares, and thereby helps demystify, the tools for expressing these understandings.

The Cockcrofts also see fruitful interaction between artist and left organizers in the community (although it clearly doesn't always happen). Through commitment to political practice, the artist's political consciousness changes. An initial understanding of issues about local community self-determination may be deepened to incorporate the underlying class, race and sexual politics. For the artist, on the other hand, the organizer can learn of the need for self-expression through art and through political struggle itself.

Ruth Domino's short story, *The Wonderful White Paper* is being reprinted here. In this allegory set in pre-republican Spain, art is seen as the vehicle for expressing awakening political consciousness. Children's drawings here, like the murals in our cities today, become the means through which people imagine their liberation and their own mastery over conditions. When the soldiers confiscate the drawings and prohibit any further activity, the villagers tenaciously hold on to the scraps of white paper, the symbols of their imaginative power and political potential. Within the cities of the United States today, neighborhood people vigorously defend their murals against destruction and defacement. Murals outside a political movement become utopian escape; within it they serve as expressions of the strength of the people.

**W**e are commenting at such length on these articles about art because we are conscious of our, and the whole Left's, backwardness in developing support for the artistic dimensions of political consciousness and political work. We plan to give up our practice of the past year of commenting on every article we print, and from now on we will refer to specific articles in our introduction only when we think we have something to add to what our authors have written.

In that spirit, a brief word on Judy Syfers' discussion of organizing paraprofessionals in the public schools. Syfers' conclusions about her experience — that working with unions is not always the best tactic — reflects frustrations felt by many radical organizers. We do not intend, nor do we think she did, this article as an argument against socialist work in unions and unionizing. We found her article useful rather because it forces its readers to face the personal frustrations often involved in such work. The most difficult issues for many organizers are not the fact that unions exist in part to control labor, or that they are bureaucratic, or that they often represent only the most advantaged workers. Most painful to socialists is often the direct betrayal by union staff who make promises they cannot or will not keep, and who undermine working-class activism, even when it is not explicitly radical at all but merely good trade-unionism. Leftists need to think creatively about how to handle these frustrations. We would like to receive other "From the Movement" articles examining similar experiences.



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# PEOPLE'S ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

## The Community Mural Movement

James D. & Eva S. Cockcroft

### COMMUNITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

A community is a group of people who have a particular sense of relatedness — who share common interests, common values, and a sense of shared risks or commitments based on these ties. In our society, dominated by conflict and alienation, there is little community. Neighborhoods are not the same thing; many are mere agglomerations of transient strangers. Community is a process of people coming together around common problems, discovering their common values, and developing a sense of solidarity. Community mural projects, although they cannot start a community process, can build or advance one; they often serve as catalyst for community action.

Community murals have a distinctive relationship to social change: they are concrete public expressions of a community's values, problems, or goals; they are created with intense community involvement and they may be seen as a form of political praxis.

Whether painted in abstract or figurative styles, community murals reflect and articulate values and concerns felt by the community. In both subject matter and style, many relate directly to a specific locality, a particular building, a dominant cultural ambience, and occasionally, even, specific local events. For example, in a mural painted by the Lil' Valley gang with artist Bill Butler in East Los Angeles, (1972), there is a universal dimension of violence, tragedy, history and peace. For knowledgeable community residents there is an additional level of meaning that comes from the recognition of a turtle and the balance-scales with the cross in between as visual representations of the names of two individuals

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*Opposite: Detail of the mural at the International Hotel. Jim Dong, San Francisco, 1974. Photo by Tim Drescher.*



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killed in a gang war. This mural served as a symbolic peace settlement between two warring gangs. This and many other mural histories recounted in our book<sup>1</sup> illustrate vividly that community art can become a form of symbolic social action and implies further social action.

Those familiar with the stories of individual murals know that these walls have emerged from the social struggles of the 1960s, and have, whatever their variety and changes in direction, continued to be rooted in a larger arena of social and political praxis. The issues may be national or ethnic identity, housing, labor, racism, sexism, education, health, sports, or economic cutbacks, but the common spirit has been and remains one of art as an expression of struggle, one of building people's solidarity, creating community, raising political consciousness, combatting racism in all its forms. While some publicity was finally given the community demands around San Francisco's International Hotel in 1977, the fact is that the struggle had been going on for many years and included as one of its first organizing weapons a huge and impressive mural a block long on one side of the Hotel. Similarly, whether one talks of the Chinatown mural in Philadelphia created to prevent a freeway from going through, or the "Wall of Respect" in Chicago, or Dewey Crumpler's Washington High School murals in San Francisco (1965-71), which were actually *demand*ed by the students, one will find throughout the history of this young movement a constant emphasis on concrete struggle against specific acts of oppression.

While many muralists cannot help but to defer more than they might like to community requests on imagery, content, message, etc., most of today's muralists are committed to raising political consciousness and not catering to "the lowest common denominator."

People's first offhand thoughts on what to include in a mural often are facile and cliché images — peace symbols, a smiling face, flowers, a clenched fist. The artist has a responsibility to direct the group to more serious thought, which usually occurs through a series of meetings in which deeper ideas are brought out and developed.

Even the seemingly innocuous theme of racial unity takes on a special significance in a changing neighborhood. Such a mural can serve as a lightning rod to draw to the surface the fears and tensions of local residents. In some cases, the discussion and controversy around the mural help to bring acceptance of integration into a community and to focus people's energies on more positive goals. This may mean actually dividing the community on the question of the wall, but placing racism in a minority position. The muralist, his team, and his community supporters and sponsors use the tensions — already there — to mobilize a majority to a more progressive position.

For example, John Weber's "Wall of Choices" (1970), painted in a largely white neighborhood of North Chicago fearful of integration, challenged racist assumptions. The mural portrayed two clear alternatives: black-brown-white unity or race war. The design was controversial, and during the painting of the wall it evoked widespread debate which at one point erupted into anonymous phone calls and thrown bottles. On the other hand, as work progressed, more people volunteered to help and praised the wall. At the dedication, shares were sold in the mural at one dollar a brick, and several hundred dollars were raised to rebuild the playground in front of the wall and buy paints for the next mural.

This particular dynamic of debate, struggle, and eventual acceptance of controversial subject matter is an experience common to

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many mural projects. The essential elements are dialogue between the muralists and the community at every phase and a willingness to compromise on some images but not on the major theme. The stories behind numbers of murals reveal that the muralist can place his art and commitment at the cutting edge of class/race struggle, raise people's consciousness, and leave behind a landmark of art/social statement for people to ponder in the years ahead.

### THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY ARTIST

The artist may serve as a prophet/leader, as a medium, or as a facilitator of a community process. Chicago's Bill Walker, a "founding father" of the movement, typifies the artist-as-prophet. Conscious of his roots in his people, Walker in his art as in his interaction with passersby on the street speaks in his own voice, confident of his identification with the sentiments of the mass of black working people. His "Peace and Salvation, Wall of Understanding" (1970), like the earlier (1967) "Wall of Respect" which he helped paint, came to command widespread community esteem and defense. While the earlier wall helped rally people to the campaign against urban demolition (so-called "urban renewal"), "Peace and Salvation" expresses many community-specific causes as well as universal ones. Like some other muralists, Walker does not hesitate to change parts of a wall as events change. His messages have frequently been on the frontier of social-change movements, anticipating "Black Power" and later becoming some of the first images to emphasize working-class themes and multi-national working-class unity.

If a prophet's or leader's role for an artist is characterized by his roots among his own people, a medium's role is one in which the artist may be from a different class or ethnic background than the people whose struggle is

being addressed or communicated. John Weber recalls how his 1970 "Fuentes Somos Ya" mural became a vehicle for a process of self-definition by the people even when the mural was painted by one person and that person was an outsider. Weber painted the mural for a storefront community-run clinic, organized by the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO). People quickly identified certain images: "Mel's son in Vietnam, Francis dressed as Santa Barbara, Pedro and Vicki at the Wicker Park Welfare office, etc. LADO used the murals in explaining their ideas to other residents who came to the clinic."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the artist may play the role of facilitator. Cityarts Workshop of New York epitomizes the possibilities here. Started by Susan Shapiro-Kiok as a workshop/staff program aimed at facilitating the making of public art works by non-professionals, Cityarts has developed over the years to incorporate among its facilitators and directors people who, prior to their work experience on Cityarts projects, had never received any art training. They in turn now facilitate others to learn mural art.

Naturally, the artist is called upon to play all of these roles to one extent or another, but the distinctive aspect to be noted is that this art is practiced in direct relationship with some set of community values or goals. The proof of this unique community dimension in art expression is often the fierce pride in a mural manifested by local residents. When a nearby gang armed with cans of green spray paint came to threaten Arnold Belkin's 1972 mural, "Against Domestic Colonialism," located in New York City's Hell's Kitchen area, "local stalwarts gathered in front of it and warned the invaders that they were risking their lives if they put one spot on the mural."<sup>3</sup> Many people in diverse urban neighborhoods from California to Massa-

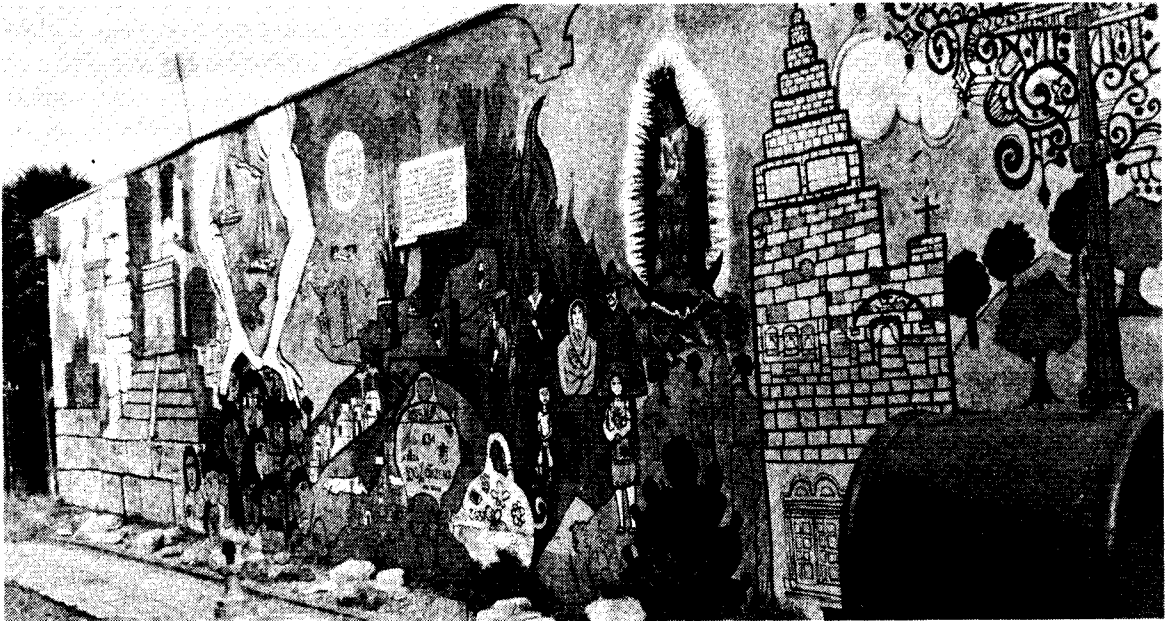
chusetts have boasted to us, "We have the best mural in town," and it is a commonplace for young ghetto residents to proudly claim authorship of the walls.

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Whatever role the artist plays, and whether a wall is executed by an individual or a team, the community is intimately involved at almost every stage, from the gaining of wall permissions, to the celebration of the mural at its completion. Funding for the work is, on a national average, over fifty percent grassroots donations. All the work — moving scaffolding and supplies, scraping, painting, etc. — as well as later developments in the community around the wall or the issues it addresses — actively involves local people.

Mural teams are not new, as the 1930s showed. But today the composition of the

teams is much different. Few of the participants consider themselves artists. They are local residents selected solely on the basis of interest and willingness to work. All ages are eligible, and some murals have been done entirely by children (for examples and advice, consult our article with John Weber, "Children's Murals," *The Urban Review*, IX:1 (Spring, 1976), 20-30). Teen-age participants sometimes receive pay from Neighborhood Youth Corps or other federal Manpower work-training programs. Team members, directed by the artist, engage in all aspects of the mural, from conception and design, through ideas, images, and colors, to completion and wall dedication (which often partakes of the team's celebration of itself as well as of the community). The 1974 "Wall of Respect for Women," directed by Asian artist Tomie Arai of Cityarts Workshop, exemplifies the dynamics of a team mural accompanied by



**"Lil Valley Mural" Gang Members with Bill Butler, East Los Angeles, 1972. Photo by Eva Cockcroft.**

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daily interaction with the local community.

Discussion of the theme for the mural brought out many important issues within and outside of the feminist movement. Portraying women as doctors or lawyers had little meaning for the female working-class participants from the Lower East Side. Such careers for them were not realistic at present. Unlike some feminists, who sometimes tend to see men as the enemy, these women emphasized the need for unity; of class and of races. They selected images of women in characteristic roles, of diverse races, in historical and contemporary settings; striving to resist oppression, unite, and triumph, yet living the concrete daily reality familiar to almost everyone on the Lower East Side. Then, at the mural site, when they began to erect scaffolding, they were told by men hanging out at the corner, "That's a man's job." Later, after seeing how hard the women worked, some of these same men began helping out in any way the women would permit them (moving and storing the scaffolding, etc.). The multi-racial team did not realize how intently people on the block were watching every detail of the mural's progress. A girl painting a Jewish star around a figure's neck had difficulties executing it and so painted it out. Next day, a number of people stopped and asked, "What happened to the star?" The location of the wall had been an historical rallying place for women strikers in the early days of the American labor-union movement. In 1975, the Lower East Side Women's Coalition of Gouverneur Hospital used the mural as the location for a rally to kick off the International Women's Day march, and since then May Day marches and other rallies have started there.<sup>4</sup>

While there is a tradition of mural teams, there is little precedent for the widespread practice of collective work among artists which

this movement has shown. While some collectives have come together only for the creation of a specific mural project, others have remained together for several years. These collectives have ranged from those in university or student ambiances to those growing out of ethnic ghettos. People's Painters of New Jersey, in which we participated, sought to eliminate every possible aspect of bourgeois individualism in its work. Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlan of Santa Fe, New Mexico, grew out of a Chicano environment and problems relating to drugs, unemployment, etc. Its members are not professionally trained artists, but its murals include some of the most visually forceful in the nation. Its emphasis on community interaction has included its participation in city politics, an alternative school project, an alternative people's health clinic, etc.

The high degree of community participation characteristic of the mural movement has led some neighborhood youth to turn toward the study of art, to forego the escapist route of drugs, etc. But the new grassroots interest in art extends far beyond actual participants in mural projects. As early as 1971, it was possible to hold "seminars" on mural painting in Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing projects. Anyone who has done any type of community-organizing work will easily appreciate the level of interest represented by over two hundred people, adults and children, crowding in to see slides and discuss mural painting.

It is on the question of the artist's responsibility to this community audience, whether through the wall's imagery or the participation of local residents, that the defenders of museum art raise a hue and cry about "compromising" artistic standards. For most community muralists, however, who have become committed to serving the people "through the process of going into their very

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midst”” and learning from them, while also raising the level of popular taste, the question of style and content has reached a new and higher plane altogether. There is no single American “style,” nor is there a singular *class* style, although there obviously is a *class content*. It was the Zhdanovist confusion between style and content that led to the senseless imposition of an outworn academism as a standard for socially committed art.\* Legibility in art works need not be equated with vapid popularization.

To some extent the possibility of developing a genuine people’s art is verified by the types of criticism emerging directly from the communities in which today’s murals are created. Criticism occurs daily in a variety of ways, becoming more astute as the wall nears completion. Neighborhood people’s close observation of a mural in process, of the changes an artist makes and the reasons for them, develops their sensibility to craftsmanship, symbolism, and imagery. The creative act is demystified, and people come to respect the hard work and skill involved in mural painting. Involvement in the creative process opens up their responsiveness to art and sharpens aesthetic sensibility.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, *how* art is made, the human interaction of the mural process, has as much to do with the relevance of these murals to social change as the content or “message” of the imagery. And the *how* includes everything, even the subtleties of mural aesthetics. People want art in their daily lives, and people appreciate art. Their energies become actively engaged in the mural process. All art derives, in the last analysis, from the energies and symbols of people engaged in work, play, and creation.

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\*Zhdanov is the Soviet art theoretician most closely identified with the rigid interpretation of socialist realism as heroic workers painted in the style of 18th-century French Academic art (David, etc.).

In bourgeois societies, the commercialization of art has elevated the occasional “genius” artist to social prominence, while relegating most artists to an economically marginal existence. Art works, as well as most of the popular struggles and symbols underlying their historical evolution, have been appropriated and monopolized into a world of wealthy investors, museums, galleries, and libraries. The artistic sensibilities of the majority of people have either been denied or else stunted or diverted into consumerism (abstract color-design ads for soft drinks are easily grasped by the public). The community mural movement is a good example of a process of people’s re-appropriating culture as their own, reclaiming their visual imagery, historical heritage, and human particularity in a medium of artistic strength and dignity.

#### COMMUNITY ARTISTS AND THE LEFT

One would be less than honest, or realistic, to claim that all community muralists succeed in controversial areas, or even desire to work on sensitive subjects. Nor have all muralists successfully managed their participation in community affairs. It would be equally naive to think that the public artist in today’s world can remain free from controversy. In many cases the artist is not just a leader, or medium, or facilitator; but also an organizer, if not an agitator. As such, one finds it necessary to improve one’s own political education and to relate responsibly to various community organizations and to people of different backgrounds. Inevitably, this has raised points of friction and/or confusion with political organizations of the Left.

Community muralists often find themselves working together with left-wing organizations on community issues, even though most muralists do not belong to political parties, nor



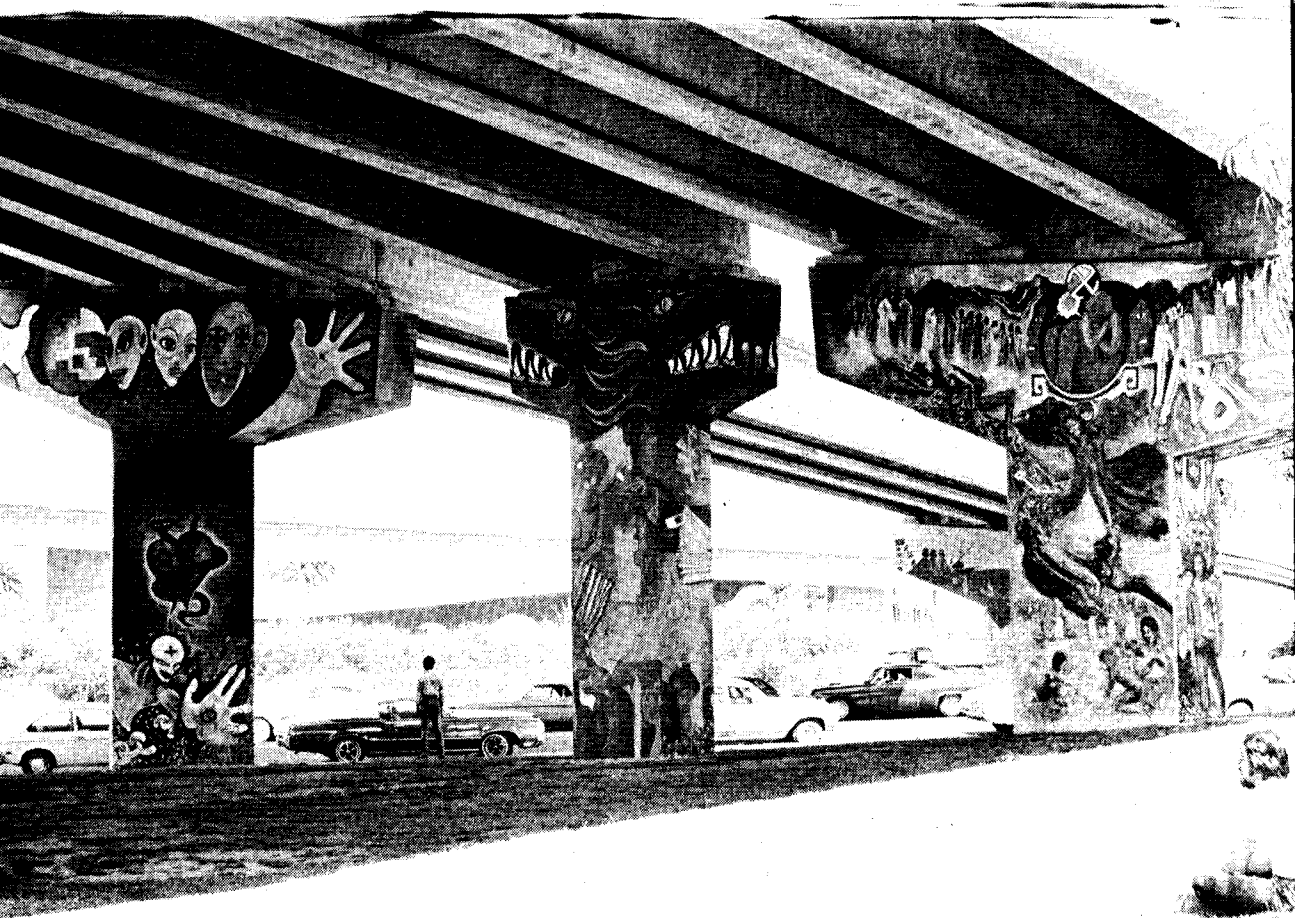
do they have their minds made up on one "correct line" or another. Many muralists have helped left-wing causes with banners, posters, signs, etc., as well as with their murals. But far too often the "politicos" have failed to understand that political art is more than simply propaganda. They have been oblivious to the aesthetic demands of art and the importance of creating a genuine people's art with artistic as well as political validity. While some "politicos" see only the propaganda dimension of art, others dismiss it as "entertainment." If art entertains, and there is no reason why it should not, it also enlightens — often more directly than speeches. To treat people's artists — whether singers, muralists, sculptors, poets, actors, or whatever — as merely entertainers, rather than a political *educators* through art, is very shortsighted. Rather than treating a people's artist as an unpaid commercial artist for the political movement, the Left might better respect the need of artists, like that of other workers, to develop their craft in the fullest and most useful way possible. Similarly, in spite of the frequency with which people have responded to a mural with urgent appeals for more such art works in their neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces, the Left has not been particularly sensitive to people's needs for art in their daily lives.

The desire people have for culture goes far beyond the immediate tactical horizon of the organized Left. Our experience has shown us that most people want a partisan culture, but one that is expressive as well as agitational. Art is a weapon to the degree that it is rooted in people's struggles and daily lives. The reappropriation of culture by the people is about the restoration to the people of a fully human image and creative possibility.

## FOOTNOTES

1. In our book *Toward a People's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1977), we have elaborated on the mural movement's aesthetics, history, internal problems, class and racial dynamics, and more general historical-sociological "place." In terms of art and society in America, the newest elements of this movement when compared to earlier ones are: the locations of the murals, outdoors and in working-class neighborhoods rather than inside government buildings; the initiative of artists, with groups of artists administering several of the programs; the leading role of artists belonging to oppressed groups traditionally excluded from the established art world (non-whites, women); community support and involvement; and collective character, with murals often executed by groups of artists or nonprofessional locals led by an artist.
2. Paraphrased from Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, & Jim Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art* (op. cit.), p. 86.
3. From a letter to the editor by E.S. Heller in *The New York Times*, September 10, 1972.
4. For further information on the role of women and women's themes in the mural movement, see: Eva Cockcroft, "Women in the Community Mural Movement," *Heresies*, Vol. I, No. 1 (January, 1977), 14-22.
5. Mao Tsetung, "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art" (May, 1942), *Selected Works*, Vol. III, p. 78.
6. Adapted from Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, & Jim Cockcroft, "Un contexto critico para los murales comunitarios," *El Gallo Ilustrado* (Sunday supplement of *El Dia*, Mexico City), April 17, 1977.

*EVA COCKCROFT is a muralist. JAMES COCKCROFT is a political sociologist. They co-authored with John Weber, Toward a People's Art (E.P. Dutton paperback, 1977, \$7.95), and the authors' proceeds from this book go to the mural movement.*

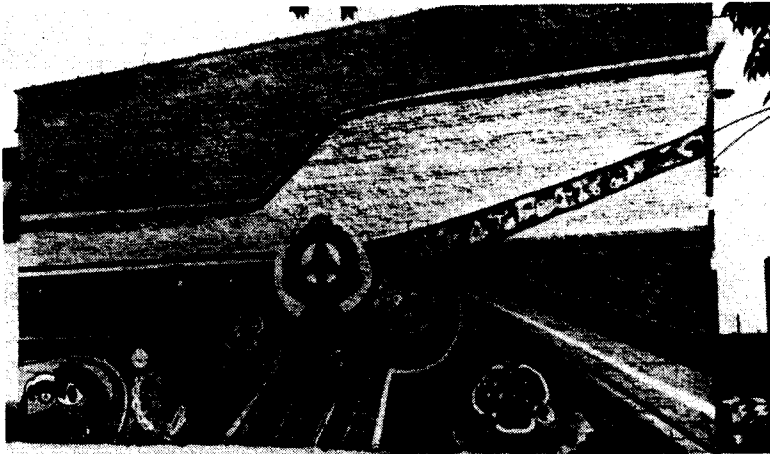


*Figure 1: Chicano Park, San Diego, California, 1974. Credits for the middle and left-hand pillars inside front cover. Right-hand pillar painted by Guillerma Arranda, Filipe Arame, Centro Cultural de la Raza. Photograph: Tim Drescher.*

# RECENT RAZA MURALS IN THE U.S.

Tim Drescher & Rupert Garcia

In the past ten years murals have been painted in many Chicano and Latino communities throughout the United States, from urban barrios to rural areas in the Southwest.<sup>1</sup>



Mario Castillo's walls in Chicago (fig. 2) use pre-conquest design motifs.



Antonio Bernal's mural in Del Rey, California (fig. 3) depicts both the Chicano present and the historical past.

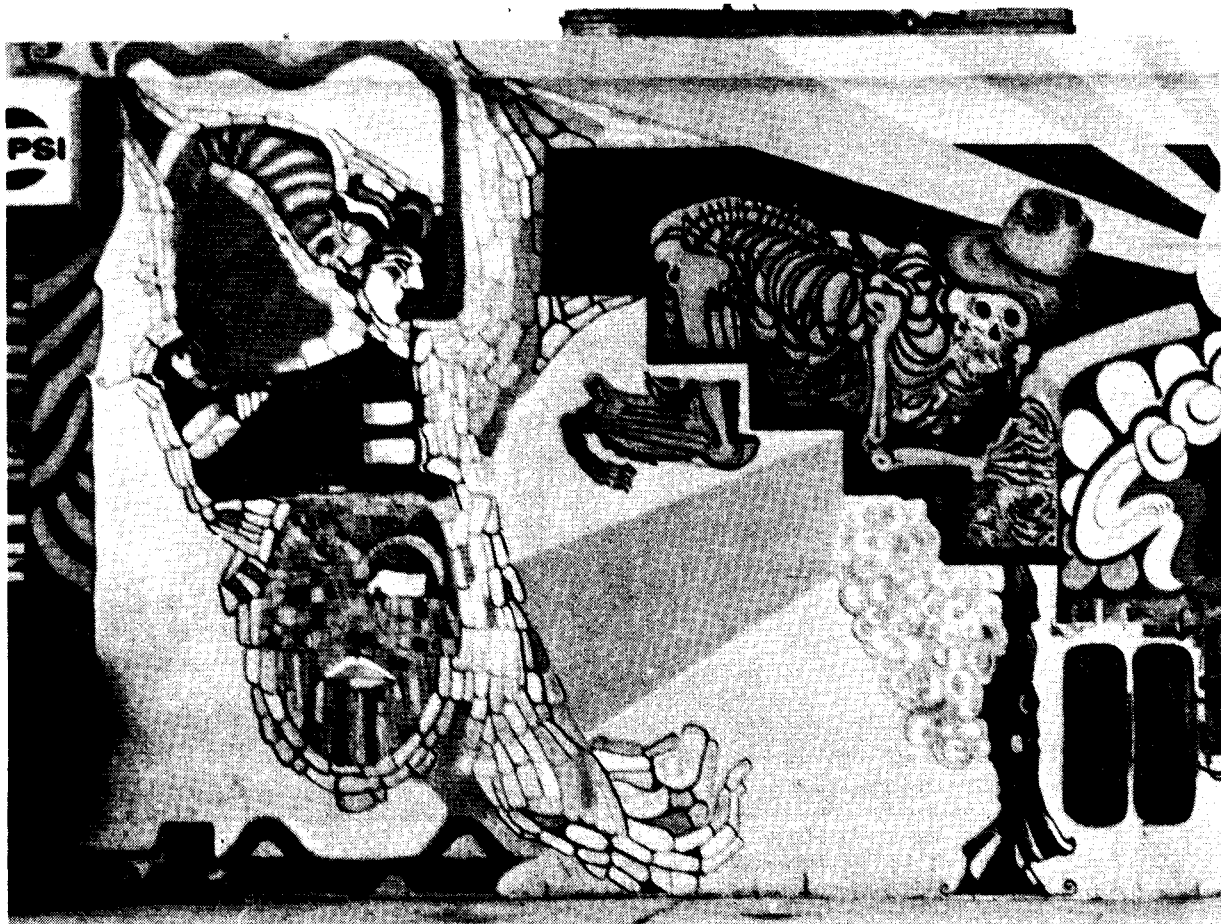
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*Figure 2 (top of this page): Mario Castillo, "Wall of Brotherhood," Chicago, 1969. Photo: Mark Rogovin.  
Figure 3 (bottom): Antonio Bernal, detail of mural at United Farm Workers' Teatro Campesino Center, Del Rey, California, 1968. Photo: Robert Sommer.*



Ray Patlan's mural in Chicago (fig. 4) is concerned with the history of La Raza.

Ernesto Palomino's mural in Fresno, California (fig. 5), shows the United Farm Workers combined with pre-conquest and post-conquest religious symbols.

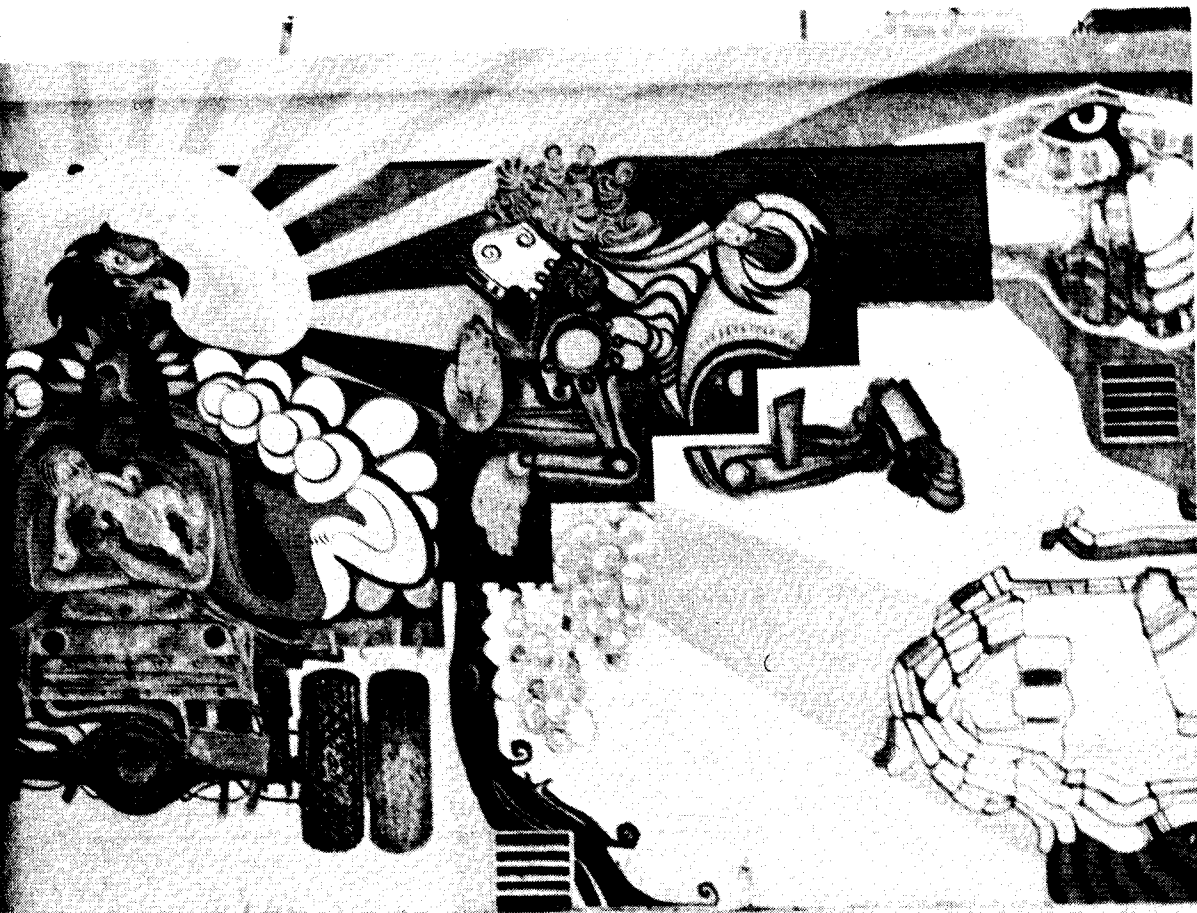


In other words, in different locations, murals of La Raza exhibit different characteristics of style and content, but, taken as whole, they share concern with present day conditions of oppression, with contemporary artistic styles, and with the socio-cultural development of La Raza from pre-Hispanic times to the present. The demonstration of concern for a heritage suppressed by a series of racist, imperialist, and ethnocentric ruling classes over several cen-

turies adds significance to the murals, giving visual presence to a complex interaction between the muralists, their communities, and the varied and lengthy traditions which inform both.

To be understood at all, *Raza murals must be viewed in terms of the several relationships, artistic and social, they simultaneously embody*. See, for instance, the discussion below of the Chicano Park freeway pillar murals in San Diego (pp. 26 & 27), where the process of community involvement and support is considered crucially important to the meanings of the mural. In theme, technique, symbol and image Raza murals often combine originality and immediacy of imagery with reference to

Fig. 4 (opposite): Ray Patlan, detail from "Salon de la Raza," Casa Aztlan, Chicago, 1970. Photograph: Harold Allen. Fig. 5 (below): Ernesto Palomino, mural at Tulare and F Streets, Fresno, California, 1971. Photograph: Robert Sommer.





previous artists and styles, including particularly the Mexican revolutionary muralists of the first half of the twentieth century, but, bourgeois art-historical opinion notwithstanding, they are not merely derivations from earlier Mexican murals or pale imitations of elitist European art trends. What is more, the mural is only one form of expression of several abounding in Raza communities throughout Aztlán<sup>2</sup> at this time, including dance, music, film, graphic art, poetry, fiction, and theater. In turn, these expressions are influenced by other contemporary politically progressive artistic expressions as well as by historical sources, and at the same time they influence those other expressions in other, non-Raza, communities.<sup>3</sup>

An explicit example may be seen in the St. Francis Road mural painted by Los Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlán, shown in fig. 6. One objective of the muralists was to show the connection between the Native American heritage and the Chicano peoples of the area. Thus in the mural we see historical figures from both Native American pre-conquest periods, and post-conquest Catholic culture represented as influences on today's Chicanos, as well as on contemporary Mexican workers and their struggles. The contradictory symbols of resistance and accommodation, revolution and religion in this case, capture the contradictions within the Raza community: acculturation into the bourgeois, Anglo-European society, vs. the realities of cultural and political heritages of Chicano peoples. Similar juxtapositions of images are evident in figs. 5, 7, and 11.

### IMMEDIACY AND TRADITION

It was the immediate history of the U.S. Raza communities in the late 1960's which caused the murals to be painted. Concurrent with developing political awareness among several op-

pressed groups in this period was a rise of Raza consciousness manifested in, among other expressions, the Land Grant Movement of New Mexico, the Civil Rights Movement, UFW, La Raza Unida Party, Chicano War Moratorium, etc. With this awareness came the need for La Raza to understand its historical development as a people whose varied roots go back to the earliest days of humans in the land now called "America"; the development of Olmec, Mayan, Toltec, and other civilizations, and of the various peoples and cultures which make up La Raza's Spanish heritage (Roman, Visigoth, North African-Islamic, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

Like the "cultural revolution" of the Mexicans beginning ca. 1920, La Raza of Aztlán emphasizes the Native American and mestizo heritage of its culture as well as the Mexican revolutionary heritage. Within this reawakening of La Raza's complex and profound history, art forms, including the mural, have been rediscovered, newly appreciated, and put to use. It is a truism that in all communities — including neighborhoods, schools, trade unions, women's groups, etc. — the history of the group combines with current ideas and issues to determine the nature of the artistic expression. Raza communities, especially Chicano communities, are particularly rich in a tradition of public visual expression through murals, and this helps explain the fact that more murals have been painted in these communities over the past decade than in any other comparable locations. Although a thorough study has not yet been made, we have knowledge of Raza murals being painted in several states, including Texas, Colorado, and California, as well as in Brazil, Mexico, and Vietnam in the period from 1930 to 1967.<sup>5</sup>

In 1968 and 1969, shortly after the acknowledged beginnings of the current U.S. mural renaissance in a southside Chicago ghetto,<sup>6</sup> the

number of murals which began to appear in other communities made a major leap. A brief comparison of two of these from Raza communities, Antonio Bernal's Del Rey mural and Mario Castillo's "Wall of Brotherhood" in Chicago, is instructive (see figs. 2 and 3), partly because Bernal's wall and Castillo's first mural were painted simultaneously, although neither knew of the other's existence at that time. In early 1968 Bernal painted his mural for the then Farm Worker's Teatro Campesino Center in Del Rey, a small town in the Central Valley of California. The mural presents a response to issues of Raza struggle in the Central Valley and, by extension, throughout the Southwest, by depicting on one side of the center Caesar Chavez alongside early California rebel Joaquin Murietta, and Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, Reies Tijerina, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, these historical figures of people's struggle are

contradicted by the depiction on the adjacent wall (not shown) of a stylized reproduction of "Aztec Procession of Nobles" and "Aztec Women," taken from G. Valliant's *Aztecs of Mexico*, showing aspects of pre-conquest ruling class, sexist culture. Bernal has uncritically identified Aztec society as a monolithic whole with Chicano culture today. In showing elite Aztec society, this panel does not identify the class distinctions then prevalent.<sup>7</sup>

Among the earliest Raza murals in Chicago are two by Mario Castillo in which the designs are almost totally made up of traditional pre-Hispanic Mexican motifs. The first was done at the same time as Bernal's mural. The second of these, (fig. 2) is made contemporary by incorporating the peace/anti-war symbol at its center. To a larger extent, what Bernal has done with human figures, Castillo accomplished with symbolic designs. In addition, the mural *form itself* draws connections with La Raza's visual

Fig. 6: Los Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlán, "St. Francis Road Mural," Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1972. Photograph: Gilberto Romero.



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cultural tradition.

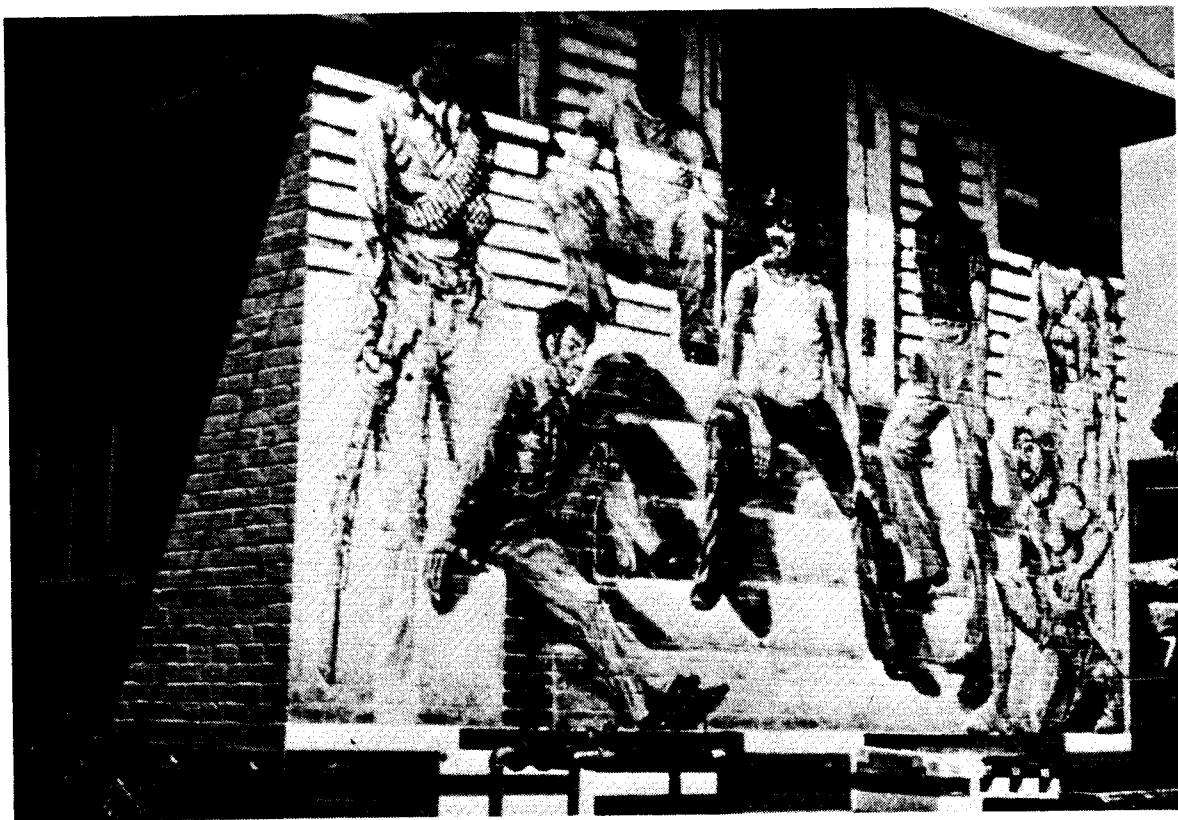
Both these works illustrate that the community murals (or "progressive" or "political" as they are called interchangeably) resulted from a combination of subjective and objective factors which motivated many artists in the 1960's. The simultaneity of these particular murals being painted in separate parts of the country is not a coincidence, but an expression of the pervasive need for cultural articulation of pressing social issues faced by oppressed and politically aware people at that period. Denied access to ruling-class dominated mass media, galleries, and museums, political artists turned to the walls of their own communities as forums for presentation of crucial issues. Neither these two murals, nor any other recent murals, were created in a social vacuum.

The complex relationship between political murals and the issues faced by their communities is not always clearly expressed in a given mural, although it is always a part of the process which brought the mural into being. An example is the section of a mural painted by Los Artes Guadalupanos de Aztlán in Santa Fe in 1973 showing a United States Army tank and flag, and Chicanos crying out that 15,000 Chicanos killed in Vietnam is bad enough and must stop ("*15,000 Chicanos muerto in Vietnam. ¡Ya basta!*"). Murals often give leadership to communities by expressing in concrete images issues facing the people. Castillo's "Wall of Brotherhood" brought the role of Chicanos in the Vietnam war to the attention of a large portion of the Pilsen barrio community in Chicago, as did the Los Artes mural for its community in New Mexico.

Progressive murals throughout the U.S. depict the horrors of imperialism, drug abuse, ethnic and racial pride, urban "underdevelopment" and urban "renewal." In Raza communities, these issues are often combined with

images directly or symbolically particularizing the issue as it affects the Raza community, and simultaneously connecting these communities with their history and with the struggles of other peoples. Raza murals frequently utilize familiar Aztec and other pre-Hispanic design motifs, including Quetzalcoatl and other gods of Olmec, Mayan, and Toltec tradition (see figs. 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10), but La Raza's murals by no means deal only with Chicano issues. Because of the close geographical and cultural proximity to the strong tradition of mural painting in Mexico, and because of the large number of Chicano people living in the United States, there are more of these murals than of any other Raza group, but other peoples of La Raza also have turned to barrio walls to express themselves. An outstanding example is cited by Victor A. Sorell, who describes the way in which Chicago's "Puerto Rican community . . . addresses its own particular culture, choosing to depict in mural form those aspects of their Hispanic-American experience that strike memorable chords." The particular example discussed is a mural of powerful political awareness, "La Crucifixion de Don Pedro Albizu Campos," painted in 1971 by various members of the Puerto Rican Art Association led by Mario Galán and Hector Rosario.<sup>8</sup>

In another mural (fig. 9) painted by the Mujeres Muralistas in San Francisco, titled "Latinoamérica" the figures are taken from cultures throughout Latin America: Peru, Venezuela, Guatemala, Mexico, and Bolivia. They are shown in traditional clothing having particular significance in their homelands. In this way the mural attempts to break down a narrow nationalism which sometimes exists in the multinational Mission District where it is located, and passersby often express appreciation for the mural's depiction of their several cultures. As it turns out, the Bolivian and



*Fig. 7: Wayne Healy, untitled mural at Ramona Gardens, East Los Angeles, 1974. Photograph: Robert Sommer.*

Peruvian devil figures are similar to depictions of Catholic demons which had been forced into the older, indigenous Native American cultures. To the right in the mural is a section showing the cultural mixtures in the community today in order to bring the whole mural and its issues clearly back into the present time and place.

In addition to Raza murals' references to liberation struggles in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Central and South America, they present the struggle of farm workers in the person of Caesar Chavez, the black-on-red symbol of the United Farm Workers, "La Causa," Pachucos

("zoot-suiters"), "low riders," and other uniquely Raza forms of daily cultural life. Note, for example, fig. 7, where muralist Wayne Healy has placed together figures from widely different historical periods. They are gathered on the steps of the Ramona Garden housing project where the mural is painted, but, like Antonio Bernal's mural cited above, this mural's juxtaposition of contradictory figures is uncritical. For example, there are static images of an elite Aztec warrior, a Spanish conquistador, a Zapatista, and members of the local community. It is clear that all these figures make up a part of Chicano history



Fig. 8: William F. Herrón, Jr., "The Wall That Cracked Open," City Terrace (Miller Alley), Los Angeles, 1972. Photograph: Eva Cockcroft.



(note that only men are depicted), but it is not clear from the mural what particular roles they played in that history. To cite these figures is progressive because by trying to recapture parts of a cultural tradition the mural challenges a system which has deliberately tried to suppress such images. At the same time, the mural lacks a critical attitude toward depicting representatives of different classes and thus blurs crucial distinctions among groups of La Raza which have functioned differently through history. Also in Ramona Gardens, which is in East Los Angeles, is a mural showing a police car and a background of a typical East Los Angeles night scene with a massive Aztec figure in the center holding the dead body of a young neighborhood gang member. The inscription says that to kill a homeboy from the barrio is to kill La Raza: "¡Viva la Raza!" This mural thus gives focus to a continuing problem in the area by relating it to the much larger history of La Raza, and, less directly, to police harassment. Many murals with images treating drug abuse are similar in intention and effect. Other murals treating daily life include figs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

The frequent use of Catholic images such as crucifixion and the Virgin of Guadalupe is of considerable political significance in Raza murals. These images often have a particular political import — Christ is seen crucified on a hypodermic syringe, and the Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of the Americas dating back to the early 16th century, and was used as a symbol of resistance by Hidalgo in the revolt against Spain in the 19th century, and Zapata in the early 20th century, as well as more recently by the UFW. A forceful presentation of all these images is seen in fig. 5, Ernesto Palomino's mural at Tulare and F Streets in Fresno, California, where a Chicano mother image is portrayed as a virtual madona yet is

placed on the frame of a farmworker's truck. This combination of aspects of the life and roles of *la chicana* gives the mural a special richness as well as a complexity of historical and contemporary reference which captures the contradiction of a people struggling to discover and recover their particular cultural heritage in the face of an oppressive, plastic, "throw away" society. The background is the UFW eagle.

The role of women in Raza murals embodies contradictions concerning their role in the society at large and throughout Raza history, and deserves special comment. As in U.S. society in general, the images depicted in Raza murals emphasize men in traditional, heroic roles, which, as in virtually all cultures, have been important in men's self-identification. However, in recent Raza murals women are often shown as leaders and role models for their communities. Lolita Lebrón, Adelita (a symbol of the struggle led by Pancho Villa), and the Virgin of Guadalupe are three of the most famous, but more general representations of women in the significant and respected roles of mother and as a source of strength for the community are frequent (see figs. 5, 6, 9).

What is more, women are among the leading muralists in the United States today. Among Raza muralists, this is also true, as the Mujeres Muralistas of San Francisco (mentioned above) indicate. They are a group of from two to eight Raza women of Mexican and Venezuelan backgrounds who began painting murals largely because the local male muralists would not work with them. In their work in the community they have often been accosted by comments that painting murals is not women's work, but their murals have overcome the opposition and receive respect from all quarters. The Mujeres Muralistas do not paint solely feminist images, believing that the mere fact that they, as women, are doing the painting is a

strong statement in itself. Their murals (fig. 9) depict issues of importance to the entire Latino community in the Mission District. Women are also equal members of Arte Revolucionario Chicano in Albuquerque, and in Los Angeles, women such as Judy Baca and Judith Hernandez have been active leaders of community muralists for several years. In Fresno, a group of Chicanas has recently been organized

to paint murals and Irene Perez, a member of the Mujeres Muralistas, has been assisting the group.

The overall point here is that Raza muralists, like artists in other oppressed groups, are motivated by current struggles, and are supported by a particular cultural and historical tradition which provides symbols and images for them. Thus, murals are always political art,



*Fig. 9: Mujeres Muralistas, "Latinoamérica," 1974, San Francisco, California. Patricia Rodriguez, Graciela Carillo, Consuelo Mendez, Irene Prez, with the help of Tuty Rodriguez, Miriam Olivo, Ester Hernandez, Xochilt Nevel. Photograph: Phyllis Ewen.*

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even if they consist of “only” traditional design motifs, because, as John Berger writes, “a people of a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history. This is why — and the only reason why — the entire art of the past has now become a political issue.”<sup>9</sup> The selective use by oppressed people of ancient images and symbols, alone or in modern settings, gives communities a sense of continuity with their past, and this awareness in turn further exposes the forced exclusion of their own history and culture in the barrios of Anglo-capitalist society.<sup>10</sup>

### ARTISTIC SOURCES

As mentioned above, Raza murals have artistic sources as well as immediate political ones. These include both contemporary trends in so-called modern, “fine” (elite, ruling class) painting, and in the work of the three great Mexican revolutionary muralists of the twentieth century, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros — Los Tres Grandes — who painted from 1921 until 1974. Contemporary Raza muralists utilize virtually every style of painting available, from ancient stylization to cubism to photorealism. They are aware of the development of modern art and many have studied in art schools, although many more are self-trained and their art developed out of local influences such as the *placas* in East Los Angeles (highly stylized, graffiti-like expressions of Raza identity, see fig. 8) or underground comix in San Francisco’s Mission District.

The significance of Los Tres Grandes in the Raza community cannot be overemphasized. They used their art training for revolutionary purposes, and thus to some extent their lifestyles as well as their art become models for today’s Raza muralists. They had one leg in the

European dominated fine arts world, and the other in the development of their nation out of colonialism and toward independence. They were able to synthesize these two aspects of their lives in their art, which became a wholly unique Mexican expression. All three muralists were formally trained in elite traditions. Rivera, for instance, was intimately involved in Europe with the “School of Paris” in the early decades of this century.<sup>11</sup> His first Mexican mural was very “European” and depicted Christian virtues, but soon after he was able to “decolonize” himself and develop a truly Mexican art-form and utilize his previous technical mastery to show the history of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and their subsequent tradition. La Raza muralists are similar in aspiration toward achieving this synthesis of technique and revolutionary content into a totally (and total) Raza expression, but their struggle is still in an early stage, for centuries of oppression are no small matter to overcome in the process of decolonization.

Revolutionary politics, of course, were the causes of difficulties for Los Tres Grandes when the Mexican government became more conservative after the mid-’twenties, and all three were forced to leave Mexico and work for a time in the United States during the 1930’s.<sup>12</sup> The murals they painted while here and also those executed in Mexico have had significant influence on the recent Raza muralists and provide a direct link between them and Los Tres Grandes. They provide several imagistic and stylistic sources for contemporary Raza muralists which are attractive to today’s artists because the images, today, relate simultaneously to Raza history, revolutionary history, and artistic predecessors to whom the muralists wish to express their indebtedness.<sup>13</sup>

Among the most popular visual references are portraits of Los Tres Grandes, the central



*Fig. 10: Michael Rios, with Tony Machado and Richard Montez, "Minipark," 1974, San Francisco, California. Photograph: Tim Drescher.*

figure of Siqueiros' "New Democracy" (fig. 4 especially, and also fig. 6 which utilizes the miner from Siqueiros' mural in the Hospital de la Raza in Mexico City), Rivera's method of dividing a wallspace into narrative segments, and Orozco's expressionist handling of paints. In one case, Marcos Raya has painted a mural which is a visual pun on Rivera's famous Rockefeller Center mural.<sup>14</sup> Raya's work thus depends on a familiarity with Rivera's earlier mural as, among other alterations, it replaces Rivera's archetypal modern worker with a fat, greedy, capitalist businessman. Dramatic techniques, developed most highly by Siqueiros and Orozco, such as dynamic and polyangular perspectives and extensive foreshortening, are

beginning to be explored now by U.S. muralists.<sup>15</sup>

The most telling of the influences of Mexican masters (also including Rufino Tamayo, Pablo O'Higgins, and Juan O'Gorman, and the political and popular prints of Jose Guadalupe Posada<sup>16</sup>) is the use of the mural form as a platform to discuss La Raza's socio-cultural, economic, and political realities. They provide powerful examples of the muralists' responsibility to their public and to their community, and a sense of solidarity with other peoples' struggles both in this country and abroad. An example of several of these traits is in the history of the murals at Chicano Park in San Diego, shown in fig. 1. The residents of the

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Logan barrio had already had their community bisected by the construction of the massive Coronado Bridge, a freeway span connecting the mainland section of San Diego with the wealthy peninsula of Coronado. When residents discovered a bulldozer beginning to prepare the ground beneath the bridge for construction of a sheriff's substation, they revolted and launched a series of militant demonstrations demanding the area be given over to them for a park. Through their militance they won the fight and built the park, including a children's playground, picnic tables, and walks through the grassy slope it occupies. The bridge support pillars became sites for murals, not merely graffiti and *placas* as had been the case before, and muralists from as far away as New York have gone to San Diego to paint there as an expression of solidarity with their struggle. Figure 1 shows some of the murals on the pillars, which every year on April 23 overlook the celebration of Chicano Park Day attended by literally thousands of residents. In the 1977 celebration, three couples were married; one young couple, and two elderly couples as a gesture of reaffirmation of their love and of respect for the community and its park.

New murals are painted on the remaining blank pillars (many are still untouched), and stress such issues as drug addiction and neighborhood pride, as well as ties developing with Mexican artists from across the nearby border. Unlike the murals of Los Tres Grandes, contemporary Raza muralists' work has greater community input and actual participation during planning and execution of the work. They also tend to be located on walls within the living neighborhoods of the people as opposed to the official government building walls most frequently used by Los Tres Grandes. Because of all these factors, there is a great sense of closeness with the work's content and its

process.

## PROCESS AND COMMUNITY

Raza muralists are often as concerned with the process of their murals as with the visual impact. They solicit theme and design ideas from their communities, and sometimes passersby or neighbors actually become part of the mural painting team. The relation of trained artist to the mural painting process happens in one of three ways. In some cases, trained artists do the design and the painting, working basically alone from inception to completion. In a second style of work a group of artists work together from the beginning to the end of a project. In this case, more experienced artists work with others in the group to develop their painting skills. The third style of organization is the most common, and includes substantial active participation by members of the community throughout the process, including actually painting on the wall. Often, inexperienced participants in the latter two styles of working later go on to paint their own murals or to work with still other community members to organize, design, and paint murals. In this way formal, art-school technical knowledge is transmitted to formally untrained members of the community. Frequently, neighborhood youth are central in the process. An outstanding example is the role of youth in the community murals painted by Cityarts Workshop in New York's lower east side.<sup>17</sup> The workshop is a multiracial group, and is highly responsive to needs and aspirations of the several ethnic and racial communities living in the area. The "Puerto Rican Heritage" mural, fig. 11, is an example of the workshop's ability to organize and focus and sustain the participation of local youth. It was directed by Alfredo Hernandez, and painted with the help of local teenagers. It should also be mentioned that where gangs are a prevalent form of youth



social activity, it is essential to work with members/representatives both to develop their abilities and to be sure the mural relates positively to the area. In some cases in East Los Angeles and in Chicago, painting murals has brought previously warring gangs together creatively for the first time. If an outsider paints on a gang's turf without permission, the mural is certain to be defaced — if it is allowed to be painted at all.

In the early years, funding came from communities through donations and collections. Only since about 1971 have muralists been receiving significant financial support from government agencies on local, state, and federal levels (although beginning in the spring of 1977 we may be seeing a reaction to this). This concern for involvement with the community in the process of mural painting, which is shared by other political muralists throughout the country, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of their walls are painted outdoors, are departures from previous mural traditions. Los Tres Grandes, for instance, painted predominantly in government buildings or courtyards. Today's artists thus confront a central contradiction in their work: they are painting often political public art on private walls such as garages, fences, private buildings, markets, etc. Much of their work in one way or another discusses this contradiction. Urban renewal, deterioration of wall surfaces and neighborhoods, and intensive or aggressive "normal maintenance" have all destroyed Raza murals, and the murals then often stand as examples of the very issues their designs depict (see figs. 1, 8, 9, 10).

This "publicness" is worth stressing. The complex process through which the murals are

*Fig. 11: Cityarts Workshop, "Puerto Rican Heritage Mural," directed by Alfredo Hernandez with teenagers of NYC's lower east side, 1975. Photograph: Lawrence Engel.*

realized is an activity that embodies cultural and political struggle, the need for community organizing legwork, familiarity with the people who must live and work near the wall on a daily basis, and a willingness to solicit and respect non-artists' ideas about the wall's design and content. The contemporary community mural is thus a public mode of depiction, unlike bourgeois forms which are designed for private ownership and consumption as precious objects. The murals are supported and protected by their communities; few are defaced because they not only articulate the history, reality, and aspirations of a community, their very process of creation is done not "for the people," or "to them" but *with* and *because of* the audience.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. "Latino" refers to people of South American, Central American, and Caribbean heritage. "Chicano" refers specifically to those of Mexican descent. "Raza" includes all of these.
2. "Aztlán" denotes the territory traditionally inhabited by Native American peoples before European conquest, and was the legendary birthplace of the Aztecs. It includes the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico.
3. Community muralists throughout the United States are in communication via the National Community Muralists' Network, established at a conference in New York City in May 1976. Both in this way and through informal letters, slide exchanges, and visits do muralists in different parts of the country influence each others' work.
4. Rupert García, *Raza Murals and Muralists: An Historical View* (San Francisco; published privately, 1974), p. 11. For a thorough treatment, see this author's forthcoming work on the history of Mexican murals from pre-conquest times to the twentieth century.
5. Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican-American Artists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), mentions the 1930's mural production of Texas artist Antonio Garcia, and the pre-mid-1960's murals of Luis Jimenez in Texas and by Edward Chavez in several states and in Brazil.
6. In 1967 a Chicano artist, Ray Patlán, painted a mural in a U.S. chapel at Camp Bearat, 30 miles northeast of Saigon, called "Wall of Brotherhood." In 1966, he studied and painted a fresco mural in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Upon returning to the U.S. he has since painted several important murals in Chicago and is now working in the San Francisco area.
7. In late 1968, the Crusade for Justice artist Manuel Martinez painted a mural with Mayan motifs and themes for the Crusade's center in Denver, Colorado. See *El Gallo*, Vol. I, No. 12, Sept. 1968, p. 4 for a reproduction of this mural.
8. In early 1969, Malaquias Montoya, Manuel Hernandez-Trujillo, and others installed portable murals in the Oakland, California, Latin American Library, and about the same time Domingo Rivera and other students joined with black artists in doing panels on Third World struggles at Grove Street College, Oakland.
9. We see from these examples that, while precise beginnings are difficult to pin down, variety and geographical scope of Raza murals is extensive at all times.
10. With the "Wall of Respect," at 43rd and Langley Streets, directed by William Walker and OBAC in the summer of 1967.
11. Bernal and Healy (v. below) should not be singled out. Uncritical approaches by Chicano and Latino muralists not only to their pre-Columbian antecedents but to other aspects of their history can be found in other murals, as well. This kind of ostensibly apolitical painting is a reflection of the artists' political awareness, and will doubtless change as their knowledge and experience of politics develops.
12. Sorrell's article is "Barrio Murals in Chicago: Painting the Hispanic-American Experience on 'Our Community' Walls," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, Año Cuatro, Numero Cuatro (Otoño 1976), 57-59. The following description is taken from this article, which has excellent illustrations.
13. The background of the wall is a massive Puerto Rican Nationalist flag whose field is "divided into four rectangles by a white cross." The usual five-pointed white star has been changed to red, "at odds iconographically but echoing the local color of the lower half of the composition." Six distinguished Puerto Rican patriots are depicted across the top of the wall, and, at the center, the figure of "The Tiger of Liberty," Don Pedro Albizu Campos (1891-1965), the symbolic leader of the struggle for national liberation of Puerto Rico. He is flanked by Lolita Lebrón, Luis Marín, and Rafael Cancel Miranda, all leaders in Puerto Rico's struggles against imperialist domination.



"La calavera catrina" (the fashionable lady), broadside by Jose Guadalupe Posada, early 20th century Mexican print-maker. Diego Rivera incorporated this figure into his 1947 *Hotel del Prado* mural. See footnote 16.

9. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 33.
10. Use of traditional and historical images in murals often runs exactly counter to the treatment and lack of treatment of ancient civilizations in bourgeois museums, texts, and schools. Also, note the dehumanizing function of "mass" culture and its use of La Raza in television, cinema, and commercial advertising. The murals are a positive countermeasure to these uses of a capitalist society based on exploitation, sexism, and racism.
11. Rupert García, "The Mexican Muralists & The School of Paris," *Left Curve*, 6, Summer-Fall 1976, pp. 4-21. The particular development and degree of active involvement in political movements among the three differed considerably. For instance, Rivera was criticized for staying in Mexico too long after the reactionary Calles and the following puppet regimes came to power. Siqueiros eventually became Executive Secretary of the Mexican Communist Party, and so forth.
12. See Shifra M. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal*, XXXIII, Summer 1974, pp. 321-327. This article describes the struggle over Siqueiros' mural "America Tropical" which was entirely whitewashed and remains obscured today. See also, Rupert García, "Alfaro Siqueiros," *El Tecolote*, vol. 4, No. 3, Feb. 22, 1974, p. 11.




13. In addition to the Raza example such as Patlán (fig. 3) and Los Artes (fig. 4), note the influence of Siqueiros on the murals of Mark Rogovin in Chicago, or of Rivera on the works of the Haight-Ashbury Muralists in San Francisco, or of Orozco and Siqueiros on Dewey Crumpler in San Francisco.
14. In 1933 Nelson Rockefeller destroyed a large mural which had been commissioned to Diego Rivera. Rockefeller paid him first, of course, then destroyed the entire wall because it has a portrait of Lenin on it. See Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), pp. 317-340.
15. A translation of Siqueiros' important work *Como se pinta un mural* (How a Mural Is Painted), with additional notes and information, is scheduled for publication next year. Early stages of research and translation in this project were supported by donations from community muralists throughout the country.
16. While not a muralist, Posada's influence cannot be ignored. He is most famous for his scathing political satires and use of *calaveras* (skeletons) to criticize ruling class characters and human folly. His dates are 1852 to 1913.

17. See Eva S. Cockcroft and James D. Cockcroft, "Cityarts Workshop — People's Art in New York City," *Left Curve*, no. 4, Summer 1975, pp. 3-15. Also, Susan Shapiro-Kiok, "Cityarts Workshop: Out of the Gallery and into the Streets," in Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, *Toward A People's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 169-185.

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# THE WONDERFUL WHITE PAPER

Ruth Domino

At the edge of the province of La Mancha, on one of the huge sand plains somewhat withdrawn from the great highways leading to Madrid, stood a little village called Cueva. On the horizon before and behind it rose bald mountains of reddish brown which, toward evening when the sun went down, shone in lilac hues.

The village was exactly like every other poor village in the land. The houses were small and white with flat roofs; and in the summer, when the heat seemed inescapable, they had sackcloth curtains instead of doors. The biggest space in every house was the courtyard, which, enclosed by the hen houses and goat sheds and living quarters, was like a room surrounded by four walls. This courtyard had the same trampled clay floor as that in the living quarters. The peasants, too, were exactly like those in other villages. They wore black shirts which hung over their trousers. In summer they wore large, broad-brimmed straw hats, and the whole year round they wore canvas sandals with matted soles and a cloth around their neck.

The women had black dresses and black headcloths. It was as if they went constantly in mourning in their white houses, because hundreds of years earlier the water had dried from their fields together with the trees in the woods. On the other side of the village was a small river whose bed was usually dried up in summer, exposing gray rocks like weather-beaten tombstones.

The priests had told the people that the dearth of water came from their sins. So they bore the heat, the drought, the flies and their poverty as the curse of God, and thought no

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more about it. They sinned and brought children into the world who, as long as they were tiny, crept about naked on the courtyard clay.

The peasants had dark brown faces, the older ones with many wrinkles and deep-wrought furrows. Their skin hung like supply leather, though not like tired flesh, about their joints. And in that, too, they were exactly like poor peasants the world over whose fat poured from their bodies, together with their sweat, as they bent over the earth. And finally — like peasants everywhere — they had a passion: they sang. They sang after their work when they sat by the side of the road; the women sang in the evenings in their tiny rooms, and the young girls on Sundays when they tied a colored ribbon in their hair. Their songs were called flamencos. They were wild, monotonous melodies that suddenly soared and swelled out of their throats. The heads of the singers lifted high as if about to fly from their necks. Then the voices would subside again. The more suddenly and fiercely the song mounted, the more highly esteemed was the singer's art. On Sundays the people of the village would sit about such a leader, and as he sang shrill and loud they would clap hands and cry "Ole, ole, ole!"

The words of the songs were very simple, generally only one short sentence: "The landlord is powerful; he does with us what he pleases." Or "The earth is dry and quivers like a fish on dry land." And the young girls sang that they were so poor the sun and the moon belonged to them, but nothing on earth; there was no man who would look upon them.

Only one thing was more remote from these peasants' imagination than a moist earth with constantly flowing streams: that was a land without colors, in which the sky did not appear blue and the earth was neither red nor violet.

Faced with such a prospect they would certainly have replied that the people who lived there must be much poorer even than themselves.

Though the rich gentlemen still sat in the castles, the King had already been turned out of the country. Gradually teachers went into the districts to instruct the children; and to Cueva there came a young man, Fernando.

Before this, when the monastery was still occupied, a few children had gone there to study, but they were the exception. Fernando brought with him maps that were very colorful. The children realized with astonishment that the land on the maps was only a plain without mountains. Moreover, the mountains were shown in folds, brown like the earth; the rivers were as blue as the heavens and as sinuous as a goat's limb; the cities were thick black points like goat turds and the villages little black points like fly specks.

The children learned that on the map their village lay directly to the right of the capital of Madrid, that the land near Valencia looked so green because it was a valley with abundant water and many green plants, and that behind it, like unending and multitudinous rivers, was the sea. And the teacher taught those who already knew a few letters that the various curves and lines in the letters of the alphabet imitated objects in nature; and that when, for example, they placed a large O on its back or stomach, it resembled the shape of a lemon, only without the little nose. And he taught those who knew no letters that, conversely, lines and curves could be joined together to form letters. He distributed colored crayons, water colors and paint brushes to the children.

For their first lesson they all drew a lemon which the teacher had laid on his desk as a model.

Suddenly a titter swept over the class. The teacher, who was reading a book, looked up in

surprise. Then the children held the painted lemons high and waved them like yellow drapes toward the desk. Fernando laughed too. There was not a child in the class who was bored.

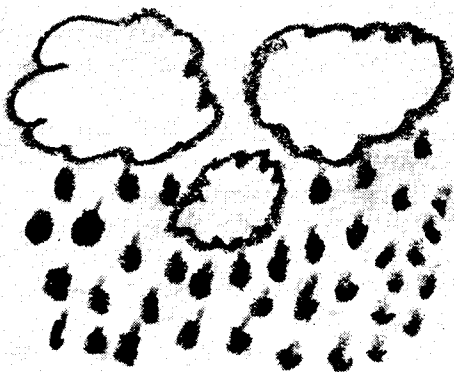
After a few drawing and painting lessons, the teacher divided his class. He asked his most diligent pupils to set down on paper objects out of their own imagination. He told them also that in the evening their older brothers and sisters, if they had time, could come to school. A few of the children tried to portray Bible stories in pictures, while others attempted to make maps.

At home the mothers clad in black made the sign of the cross when they saw the paintings. To be sure, they had learned how to embroider in their youth; but they had not drawn objects from nature. They had made patterns which had no meaning, or which depicted the cross of Christ and the loose swaddling-clothes of a Christ child on his Mother's lap. The fathers, for their part, gazed long at the maps. The children explained that the blue lines represented flowing water, and that where there was much water everything was green, and that near Valencia there were three crops in the year.

To reproduce mountains, rivers and fruits on a small white piece of paper so that one could recognize and find meaning in colors and spaces as easily as in words, even if one could not read or write, fascinated everyone. But then began what the priests and the authorities later called "the plague."

In the houses where there were boys, a colored map soon hung next to the oil painting of the Virgin Mother and the calendar of the Saints. Watercolor paintings of biblical events were pasted over the sleeping places of the girls. And where there were boys and girls, colored drawings were grouped both to the right and the left of the Virgin.

Little Juanita wanted to show the rain of



*Drawing by Etienne Goldstein*

manna in the wilderness. But since she was unfamiliar with manna and tomatoes seemed to her good, tasty food, a gift of God worthy of the unfortunate Jews, she let tomatoes rain down from heaven. So her paper was filled with many beautiful red tomato plants. Nine-year-old Angelita had a weakness for matches, so she made an angel walk from star to star, at the coming of night, with a burning match in order to light the star spots which by day were colorless.

Not far from the village lay the landlord's house. The peasants had to bring payments to him for the arid little fields they rented from him. The tribute consisted of vegetables, eggs

and a little wine. But the vineyards bore badly in the years of drought and exacted much toil. The landlord's house stood on the same broad expanse as the village; white rectangular, it faced the high red mountains. It had an outer courtyard and an inner courtyard around which the living quarters were grouped. At each of its corners was a spire. The peasants knew only the outer courtyard where the bailiff stripped them of their food payments. But once little Pedro, peering from behind his father's black shirt, had glimpsed the inner court. There in the center stood a well with magnificently embossed iron troughs. A stream of water jetted forth and fairly flooded the surrounding flower beds. It struck him as the height of earthly splendor: water which was not laboriously drawn by bending over a thousand times, water which did not have to be stolen from the sparse rains, water which poured lavishly forth and yet was neither river nor rain!

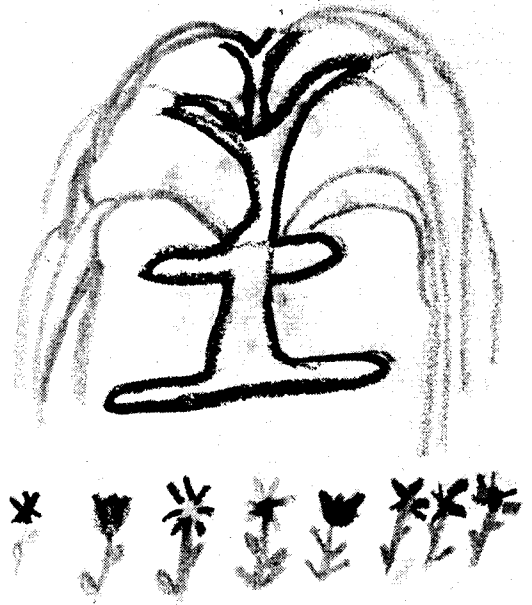
When the teacher placed colored crayons at Pedro's desk, he chose a big one. Then he drew a white, wavy rectangle with pointed spires at the corners. And in the middle he drew a blue stream gushing high and away over the walls and over the brown fields right into the middle of the village. At home he laid the sheet of paper on the table. His mother wrung her hands; his father took the picture in his hands and murmured in his black beard: "Is this not the landlord's castle?" His wife asked: "What are you saying, husband?" But Pedro's father fell silent again, so the matter was left as if unspoken.

And therewith, the priests and authorities later said, sin came to the village because of the plague of the drawings.

In the evening before the sun had completely set, the father said to Pedro: "Give me a piece of paper and the drawing pencil!" And he sat himself in the yard, not by the edge of the road

as was his custom, and drew his house and the blue stream of water which he let fall on his field behind the house.

That night it rained mightily, and the pails that had been set out were filled to the brim with water. The next morning the leaves were crisp and green.



*Drawing by Etienne Goldstein*

"The Holy Virgin is pleased with the picture," said little Pedro's mother. Word spread through the village. "The Holy Virgin grants us water and painting to the children," the people said. Pedro's father did not listen to the women's prattle; and before the sun went down he again sat in his courtyard and painted a garden to his house, and colored his field green, red and blue. The blue came from the water of a little river which he depicted leading through canals and then flowing richly through

all his fields. He painted the red tomatoes and the green of the vine and the onion plant. The next day he sat down again and added a few more hills covered with vineyards, to which a little path led from his house.

The news of the painting by Pedro's father did not remain secret, and the neighbors with whom he used to sit before the house now came and watched over his shoulder. They liked the joyous colors of the garden and especially the water in it; and since their children also had crayons at home, one after the other began to sketch and paint his house with a big garden beside it and much water — in short, everything which did not in reality exist. And since they did not have much water, they copied from the stream which Pedro had sketched in his painting of the landlord's house. They made their little fields and gardens abundant in water and added vineyards which rose higher and higher, almost as high as the red mountains, but in green. They extended their painted fields so much that they soon came close to the landlord's house.

And now, instead of singing flamencos, the peasants sat on Sundays before their houses and painted. Even those who could not write thus gave expression in paint to their desires on this earth. Fernando the teacher, who sometimes strolled in the evening through the village streets, would correct here and there an uneven line by one of the artists. He also showed them how to use watercolors.

Then one evening a peasant said: "Yes, we're really painting our fields too big; the land no longer belongs to us."

Pedro's older brother sketched a white rectangle with spires and made it quite small next to the many-colored fields and blue canals. But no one yet said aloud to whom the great fields really belonged and what kind of a house that white rectangle with the ornamental spires

was.

It seized them like a wild wind from the fields. Almost everyone painted; and if it was not a father, then it was his sons and small daughters who painted the white rectangle with spires as well as they could. Some painted the Egyptian plagues, and huge grasshoppers rained down over the little white rectangle with spires. The rectangle remained unchanged, as little Pedro had first drawn it. Some painted the Flood like a mighty blue pinion which started in one corner of the paper and moved down to the other where stood a small white rectangle with spires, tottering and wavelike. And there was a second picture, "After the Flood," in which green plots of ground with houses and fruit orchards rose up. One who could also write drew an inscription on the green plots of land: "Fields of the peasants of Cueva, the village is swimming far behind."

After two months the supply of drawing crayons and paper was exhausted, so the teacher went into the city to get new materials. The proprietor of the stationery store told Fernando that he did not have so many supplies in stock, and asked him what he was doing with so much paper and so many crayons. Fernando replied that he was only the teacher of the village of Cueva, and that his pupils and several of the peasants were now actively painting.

"And what do they paint all the time?"

"They paint water, always water, so much water that it almost drowns out the landlord's house," smiled Fernando.

But the merchant did not smile. He remarked that that was very serious, but Fernando did not agree with him.

In the evening at the tavern the tradesman told the mayor and the doctor of the town, and they all shook their heads. They had never bothered with the village of Cueva because none of the peasants there had ever brought

them any money. But now times were uncertain in the country, they said, and even churches and monasteries had been burned. The monks had long since been driven from the district of Cueva, and undoubtedly the peasants no longer went to church; and now this young and worldly teacher. The authorities should really begin to pay attention to the village now that insubordination was so rife among the people. On Sunday they even voiced their opinions to the priest.

And that Sunday the peasants of Cueva sat before their houses, and Pedro's older brother sang a flamenco with a new text. He sang: "Oh wonderful white paper, you are getting fruits and fields! Oh wonderful little white paper, the water flows blue on you and the vineyards grow. Little white paper, you will be bigger than the house with the spires facing the red mountains!"

The peasants were silent a moment after the song had ended. Then they cried loudly: "Ole, ole, ole!" They clapped their hands and sang: "Little white paper, oh wonderful white paper."

The following week a priest visited the schoolhouse and inspected the children's paintings on the walls. He wrung his hands and hastened back to the city.

The next Sunday there came four men of the Guardia Civil. It was about noon. They had revolvers and swords in their belts. They strode through the village streets until they came to the schoolhouse, which was closed. They knocked. The young teacher looked out of the window. What did they want? Just let him open the door, he'd see soon enough! He opened the schoolroom. The many pictures of the children and grown-ups hung roundabout on large thick nails.

"Who has painted these pictures?"

"The children," answered the teacher.

Didn't he know that the pictures were subversive? And they placed handcuffs on him. Two of them began to tear the pictures down from the walls. The children came running to the schoolhouse. They pressed themselves against the classroom door. Suddenly little Pedro sprang forward and cried "Leave our pictures alone!" And he grasped the gendarme by the arm to stop him. When the man tried to shake him off, Pedro bit hard into his arm.

"Now will you!" the gendarme roared.

A gust of wind blew into the schoolroom and drove the pile of pictures into the street. The children watched with eyes wide open. Now the men of the village stood behind them; they too stood silent, their eyes staring.

Meanwhile the soldier had hurled the child from him with a powerful blow. The small body fairly flew across the room and lay on the threshold, stunned by the impact of his fall. His head hung down, his eyes were closed.

"That is my son," said Pedro's father, taking a step toward the child.

"And so much the worse for you," shouted the soldier, "for his is the son of a dog!" Provoked by the silence of the children and the men, he kicked the senseless child from the threshold.

At that Pedro's father clenched his fist and held it ready for a blow. But the gendarme drew his saber and made as if to strike the peasant over the head. Perhaps he meant to use only the flat side. Pedro's father tried with his other hand to ward off the upstretched arm, but the blade turned and fell downward, slashing him right across the face. Blood spurted forth and gushed on his new sandals. He staggered toward his son. The gendarme, still more infuriated, pointed to the red drops in the sand. "There you have colors to paint with!" Then all four of the Guardia Civil turned to go, dragging the handcuffed teacher after them. A



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cry arose from the crowd of peasants. But the four men soon disappeared around a bend of the village street.

Perhaps it was this cry, a long echo, grown audible, of the drops of blood in the sand. All of them suddenly had the oppressive feeling that they had been robbed, and that still more would be stolen from them. So they went swiftly home, and those who had paintings took them from their walls and hid them in the darkest corners of their closets.

Early next morning a party of horsemen drew near the village. A few children, seeing the glint of harnesses in the sun, ran into the fields to tell their fathers. The peasants dropped their implements at once and ran back with their children. The vanguard of the riders had already entered the village. They rode on beautiful white horses that shimmered even more brightly than the little white houses. Then they shouted to the men and women that they must hand over those accursed pictures or else they would soon see what would befall them. And they set about searching the bedding and the few pieces of furniture, smashing them to

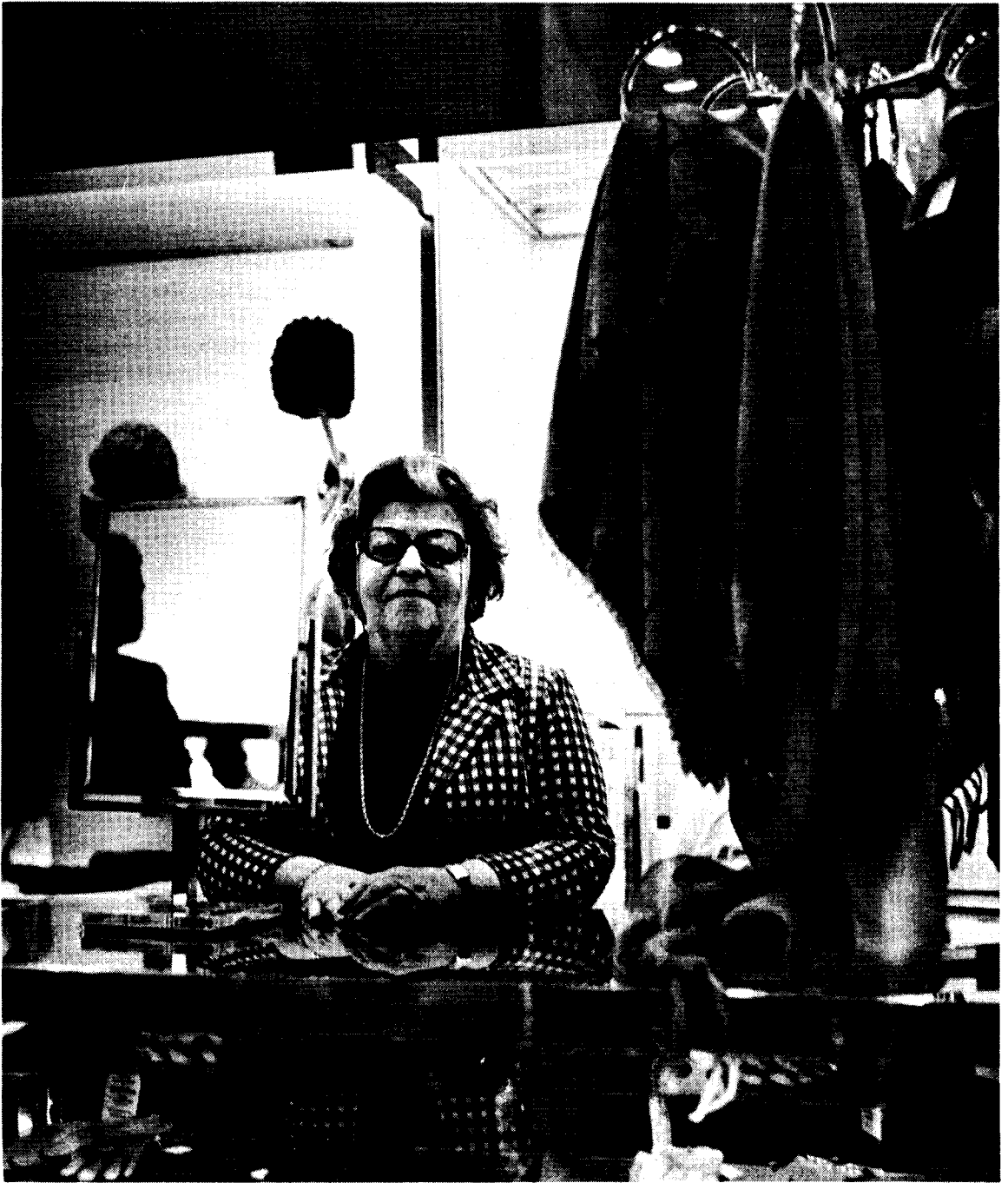
bits. The men stood silently by, but when a soldier found a picture, they would unfold their arms and leap furiously at him.

That lasted about an hour. When the soldiers left the village, they dragged behind them ten peasants in chains.

In the afternoon three dead men lay outstretched on the square before the schoolhouse. Among them was Pedro's father. The black-clad women stood at the foot of the biers staring into the faces of the dead. Then Pedro's mother and another woman stepped forth and loosed something from the stiff hands of the corpses. They were fragments of the torn pictures. They smoothed them with loving care and brought them home. Then they again hid the bits of paper in the darkest corners of their closets.

From *Story Magazine*, March-April 1943  
New York

*This story is reprinted with permission of Alvah Bessie from Heart of Spain.*



*Photo by Phyllis Ewen*

# **“THE CLERKING SISTERHOOD”**

## **Rationalization and the Work Culture of Saleswomen in American Department Stores, 1890-1960**

Susan Porter Benson

The work of recent historians has made it clear that work culture is an important key to understanding the lives of past generations of workers. By work culture I mean the ideology and practice with which workers stake out a relatively autonomous sphere of action on the job, a realm of informal, customary values and rules which mediates the formal authority structure of the workplace and distances workers from its impact. David Montgomery and Harry Braverman, in particular, have shown us the power and importance of the work culture that united conception and execution in the hands of skilled male workers in the nineteenth century. The tales they tell, however, are those of decline, despite Montgomery's vivid evocation of workers' struggles to preserve their traditional control over production. In the end, the effect of scientific management on these workers was decisive: skill was undermined, the work degraded, the control of the informal work group over the work process and the social relations of the workplace inexorably eroded.

The history of women's paid labor and of the work culture growing out of it is somewhat different. My research on the work of saleswomen in American department stores from 1890 to 1960 suggests that, at least in this major women's occupation, the effect of changes in management practice over the twentieth century was, ironically, to increase the level of workers' skill and thus inadvertently to permit the development of a powerful and enduring work culture. There are critical differences between women's work and the men's craft work which is the central concern of Montgomery and Braverman. First, for most women in the paid labor force at the turn of the century, work was so poorly paid and so brutally demanding of mind and body that it would be difficult to conceive of its further

degradation. This is as true of women's white collar work as of women's factory work; women were never career clerks like Bartleby the Scrivener or fledgling entrepreneurs like R.H. Macy, but entered office and sales work only as they were becoming proletarianized. In the case of women's occupations, therefore, the story is not one of unrelieved degradation of the work process. Second, the study of women's work shows that craft skill was not the only basis of an effective work culture. The informal work group which thrived among saleswomen was grounded in the social relations of the selling floor. It was, in fact, exactly because new management practices in the department store industry altered these social relations only minimally that they failed to undermine the position of the informal work group and the strong influence of work culture over worker behavior.

As defined by the Census Bureau, a department store must sell a wide assortment of home furnishings as well as clothing and related items, but for my purposes this definition is too narrow. I include in the category "department store" those stores which saw themselves as part of the department store industry and which behaved like true department stores in their internal organization and policies. My arguments would therefore apply to specialty stores which carried only apparel, such as Filene's in Boston, as well as to chains such as Sears, Roebuck, which are outgrowths of mail order houses. Even by the Census Bureau's limited definition, however, the department store has had since 1929, when figures were first compiled, a larger share of total retail sales than any other detailed classification except grocery stores, auto dealers, and gasoline dealers.

Department stores have historically been major employers of women; since 1900, the job

of saleswoman has ranked among the top ten women's occupations. The proportion of women in the department store workforce seems to have stayed fairly stable at around two-thirds since the early twentieth century. Most of these women have been in selling positions, with clerks making up from just under half to ninety per cent of the total store force, depending upon the level of extra services provided by the store. The experience of the non-selling workers had far more in common with production workers in manufacturing industries than with clerks, and so I have omitted it here. Saleswomen have not only been important numerically, but have played a central economic role as well. As Braverman notes, a key aspect of management is marketing, or the production of customers; in this process, salespeople are basic production workers, and the only ones who have close and frequent contact with the customers.

Work culture is constrained but not determined by management practices; the two are constantly in struggle and cannot be understood separately. I focus below on some large continuities in the department store industry's development, minimizing short-term changes and fluctuations in order to suggest an overall conceptual framework. Probably the single most important factor in understanding large-scale retailing both as an industry and as an employer is the split consciousness of retail managers. On the one hand, they have been businessmen pure and simple, seeking to maximize profits by reducing costs. On the other, they have thought of themselves as purveyors of a service, managers of social institutions which sold not just merchandise but also style, respectability, and urbanity — things not strictly accountable in dollar terms, but which were of course expected to pay off in a general way.

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In the early twentieth century, department store managers improved their physical plant, ameliorated basic working conditions, and centralized control in much the same way as the factory managers described by Daniel Nelson in his admirable book *Managers and Workers*.<sup>3</sup> What he calls "the new factory system" appeared in the factory between 1880 and 1920, and about a decade later in the large store. The department store management strategies which emerged during these years would be elaborated and spread more widely in the next thirty years, but not fundamentally changed.

First of all, department stores grew impressively. By 1898, for example, Macy's had 3,000 employees, making it comparable in size to such manufacturing giants as the Merrimack cotton mills in Lowell, the Waltham Watch Company, and Carnegie Steel's J. Edgar Thompson Plant, as well as larger than the towns in which sixty per cent of Americans then lived. Although most stores were far smaller, the change in scale from the early nineteenth century's typical small, highly specialized shop to the department store was enormous. Retailers preceded factory managers in coping with the problems of scale; as early as 1905, for instance, department stores had widely adopted a functional structure which major manufacturing firms were only beginning to adopt by the 1920's.<sup>4</sup> This four-part functional organization consisting of merchandise, service or store management, publicity, and control or accounting divisions was the rule in department stores until after World War II.

Selling work in the turn-of-the-century department store had much in common with both sweated and machine-tending modes of manufacturing. Elements of the sweatshop in the department store included squalid surroundings, minimal sanitary facilities, unlimited hours, and mandatory unpaid over-

time. From another point of view, clerks in most large stores were taught to regard their counters as machines to be tended but not controlled; they were expected to wait passively for customers, politely give them what they asked for, and send the merchandise to the wrapper and the payment to the cashier. Their work was defined negatively: they should not violate store rules or commit blunders of etiquette.

Department store sales work changed not just as part of a general change in business climate and in accepted managerial wisdom, but also as a response to two problems specific to department stores. First was the bad publicity given to department store working conditions by the Consumers' Leagues after 1890. Department stores were peculiarly vulnerable to public observation of their labor policies. The contrast between the work lives of their employees and the atmosphere of gentility and even luxury which they tried to convey to their customers was telling indeed. Worst of all, the reformers came from the same upper income strata as the stores' most valued customers. As one magazine writer put it, "The public resents the worn out, famished type of clerk and its feelings are hurt by seeing women faint behind the counter."<sup>5</sup>

The second factor was the lagging productivity of the distribution sector of the economy compared to the production sector. While the output per person-hour in production increased two and a half times between 1899 and 1929, output per person-hour in distribution increased only one and a half times in the same period. Within a given store, the figures were sometimes even more discouraging to managers: for example, at Macy's the average yearly sales per employee doubled between 1870 and 1938, while the average weekly salary quadrupled.

Department store managers met the challenge of public relations and productivity with the full range of measures used by their counterparts in manufacturing, but with somewhat different results. Nelson has classified the elements of the new factory system into "three interrelated dynamics — the technological, the managerial, and the personnel;" of these, the technological was by far the least important in the department store. Basic urban technology such as electric lighting, elevators, and improved ventilation helped to make the store a cleaner and more pleasant workplace, but did not affect the sales transaction. Well-designed display cases and clothes racks, when substituted for the old practice of storing goods in huge piles, made it easier for the salesperson to show goods to the customer, but left the social interaction of the sale unchanged.

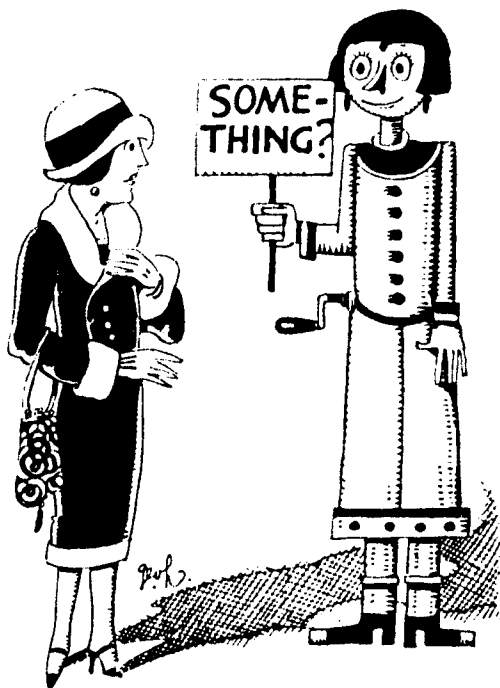
The managerial dynamic in the department store took much the same form as it did in the factory. After the depression of the early 1920's, the merchandise division, traditionally the foremost among the store's four divisions, found its territory invaded and colonized by the other divisions, in large policy matters as well as in day-to-day operations. The controller, armed with sophisticated new accounting procedures, exerted a degree of financial surveillance over the merchandise division which had earlier been impossible. Second, with the development of advertising and the consumption economy of the twenties, retailers redefined their economic role: it was now "to act as purchasing agent for the consumer, rather than as sales agent for the manufacturer."<sup>6</sup> In this new atmosphere, the merchandising division's traditional close relationships with manufacturers and wholesalers took a back seat to the judgment of the publicity division and its prophet, the fashion stylist. Third, this new active type of selling demanded

salespeople who were more carefully selected and trained, functions which were assigned to newly created personnel departments.

From the perspective of the individual selling departments, these changes meant the diminution of the power of the buyers and floorwalkers, whose jobs changed in much the same way as that of the factory foreman. Buyers had traditionally been *prima donnas*, running their departments with intuition and high-handedness; the new buyer was hedged in on all sides by financial, style, and personnel requirements imposed by the other three divisions. Similarly the new floorwalker was no longer the suave host to the customer and the tyrannical disciplinarian of the sales force; at best, his job was downgraded, and at worst his tasks were split up among lesser employees. The net effect of these changes in the authority structure of the selling floor was to limit broad discretion on the part of the salesperson's immediate supervisors; authority moved up the hierarchy.

Finally, the personnel dynamic led to the gradual centralization and standardization of hiring, training, and employee service functions under the aegis of a single department. Beginning around 1890, department stores undertook extensive employee welfare activities, frequently outdoing factories in providing lavish dining, recreation, and health facilities, elaborate social programs, and even vacation retreats. By the twenties, the welfare departments were being transformed into personnel departments which took over the old programs and combined them with the newest techniques of employee recruiting, testing, and training.

These innovations, whether technological, managerial, or personnel, failed to change fundamentally the basic tasks of the salesperson, as they did the work of most factory employees. In 1960 as in 1910, sales work was



*Don't Be an Automaton*

made up of the same combination of waiting on customers and attending to stock. In fact, while most manufacturers wanted to dilute skills and to produce a new category of "semi-skilled" workers, retailers strove to upgrade an unskilled workforce into a skilled one. They sought to inculcate not the skill of the nineteenth-century machinist, or of the hand craftsman, but rather a new twentieth-century form of skill: skill in complex social interaction, skill in manipulating people rather than objects, a skill which would be taught by management rather than one that grew out of the workers' own grasp of the work process. An insistence on the centrality of selling skill is the dominant theme of retail management literature from the time of World War I to 1960.

The emphasis on selling skill grew partly out of retailers' ideal of service to the public, and partly out of the resistance of retailing to standardization and control in two major ways. First was the fluctuation of volume in the store's work pace; the flow of customers varied from department to department, season to season, day to day, hour to hour. Equally unpredictable were customers as individuals: their wants, moods, and personalities varied in infinite combinations and made each transaction a unique situation. Management's best efforts to standardize conditions on the selling floor availed little, and it remained a highly unpredictable and largely uncontrollable environment in which the salesperson was expected to make the most of every opportunity to sell.

Department store managers resisted the alternatives to skilled selling which other branches of retailing devised; they were never wholly satisfied with allowing customers to be pre-sold by advertising or to sell themselves in self-service departments. These methods were part of the department store arsenal of selling tactics, but only preliminary steps in a strategy of skilled selling. On the one hand, personal selling (as it came to be called) differentiated department stores from their crasser competitors, giving customers a reason to shop at Gimbel's rather than at J.C. Penney's; on the other hand, the department store's high proportion of fixed costs for such expensive services as parcel delivery meant that the payoff for sales efforts to boost the size of each transaction was high. In one department, for example, an 80% increase in the size of a sales transaction meant a 600% increase in the net profit.

Everything, then, converged on selling skill: the nature of the work, the managers' image of themselves, and the financial structure of the

business. It was, however, difficult to define and transmit this skill. Was selling an art? A science? Was it inborn? Learned? Managers' definitions of it varied as much as conditions on the selling floor, in large part because of the contradictions surrounding the work of selling in store life.

The first contradiction in fostering selling skill was the contrast of bosses' high verbal valuation of sales work with their own avoidance of the selling floor and the low social status of the work. The retail literature constantly urged executives to spend more time on the selling floor, teaching by example and proving that management regarded selling with respect, yet department store managers were notorious for fleeing to their offices. Their behavior reflected not only their own sense of store hierarchy but also the generally bad image of sales work. Most saleswomen could console themselves only with their marginal prestige as white-collar workers and some minimal reflected prestige from their association with wealthy customers and luxurious goods, for the physical strains, psychological demands, hours, and pay of their work did not compare very favorably with factory and clerical work. Moreover, sales work had a number of similarities with domestic service, an increasingly unpopular occupation. John Wanamaker's classic statement that the customer was always right subjected generations of saleswomen to the idea of unquestioning obedience to customers' whims. Dress codes set uniform-like limits on what saleswomen might wear. And, finally, saleswomen found distasteful the personal services, such as helping customers try on clothes, which they had to perform.

The second major contradiction in skilled selling was between store managers' belief that they should and must teach it to their workers, and their actual unwillingness or inability to do

so. When training became a formal store activity with the establishment of Filene's training department in 1902, it was negative, remedial, and mechanical, focusing on eliminating errors in paperwork and procedure. Conceptions of training subsequently broadened to include sales techniques, merchandise and fashion information, and general education, but the 1942 lament of a saleswoman was sadly true: "The average salesperson does not respect her job because management too often doesn't seem to care as long as her book [sales tally] is passable and she doesn't make too many errors in her transactions."

The problem was that selling skill was learned not in the store classroom but rather in experience with merchandise and customers on the selling floor. Managers recognized this, and a Macy's program to collect and codify salespeople's "selling secrets" into a booklet entitled "20,000 Years in Macy's" was typical of their efforts to take over shop-floor knowledge. It should be emphasized that training difficulties were not due to resistance by salespeople; one survey showed them eager for substantive training (in merchandise training and techniques of selling and display) but uninterested in classes on trivia such as personal grooming. Sometimes, salespeople did balk at training, but small wonder when they were required to chant in unison "Personal service means showing interest" when an instructor held up a cutout of "a cheerful smile."

The final contradiction in the upgrading of selling grew out of the fact that any but the most perfunctory sales transaction depended for its success on rapport between people of different classes. In most large department stores, the counter was a social as well as a physical barrier. On the selling side were women of the working classes; middle class women with a choice shunned the low status



and difficult conditions of store work. On the buying side were women of the middle and upper classes; as late as 1950, the department store clientele included twice as high a proportion of upper income people as the population as a whole. One observer sympathetically reported on the resulting tensions:

"It seems," a salesgirl said to me, "as though all the women who have servants they dare not speak to, or a husband who abuses them, take special delight in asserting their independence when they come to buy from us girls, who must say 'Yes ma'am' and 'Thank you' in the sweetest possible way."

Often, within the hearing of sales people, a woman will make to the friend accompanying her some such remark as this: "I wouldn't buy that if I were you; only the shop girls are wearing them."

It is common for customers to show, at least by their manner, that they consider the sales people beneath them.\*

Managers persistently tried to ease this conflict by giving their employees a veneer of bourgeois culture; most of their efforts were absurd and superficial, such as requiring saleswomen to memorize a few French words and the names of chic Parisian streets, but a few spoke hopefully of remaking saleswomen's "inner consciousness" with "a cultural background which would enable [them] to talk easily, informedly, about the qualities of [their] merchandise... in such a way as to express its esthetic values as well as its use values."<sup>10</sup> Such programs generally backfired; saleswomen bungled (often, I suspect, intentionally) the minutiae, snubbed and therefore offended customers if they took the training too seriously, and for the most part simply continued to judge their customers' needs and means by their own class values.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WORK CULTURE

While managers, caught in these contradictions, were unable to control skilled selling behavior, the saleswomen themselves were

developing a strong work culture and durable informal work groups. Conditions on the selling floor encouraged worker autonomy. Saleswomen spent only a small part of their time — some estimated as little as one-third — with customers and so had many opportunities to socialize with one another, enhanced by their relative freedom to move about their departments. Moreover, it was difficult to supervise a salesclerk closely. A supervisor who meddled during a sale risked annoying both clerk and customer and thus sabotaging the sale. The saleswomen's duties while not actually serving customers were often indistinguishable from the activities of the informal work group; a gathering of clerks might be discussing new stock, but then again they might simply be gossiping, and the lines between the two were never clear. Finally, unlike production workers who could only play production off against the bosses, saleswomen could play a complex three-way game, manipulating managers, customers, and merchandise to their own advantage.

Despite wide variations in time, place, and type of store, the basic features of the work culture of selling are clear. Sources discussing highly diverse situations from very different points of view reveal quite similar practices and standards. I do not mean to suggest that all saleswomen everywhere shared an identical work culture, but rather that the situation on the selling floor evoked analogous reactions among workers in different departments. What I am outlining is the range of variation of the work group's rules and tactics; every department devised its own individual subculture within the parameters of the work culture of selling in general.

The foundation of the informal work group was some degree of departmental solidarity. Departments were not only the administrative and accounting units of the store, but were

social units as well. The selling departments of a large store were far more independent from one another than the production departments of factories, and were unlinked by any sequential processes. Moreover, personnel managers staffed departments selectively: young, attractive women were hired for the first-floor departments, motherly types for the children's clothing departments, glamorous women to sell high-fashion clothing, heavy women to fit their half-size sisters. There was an unofficial hierarchy of departments in the store, and solidarity frequently developed around a given department's place in it. The custodians of the fine linens regarded their stock, and therefore themselves, as a cut above the rest of the store in elegance; the women in one chaotic bargain basement refused transfers to upstairs departments because they preferred the liveliness and bustle of the basement. The physical and functional differences between departments, therefore, became social barriers as well, contributing to the power of the informal work group by emphasizing the uniqueness of the department.

Social interaction on the selling floor was friendly and supportive. The tendency of saleswomen to "huddle" or "congregate" on the floor was the aspect of their behavior most frequently remarked by managers and customers alike. Bosses constantly complained of high spirits and boisterous sociability in the departments, and did their unsuccessful best to stamp out loud laughing, talking, singing, and horseplay. Saleswomen in the more solitary departments shared stockwork and paperwork even when it was assigned to individuals, and reinforced day-to-day contact with parties, both on the job and after hours. They integrated the rituals of women's culture into their work culture; showers and parties to commemorate engagements, marriages, and

births (women in Boston stores who left to be married were sent off with a shower of confetti) are reported in employee newspapers by the score. Not all departments were this close, this intensely friendly, but it is significant that even when managers note that a department is quarrelsome and divided, they almost always marvel that it still unites in self-defense against outside threats.



The practices of the informal work group continually reinforced departmental solidarity. Work culture provided, first of all, an initiation process whereby new members were received, taught the ropes, and kept in line until they showed themselves willing to go along with the group. The initiation was not always a friendly one; new, part-time, and temporary clerks complained long and loud about mistreatment by regulars. Second, work culture supplied a common language with which saleswomen could discuss their world. Clerks had terms for types of selling behavior as well as for varieties of customers. A "crepe-hanger," for instance, was a salesperson who ruined a sale by talking a customer out of something she had resolved to

buy; a saleswoman who called "Oh, Henrietta," while waiting on a customer was alerting her co-workers to the fact that the customer was a "hen," or a difficult type. Third, work culture imposed sanctions on those who violated the group rules: penalties included messing up a transgressor's assigned section of stock, bumping into an offender or banging her shins with drawers, public ridicule and humiliation, and complete ostracism, which sometimes drove people to leave the department. If the informal work group demanded loyalty, it repaid it with protection: it insulated the individual worker from the demands of bosses and customers alike.

Saleswomen had an ingenious variety of tactics for manipulating managers, customers, and merchandise to their own advantage. The first element, management, was well aware that saleswomen's highjinks were not just a way to blow off steam, but were evidence of an underlying unity. Bosses understood that the selling floor was the turf of the clerks, that it had its own elaborate rules and social system which were distinct from and often in conflict with the store's formal structure. They tried sporadically to suppress the more disruptive outbursts of the informal work group but in general they treated it with a wary respect and at least partially yielded control of the floor to it. They relied on the "clerking sisterhood" to maintain good order and high morale; they cautioned new workers to tread lightly until they learned the customs of the department; they even tried to coopt and institutionalize the informal initiation process by designating one saleswoman an official sponsor of new clerks. Saleswomen were astute observers of their superiors, punishing the bad and rewarding the good. A boss who gave offense received the cold shoulder or petty harassment in return; the ultimate penalty was to embarrass a buyer or



floor manager in front of his or her superiors. A boss deemed worthy of respect could count on the saleswomen's backing when it counted, particularly against upper management.

Management directives frequently emerged from the crucible of work culture in quite altered form. Saleswomen reorganized cumbersome paperwork routines to fit their own convenience, and sometimes completely thwarted their purposes: in one department, they effectively short-circuited a management scheme for subtracting returned purchases from individuals' sales totals. Clerks refused to take on extra duties which would eat into their "spare time", and when they felt threatened by new practices, such as self-service, they fought back by doing sloppy or eccentric stock work on the new displays. Concerted action could bend rules quite sharply: the eight women in one especially well-unified women's shoe department unilaterally lengthened the lunch hour from 45 minutes to a full hour and compounded the insult by wearing huge hoop earrings forbidden by the store's dress code. A helpless management acquiesced. The informal

work group also covered up for a certain amount of theft of merchandise and materials; managers warned one another worriedly that a department infected with the virus of thievery was a serious threat indeed.

The most important and effective way in which work culture worked against the interests of the bosses, however, was in restricting output and limiting intradepartmental competition. Each department had a concept of the total sales that constituted a good day's work. Saleswomen used various tactics to keep their "books" (sales tallies) within acceptable limits: running unusually low books would imperil a worker's status with management just as extraordinarily high books would put her in the bad graces of her peers. Individual clerks would avoid customers late in the day when their books were running high, or call other clerks to help them. Saleswomen managed to approximate the informal quota with impressive regularity, ironing out the fluctuations in customers' buying habits in ways the managers had never dreamed of. They adjusted the number of transactions they completed to compensate for the size of the purchases; if they made a few large sales early in the day, they might then retire to do stockwork. During the slow summer season or during inclement weather, they were more aggressive with the smaller volume of customers; at peak seasons, they ignored customers who might put them over their quota.

Department store managers attacked the workers' stint with a bewildering variety of commission, commission-plus-salary, and quota-bonus payment schemes beginning in the years just before World War I, but monetary incentives to break worker solidarity were no more effective with saleswomen than with skilled craftsmen. The definitive industry study of these plans concluded, not surprisingly, that

no pay scheme could increase sales output, but that sales levels were linked to the overall atmosphere of the workplace. Bosses reported similar failure with competitive devices such as sales contests, even when they offered cash prizes, although they occasionally reported successes with group, as opposed to individual, incentive schemes. As universally as managers complained about restriction of output, nowhere did a boss testify to the successful elimination of the practice, even in the most insecure days of the depression.

The strongest epithet in the saleswoman's vocabulary — "grabber" — applied to those unwary clerks who ran excessively high books. The grabber seized on customers out of turn, sometimes two and three at a time; she shirked stockwork and paperwork; she gave the department a bad name for offensive overselling. The fear of grabbing accounts in large part for the rigors of the departmental initiation process. Ignorant of the amount of the informal quota, and perhaps even of its very existence, outsiders — new, part-time, or temporary clerks — required stern socialization. In some departments, newcomers were effectively prohibited from making any sales at all for the first few days; part-time and temporary clerks were exiled to the duller corners of the department. The retaliatory power of the informal work group was amply demonstrated in one children's wear department when the management made the mistake of firing a popular though unproductive saleswoman and immediately replacing her with a new employee. The new clerk, experienced in the ways of saleswomen's work culture and sensible of the hazards of her position, tried eagerly to learn how the department defined a "good book," but her co-workers kept the information from her and thus excluded her from the work group.

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Customers were the most strainful and least constant factors in saleswomen's work lives, barraging them with a kaleidoscopic succession of demands, moods, and quirks and constantly coming in for special treatment by the informal work group. While management ingenuously maintained the fiction that all customers could expect equal service, saleswomen picked and chose among their customers and served them with widely varying degrees of interest and efficiency. As one clerk, clearly near the end of her rope, put it, "All customers are crackpots!"; her co-worker, more relaxed but still wary, grimly affirmed, "I like a counter between me and the customer."<sup>11</sup> The customer was not an unambiguous enemy, for under the right conditions she might become the saleswomen's ally against management, but she was always a potential threat.

A theme that appears in management literature almost as frequently as "huddling" is that saleswomen, even those on commission, used a variety of tactics to avoid waiting on customers. Methods ranged from the subtle (pretending not to notice customers while engaged in stockwork or in conversations with fellow workers) to the blatant (disappearing on sudden errands) to the outright rude (explicit refusals to show merchandise). The work culture allocated customers among saleswomen in ways that included rough rotation as well as reserving certain types of customers for certain clerks; to violate this order was to risk being labelled a grabber. But there was a larger message to management and to the public in this behavior: the saleswoman was taking her clients on her terms and not theirs; while they might have a superior class position, she had the upper hand through her control of the merchandise. Hence, two important subthemes in management's laments about clerks' indifference to customers: first, they displayed goods

reluctantly and usually only on direct request; second, they often addressed customers with unbecoming familiarity — the term that made bosses especially apoplectic was "dearie."

A customer whose only sin was to appear in the department when saleswomen were not prepared to greet her met with indifference, but far worse awaited the customer who committed a more active offense against the "clerking sisterhood." If a customer appeared to a saleswoman's practiced eye to be a looker, she might be harassed or treated rudely; if she asked for something that was out of stock, she might be told scathingly that no one wanted *those* anymore; if she was too slow in making up her mind, she might find a number of clerks ganging up on her to force a choice. Saleswomen discussed the worst customers loudly within earshot of other customers, an unsubtle warning to those who might dare to cross them.

Customers could be allies, however. A saleswoman who took a liking to a customer and sincerely tried to please her might be genuinely upset if she failed. In order to smooth rough transactions, saleswomen had a number of tactics with which they could secure the good will of the customer, often causing store management extra trouble and expense in the process. Clerks could suggest the delivery of small parcels to close a sale quickly, or suggest that a tediously undecided customer send home a selection of merchandise to reflect on at leisure. Dry goods clerks generously over-measured yardage while their pleased customers looked on. To quiet customers' doubts, saleswomen would make wild guarantees or outrightly misrepresent merchandise; they also encouraged customers to place costly special orders instead of trying to talk them into something in stock.

Saleswomen often built up clienteles of frequent customers, keeping files of their

addresses and purchases with their employer's encouragement. On the one hand, close clerk-customer relations could encourage extra purchases, but on the other saleswomen gave their clientele special treatment that was contrary to managers' interests — for example, they withheld items from display until markdowns could be taken on them, and then alerted favorite customers. Moreover, it was not uncommon for saleswomen to concentrate so exclusively on "their" customers that they completely ignored new or unknown customers.

Just as saleswomen would not wait on all customers equally, so they would not sell all goods with equal energy. Saleswomen developed legendary instincts for good sellers; as one retailer put it, they could "spot a lemon quicker than a Mediterranean fruit fly."<sup>12</sup> It was an unwritten rule that buyers should heed their judgments, a rule which saleswomen enforced ruthlessly. In one toy department saleswomen refused to sell stuffed toys that they had pronounced too low in quality, labelling them "drug-store Easter bunnies."<sup>13</sup> Frequently, saleswomen took a real proprietary interest in their merchandise, occupying themselves with stockwork and displays to the practical exclusion of selling. They eagerly showed fresh and interesting goods, consigning older or worn items to bottom drawers where they awaited profit-eating markdowns. Managers were sometimes able to introduce new items only with great difficulty. Domestic saleswomen were so impressed with the virtues of all-wool and Irish linen goods that they strongly resisted the introduction of synthetic fibers after World War II; buyers reported that clerks undid the advertising efforts of stores and manufacturers with their "silent scorn" for the new materials.<sup>14</sup>

Investigators who were dismayed at this lack of interest with which saleswomen presented goods and the noncommittal or even inaccurate answers which they gave to questions were even more appalled when they discovered that these same saleswomen were extremely knowledgeable about their wares. One notably silent saleswoman, for example, was so intrigued to know more about her stock that she eavesdropped on a manufacturer's representative. There was no doubt that the training in merchandise information was conveying the message to the clerk; the problem was in convincing her to pass it on to the customer. In general, clerks persisted in selling what they themselves preferred, if they made special efforts to sell anything at all. A woman who tried to buy service-weight stockings from a clerk enamored with sheer silk hose would be treated insultingly; a customer contemplating a purchase, such as expensive silverware, which a saleswoman considered extravagant would be strongly discouraged.

Saleswomen not only policed the merchandise offered by the department, but also keenly observed the selling skill displayed by co-workers. A sociologist doing field work in a women's dress department observed the saleswomen "Playing Customer." They watched in total absorption as two among them acted out a sale, recreating familiar types from both sides of the counter. The skits were social glue, shared rituals in which the saleswomen re-emphasized their group solidarity against the perennial threat of the customer. They also constituted an oral tradition, passing along and elaborating the wisdom learned on the selling floor. Finally, they reinforced the department pecking order by the ways in which different members were caricatured. Other departments had other forms of selling drama; frequently, saleswomen would demonstrate their selling

skills to their co-workers by lavishing attention on "lookers" on slow days.

This recognition of selling skill suggests that the informal work group could tolerate a certain limited amount of amiable competition as long as it did not threaten the relationship of the whole group to managers and customers. Clerks could compete over favored customers, preferred selling locations, or rights to certain kinds of merchandise. Sometimes, these com-



petitive aspects could erupt into outright conflict; more often, however, it appears that the relative flexibility of the selling floor allowed individuals to stake out special roles which were then tacitly recognized by the group. Hierarchies of age, experience, ethnicity, and skills played some part in assigning these roles, but there was ample room for simple personal inclination. In one department, the turf was elaborately allocated by the informal work group, despite bosses' persistent efforts to change the arrangement; the group functioned peacefully because everyone knew her place and kept to it. The clerking sisterhood was not invariably one big happy family, although it

often was; but whatever the internal discord, it was clearly saleswomen's work culture and not managers' conceptions of selling skill which determined their conduct.

## CONCLUSION

The outline of the development of the work of American department store saleswomen from 1890 to 1960 suggests some factors which we should bear in mind in studying the history of women's work. We must, first of all, rethink our definitions of skill. Whether in store, office, or factory, most women's work has been regarded as unskilled, but we should find new ways to conceptualize work which reflect its real nature and are not bound by traditional male-oriented notions of skill. Second, we should be alert to the fact that a linear degradation of work was not the invariable fate of the woman worker. It is critical to understand the impact of the whole process of rationalization: the limits of the application of scientific management, its differential effects on men and women, and the importance of other types of management reform, particularly personnel work and human relations. In many occupations, the impact of a more wholesome work environment may have been greater than that of Taylorism, and in some occupations managers actually sought, at least for a time, to upgrade employees' skills. Finally, we must investigate the ways in which work culture and the informal work group limited management's freedom of action and provided a measure of workplace autonomy for workers. The work culture of women workers is particularly ill-understood, but sales work provides an example of an enduring work group in the face of rapid turnover, a high incidence of part-time and temporary work, and women's supposed primary identification with home and family rather than with paid work. The prospects for

the future are mixed; innovations in data processing and the pressure of discount-store competition may well have undermined the conditions favoring the work culture of saleswomen, and increasing numbers of workers are seeking the formal protections of a union in addition to those of the informal work group, but the practices which I have described here are hardly a thing of the past.

## SOURCES

I wish to thank Edward Benson, Ann Bookman, Roslyn Feldberg, Maurine Greenwald, Barbara Melosh, and Susan Reverby for helpful and supportive criticisms on earlier versions of this paper.

Because of space limitations, I have only annotated direct quotations and sources that do not apply to department stores below. Full citations may be obtained by sending a stamped envelope to *Radical America*.

The sources I have used for this paper fall into five categories:

1. Management literature: *System* and its successor, *Business Week*; the *Bulletin* (later titled *Stores*) and other publications of the National Retail Dry Goods Association, the major department store trade association; the *Dry Goods Economist*, later the *Department Store Economist*; the *Journal of Retailing*; and a variety of retailing handbooks and training manuals. This material is useful principally in learning about managers' ideas and practices, but it is also possible to deduce a great deal about workers' behavior from management's complaints about them.
2. Store histories: although all are management-oriented, and some nothing more than long advertisements, they provide some useful information. The best are: Mary LaDame, *The Filene Store: A Study of Employees' Relation to Management in a Retail Store* (New York, 1930); Ralph M. Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858-1919: Chapters in the Evolution of the Department Store* (Cambridge, 1943); Henry Givens Baker, *Rich's of Atlanta: The Story of a Store Since 1867* (Atlanta, 1953); Robert W. Twyman, *History of Marshall Field & Co., 1852-1906* (Philadelphia, 1954).
3. Masters' theses written by students in retailing at Simmons College and the University of Pittsburgh. Most of these take the form of case studies, based on the student's

field work in a selling department; they are especially revealing because of the students' position as present worker and future manager. Rich sources of anecdote.

4. The single most valuable source I used was a human relations study of the children's wear department at Macy's: George F.F. Lombard, *Behavior in a Selling Group: A Case Study of Interpersonal Relations in the Department Store* (Boston, 1955) and the thesis on which it is based, *Executive Policies and Employee Satisfaction: A Study of a Small Department in a Large Metropolitan Store*, D.C.S. thesis, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1941. Lombard is an extremely astute observer, and, more important, he has great respect for the people whose work lives he studied.
5. Articles from the popular press, social investigators' reports about department stores, novels, films. I have used these here only for background, but they are rich sources indeed for the study of the cultural aspects of consumption.

## NOTES

The phrase, "the clerking sisterhood" comes from Zelig Leigh, "Shopping Round," *Atlantic Monthly*, 138 (August 1926), 205.

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# FROM THE MOVEMENT

## DARE TO STRUGGLE, DARE TO INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Frank Ackerman

This is the text of a speech I gave at the 1977 convention of the New American Movement (NAM). Founded in 1971, NAM's original strategy was to present a coherent socialist politics within the anti-war movement, and to prepare for the upsurge of working-class activity expected to result from the economic crisis. As the anti-war movement subsided, and the working-class upsurge largely failed to occur, NAM floundered for a while, seeking the "perfect program" that would automatically lead people to a socialist consciousness. The splits and loss of membership in some areas in 1974-75 resulted from this period of strategic confusion.

The new strategy adopted in 1975 reoriented NAM away from the search for the perfect socialist program, and focused the organization on work in unions and existing mass movements. The implementation of the new strategy has led to a new period of organizational growth, and to the beginnings of success in many areas of mass work. In that context, my speech examines some of the problems that continued success may bring: the danger that too much critique of our former purism, and too much uncritical immersion in mass movements, could lead to reformism; and the difficult balance required to avoid reformism without avoiding realistic mass work altogether.

For more information on NAM, see the monthly magazine *Moving On* (\$5 a year), strategy papers, and theoretical Discussion Bulletins, all available from NAM, 3244 N. Clark St., Chicago, 60657 (new address).

I'm going to talk about reformism, what it is and what it means to avoid it in our mass work. I'll start by describing a chapter in one of my favorite books, *A Long View from the Left* by Al Richmond. In one of his theoretical chapters, Richmond evaluates the experience of the American Communist Party in the 1930's, and compares it to the Chinese Revolution. He presents two principles that are necessary for any serious revolutionary movement: first, the left must work in a united front, a unified mass movement fighting for immediate, non-revolutionary goals; second, the left must maintain the correct balance of unity and struggle within the united front.

In China, Richmond's example of the successful use of these principles, the Communists formed an anti-Japanese front with their former enemies, the Kuomintang. This front remained in existence until 1945 — even though the Kuomintang killed a unit of Communist troops in 1941. Mao and others criticized the CP's tactics within the front at times for placing too much emphasis on unity, at times for too much emphasis on struggle: balance had to be constantly restored when the party veered off to one side or the other.

In this country, the Communist Party was in theory following a similar policy. However, Richmond argues that the party leadership actually made one compromise after another within the CIO to preserve the unity of the Left-Center bloc, the CP's alliance with the CIO leadership. Richmond's most striking example concerns the election of the UAW president at that union's 1939 convention.

A delegation of national communist leaders, headed by Earl Browder, descended on that convention to persuade Communist delegates to support R.J. Thomas, an incompetent opportunist, for the union presidency against George Addes, a militant who was associated with the Left in internal union politics. (p. 238)

The reason was that Thomas was the candidate

of the CIO leadership. Richmond's opinion of this and similar compromises is *not* that the Left-Center bloc was a bad idea; nor even that *some* tactical compromises to preserve it were a bad idea; but rather that the party's balance of unity and struggle within the bloc had tipped, ever more lopsidedly, toward all unity and no struggle. In Richmond's words,

At each point of the CIO story there was, of course, a credible tactical argument, hinged on preservation of the Left-Center bloc, for the position taken. Viewing it all in historical perspective, however, it is difficult not to conclude that in their sum those positions represented a rape of principle by tactic. And in the end what profit was there in the shrewdness of the tactic? The question concerns more than narrow self-interest. Patently, surrender of independent positions and compromises of principle eroded Left strength and moral authority, but did not these concessions also vitiate the character of the CIO as a militant, progressive movement? The more the Left conceded, it might be said, the less it contributed to the CIO and the less it got for itself. (p. 244)

## CURRENT NAM DEBATES

How does this relate to our present debates in NAM? The first principle, the need for a united front, for the left to work in mass movements, has been the most important issue debated in NAM over the last three years. By now this principle has been quite largely accepted, a significant change in view of the new left origins of early NAM. Doubtless, isolated exceptions can still be found — members who still reject mass work when it fails to lead immediately to socialist consciousness. But for the most part, this question is no longer controversial in NAM.

On the second principle, the need for a balance between unity and struggle within mass movements, we have reached less clarity and agreement. In fact, this principle can even be obscured by the frequent repetition of the urgency of mass work — as if that were still the major point of controversy.

For example, take the familiar argument about the economic crisis of the 1970's: the crisis has meant lower profit rates for U.S. capital, and has led to ruling-class attempts to restore higher profits at the expense of the working class. Now more than ever, the argument goes, we have to unite with existing mass movements to defend the living standards and reform victories that have been won in the past, in the face of the capitalist push for cutbacks and retrenchment.

This argument is true as far as it goes. But unfortunately it doesn't go very far. Though often presented as if it could guide our political work, the economic crisis argument tells us neither *which* mass movements to work in, nor *how* to work in them. The only strategic conclusion that can be drawn from it is the undifferentiated urgency of mass work. Typically, the argument is followed by a catalogue of recommended movements or activities. But the catalogue can be rewritten according to individual speakers' preferences, since it has little logical relationship to the economic crisis argument.

I am not going to talk about which movements to work in. This is a complex question which will have partially different answers in different areas, although there will be national priorities as well. Rather, I want to talk about *how* we work in mass movements, how we maintain the balance between unity and struggle.

At a time when the left is relatively isolated from mass movements, the most likely error is sectarianism, rejecting immediate struggles because they don't have pure enough politics or lead directly to discussion of socialism. But as we move out of isolation into widespread involvement in mass movements — the transition which I believe we are rapidly, and correctly, making — the most likely error

becomes reformism, the tendency to suppress or compromise our independent positions to preserve the unity of the mass movement.

Reformism is not, except in rare cases, a matter of bad faith, misleadership, "taking the capitalist road," or anything of the sort. Much more often, it is a very understandable response to the constant pressures we all feel in doing political work — pressures to just tone it down a little bit, be a little more reasonable and compromising, wouldn't you be more effective if you were a little less difficult and radical-sounding? Anyone who is completely free of this pressure is probably not doing useful mass work.

This pressure is all the harder to resist because what is needed is not just a massive counter-pressure, but a delicate balance. Some of the compromises we are pushed toward must be made; too many compromises, as Richmond explains, add up to a serious change in strategy, even if each one seemed justifiable by itself. A long march backward as well as forward begins with a single step.

## AGAINST REFORMISM: A SOCIALIST PRESENCE

More specifically, there are two parts to the question of reformism: one about socialist presence, the other about socialist strategy. First on socialist presence, which itself has two aspects, one quite familiar and the other less so. Traditionally, the left has defined reformism as forgetting about the ultimate goal of socialism, and focusing exclusively on the existing state of popular movements. As Bernstein expressed it, "The movement is everything, the goal is nothing." The response to this aspect of reformism is straightforward: we have to maintain a public socialist presence, through schools, publications, forums, and through some (certainly not all) members being willing to

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publicize their socialist affiliations in their mass work.

This is a good start, but it is far from enough. Reformism can affect our socialist presence in another way. As well as the pressure to stop talking about our ultimate goals, there is a pressure to redefine the goals, in a way that makes them more acceptable, less threatening, more within the existing boundaries of mainstream political debate. The Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), and many editorials in *In These Times* (ITT), represent this error. DSOC and ITT both proclaim, often enough, that they are socialists; but they are so anxious to make socialism immediately acceptable to the liberal wing of the AFL-CIO leadership, left-liberal congress-people, and reform leaders in general, that they transform the vision of a socialist society into an amalgam of achievable reform proposals. And while they may have some of the right kindling piled up, they've definitely lost the flame.

The external forces pushing us in this direction are strong: If you *have* to keep talking about socialism, one can almost hear our liberal acquaintances saying, why not break it down into smaller, more practical-sounding issues? Issues like socialized medicine, public investment banks, public energy companies? Or why not talk about those sort-of-socialist countries in Western Europe?

Don't get me wrong — I think that social-democracy, Western European style, would be an improvement over the anti-social democracy this country now enjoys. But there is a world of difference between proclaiming that you are part of the Second International, as DSOC does, identifying yourself with the ruling parties of West Germany and Portugal, on the one hand, and my vision of socialism on the other hand: workers' ownership and democratic control of the means of production

and the machinery of the state; the establishment of a society that is able to eliminate class, race, sex and national oppression. I definitely favor popularizing this vision, expressing it in jargon-free, colloquial language. But there is no way that rephrasing it will bring it within the present boundaries of mainstream political debate: we have to work toward the day when we are strong enough to move those boundaries, not try to talk ourselves inside their current location.

Thus there are two aspects of reformism as it affects socialist presence: the pressure either to drop or to dilute our statement of ultimate goals. Our response must be to maintain a socialist presence, even at the cost of some effectiveness in mass work; *and* to remember that an honest description of our goals cannot be made appetizing to everyone. True, it includes some smaller morsels of social-democracy which the bourgeoisie could be forced to swallow; but it includes some larger chunks as well, which they are guaranteed to choke on.

## AGAINST REFORMISM: A SOCIALIST STRATEGY

Turning now from socialist presence to strategy, there are reformist pressures that affect the way we work in mass organizations. In particular, there are pressures to identify ourselves too closely with the present leadership of mass organizations, and with the leadership's strategies. At a time when activism is not widespread, such as the present, our involvement in reform movements often leads to personal and political ties to the leadership, rather than the rank-and-file, of the movements — for the simple reason that the rank-and-file is fairly inactive.

These ties to the leadership, or to the handful of hard-core activists, are valuable. Without any such relationships we would likely end up

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in a sectarian, isolated position within mass movements. But again, it is a question of balance: too much of a good relationship with the leadership means giving up any independent strategy; and as Richmond warns, it can mean that the mass movements end up weaker as well.

Finally, then, the core of the problem of reformism: what's wrong with the present leadership of mass organizations? When and why should we break with their strategies? I will discuss three parts of the answer.

*First*, we should support internal democracy and broadened membership participation in mass organizations, when the issue comes up. In a time of mass inactivity, small organizations become cliquish, and large organizations become bureaucratic and hierarchical. This, in turn, tends to prevent increased participation in the future. There is no sense in challenging an undemocratic organization abstractly; but when there is a progressive rank-and-file opposition, or when interested people are being driven away by the group's closed structure, it is time to push for more openness and internal democracy. The lack of democracy has reached epic levels in many unions, of course; the experience of our NAM chapter with Fair Share,\* and of Baltimore NAM with Maryland Action, suggests that this is becoming a serious problem with at least some of the new populist organizations.

*Second*, we should advocate links between different constituencies: between city workers and taxpayers, industrial workers and environmentalists, and so forth. The interest-group style of organization common to unions and reform groups often leads to a parochialism, a smugness about defending the group's traditional membership and ignoring the rest of

the world. The leadership of most groups will be thoroughly imbued with this style of operation. Here, too, there is no point in challenging the leadership abstractly; but since so many social conflicts pit one part of the working class against another, the problem of integrating different struggles is bound to arise.

*Third*, we need to look, soberly, at the small scope of existing mass movements. The percentage of the labor force that belongs to unions is actually declining. Most reform groups involve only a tiny fraction of the constituency that should be supporting them. The problem is not just that there are too few people working to build these movements, and that more are always needed — that's the one criticism which will always be acceptable to the leadership, and it is partially true. The problem is also that the leaders and staff of unions and reform groups often have very ineffective organizing strategies.

For example, in Somerville community politics there are a fair number of reform groups, and a stable network of reform leaders who keep them going. Yet, although several past elections have suggested that Somerville has a mildly pro-reform majority, the reform leadership suffers from a severe timidity about mass organizing, and repeatedly pursues a much too electoral strategy. They try to get reformers elected on a very non-political basis, simply as the more honest candidates, and then hope to introduce their reforms gradually after they are in office. (Even this strategy has failed, as the "reform" mayor became more and more interested in his own personal power, rather than in reforms. After eight years of his administration, the voters threw out him and his supporters, and brought back the old machine, in the last election.)

I am not saying this to sneak in a denunciation of electoral politics. I look forward to the

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\* See Frank Ackerman, "The Melting Snowball," *Socialist Revolution* 35.

day when the left matters to the outcome of elections, either because we run our own candidates or because of the impact we have on the positions other candidates take. But the strategy of the Somerville reform leadership attempts to rely on elections without mobilizing a mass base — all the more tragic an error since it appears that they could mobilize that base if they tried.

I suspect that the situation in Somerville is not unique; in such cases the weakness of the traditional reformers' strategies implies that we need to start friendly but separate mass organizations. Of course in other cases this is not true: a group like NOW represents the opposite extreme, an obviously important focus for political work. Few mass organizations, however, are currently as healthy as NOW. The question of when to work in existing groups, and when to start new ones, has to be answered locally or case-by-case.

Even in unions, where there is no possibility of starting separate groups, our criticism of the leaders' strategies will often be important. Consider, for example, the timidity and slowness of the Clothing Workers in doing anything visible about the J.P. Stevens boycott. Or — and on this point I'd like to criticize NAM's activity last year — consider our reactions to the Sadlowski campaign. Some of the NAM members most involved in the Sadlowski campaign had important criticisms of its organizing techniques, things that made Sadlowski weaker than he should have been. Unless such problems are catastrophic (which they weren't) they shouldn't be publicly debated *before* the election. But in the *Moving On* article written *after* the election, (the only national position we officially took) we continued to present *uncritical* support of Sadlowski. How, then, will we learn from our own members' experience and criticisms? And isn't this the beginning of the same error

Richmond described in relation to the labor movement?

To summarize, a socialist strategy breaks with the leadership of mass movements, when the issues arrive, over lack of internal democracy, single-issue parochialism, and timidity or weakness of organizing approach. This, in addition to maintaining a socialist presence, is what I mean by avoiding reformism. Again, let me stress that these are all questions of balance. Too constantly disagreeing with the leadership of reform movements is sectarian; too rarely disagreeing with them is reformist. The balance has to be endlessly re-established when we begin to waver.

Let me close by anticipating a major criticism of my remarks. I predict that I will be accused of mistaking the major error NAM is likely to make. We are still much closer to sectarianism, it will be said, and such elaborate warnings about the dangers of reformism will only make us more sectarian. I disagree because I feel the rapidness of the transformation taking place in NAM: our chapter, and most chapters, have moved rapidly into mass work. We are beginning to engage in successful, growing activities, which have once again, the excitement of contact with widening circles of previously uninvolved people — a refreshing change from the last few years' wanderings through isolated debate.

And it's because of this feeling, the rapid transformation, the beginnings of success, that it's time to look ahead a few years. Not to gloat, or to relax, but to anticipate the new problems that success may bring. It is in this sense that it is important to consider the problem of reformism.

**FRANK ACKERMAN**, a member of NAM, lives in Somerville, Mass., and is on the staff of Dollars and Sense.



# **SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOL WORKERS' UNION STRUGGLE**

Judy Syfers

Near the finish of a struggle to establish our own union local of school paraprofessionals in San Francisco, I happened to see the movie, "Union Maids". The film is an inspiring story of three working women in the thirties who organized and fought for unions which made real changes in their lives and their working conditions. I remember well how I felt when I left the theater where I had seen "Union Maids". If only it were still like that, I thought. If only a union still meant solidarity and strength. If only I did not feel dishonest when I urged other workers to support a union. If only I could, like those women in the movie, put my trust in the union.

But I didn't feel that way. I felt, as a worker, that I now had two enemies: the management under which I had to work, and the big unions. For me and my fellow workers the message of "Union Maids" did not hold. It's just not that simple anymore.

And now, a year later, I do not belong to the union (the American Federation of Teachers) which "represents" me. Nor do most of my fellow workers. And, like them, I will not join it. Our story is probably not unique. Perhaps the telling of it can help other public workers who find themselves involved in union struggles.

## **EXPLOITATION OF PARAPROFESSIONALS**

There is no doubt that we school paraprofessionals, as largely unorganized workers, are severely exploited. As an illustration, I remember another para once telling me about a conversation he had with a street cleaner who had never heard of paraprofessionals. The



para described his job. The street cleaner commented that it sounded like a pretty good job. The pay wasn't so great, but you can't have everything. "What kind of fringes do you get?" asked the street cleaner. "None", answered the para. The street cleaner looked astonished. "Man", he said, "then you ain't got a job. You're just volunteering, and they pay you a little to make sure you come back the next day!"

And now that the unemployment situation in this country has become so severe, we do intend to come back every day. There are about 2500 of us in the San Francisco public schools. Nearly all of us work in the classrooms. We do everything from janitorial and secretarial work to actual teaching. We have no real job description, and what we do as paras depends on what school we work in, what teacher we work under, and sometimes what state or federal program pays our wages.

Our job conditions have been bad enough that one Black school board member in San Francisco has a speech he occasionally gives about us which we call his "slavery speech"; he eloquently maintains that the paras in this district are treated like slaves.

Although the historical analogy may be incorrect, our jobs *are* miserable. We are seasonal workers, hired in the beginning of the school year, and fired automatically in June with no assurance of being hired the next year. Our work is mostly part-time, the average work day being about four hours. While there are no qualifications for the job, our pay is determined solely by educational background, and those with two or more years of college make over a dollar an hour more than a high school graduate. Since there is no pay increase for experience, the pay differential based on education becomes clearly discriminatory. Third World workers, who tend to have less

college education, remain at the bottom of the pay scale.

We are exploited equally, however, when it comes to fringe benefits. Only about four percent of us enjoy permanent status and thus receive some fringe benefits. The rest of us, as temporary workers, are denied all fringe benefits, vacation pay, etc.

Not surprisingly, we are the only group of school employees in direct contact with students which even begins to reflect the racial composition of the student population. In San Francisco the student population is 75% Third World; the teachers are not much over 20% Third World, and that percentage continues to drop as the seniority system — upheld by both the administration and the union — mandates the laying off of the more recently hired Third World teachers. It is impossible to obtain from the school district exact statistics regarding the racial composition of paras, but at least half of us are Third World. Most of us are women, and many are single parents of school children.

In San Francisco our undesirable situation is compounded by a complicated legal confusion over who is really our employer. Due to a special provision in the California State Education Code, classified employees in the San Francisco public schools (all employees except administrators and certificated teachers) are technically employees of the city rather than the school district. We are considered "exempt" civil servants; that is, we are exempt from the job security and fringe benefits that other city workers get. The exemption allows the school district (rather than city hall) to hire and fire us, but also allows the school district to disclaim any responsibility for us. They do not legally have the power to set our wages, etc., though they have the power to determine our working conditions, hours of employment, and so on. This arrangement is very convenient for

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both city hall and the school district. Each one blames the other when complaints are made, and neither one does anything.

Lastly, while it is not usually listed as one of our working conditions, something needs to be said about the psychological devastation that most of us suffer. It is no secret that public schools in this country are failing to educate American children. We, as paraprofessionals who deal with children in the schools on a more individual basis than any other school workers, must see every day the visible evidence of American educational failure. And — if we want to keep our jobs — we must all too often stand by silently and impotently as we watch incompetent or insensitive teachers and administrators daily add to the damage already done to our children. Moreover, we must stoically receive our own daily doses of humiliation at the hands of those same teachers and administrators. We must always be reminded of our “place”. In many schools, for instance, we are not allowed in the teachers’ lounge; that room is exclusively for teachers. In one school a para had the vulgarity to faint in a classroom near the off-limits teachers’ lounge. There was considerable concern over whether or not that para should be allowed to rest in that lounge set aside for her superiors. In the end she was helped to a basement room.

### THE NEED FOR A UNION

Working at the bottom of the educational hierarchy and isolated into the different classrooms of some 150 different school buildings, we are a fine example of the powerless — and unorganized — worker. And so it seemed to a few of us a few years ago that one solution to many of our problems as workers lay in organizing ourselves into a union which would truly represent all of us, which would become our weapon. What seemed so clear as we

started out, however, became a good deal less clear as the struggle began.

There have always been unions around who were quite willing to take our dues money. Despite the ambiguity of our status as city or school workers, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) claimed some few hundred of us as members. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the largest union of city workers, had a few paras as members, though the AFT and SEIU had arrived at a jurisdictional agreement that the AFT would be the only union to recruit paras. The AFT was powerless, however, to do anything for paras, for there was no collective bargaining for school employees. Then in January of 1975 the Rodda Act became law, establishing collective bargaining for school employees in California. This was our chance. Now if we could organize and elect a union under this new law, we might be able to end forever the confusion over the identity of our boss, establishing ourselves once and for all as school workers, not city workers. We could then sit down with the school district and work out a contract which would be legally binding. We would have a voice at last.

Shortly after the Rodda Act was passed, an independent organization of paras was born. Its foundations lay in a small group of paras (all of us politically active) who first met together in 1973 to discuss our situation as workers. We needed some kind of movement. We had recently suffered more deprivations through new city rulings, and the union (AFT) was doing nothing for us. But we are a widely scattered work force, and there wasn’t even a method of communication open to us.

That last realization led us to our first move. Unless there was some form of communication among the workers, nothing was possible. So we started a newsletter. The newsletter, which focused on national questions facing public

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education as well as local problems, continued for a year. The people who worked on the newsletter and distributed it (free) to as many schools as we could, developed a good working relationship with each other, and did, in fact, establish a beginning network of communication and contacts in the various schools. Those accomplishments proved invaluable during the later union struggle.

By the second year of the newsletter, we agreed that something more than just a newsletter was needed. Attacks on paras from the school district and the city had increased. So we called for a general meeting of all paras. The meeting was not large, but it did pull in some new people. By the third general meeting in December of 1975, the new group decided to form into an on-going organization, naming itself United Paraprofessionals (UP).

The group of people who had worked on the newsletter were not representative of all paraprofessionals. We were all white, and we were all women. All of us had some college education, and were all active in one or another progressive political organization or group. Most of us were single and childless. It is difficult, even in hindsight, to assess what effect on the later union struggle the character (i.e., white radicals) of that original group had, but there can be no doubt that our limitations and our biases played at least some part in our final defeat.

One obvious weakness, probably arising from our past working relationships, was that as an organization UP remained very loose. We never established officers, dues, by-laws or any other sort of official form. We were severely pressed for time. We had to deal immediately with the question of choosing a union to represent us and could not afford the time to work out structure. Whatever our reasons, however, the result of our looseness was that,

although the people who became involved with the union struggle were more representative of paraprofessionals in terms of race and educational background, the leadership tended to remain in the hands of mostly single, white women.

## CHOOSING A UNION

While there were a number of important issues UP could deal with, the one issue that emerged clearly as the cause for the most concern was the newly passed collective bargaining bill for California school employees. We knew that teachers, who outnumbered paras, would choose one of the two competing organizations (the AFT and the Classroom Teachers Association) as their bargaining agent. If paras did not elect a union representative, we would be left out in the cold, and there would be little to prevent the teachers' union and the school district from negotiating us out of jobs, releasing more monies to insure more jobs for teachers.

Our next question, then, concerned what kind of a union would best represent paras. There were three alternatives: we could form an independent union, we could align ourselves with the AFT, or we could approach the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the only other AFL-CIO union open to us which represented public workers.

The first alternative was quickly dismissed. None of us felt that we had the resources with which to form an independent union, and we felt that an independent open-shop union (closed shop was prohibited by the law) of paraprofessionals would not have enough weight in San Francisco. Suspicious as people felt about the AFL-CIO, they also felt that they needed that kind of organized backing.

We were then left with choosing between the

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AFT and AFSCME. We knew we wanted a union in which paras could have control over para issues and contract negotiations. We wanted a union with rank and file control. We wanted a union whose leadership reflected the racial and sexual composition of its constituency. We wanted a dues structure based on income because of the unequal pay scales and number of working hours among paras. We wanted a democratic union with open membership meetings. And we wanted our own local.

That last demand was pivotal in terms of our final decision. It is important at this point to say something about the structure of AFT Local 61 in San Francisco, in which many UP members were enrolled. There were two caucuses in the union: Progressive Action Caucus (PAC), a pro-Shanker caucus (Albert Shanker is the International President of AFT), controlled by the leadership of the local president, who was also one of the international vice-presidents; and Teachers Action Caucus (TAC), a small militant group largely controlled by members of the Progressive Labor Party. In a successful effort to stifle the dissident voice of TAC, the leadership a few years ago had dispensed with open membership meetings and instituted a "delegate assembly" in their place. Each school has one delegate per fifteen union members, and only delegates have a voice or a vote in the monthly meetings. Further, the Executive Board, totally controlled by PAC, has full control of all union committees; they decide what committees are to be established, and they pick the members of the committees and the committee chairs.

As the AFT was (and still is) constituted, it certainly did not meet our requirements of a democratic union controlled by rank and file. But even if AFT Local 61 had been a democratic union, there was another potential problem for paras. Under the Rodda act, certi-

ficated personnel (teachers) and classified personnel were to be in two separate units, which meant that if both teachers and paras elected the AFT as their representative, they would both be members of the same local. Two different contracts, however, would have to be negotiated. The AFT, as primarily a teachers' union, is first concerned with the working conditions of teachers which are quite different from the working conditions of paras. Teachers number twice the work force size of paras. Further, the racial composition of teachers and paras is quite different, paras being nearly half Third World. Under these conditions, it seemed obvious that the major effort of the AFT would be put forth on behalf of the teachers. If, then, the teachers negotiated a contract acceptable to them, and the paras were presented with a contract which was unacceptable to us, we would be in a very weak position to force the school board to renegotiate. There is not at this time the ghost of a chance that teachers would ever vote to go out on strike over an unacceptable offer to paras, and since teachers so far outnumber paras, we would be out-voted if that issue ever arose. We would be effectively denied a worker's last ace in the hole — the right and ability to strike.

United Paraprofessionals sent delegations to both unions inviting them to come and talk to us. AFSCME representatives agreed to come to a UP meeting. The AFT refused to come and talk to us, and further stated that under no conditions would they permit paras to form a separate AFT local, nor would paras be allowed to do negotiating (they have since changed their tune on that last item). The president's attitude was openly hostile to UP with insinuations (even to the press) that our sole purpose was union-busting.

When AFSCME came to talk to us, they sounded like The Answer. They promised us

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our own local, controlled by paraprofessionals. They promised us full control of by-laws, negotiating, dues structure, and so on. They promised us the full backing of the local Joint Council, of which they were a member. And they promised us an operating budget in the neighborhood of \$30,000 out of which we would pay two full time professional organizers, that budget coming from the combined two Internationals of the Joint Council.

The Joint Council was a local organization of three unions in San Francisco which represented public employees, and was made up of AFSCME, Union of City Employees (a small independent union formed from an opposition caucus within the SEIU local of city employees), and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) which represented the bus drivers, one of the strongest unions in the city (and, as other city workers had discovered, a crucial group of workers when strike support was needed). The possibility of organizational connections with other groups of city workers — in particular the bus drivers — played a major role in our final decision.

We set a date and arranged another meeting at which we would take our final vote between AFT and AFSCME. But before that next meeting, our hand was forced. The AFT made a surprise move.

### BIG UNIONS BEGIN TO MOVE

As was mentioned earlier, paras in San Francisco are legally employees of the city rather than of the school district. City employees were divided into twelve different units for the purpose of union elections and bargaining, the conditions of both activities governed by the City Charter. Paras, who all have Civil Service classifications, had been scattered among those twelve units. The AFT

had, at the beginning of the year, petitioned the Board of Supervisors to create a thirteenth unit specifically of paraprofessionals. The Board complied, and Unit 13 was established. The significance of that action totally escaped us when it happened. But now with the existence of Unit 13, the AFT filed for a union representation election for paraprofessionals under the City Charter, ignoring the new state law for school workers.

It was clear what the AFT tactics were. Under the city charter which sets down the rules governing city union elections, only permanent employees can participate in elections. And only 4% of us are permanent employees. The president plainly figured that he could win an election with only four percent of the employees eligible to vote, and once having won that election he would have effectively stopped any organizing with another AFL-CIO union. Although we had known nothing about them, the provisions for city worker union elections had been in existence for several years. If the AFT had been serious about working to better the job conditions of paras, they could have filed for such an election — despite the limitations of the City Charter — before there ever was a State Collective Bargaining Act for school employees.

The informal core group of UP leadership made an emergency decision to affiliate with AFSCME. A few days later we got our first harsh lesson in the workings of international unions. Back on the East Coast, where both the international offices of the AFT and TWU are, Shanker had gotten to the international president of TWU. Hands off, Shanker had apparently said. And TWU had complied. There would be no money coming from the TWU International, and locally we could not be part of the Joint Council. Our working budget (now coming only from AFSCME)



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would be \$10,000, and we would have to hire our own organizers, paying them from that sum. We felt we had to accept that set-back.

So our first task was to find paras who would be willing to leave their jobs (jeopardizing their chances for being re-hired) and take on the short-term job of working as an organizer. It took us a week to find our three organizers. Two were paras, one white and one Latina, and the third was an active Black parent in the schools. Our second task, also accomplished in that week, was to gather enough supporting signatures from the small group of permanent paras so that we could file, ourselves, in the city election initiated by the AFT. By so doing, we would become a "party of interest", and would then be in a position to take legal steps to prevent the election. We had to design and institute a strategy for gathering enough signatures of all the paras, temporary as well as permanent, so that we could file for a representation election under the state collective bargaining law (having forstalled the city elections). Lastly, we had to figure out what kind of a relationship we, as UP, would have with AFSCME.

Gathering the signatures of 50% (as required by the law) of unorganized and isolated, part-time, temporary workers was no easy job. Our organizers had to be trained. We had weekly strategy sessions. When we hit slumps, we had to arrange to pull more of us in on the organizing. We partitioned the city into areas, dividing those areas among the organizers. They went into the schools and either arranged with the principal to attend a meeting of paras, or — more usually — they tried to see paras individually when they were on coffee breaks. We never did gather the required 1,300 signatures, though our reception from paras was generally better than any of us had hoped for. Our strength lay in those 96% of the paras

who are temporary workers, most of whom did not like the way that the AFT had disenfranchized them by filing for a city election. Looking back now, it seems probable that we could have acquired the necessary signatures if we had been able to concentrate our energies on that activity alone.

Much of our energy and our time was diverted, however by a continually escalating struggle with the union that was supposed to be our champion and supporter, and with whom we were affiliating. In the beginning, we saw AFSCME as a much more progressive force than it actually was; toward the end of our campaign we were very demoralized by the contradiction between trying to convince fellow workers to support an AFSCME local while continually being undermined by AFSCME's string of broken promises and outright lies.

During our four months with AFSCME, we fell under the jurisdiction of four successive AFSCME officials. Our first AFSCME "boss", the one who convinced us that we should affiliate with AFSCME and who painted a picture of AFSCME as a valiant fighter for workers' rights and progressive causes, quit his job after we had been campaigning for a month. No one knew why. Our second "boss", an out-of-town AFSCME official, was with us only a few weeks and knew nothing of the complicated local situation or the legal battle we were entering into with the AFT regarding the city election. She cost us a lot of valuable time. Our third "boss", a local woman, was with us only a few weeks; then she was transferred to another city. Our last "boss" was another out-of-towner from the East Coast, who was more openly belligerent to us than any of the previous officials had been, and who contradicted the policies and promises of our first AFSCME representative.

At the beginning of our partnership with



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AFSCME, we had enlisted the help of a local project of the National Lawyers Guild, the Women's Labor Project. They advised us first that we did have a legal basis on which to fight the bogus AFT election, and they did much of the legal groundwork for us which we then took to AFSCME's lawyer. Further, they advised us that we had better draw up a contract of affiliation with AFSCME, so that when we did get our union local we would be guaranteed the kind of autonomy we had been verbally promised. We brought up the question of a contract of affiliation with AFSCME early in our association with them, and they assured us that there would be no problem over it. We accordingly went to work on the contract. Then the AFSCME representative quit. The next two officials refused to deal with a contract of affiliation, saying that they did not have the authority to sign such a document. By the time we had our fourth union director, we were told that under no circumstances would AFSCME consider signing any such agreement. And by that time, of course, we were nearing the AFT city election deadline, could not pull out, and thus had no bargaining power with AFSCME.

AFSCME's strategy regarding the AFT city election had also changed. At the beginning the plan was to file in the election, take the matter to court if necessary, and use that time to gather the necessary signatures so that we could file for an election under the state law, in which all the paras would be eligible to vote. The AFSCME lawyer began dragging his feet from the start. A couple of weeks before the election was scheduled to take place, AFSCME totally reversed their position, and with that reversal denied us any legal help. They demanded that we win the city election first, and then they would work on winning an election under the state law. We were appalled. Our understanding from the Women's Labor

Project was that the city election, if it took place and even if we won it, legally endangered our chances of being able to file under the new state law. We could not understand why AFSCME had so betrayed us. But, again, we felt we had no choice. We threw all our resources into that election a week before it took place. But the AFT had gauged the lay of the land accurately. The four percent of us who were allowed to vote in that binding election for union representation were the most privileged paras (as they had some measure of job security and fringe benefits) and the most conservative. We lost the election by a margin of three to two in June of 1976. Only slightly over 100 people voted.

Four months earlier we had started out with lots of hope, lots of energy, and lots of promises. When we finally lost our campaign to form our own union with AFSCME, we were exhausted and incredulous. Worse, we felt stupid. If we had only done this; if we had only done that. Now, from the comforting distance of a year's time, it is easier to see that there was probably no way we could have won any kind of real victory for ourselves as workers. We were surrounded by forces to which our inexperience blinded us and which were out of our control.

Within a few months we began to hear rumblings from the other few AFSCME locals in the city. By now the Joint Council had disbanded, and for all intents and purposes, AFSCME no longer exists in San Francisco. We were the unknowing victims of a decision on what appears to be the national level to pull AFSCME out of San Francisco, for AFSCME had been steadily losing all the other city elections to SEIU. Even if we had won that election, it seems probable that we would now, like the other locals here, be threatened with abandonment by the international, leaving us



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— as those other locals seem to be — in a very weak bargaining position.

## WHERE WE ARE NOW

On the strength of somewhere between 60 and 70 votes, 2500 paraprofessionals now have the AFT as our union. The AFT did win the election with the teachers early in 1977, and the teachers have signed their first contract with the school district. Very recently the AFT offered us, too, a "contract", but unlike the contract for the teachers, the only gain our "contract" offers us is a pay raise and that is provisional, pending approval by the Civil Service Commission. (In over four months we have not yet seen a cent of that pay raise.) Further, our "contract" provided us with "job security" in the form of a notice in June about where we would be working in September. Since more than 90% of us work in state or federally funded programs, such a notice does not mean too much in terms of jobs, for state and federal funds don't come into the district until August. But that same notice means a lot in terms of unemployment benefits during the summer. With the "promise" (even provisional) of employment, we will no longer be eligible for unemployment benefits and will thus, at the behest of our union, save the district a considerable amount of money. The "contract" was "ratified" by the vote of some 15 to 20 people at an all-para meeting called by the union which was attended by about 30 people.

United Paraprofessionals continued to exist as an organization for another year after the AFT had won the right through the city election to be the official union of paras. During that time the Board of Education refused to recognize the AFT as the official representative of paras because the AFT had won bargaining rights with the city supervisors, but had not

won an election under the Rodda Act. UP played an important role for paras during that time. The Board considered UP as still a legitimate voice for paras, and we worked on issues which the AFT refused to bother about. We were successful in one major campaign to win unemployment benefits for paras during the 1977 summer months after the AFT had said they could not do anything. But in the fall of 1977 the AFT won recognition under the Rodda Act as our union and thus finally displaced UP, which formally disbanded in the winter of 1977.

The future of American public education does not look very bright. And the future of paraprofessionals within that system is anybody's guess. UP no longer exists. AFSCME needed paras once because we were a possible foothold into San Francisco public workers. AFSCME doesn't exist here now. The AFT needed paras because our loss might well have hurt them when they were trying to win the teachers. The AFT does not need us anymore, and their contempt for us has already become so obvious that only 30 people would attend their last "city-wide" meeting of paras. And as the financial crises become ever more severe in cities and school districts, the need for paras as workers becomes more and more dubious to school administrations. Thousands of paraprofessionals have been laid off in New York. The AFT, which recently endorsed the anti-affirmative action Bakke decision, did not fight those lay-offs, and there is no indication that it will fight what must wait just around the corner for us in San Francisco.

When UP began we thought we were involved only in a struggle with our employers, but we soon found ourselves involved in covenants or squabbles and jurisdictional disputes between the school board and city management, between city government and the legal system, between the courts and the state legis-



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lature, between one local union and another, between local unions and internationals, and between one international and another, and so on. We found, in short, that unions have become one of a massive, interlocked system of bureaucracies which protect the interests of the capitalist class. The women in "Union Maids" didn't have to face such a superstructure.

Not long ago I was at a political demonstration where people began singing that old union song which begins, "There once was a union maid, who never was afraid..." and ends with the chorus, "Oh, you can't scare me, I'm stickin' to the union...". I used to love that song. But I couldn't sing it. The words stuck in my throat.

I don't mean to imply that I now believe that all unions are always the enemies of workers. But for me, along with many other school workers in San Francisco, that old maxim, "any union is better than no union", has been

called into question. And for me this means that progressive people will often have to work around and in spite of unions to effect social change, rather than working through or along side those unions (as many of us had thought). For us in UP the realization that unions would not help us was a bitter pill to swallow. But we have fewer illusions now about the nature of our complex enemy; and one must know an enemy if one is to effectively fight it.

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*JUDY SYFERS is a member of Union Wage; her main political work is in and around the San Francisco public schools. Her political birth occurred through the women's movement in the late 1960s and she is still best known for a pamphlet, "Why I Want a Wife." A trip to Cuba was also important for her in developing a class and anti-imperialist consciousness.*

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# LETTER FROM THE EHRENREICHS

We are pleased to have gotten so many thoughtful responses to our articles on the professional-managerial class, both those which were printed in *Radical America* and letters we have received privately. Some of the negative responses are based on misreadings of our articles, for example: T. McCarthy's perception that we are opposed to professional-managerial people taking working class jobs and Wini Breines' interpretation of our second article as a diatribe against the New Left. Here we will not take the space to deal with misunderstandings, but will focus on what we see as the major disagreements which emerge from the correspondence on the professional-managerial class (PMC) articles.

Most people who have written from a critical perspective agree that the social grouping which we identify as the professional-managerial class corresponds to some sort of "middle strata" lying between the working class and the bourgeoisie, but are adamantly opposed to identifying this grouping as a class. Several of them (Healey, Webster) cite an article by Eric Olin Wright (*New Left Review*, July-August, '76) in which it is argued that members of the "middle strata" do not occupy a class (or classes) at all, but a new kind of social position which Wright terms a "contradictory class location." According to Wright, there are three classes in capitalist society (the working class, the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie), plus "contradictory class locations" occupied by various professional, managerial and small-scale capitalist occupational groups. Occupants of the "contradictory class locations," unlike members of real classes, have their class positions (by which he means their potential for

allegiance with the working class or the bourgeoisie) largely determined by ideological and political factors. In no way, then, could Wright's middle strata be likened to a class: Not only are they segmented into at least three broad groupings on the basis of their occupations, but their members are not subject to any objective historical forces which might shape a common outlook.

What is at issue here goes beyond the PMC thesis to the more fundamental question of whether a *class analysis* even applies to the "middle strata" or whether these strata are so heterogeneous and economically indeterminate that they require some new form of categorization. David Plotke makes it clear that this is where the debate is at by his polemical distinctions in a recent issue of *Socialist Review* ("Politics and Class Forces in the U.S.," *S.R.* #37). He lumps together all those who have sought for a clear class designation for the middle strata — "new working class" theorists (e.g., Mallet), those who would put the middle strata in the petty bourgeoisie (presumably Poulantzas), and proponents of the PMC analysis.

Now, there is an enormous difference between these three approaches, as we took pains to explain in the beginning of the PMC articles. But to Plotke they are all equally guilty of "formalism" and "structural-functionalism" — and what this seems to boil down to is that they are all guilty of attempting a systematic *class analysis* of the middle strata. This "procedure," according to Plotke, is not only methodologically wrong, but is actually "damaging" on the account of the "relatively weak socialist tradition" of the U.S. In the end, then, he abandons the analysis for the pragmatic reason that it might reveal antagonisms which our "socialist tradition" is too weak to handle.



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The question we want to raise before returning to our particular views on the middle strata is: *Why this resistance to a class analysis?* Confronted with the problem of the middle strata, otherwise level-headed Marxist thinkers bristle with obscure accusations (Plotke), resort to byzantine new social typologies (Wright), or dissolve into empiricism (Richard Healey, whose letter in *R.A.* proposes that we begin by sifting through the middle strata occupation by occupation, focussing not on “class structure,” but on “politics and ideology”).

To address the question of whether a class analysis applies to the middle strata — and beyond that, how it applies — we have to recall what class analysis means as a method. Marx left us not only with an analysis of the class dynamics of 19th-century capitalist society, but with a tool for dissecting the potential conflicts in other historical forms of capitalist society. To summarize the principal features of this method, as revealed by Marx’s own analysis of 19th-century bourgeois society:

First (and this should hardly need saying) class analysis must be based on *objective* analysis, not preferences or value judgments or bald assertions. Second, class analysis is not an exercise in determining the subjective orientation of various groups at particular moments in history — as Healey would apparently have it when he argues that class analysis is basically concerned with “which groupings and sectors [within the middle strata] are in motion around what problems.” Politics and ideology cannot be reduced to matters of class, as Healey correctly points out, but neither can class analysis be reduced (or perhaps we should say “evaporated”) to a matter of subjective orientations.

Third, and this is the point which appears to need the most stressing — class analysis operates at a level of *abstraction* which is not

simply “higher” than the empiricism of bourgeois society, but contrary to it. If Marx had proceeded as Healey and others advocate, he would never have encountered the proletariat as a class. Instead he would have seen only an endless complexity of occupational strata, ranging from children working for subsistence wages to relatively well-paid, even relatively autonomous, craftsmen. He would have concluded of the proletariat, as our comrades do now of the middle strata, that it is a grouping too complex, too heterogeneous and too ideologically diverse to qualify as a class. But as we know, Marx believed that scientific analysis “would be superfluous if the outward appearance of things coincided with their essence.” He leaped — unforgivably from a bourgeois sociological point of view — beyond the morass of data to the essential relationships of capitalist society.

Finally, class analysis is about (objective) *antagonisms*. The various social strata of capitalist society can be defined arbitrarily to suit any sociological investigation, but only the essential objective antagonisms can reveal the mechanisms of revolutionary change.

Using his method of class analysis, Marx developed a simple and elegant theory of capitalist society, *viz.*, that it is polarized between two classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie, and that this objective class polarization would lead to the destruction of class society itself. Marx did not omit the modern middle strata from the basic theory of capitalist society because he found them to be inherently unclassifiable, or because there can only be two-way polarizations, or for some other metaphysical reason, but for the simple reason that they were not yet an important factor on the scene — certainly not at the level of abstraction at which Marx operated.

With the vast expansion of the middle strata



than a ruse. The only path to the state of transcendence which Wright and his followers claim for the "middle strata" lies through an uncompromising analysis of the objective class forces which have heretofore restricted our outlook and strategy. As we argued in the second part of our article, the New Left, at its best, came to understand this. It is an insight which we owe to succeeding waves of radical movement.

*Barbara and John Ehrenreich  
January 10, 1978*

## LETTERS

*Dear Radical America:*

Jim O'Brien's "American Leninism in the 1970's" is to my knowledge the first dispassionate and comprehensive historical treatment of the various attempts to build a new Marxist-Leninist party in this country. By collating a lot of information which has till now remained buried in organizational newspapers or the memories of activists, he has performed a very valuable service. But on the substantive issue I think that his account errs in underestimating the significance of Leninism for the political life of this country.

The undertone to the article is that in the past and present as well as the future Leninism is no more than a sideshow. For example, of the Left's immediate past, he writes, "...the youth radicalization of the 60's did not come via the CP and it was not even significantly influenced by the CP." As evidence of this he cites the failure of the CP's W.E.B. DuBois Clubs to develop more than a token presence on college campuses. He also states that CP influence in other organizations was slight. On the first count, using the DuBois clubs as an indicator of CP influence is too empirical and narrow. It fails to recognize indirect influence. Many of the early leaders of SDS were red diaper babies and hence had been brought up in a CP-influenced milieu. Many of the concepts seized upon in the 60's (e.g. imperialism, the class struggle) had been originally propagated by CP writers or by writers who wrote in a context, the parameters of which had been established by the CP debates. On the second count that CP influence was slight in organizations, I have my doubts.

While I agree that CP influence certainly was not at all decisive in most organizations, I think that there was a lot more of it than is generally recognized. It was not until around 1965 that CP policy changed and some of their members in mass organizations openly announced that they were communists. The 1966 SDS Convention had a very emotional session where a number of people announced that they had been or still were CP members. (At the previous year's Convention SDS had dropped a clause from its Constitution excluding communists from membership.) In another respect, the CP has always been involved in legal defense work which certainly was a part of the whole atmosphere surrounding demonstration politics. O'Brien is correct in the general interpretation that the 1960's movement arose outside of Leninism in general, but I don't think that any Leninist would disagree. Leninists don't see themselves as starting mass movements, societal conditions do that; Leninists rather attempt to influence the direction and course that those movements take. It is in this latter sense of influence that I think he underestimates.

For the present I think that his interpretation errs into another empiricist problem by confining the influence of Leninism to the existing national organizations. What I mean here is especially the influence that Leninist theory has had on the present political consciousness of the Left. Marxism and Leninism have always been distinguished from varieties of empiricism and pragmatism by their insistence on the study, development, and application of theory. (Although it is true that some groups understand by theory, dogma, such a rendering does not inhere in Leninism per se.) Consequently after the amorphous radicalism of the 1960's Movement, Leninism became a methodology for revolution not only by its advocacy of disciplined organization, but also by its advocacy of the importance of theoretically-informed practice. Most of the Leninist groups consequently precipitated a virtual renaissance of study of the classics among political activists. Out of such study has come considerable disagreement, naturally, but at least many more of the right questions are being asked. For example, many of the Leninist groups have tackled the crucial question of the theoretical interpretation of the positions of minority groups in the United States.

O'Brien's article neglects to mention the enormous influence that Lenin's theory of imperialism has had in anti-imperialist work within this country. It has sensitized activists to the welding of the national to the class struggle and to the necessity for solidarity work.

In general, O'Brien's account of what constitutes American Leninism is too narrow. By confining himself to the pro-Moscow, pro-Peking, and Trotskyist organizations — among others, he leaves out one very significant Leninist



organization, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party — he fails to treat seriously the large number of independents (undoubtedly a greater number of people than those in the organizations) who are ready to join a Leninist party when one comes along which appears to embody a reasonable politic and be more than a sect. This brings us to the future and the classic Leninist dictum of the need for a revolutionary party if capitalism is ever to be eradicated. The point to building a party is to be ready when there is an upsurge of mass spontaneous activity such as in the 1930's and the 1960's. The CPUSA may have more members (about 12,000, I understand) than the other groups, but even at that they do not have a hegemonic or vanguard position when you consider that their numbers are only a drop in the bucket in a country of 226 million people. Compare the membership figures here with those of any Western European party in countries one-third or less the population and you will see what I mean. The miserable experiences of the new Leninist organizations of the 1970's are not a necessary indicator that they will be that bad in the 80's or 90's or the next century. Nor are we to understand by the present organizations what a future Leninist party must be like.

*Jim Russell*

*(Editors' Note: The following letter was written in response to the letter about PROD, which we published in the last issue.)*

*Dear Radical America:*

It was not the purpose of my article ("Dissent in the Brotherhood: Organizing in the Teamsters Union", *RA*, July-August 1977) to give a "history" of dissident groups in the IBT. A real analysis of the nature and role of PROD would be worthy of a separate piece.

The footnote in question reads as follows:

"In the early months of 1977 an organization called PROD, based in Washington, D.C., began attacking TDU for being 'controlled' by socialists. PROD is a lobby group run by non-Teamsters but claiming dues-paying Teamster members. It is attempting to become a significant reform element in the IBT, and as such its red-baiting approach is particularly ominous."

There is no denial that PROD has dues-paying Teamster members. The question here is one of organizational form. One joins PROD as one might join the ACLU; you pay your annual dues and you receive regular mailings. The dues money supports the "five-person full-time staff" who do excellent research but unfortunately are not Teamsters.

This may indicate a strong base of *financial* support from rank-and-filers, but this is something different than building a rank-and-file organization.

It must be said that the PROD staff is now stimulating organizing efforts. But this is limited geographically. Here in California a few members of Bay Area TDU belong as well to PROD, but they see it as a source of information on the IBT. There is no perception here of PROD being a rank-and-file organizing group.

My skepticism of PROD is increased by personal experience. Almost two years ago I purchased some PROD literature, though I did not join the organization. From that point on I began receiving mail from them with the invariable salutation, "Dear PROD Leader." How many others are similarly mis-described?

But beyond the question of organizational form lies the real issue of political content. PROD may indeed gradually transfer itself into a more genuine Teamster group. If so, its efforts will be to create a consciously anti-socialist reform movement. These politics are strikingly revealed in a PROD statement published in January 1977:

"Under most circumstances, it would make no difference whether the participants or leaders in a rank-and-file organization such as TDC, or a rank-and-file organization such as PROD, were Republicans or Democrats, Christians, Jews, or Buddhists.

"With Socialists it is different. The reason is simple. Your political party or your religion have nothing whatsoever to do with your job and your desire and need to improve it. On the other hand, Socialism seeks to obtain its political goals through infiltrating rank-and-file groups and through striking to cripple industries and ultimately the country and government."

The seventies have been a fruitful time for union reform movements. It is interesting that Steve Early should recall the Miners for Democracy in the UMWA, for both the MFD and PROD have drawn water from the same wells in the Washington liberal community. The tone for the MFD was set when it excluded left-wing groups from the founding convention, and its legacy is told in the widespread disillusion with Arnold Miller's regime.

It is to be hoped that there will be greater unity and cooperation between TDU and the rank-and-filers in PROD, but such unity cannot be based on an anti-socialist program. To do so would be to abandon efforts to organize the class to govern for itself and instead consign us to endlessly perpetrate the cycle of union "reform" movements which simply bring in liberal faces to administer the old business unionism.

*Matthew Rinaldi*





## OFFICIAL TERRORISM IN WEST GERMANY

It is hard to tell which is more frightening: the rapid growth of police state repression in West Germany, or the broad support which this repression has received from the West German population. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was the murder of three imprisoned members of the Red Army Fraction (the "Baader-Meinhof gang") in the wake of the kidnapping and murder of the head of Germany's Manufacturer's Association, Hans Martin Schleyer, and the hijacking of an airliner in solidarity with the kidnapping. With one stroke, the West German police attempted to end the cycle of attempts by the Left to free imprisoned comrades, which has usually resulted in an increase in repression and thus more imprisoned comrades to be rescued.

But these prison murders — most of the press outside of Germany has been skeptical of the "suicide" stories — are only the tip of the iceberg. The government and its civil service have implemented a widespread practice of blacklisting professionals and teachers with

radical sympathies (called "Berufsverbote"), computerized surveillance and book and magazine censorship. All of this has had an extremely chilling effect on dissent: nuclear scientists, for example, are forbidden to participate in forums on nuclear energy, and lawyers have been arrested for defending radicals.

Information about repression in West Germany, and about movements against it, has been hard to come by. There is now, however, an organization called "The Campaign Against the Model West Germany," which has published four excellent reports in English on blacklisting, computerized surveillance, censorship, and the Stammheim prison murders. This last report is particularly good, showing step-by-step how the government's claim that these murders were "suicides" cannot stand up to scrutiny, and placing the murders in the context of recent events in Germany. These reports can be had from the Evangelische Studentengemeinde, Querenburger Hohe 287, 4630 Bochum 1, West Germany. Another useful source of information is a newsletter published by the New York Committee for Civil Liberties in West Germany (PO Box 483, Village Station, NY, NY 10014; \$3/year). The first issue describes the government's blacklisting and censorship campaigns, and has a useful short reading list of English language sources.

Finally, one of the main objects of the Government's censorship/terrorism campaign has been translated into English. This is Bommi Baumann's book, *How It All Began (Wie Alles Anfing)*, the autobiography of a West Berlin leftist, covering the period from roughly 1966 to 1973. A working-class youth drawn to rock music, drug culture, and personal freedom, Baumann gradually became involved in the politics of the German New Left. He eventually made Germany's most wanted list, and though



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no longer active, is still underground. His story is very personal, and he gradually came to the conclusion that terrorism, though understandable in its historical context, led only to the isolation, imprisonment and death of his friends, without enlisting any support from the working class. Nevertheless, in November 1975 the book was considered dangerous enough for three dozen police armed with sub-machine guns to invade the leftist publishing house in search of copies of the book and other "criminal" evidence. The English-language version is published by the Pulp Press (Box 48806 Station Bental, Vancouver, B.C.), and is also available from Carrier Pigeon distributors (88 Fisher Ave., Boston, MA 02120; \$3.75 postpaid).

*Frank Brodhead*

**Peggy Dennis, *The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925-1975*.**

Creative Arts Book Co. (Berkeley, Calif.) and Lawrence Hill & Co. (Westport, Ct.), 1977, 302 pp., \$5.95 paperback.

This book's subtitle defines the unique vantage point that Peggy Dennis employs. The book has its limitations, but the author's compelling honesty in relating details of her personal life and feelings during her fifty years in the Communist Party make it a fascinating story. Other CP autobiographies such as George Charney's *Long Journey* and John Williamson's *Dangerous Scot* have more to say about the day-to-day work of CP organizing, but there is no other book that comes alive in the way this one does in linking emotional life and political activity.

The author's relationship with her longtime companion Eugene Dennis (they were never formally married) is the centerpiece of the

book. Eugene Dennis held a number of responsible positions in the American CP and as an intermittent representative of the Communist International all over the world. He was general secretary of the American CP, except for time spent in prison, from 1946 to 1959, two years before his death. In describing intra-party squabbles the book is consistently loyal to the generally middle-of-the-road positions that Eugene Dennis took. The most striking impression that emerges, though, is the cold impersonality that marked life in the higher circles of the CP and the Comintern. For example, when she first learned that Eugene Dennis was dying of cancer every party official who talked to her about it expressed concern only about the effect his death would have on the balance of power within the party.

Politically the book expresses views close to those of Al Richmond (in *Long View From the Left*) and Dorothy Healey, both of whom left the CP somewhat earlier than Peggy Dennis did in 1975. They are sympathetic to the Czech experiments before the 1968 invasion and to Eurocommunism today, and critical of the American CP for its fealty to Moscow and its stiffness in relating to other radical groups in the U.S. It is not a unique or peculiarly left-wing criticism of the CP, but this is not a book whose value can be expressed by summarizing its political point of view. This book is simultaneously an act of courage in its self-revelation and an expression of the faith that personal needs and the fight to change society are not incompatible.

*Jim O'Brien*

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