

Stephanie J. Smith. *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 292 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-3568-2.

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Published on H-LatAm (February, 2019)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Stephanie Smith's new book makes a welcome addition to the study of art and politics after the Mexico revolution. Her central argument is that even though Mexico's leftist artists stridently disagreed with one other "on the exact nature of revolutionary art," they "shared a common belief in the potential of art to be revolutionary," and looked to the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) as the nexus through which they defined themselves as revolutionary artists. In contrast to Soviet social realist art, which fixated on "state figure-heads," Mexican social realism, with its distinctive emphasis on the masses and on organic intellectuals, gave leftists greater flexibility to publicly critique "the policies of the Mexican government" (p. 9). Smith seeks to understand how artists created this political space for action within postrevolutionary Mexico and the limitations of this flexibility. The book joins a growing body of literature that focuses on the intersections of art, politics, and culture that includes my own work as well as outstanding studies by such scholars as Mary Coffey, Adriana Zavala, Andrea Noble, and Mary Kay Vaughan.

Smith focuses on dominant historical figures such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Xavier Guerrero, and the Russian intellectual Leon Trotsky (who took refuge in Mexico until he was assassinated in Coyoacán in 1940), while also

pushing beyond them. Drawing inspiration from her own experience as a professional artist, Smith asked insightful questions specifically about how women artists such as Tina Modotti, Frida Kahlo, and Anita Brenner navigated this gendered landscape of art and politics to help shape postrevolutionary culture. At each step in her analysis, which draws on extensive archival research in Mexico, Europe, and the United States, Smith recognizes the complex roles of the artists as producers of art as well as activists. She takes a nuanced approach toward public reception, ranging from directly viewing art to consuming media about the artists. The result is a book that offers compelling analysis, while conveying the fun that draws so many of us to the craft of history.

Smith argues that despite "the PCM's marginal membership in terms of actual numbers, this relatively small group of revolutionary artists and intellectuals played an outsized role in the intellectual life of the country and significantly influenced Mexico's political culture and cultural production through art dedicated to the restructuring of Mexican society" (pp. 3-4). She takes a nuanced view of individual artists' changing understanding of Marxism and art, showing how they used the PCM as the site for their ideological battles, and, in the process, lent their cultural stature to the PCM.

Communist Party leaders were never quite sure what to do with these artists, whether they should put them in charge of political affairs that would distract them from their art or urge them to pursue art as their contribution to the cause. From the 1920s through the 1950s, PCM leaders were exacting in their demand that the artists conform to narrow orthodoxies and eagerly punished or expelled those who demonstrated individualism or aberrant thinking. Given that these artists were difficult to control, we might ask what the PCM got out of its relationship with these obstreperous individualists. The answer, according to Smith, is that the artists helped the PCM “attract additional members and spread propaganda” and present communist “ideas in a manner that would appeal” to the masses (p. 29). Given that the exacting demands of PCM leaders constantly drew artists away from their art and punished them for independent thought, one can’t help but wonder why the artists tried so hard to win the approval of PCM leaders. Smith answers this question, as well, arguing that the artists gained inspiration and prestige from their affiliation with the PCM. Rivera, for instance, felt that his connections to the PCM inspired his best work, and moments when he was estranged “corresponded to” his “weakest work” (p. 22).

Men such as Rivera and Siqueiros loomed large as the public face of leftist radicalism and exerted major influence within the party. The situation for women artists was more complicated. Radical women such as Tina Modotti, who sacrificed so much for the Communist Party, found themselves subjected to gendered forms of diminishment inside and outside of the PCM. According to Smith, this marginalization from the time has been reproduced by modern-day scholars who tend to take seriously men’s actions and decisions as extensions of their political and artistic ideals, while focusing on women’s sexual and romantic relationships, thus burying “the historical memory of the women’s activism beneath the very pa-

triarchal rhetoric that feminist scholars hope to eliminate” (p. 54).

In contrast to this tendency to relegate women to the roles of scorned lovers or victims of machismo, Smith seeks to uncover the political and artistic ideals of women such as Frida Kahlo, Frances Toor, Aurora Reyes, Anita Brenner, Tina Modotti, and Concha Michel. She finds that involvement in the “vibrant cultural and political environment” of postrevolutionary Mexico offered these women novel options to challenge traditional sexual and gender norms in their lives, politics and art (p. 55). Though these women were crucial to the PCM’s various successes, they were unable to resist the pressure by the PCM to put aside women’s issues in favor of a unified front. In addition to her penetrating insights about the possibilities and limitations for women at the time, Smith helps us see Modotti, Kahlo, and others as full, complex human beings and shows how they negotiated expectations that they choose between art and politics, and the means by which we as historians can understand both their individual agency and sexual relationships. These women, who “refused to abide by contemporary gendered norms,” assumed “oversized roles in Mexico’s postrevolutionary cultural life,” and influenced “the establishment of an ‘authentic’ Mexican identity” (p. 147).

Smith’s invaluable study reclaims the PCM as a vital force within postrevolutionary Mexico. Too often, scholars invoke affiliation or nonaffiliation in the PCM as though that in itself tells us something about a historical figure. Smith is far more sophisticated in her study as she carefully pieces together exactly how each of her subjects thought about politics, how they viewed and interacted with the party structure, and how all of this, in turn, informed their artistic production and social relations. In this way, rather than catalog who did or did not belong to the PCM, or simply recount the history of the organization, Smith demonstrates how individuals wove their involvement

with the PCM into their art, political action, and personal relationships, and how these connections evolved over time. The result is an impressive work of scholarship that is a joy to read.

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Citation: Rick Lopez. Review of Smith, Stephanie J. *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2019.

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