

LOS INDIOS AND
THE PAN-AMERICAN SOLUTION:
THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF MODOTTI AND STRAND;
DEFINING MEXICANNESS

by

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Abstract

Two bodies of photographic production are the focus of this thesis: a show entitled *La Exposición Fotográfica de Tina Modotti* of 1929 and a portfolio entitled *Paul Strand: Photographs of Mexico* of 1933. These images are interesting and important because they mark the boundaries of a representational system in Mexico. The Mexican government encouraged this system that Roger Bartra would later refer to as the *homo mexicanus* (the spirit of the modern Mexican). Through the representation of the *homo mexicanus*, the Indian became a *metaphor* for the nation. Modotti and Strand used the Indian to construct identity from different perspectives to that of the government and each other. To locate critiques of a government that used “Revolutionary” rhetoric yet simultaneously suppressed Leftist expression, it is imperative to differentiate the variations of the *homo mexicanus*. Through this analysis, my aim is to demonstrate which forms supported the status quo, and which were transgressive.

La Exposición Fotográfica de Tina Modotti marked a rupture between the national government and an intellectual Left associated with the Mexican Communist Party. The exhibition brought to the surface a competing representation of the *Homo Mexicanus* to the one proposed by the government through its Secretariat of Education. My analysis compares Modotti’s representation of the Indian as universal proletariat with the secretariat’s representation of the Indian as an embodiment of the state. What this exhibition demonstrates is how conflicts surrounding the Secretariat of Education and different factions of the Left were structured through representation. The tensions were highlighted by Modotti’s particular form of “straight” photographic production, and the framing of subject matter (the *trabajadores* [or workers] and indigenous communities). Modotti’s photography established its identity within an

environment marked by the competing structures of the Secretariat of Education, the publication *Contemporaneos*, the Mexican Communist Party, and the Comintern. These institutions used representations of indigenous people transformed into symbols of the Indian to produce claims for the *true* representation of these communities.

A transition in Mexican society and its government occurred between 1929 and 1933. I examine this to explain the shift in visual strategies between Modotti's and Strand's production. This transition was largely a result of the Great Depression and the consequent rise of totalitarianism in Europe. Unlike Modotti who had identified with the Comintern, I argue that Strand's work partly embodied the Pan-Americanist politics of the federal administrations of the United States and Mexico. Starting in 1932, a nexus of reform liberal American intellectuals focused on a representation of marginalized communities using the ideals of Pan-Americanism. The federal governments of the United States and Mexico used the symbols of the "forgotten man" and the "Indian" to demonstrate the hardships brought on by *laissez-faire* capitalism. Consequently, the governments wanted workers to identify themselves with these representations and each government's respective reform policies.

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“Los Indios” and the Pan-American Solution: the Photography
of Modotti and Strand; Defining Mexicanness

Introduction

The photographic images featured in this thesis, those of Tina Modotti and Paul Strand mark the boundaries of a contested representational system in Mexico. The Mexican government encouraged this system, and Roger Bartra would later refer to it as the *homo mexicanus* (the spirit of the modern Mexican). Modotti and Strand produced these works between the years 1929 and 1933 and differed in their conceptualization of the modern Mexican.¹ The photographs, I argue, marked the parameters of a discourse surrounding the Indian. The term “Indian” has become highly contested within recent years as it ineffectively tries to unite several indigenous groups into a homogenous whole. This term though was nevertheless central to creating national identity in the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, it did not address the inequities between those defining this identity and those being defined.

Like language, imagery can classify and reorder meaning from diverse sources into a homogenous whole. By formal arrangement and choices of subject, photography has shaped an archive of knowledge while further it has challenged conventions in visual production and reception. We can see the difference in photographic languages between Modotti and Strand by comparing Modotti’s *Corn, Guitar, Cartridge* (figure 1) with Strand’s *Man, Tenancingo* (figure 2). In Modotti’s image, we can see the corn as symbolic of agriculture and the rural environment of indigenous communities, and the cartridge as symbolic of revolution. Finally, we can see the guitar within the contemporary interest of incorporating “rural” indigenous musical culture into “high” cultural production. As an example of this, Carlos Chavez, the modernist orchestral

conductor actively incorporated indigenous elements into his classical works at this time.

Corn, Guitar, Cartridge functioned as part of a discourse surrounding the revolution with its combination of culture, agriculture and associations with Zapatista revolutionaries from Mexico's past. However, in itself, the cartridge did not evoke Zapatista revolution. But when combined with the corn, its placement spoke to the importance of land reform and redistribution that was central to Zapata's political positions. The image fell within the formalistic tendencies of art photographers with its attention to surface textures as opposed to narration or documentation. By contrast, Strand's image, *Man, Tenancingo* (figure 2) emphasized a humanist subjectivity that placed formal concerns on an equivalency with the dignity of the person represented. Does the revolution Strand evokes in this image fundamentally differ from that of Modotti's?

When comparing these two very different images we can still see many similarities. First, both images make references to rural labor predominantly through the harvesting of corn in Modotti's image and through dirt found throughout the clothing in Strand's image. Furthermore, both images refer to the centrality of the skill of the hand through the implied ability to play the guitar in Modotti's image and through Strand's highlighting of his subject's left hand. Both photographers emphasize shallow space forcing us as viewers to confront these subjects with a great deal of immediacy. Both the corn in Modotti's image and the dirt through Strand's image function as metaphors for the soil from which life comes forth. Both images also have a level of implied force with the reference to the belt of cartridges in Modotti's work and to stability of pose in Strand's work. The photographs both function as portraits of rural peasantry through highly symbolic references in Modotti's image to Strand's relatively more literal portrait. Both subjects also extend beyond the frame of the photograph implying that the subjects are sections of a larger whole. This framing

furthermore solidly anchors each image giving both subjects a sense of unflinching power. Finally both images are arranged so our vision flows down and outward from a point in the upper center of each photograph. This center in Modotti's image is the place at which each of the three objects overlap; the center in Strand's work is his subject's face.

The revolutions that each photographer evokes are immediately seen by us in terms of visual vocabulary. Though both images idealize their subjects, Modotti's work is much more of a call to arms directed to her audience. Strand's work emphatically stresses the central importance of a social type to a larger community. The strong verticals within Modotti's image implies rapid movement towards the revolution; Strand's work de-emphasizes urgency and substitutes it with implied stability.

Another question at this point would be why Modotti chose to represent these three objects within this particular formal rhetoric in 1928. Furthermore, what did this signify in the environment of the gallery that exhibited it? The central concerns of various institutions within Mexico were their commitments to representations of the "Revolution." Several parties believed in a progressive social model embodied in this concept. Revolution, in this context, meant everything from republican and social democratic reform, liberal reforms to incorporate indigenous groups in the social structure of the state, land reform, socialism, communism, Left Oppositionism, Stalinism, Leninism, and Marxism. Did political circumstances force Modotti to position herself within these many forms of revolution?

Why did both Modotti's and Strand's images center on a central symbolic figure, the Indian or peasant? Furthermore, why did the federal government actively pursue this subject as a symbol to define the nation? Did problematic relations between the government and other institutions transpire because of the symbol and its usage? Modotti used images of the Indian to construct an identification for world communist revolution -- an oppositional strategy to the bourgeois politics of the Mexican

government. The writer Roger Bartra defined the term *homo mexicanus* in 1992; he took his definition from writers affiliated with the Mexican journal *Contemporáneos* between 1928 and 1931. In this signification presented in *Contemporáneos* and elsewhere, *the Indian* became a *metaphor* for the nation state. Though Modotti's and Strand's images differed in period (one set was shot in 1929, and the other set was shot in 1933), they demonstrated the continuity of the Indian as metaphor. The definition of national, institutional and anti-institutional identities that used the Indian as a symbol was not restricted to the work of Modotti and Strand. Photographers, filmmakers, muralists and painters from Mexico City, New York, and other centers produced wide-ranging representations of the *homo mexicanus* during this period. Most notably, these producers included Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Laura Gilpin, Anton Bruehl, and Sergei Eisenstein.

We see the symbolic use of the Indian in Modotti's image *Indian Mother Breastfeeding her Baby* (figure 3) and Strand's image *Men of Santa Ana, Michoacán* (figure 4). The similarities between Modotti and Strand were in their choices of indigenous people as subjects and further on their stress on the dignity of these subjects. Modotti's image stressed the recognition of maternity and reproduction as critical forms of labor. However, by itself, the image did not demonstrate the importance of indigenous women's labor through a multiplicity of functions. Yet, when combined with other images which Modotti produced of indigenous women who engaged in other labor activities during 1929, it did produce a heterogenous notion of labor. Overall, Modotti produced an idea that labor was not gendered as either exclusively masculine or feminine, and consequently she broadened class analysis to incorporate this subject. Strand's image, which used the vocabulary of nineteenth century portrait photographers like Julia Margaret Cameron, Félix Nadar, and David Octavius Hill, attempted to place his subjects on an equal position to the bourgeoisie as

subject. Did both photographers, Modotti and Strand, embody an avant garde position? Were they or were they not *critical of the practices of hegemonic structures affecting the subaltern*, the indigenous peoples of Mexico?

Strand shot the second body of photographic images examined in this discussion in the spring of 1933. My main question here is did this body of work represent the liberal Pan-Americanist attitudes of the federal government in Mexico City? As will be discussed below, even though the Mexican government prided itself for its contribution to the "Revolution" it was simultaneously hostile to communism. This might suggest that the only kind of authentic revolution that I am proposing is that of communism. Within the context of 1932 and 1933, many artists and writers do openly advocate this latter definition of revolution, however, both in Mexico City and New York. The government was liberal yet actively censored political expression on the Left throughout the period of February, 1930 to December, 1934. Some governmental officials directed fear campaigns against foreign citizens identified with communism who lived in Mexico. The functioning of foreign artists within Mexico interests me because cultural historians have rarely discussed the ramifications of censorship within the cultural field during this period. Modotti and Strand functioned under different forms of state control and censorship; it is intriguing to see how each photographer negotiated in this environment.

Even though both Modotti's and Strand's practices came out of "straight" photographic production, there were marked differences in attitude by them towards their subjects as well as their formal compositions. Interestingly, Modotti's and Strand's production of "straight" imagery was similar until 1926 when Modotti moved in a trajectory different from that of Strand's production. Also in November of that year, Edward Weston, who had been working with Modotti, moved from Mexico City to San Francisco. Weston had been Modotti's teacher and lover, and Modotti had further worked as his apprentice during his stay in Mexico from 1923 to 1926. Modotti's break

with Weston coincided with her accelerated commitment to revolutionary visual vocabulary. Furthermore, Modotti's shift of emphasis corresponded with her increased involvement with the Mexican Communist Party. Strand remained an apolitical "straight" photographer until 1932 when the effects of the Great Depression as well as the environment of New Mexico altered his focus. Therefore, though Modotti and Strand remained formalists with some stylistic differences, the subject matter of each was intrinsically different from the other from 1926 to 1932. Also, though neither Modotti nor Strand interacted directly with each other at any time, both had interacted with Weston.

Modotti and Strand broke away from the apolitical positions of their mentors, Weston and Stieglitz, towards a politically engaged production during this period. I argue that the formal tactics used by Modotti and Strand, while they produced different outcomes within the cultural realm, articulated visually in the political realm as well. An intertextual analysis of these images, with an emphasis on their materialist surroundings, will explicate their relevance to this historical juncture. What this thesis hopefully avoids is a naturalization of the act of photography. Instead, it proposes historical specificity for why these objects were in contestation with other representations within and beyond Mexico.

Chapter One: Competing Identities: Photography as a Site for Modernist Practice in Mexico and the Comintern

Modotti's Lens and "the Indian": A Construction and its Contestation in and Beyond the Mexican Communist Party

How did the emergence of the photographic medium as a site for modernist discourse affect the symbolic imaging of the Indian? When comparing murals that used the symbol of the Indian against photographs that recorded the same subject there was a belief amongst some viewers that photography faithfully reproduced the subject. A process of naturalization hid the notion that these latter images were also representations; photographs hid the human interventions responsible for their construction. Murals always showed the intervention of the bodies of artists in their production through the artists' brushstrokes. Brushstrokes stood in place of absent muralists. Where brushstrokes stood in place of absent muralists, the equivalent position for photographs were their frames that marked absent photographers. I am interested in looking at modernist strategies that utilized the photographic medium as an intervention into traditional visual regimes. I am less interested, therefore, in representing the medium in a social history of the symbol of the Indian or as a passive documentation of indigenous communities. The latter focuses would continue to render the medium and those active in formulating a discourse surrounding it to a status of reflecting the *zeitgeist* under investigation. During this period, many photographers actively constructed the symbol of the Indian mapped onto the indigenous body from a series of different positions. Only by identifying a small body of these images can we make an active intervention into the known constructions of the symbol of the Indian.

When comparing the amount of written criticism on painters to photographers in 1929, we would have to conclude that critics recognized the brushstroke as more substantial an expression relative to the photographic frame. Furthermore, the

mechanical status of photography meant that many critics would not accept it as an art medium in 1929. Therefore, an art historian who tries to locate debates on its modernist strategies in a Mexican or New York art journalist press is somewhat limited. Since many art critics in Mexico City and New York did not locate the medium as art in 1929, one immediately has to shift the focus of analysis. The area that painting could not enter into, and therefore became the domain of photography, had to deal with the latter medium's materialist construction and illusion of naturalism.

The strongest discourse on photography as a modernist practice in North America, from 1929 to 1932, surrounded the works of "straight" photographers from the United States. Given the relative economic prosperity that prevailed in the United States in 1928 and 1929, prior to the Depression, there was little overt politicization of photography. Geographic distance largely removed America from the debates between communism and the specter of fascism that characterized European relations in 1929. The crisis in American economies, after the Stock Market crash, partially contributed to a re-evaluation of philosophical ideals surrounding modernity in the United States. "Straight" photographers, largely though not exclusively citizens of the United States, shared the apolitical positions of others in the nation. In contrast, rhetoric in Mexico City was very different from that in New York in 1929. "Revolution" was the central philosophical pre-occupation that intellectuals of different political backgrounds advocated. The contradictions between the political environments in Mexico City and New York help explain why Modotti's work appeared more overtly political than "straight" production in New York.

The theoretical positions of "straight" production and the rhetoric of "Revolution" informed Modotti's photography. Like the "Indian," "Revolution" was also a highly contested symbol as conservatives, liberals, intellectuals, bourgeoisie, peasants and others all claimed to work for the "Revolution." By fusing a mode of expression, recognized by an informed intelligentsia in Mexico City, with one of the multiple

conceptions of “Revolution,” Modotti’s images resonated in Mexico. The largely apolitical “straight” production north of the border did not engage issues in this rhetoric. Consequently, the articulation of modernism visually in Mexico City was much different from that in New York. For Modotti to succeed in articulating her “Revolution,” she had to use iconography and subjects that her audience would not misconstrue as advocating the government’s “Revolution.” Thus, she produced images of Julio Mella, a Cuban revolutionary, published her works in communist periodicals, and used specific iconography associated with the Third International. However, it was not enough to use revolutionary subject matter to communicate to her intended audience made up of intellectuals and artists. Photography documenting the gathering of workers was less effective than an image organizing that space that showed all its constituent parts ordered for a central purpose. Additionally, for her images to succeed they had to be unconventional to stand out from other visual production. But, they could not be so unusual that they did not have an affinity with some other form of production.

Different political postures surrounding “straight” photography’s implementation informed the debates around its theoretical framework. Modotti was probably the most overtly political practitioner of “straight” photography in either Mexico City or New York. Modotti was strongly critical of the policies of the Mexican government and identified with the intellectuals associated with the Communist Party in Mexico City. *La Exposición Fotográfica de Tina Modotti* of December, 1929 was a site that marked the relationship of representation to societal stresses in Mexico City. Modotti’s photography and its subject matter played out antagonism between the national government and different factions of the Left. The subject matter for the photographs included indigenous communities and *trabajadores*. The National Library connected with the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* in Mexico City was the site for the exhibition.

Two images gave a sense of Modotti's work within the show: *A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street* (figure 5), and *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete* (figure 6). I argue that the exhibition marked a rupture between the Mexican Secretariat of Education and an intellectual Left associated with the Communist Party. It fomented the rupture and partly contributed to the mass expulsion of foreign Communists, including Modotti herself, in February, 1930. The exhibition is worth examining for it brought to the surface a representation of the *homo mexicanus* that competed with that promulgated by the Mexican Secretariat of Education and *Contemporaneos*, a publication that explored Mexican national identity. In these images (figure 5 and 6), Modotti tilted the camera downward from her elevated vantage point to create the sensation of abstracted forms. Through this process, there was a rupture in what one would traditionally see in either group portraiture or documentary photography. We observe a sea of sombreros (figure 6) out of which emerges the newspaper *El Machete*. As a viewer in the late 1920s, one would identify the newspaper as the official organ of the Mexican Communist Party. The government would have recognized this, and the use of Communist motifs in other images, as the construction of a revolution in contradiction to its own.

Further, these representations stood opposed to the government's symbolic delineation of the Indian as an embodiment of the state. The images did this by showing, not the noble savage overcoming centuries of oppression by Spanish colonialism, but instead portraying an active contemporary ordering of individuals. They moved in unison towards one goal -- solidarity along class lines. Interestingly, the rhetorical devices used by the government and Modotti accentuated different goals that were not mutually exclusive of the other. Moises Sáenz, the former head of the Mexican Secretariat of Education, had discussed the formation of the Mexican state as an extension of post-colonialism. But, Sáenz did not, to the same degree, recognize indigenous communities as an economic class with interests different from those of the

ruling *mestizo* classes. In comparison, Modotti emphasized the symbol of the Indian as worker but rarely as an extension of Mexicanness. Further, she constructed the symbol of the Indian as worker sharing an identity horizontally along class lines. When looking at *A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street*, the repetition of sombreros that unified the composition provided a sense of group identity. Furthermore, Modotti used the same rhetorical device in *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete*. In this composition, the sombreros pointed inward toward the edition of *El Machete*. The headline of the edition read “¡Toda la Tierra, no Pedazos de Tierra!” [All the Land, Not Just Bits of Land!]. At the essence of this headline was a call to revolution, this time in a Zapatista framework.

Modotti wanted to show not so much what she had accomplished in Mexico, but what “could be done without resorting to colonial churches and *charros* and *chinas poblanas* . . . [that] most photographers [had] indulged in. . .”² By identifying these objects, Modotti demonstrated that there was heterogeneity of experiences in Mexico that needed to be looked at instead of reviving tired clichés. Modotti also called on photographers to look at contemporary Mexican society without becoming mired in a mythic past. She set a tone for her exhibition with her statement “On Photography” where she described herself as producing “not art but honest photographs.” In this manifesto, she wrote that although critics applied the words “art” and “artistic” to her photographic work, she disagreed with their usage. Modotti’s attempt was to create independence for the photographic medium which would not have at its core a slavish imitation of other mediums such as painting. Nor was Modotti interested in photography’s dependence on the documenting of material facts. Ironically, Modotti constructed her images using asymmetrical spacing and a concentration on form and light, so her dismissal of the “artistic” was contradicted in her production. Modotti wrote that the majority of photographers still sought “artistic” effects, imitating other mediums of graphic expression. She found that the result was a “hybrid product that

did not succeed in giving their work the most valuable characteristic it should have -- photographic quality." The key word in this quotation was "hybrid." The modernist photography of Weston, Modotti and Strand possessed a formal purity and means of expression that was the antithesis of hybridity. Modotti defined modernism as a hierarchy between purity and hybridity with the former concept taking precedence over the latter concept.

Modotti shared some similarities to the practices of both Weston and Strand. However, formally her work, and its theoretical and revolutionary basis, from 1926 to 1929, was more similar to a photographer in the Moscow based artists' group October. This photographer, Aleksandr Rodchenko, adamantly argued for the autonomy of photography from other media:

We [struggled] against easel painting not because it [was] an aesthetic form of painting, but because it [was] not modern, . . . it [could not] be of any use to the masses. / Hence we [struggled] not against painting but against photography carried out according to the models of painting as if it were an etching. . . . / A "fact" photographed badly [did] not represent a cultural phenomenon, and still less a cultural value for photography. . . .³

Rodchenko and Modotti rebelled not against abstract painting but against the centuries old way of constructing space that was institutionalized by painters and remained entrenched in 1929. Rodchenko further stated that, "[t]he modern city with its multistorey houses, factories, mills, etc. . . [had] changed although not by much, the usual criterion of visual perception. / Only the camera [seemed] to be really capable of describing modern life."⁴ Rodchenko's and Modotti's way of constructing a radicalized space was to shoot images from unconventional vantage points. This called attention to how the modern technological world shifted one's perception of space. These unconventional vantage points also located Rodchenko and Modotti in the avant garde photographic practices of various European centers. The debates over radical experimentation in the Soviet sphere would continue until 1932. This debate would

occur between the avant garde and its opponents, the realists (ironically both sides used Marxist theory to buttress their respective positions).

Modotti criticized those who did not recognize the medium of photography as on par with other mediums of expression. These people, Modotti wrote, “[have looked] myopically at the twentieth century with eighteenth century eyes, incapable of accepting the manifestations of our mechanical civilization.” This last statement was avant gardist as it suggested an embracing of the contemporary environment. Furthermore, it did not romantically view this environment from older notions of visual production. The mechanical eye of the camera was directly analogous to the environment that the individual confronted in everyday existence. The photograph became the most modern form of visual production in that it removed all traces of the hand from its final form. In other words, the hand left no direct trace on the surface of the photographic print unlike other media. The photographic print, therefore, became the product of a disembodied eye, whereas other media evoked a history where various audiences equated the hand with craftsmanship.

The photograph entitled *Mella's Typewriter* (figure 7) supported her proposals. It was typical of Modotti's work of 1928 and 1929 in that it focused on modern life from a viewpoint that broke with traditional ways of delineation. For example, the photographer represented the typewriter diagonally to the picture plane. The image of the typewriter was a sign for both labor and technology, progressing from the physical labor of the writer, represented by the keyboard united with technology, symbolized by the keys. Finally we progress upward to the thoughts of the writer, represented by the text on the page of the image's upper right corner. Thus, the photograph formally united physical labor, technology and thought. The title *Mella's Typewriter* referred to Julio Mella, a revolutionary writer who had been assassinated by right-wing extremists in Mexico City in January, 1929. What appeared in the photograph, in the upper right corner, and in the invitation to the exhibition was important, because it

made the exhibition a symbolic act. The art historian Margaret Hooks attributed the quotation on art and revolution that appeared in part of the photograph and invitation to Leon Trotsky. The typewriter acted as a metonymy for Julio Mella who had been a supporter of Trotsky.⁵

With this referral to Trotsky, the presence of such a quotation would be divisive in the structure of the Mexican Communist Party. The discursive divisions in the party are important to focus on because they demonstrated the incompatibilities between Left Oppositionism (or “Trotskyism”) and Stalinism. In the party, many members viewed the Left Opposition as a sellout to the Revolution; these members viewed those who advocated Oppositionist positions as their enemies. At the essence of this division between the Comintern and the Left Opposition was the issue of “socialism in one country.” Trotsky, in an essay entitled, “A Declaration of *La Verite*” in the Oppositional weekly of the same name, on September 13, 1929, stated that

The liberation of the proletariat [was] possible only through the international revolution, into which the national revolutions [would] enter like successive rings. . . . National socialism [was] economically and politically impossible. We [rejected] Stalin’s theory of socialism in one country as a reactionary petty-bourgeois utopia which incontestably [led] to petty-bourgeois patriotism.⁶

The Stalinist and Comintern position was that revolutionaries needed to establish communism in one nation before they could establish it in other nations.

Another difference between Left Oppositionism and Stalinism had to do with their attitudes toward trade unions. The Stalinists believed that trade unions should be an extension of the party, while the Left Oppositionists believed that unions should be independent of the party. Trotsky wrote that “[it was] criminal to transform the unions into a . . . larger edition of the party, or to make them an appendage of the party.”⁷ Trotsky’s position was that Stalin had moved the communist movement away from the ideals of the October Revolution towards a bureaucratic structure. The importance of

labor to this discussion is to establish how the Mexican government, the Communist Party, and the Left Oppositionists, entered into dialogue with both Modotti's and Strand's works. Modotti and Strand produced images of labor and the labor movement, and the way they composed their images supported or critiqued various institutional positions.

Mella's Typewriter involved contradictions in that Mexican communists championed Mella, regardless of the split between Stalinism and Left Oppositionism, and knowing that Mella had ambiguous sympathies with Left Oppositionism. As well as this photograph, Modotti had shot a portrait of Mella just prior to his assassination, and a special edition of *El Machete* reproduced Modotti's portrait on its front page. This latter image was also interesting because it appeared above all other works in her exhibition. To give the photograph such prominence within the space was to demonstrate the importance of Mella as a figure within the context of the exhibition. As noted above, with the Trotsky quotation in the invitation and the photograph *Mella's Typewriter*, Modotti revealed the importance of "Trotskyism" to her revolutionary views.

However, her position was ambiguous in that as a committed member of the party, she sympathized with it when its leadership expelled Rivera from the organization. Having taken the viewpoint of the party, Modotti should have been naturally sympathetic with the Stalinist ideals towards the Revolution advocated by the organization. According to observers of the time, the party leadership expelled Rivera because he belonged to artistic and intellectual groups that used the writings of Trotsky. Party members felt that these writings gave "a political appearance to selling out"; several party members knew about Rivera's Left Oppositionist sympathies. Rivera wrote about his expulsion, arguing that the leadership carried it out under ridiculous pretexts; he knew that the purge occurred because of his Oppositionist leanings. He noted "*Declaro que sólo estaré de acuerdo con aquellos que hayan estén*

dispuestos a trabajar en adelante dentro de ella; entiendo por línea internacional de la oposición aquella definida y encabezada por el compañero León Trotsky."⁸ In this perspective, Modotti held an ambiguous position as some party members identified her as a *stalinista* and yet others saw her as a *trotskista*.

The periodical *Mexican Folkways* possessed a non-communist stance that was evident through a review, printed in the publication, of the Modotti exhibition. It largely avoided Modotti's specific social concerns, and instead it focused heavily on the formal qualities of her work. Frances Toor, the reviewer, noted that the Modotti exhibition was the very first exhibition that the newly autonomous National University of Mexico had held. The university became autonomous from the federal government that past summer. Toor mentioned Modotti's relationship with Weston and observed that Weston had left Mexico in 1926 while Modotti had remained to develop her work further. Toor found that Modotti held a place amongst "artists and the general public of good taste." She presented Modotti as a person of studied talent who was recognized by a selected audience of intellectuals in Mexico City. Toor effaced all references to Modotti's involvement with communism and effectively recast her as a predominantly apolitical photographer who was almost exclusively concerned with formal strategies.⁹ Later on in her review, Toor focused on an essay written on Modotti by Carleton Beals from February 1929. In slight contradiction to Toor, Beals noted that Modotti's work was "born of the . . . struggle . . . towards attainment of a true and superior balance between social and individual expression."¹⁰ Beal's quotation, in Toor's text, probably leaned the closest towards exhibiting a political stance since it recognized a social position for the artist apart from pure individualism.

Toor then stressed Modotti's relationship to Rivera. She quoted Rivera who had written earlier that "Tina Modotti, his pupil [Weston's] [had] done marvels in sensibility on a plane, perhaps, more abstract, more aerial, even more intellectual, as [was] natural for an Italian temperament. Her work [flowered] perfectly in Mexico and

[harmonized] with our passion.”¹¹ The Rivera quotation emphasized the connection between intellectualization and other notions of experimentation in connection to Italianness. In Rivera’s statement, there was a distinction made between Modotti, the student, and an ambiguous social, ethnic, or biological predisposition attributed to her (Italianness). He viewed Modotti’s Italian heritage as an asset for visual experimentation in Mexico. Moreover, when the Rivera quotation referred to “our passion,” it did not limit it to the exclusive passion of the Mexican muralist movement. Instead, it essentialized the characteristic by extending it to all the people that Rivera constituted as falling in a construction identified as “Mexico.” Can too much be made of Rivera’s connection between Modotti’s production and her ethnicity? I think not because of the nationalism that was at the core of a significant amount of modernist production in Mexico during this period.

Modotti’s *Hammer and Sickle* (figure 8) presented in the exhibition, and her photomontage *El codigo federal del trabajo, una trampa tendida al obrero* [*The Federal Code of Employment, a Trap Spread Out for the Worker*] (figure 9) were two examples of her work that demonstrated her political views. *El Machete* and the *New Masses* published Modotti’s photomontage in 1929, and these works played up symbolism staunchly associated with the October Revolution and Soviet communism. The viewer could analyze *Hammer and Sickle* completely on a formal level like the “straight” photography of predominantly New York formalist photographers. However, he or she was ultimately forced to acknowledge that the two objects photographed had a strong resonance as well-known revolutionary icons. The other work, *El codigo federal del trabajo*, was a photomontage that shared superficial similarities with the work of other communist artists like John Heartfield. In the image, the upward moving fist with hammer was also a well-known Revolutionary icon. The text of the photomontage read:

Workers of all Tendencies: Unite in the Defense of Your Threatened Interests
Our demands have to be clear and specific: become the sole class front, in order to
impede the approval of the Federal Code of Employment that the Government
plans: fight without truce for the autonomy and free operation of [workers']
organizations; work for mandatory arbitration!; fight without rest for wage
increases and against the [negative] readjustment of pay, time and production!

The text in the photomontage was direct with no ambiguity regarding its purpose. The work used a photographic image set against no defined background, with the exception of superimposed typographical elements. Overall, the montage constructed the peasant body through its supreme power especially through the stability of the heavily grounded arm and hammer. This arm and hammer was further anchored by the solid black border on the image's left and bottom sides. However, even though the image was about empowerment, it failed to deal with the symbolic body of the peasant in a complex manner.

What I have presented thus far is the articulation of national identity through numerous sources. However, what I have not discussed is the attitudes of the Mexican Communist Party towards the "Indian" and how the party constructed this symbol. There was very little discussion in the party regarding indigenous communities, as either an audience or as a revolutionary and symbolic subject. The party's appeal lay primarily with the *obreros* and *campesinos* (workers and peasants respectively) to which they tried to organize under their organization. Again, a tension between Stalinism and Left Oppositionism slightly exposed another problem. Bertram Wolfe, in the pamphlet *The Trotsky Opposition: Its Significance for American Workers* of 1928, argued that the differences between Stalinism and Left Oppositionism had to deal with the roles of the worker and peasant in revolutionary society. Wolfe stated that Stalinism emphasized the supremacy of the worker as leader, while Left Oppositionism emphasized that the proletariat and worker also oppressed the peasant. How did this translate to Mexican society and indigenous communities that were not directly equivalent to the peasantry yet held similar social positions? The party saw

racial issues as an extension of class oppression, whereas the government saw racial issues as an extension of national unity problems. Therefore, Modotti's images projected a viewpoint that was slightly, though not exclusively, closer to the party position. However, her images were equivocal and closer to a synthesis of these positions rather than the entire adoption of one over the other.

A major juncture partially explained the difference between Modotti's and Strand's photographic production. This juncture, which art historical analyses of Strand's work have not addressed before, was the environment in which he functioned and how the events of early 1930 influenced his production. This environment explained why the revolutionary subjects that Modotti focused on did not appear with the same explicitness by foreigners working in Mexico after her departure. The government expelled communists like Modotti beginning in February 1930. Further, the range of imagery that foreigners produced in Mexico after February, 1930 was also restricted by the government. The censorship of the Mexican Communist Party included a complete ban on its publication *El Machete* (Rivera and other artists had founded the publication in the mid 1920s). Non-Leninist intellectuals who published material in various publications such as *Mexican Folkways* or *Contemporaneos* did not adequately explore the suppression of the Communist Party in 1930.

(Re) Constructing the Revolutionary “Indian”: *Contemporaneos*’ and the Education Secretariat’s Alternative Vision to Modotti’s Revolution

The previous section largely focused on how Modotti’s imagery functioned in the political environment of the Mexican Communist Party. To explain how these images functioned in a larger context, I now turn to predominantly non-Leninist institutions that constituted the political center of Mexican society. A conflict arose between some artists and photographers of the Left and the Mexican government. This was due to the latter institution’s wanting to consolidate an image of the Revolution with the problem of the Indian’s integration into this scheme. Looking at arguments regarding the symbol of the Indian in Mexican national culture, I have found it helpful to look at Roger Bartra’s work. Bartra has examined different forms of hegemony, the most important being that of urban *mestizos* in relation to rural indigenous communities. Moreover, he has examined several late 1920s studies that were produced by writers connected to *Contemporaneos* and other journals regarding the national character. What interested him in these studies was that their object of reflection, Mexicanness, was actually an imaginary construct that the studies had formulated.¹² Most importantly, Bartra saw the imaginary construct of Mexicanness as an important force in the institutionalization of the modern capitalist state in Mexico.¹³

Different institutions transformed the bodies of various indigenous communities in Mexico into symbolic metaphors. Placing Modotti’s work in a larger context allows us to see how this transformed symbolic body was not static but highly contested. Modotti’s involvement in the Communist Party positioned her construction of the symbolic body of the Indian in a discourse surrounding Trotsky’s permanent revolution. The major point here is her emphasis on the contemporary or modernist approach to her subject using the photographic medium from an unorthodox vantage point. In contrast, what follows concentrates more specifically on literary and oral

representation of the symbolic body of the Indian. The primary thread that ties Modotti's visual production into the literary and oral representations that follow is the continuity in intertextual discourse surrounding the symbolic body of the Indian. What is of interest here is how the vocabulary of Modotti's photography undermines the representations of the symbolic body of the Indian in entirely different modes of representational enunciation. Secondly, what is important here is that the literary and oral representations that follow require the suppression of Modotti's production to construct their reality.

In this study, the notion of a national self versus an external definition of Mexicanness is helpful, because studies that have been done on Modotti have largely focused on her biography. These studies have often placed her photographic work as a secondary consideration to her adventures in and beyond Mexico. This has often relegated her photographic work to a lower status than her organizing work for the party. By using Bartra's study, we can refocus the discussion principally on her photographic work and demonstrate how it transgressed other representations of Mexicanness. Likewise, studies that many art historians have written on Strand have also been preoccupied with biography and have not adequately situated his production with other production in Mexico. By using Bartra's study, we can place Strand's production in a complex field of national identity formation. The Mexican environment in 1932 and 1933 was substantially different from the American environment. By placing a study of Strand that emphasizes discursive constructions in place of one that focuses on biography we gain greater complexity. Furthermore, by using Bartra's study we can problematize the Mexican Revolution by seeing it as a rhetorical device used by post-revolutionary governments to maintain the status quo in Mexico. This is helpful to demythologize the romantic constructions of Revolution that we see in some Strand studies.

Those that largely inherited the gains of the Mexican Revolution during the period under investigation were the urban *mestizos*. Alfonso Reyes proposed one construction of the *mestizo* (a person of mixed ancestry usually Spanish and Native) in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He viewed this social group as enduring all the sins of the modern epoch, but still living immersed in the golden age (in the “subverted paradise”).¹⁴ Reyes located the *mestizo* in a double position; both participating in the industrializing economy of the twentieth century while at the same time inherently aware of his or her otherness to European culture. This framing of social groups under a national framework was partially at variance with Modotti’s position. Firstly, the whole idea of producing a discourse to support the nation state was inherently anti-Trotskyist. Secondly, Modotti’s work was not really about a conception of Mexicanness since this would ultimately support the power base of the government.

On Modotti’s visual production, the above mentioned discourse surrounding “Indians” incorporation into national identity was contradictory to that of her position. Both positions were anti-imperialist in their rejection of philosophical thought associated with centuries of Spanish colonialism. However, Modotti’s position went further by locating inequities in Mexican society itself, especially in the relations between a bourgeois government and indigenous communities and workers. Modotti’s associates in the Mexican Communist Party exacerbated the conflict by advocating Stalin’s theory of “social fascism” instituted in 1928. This theory located anti-Stalinist government positions, whether they be social democratic, republican or fascist, under the same label of “fascism.” Interestingly, under such a construction, the party and its members could define Mexico as a fascist state.

In the context of Mexico, both “social fascism” as well as “permanent revolution” became somewhat problematized by how they should be applied to a post-colonial nation. An interplay between universal culture, often defined as European, and indigenous inflections were common in many forms of nationalist production from 1929

to 1931. José Vasconcelos asserted the value of sentiments against reason. He believed that it was fitting for an “emotional race like our own to establish the principles of an interpretation of the world according to our emotions. . . .”¹⁵ Vasconcelos wanted to be universal, while at the same time Hispanic. Several artists and writers wanted to address the inequality between Mexicans’ lack of acknowledgment of their own culture compared to their acknowledgment of European culture. These artists and writers wanted to focus on indigenous contributions to Mexican culture as an antidote for derivative productions based off of European culture.

The weapon in fighting hegemony, past and present, was through a notion of nationalist discourse best articulated by the Mexican Ministry of Education. The ministry from 1929 to 1933, headed by Aarón Sáenz and Narcisco Bassols respectively, promoted this discourse. Professor Moisés Sáenz, a former assistant secretary of the ministry also promoted the *homo mexicanus* as seen in his presentation, “The Genius of Mexican Life.” He delivered this paper at “The Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America Fifth Seminar” in Mexico City in the summer of 1930.¹⁶

Thinkers like Sáenz influenced Bartra’s construct of the *homo mexicanus* as an assimilation of groups -- particularly indigenous communities with the *mestizo*. Sáenz noted in his speech that

. . . one [had] to learn that in every part of America where Spain held sway she created a new type, the *mestizo*, this being not the least of the many remarkable contributions of Spain to the New World. The *mestizo* [has been], of course, a cross, a blend and as such *he must be considered as having a quality of unity* rather than of contrast.¹⁷ [Emphasis mine]

Sáenz emphasized what he considered important to the future definition of the state -- the process of *mestizaje* of the population. The “Indian” was important to him in that this symbol could bring a unifying structure to the new Revolutionary state -- through the Indian’s assimilation into a homogenizing culture.

Sáenz proposed a deterministic model for the Mexican environment through the following statement:

The coming up of the *mestizo* type [was] inevitable; from a biological point of view the evolution of the Mexican [has been] an unquestionable fact. With the proportion of whites practically at a stand-still, the growth of the population must come about by more and more frequent crossings of Indian and *mestizo*. Indian blood is, consequently, in the ascendancy. Mexico is becoming darker.¹⁸

Again, Sáenz's focus rested on the future of Mexico as a *mestizaje* state. Sáenz saw the hybridity of cultures implied in the term *mestizo* as a positive postulation.

Simultaneously, he implied that the status of indigenous peoples were still underdeveloped as long as they remained separate from the Caucasian element of the *mestizos*. Though the speech pointed out that "Indian blood" was on the ascendancy -- again another positive postulation -- he still kept it contained in the *mestizo* framework. Thus, the recognition of indigenous cultures was never the goal in Sáenz's text, even though he stressed the idea that Mexico was "becoming darker." The true goal was indigenous communities' assimilation into the *mestizo* framework. This latter group, in Sáenz's estimation, best held the interests and welfare of the state apparatus.

This notion of the *mestizo* or *mestizaje* as the unifying structure of the revolutionary state was antithetical to Modotti's construction of the *mestizo* and Indian. Her Indian construction utilized the "Revolution" but evoked "permanent revolution" where class interests theoretically motivated all oppressed groups to overthrow bourgeois governments (the Mexican state included). Her work argued against national consciousness and advocated workers' consciousness pan-nationally in favor of the "permanent revolution." She did this primarily through the distribution of her work through international communist presses as opposed to solely distributing her production exclusively through capitalist publishers. In her first solo exhibition,

her works spoke to her commitment to the “October Revolution” and not to the one claimed by the Mexican government.

As we have seen thus far, in Mexico there was an exploration of the difference between European defined culture and a recognized indigenous culture. How did Modotti’s work address this concern? For her work to accomplish significant resonance in this environment, it had to first acknowledge this difference between European and indigenous cultures. Though Modotti’s formalism was imported, her underlying political application was almost entirely alien from pre-New Deal American photography. Its focus on the Indian as proletariat was also different from some European artists’ focus on non-Occidental societies as the source of a golden age before industrialism.

My analysis has partially explored the predominantly bourgeois concern in Mexico of focusing on hegemony through the form of anti-imperialist nationalism. Modotti’s critique of hegemony largely focused on the corruption of the Mexican government; as such her interest was not in its superficial reform. However, her position came very close to Left Oppositionism with its rejection of nationalism and its replacement with permanent revolution. Using the example of *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete* (figure 6), its focus was on education through the primary organ of the Communist Party. Through the importance of *El Machete* in this composition, we see the role that Modotti intended the party to play in the revolutionary struggle. The publication *El Machete* played a similar role to that of the Mexican Ministry of Education though towards fundamentally different outcomes.

The chief focus of many bourgeois intellectuals in Mexico City was the importance of the *mestizo* type for the success of the Mexican state. Modotti’s focus through *Corn, Guitar, Cartridge; A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street; Hammer and Sickle; and El Codigo federal del trabajo, una trampa tendida al obrero* (figures 1, 5, 8, and 9) was to distinguish the indigenous worker from the *mestizo*, and to further fracture the

ideology of cultural incorporation. A difference concerning Modotti's relationship to the government was that the latter institution saw the revolution in its past, while Modotti advocating the permanent revolution saw it in its future. This may explain the urgency that Modotti brought to her images as opposed to its focus on a nostalgic, pre-colonial golden age. The government could use the golden age metaphor to incorporate its opposition into its own platform. The stabilization of the revolutionary state in Mexico had occurred largely due to Zapata's defeat in 1919. Zapata had advocated much greater redistribution of land into the hands of rural peasantry than those who governed Mexico from 1919 to 1934. The closest form of revolution in the Mexican context that approached Modotti's position was that of the Zapatistas of the previous decade. Modotti's construction reconstituted the Indian into the peasant and worker to fall in Leninist, Stalinist, and Trotskyist categories. Where the conflict was most apparent in the government's and Modotti's discourses was the concept of a workers' state which both parties appropriated into their platforms.

The suppression of difference to establish visual and intertextual symbolic constructions of the Revolution was central to Modotti's, the Communist Party's and the government's positions. Sáenz's critique of the "melting-pot" ideology of the United States was contradictory to his *mestizaje* project which he also imbued with homogenization. Likewise, for the Leninist Revolution to succeed, there had to be a suppression of difference based on race for Modotti and the Communist Party to effectively initiate their projects. In the party, homogenization of vision was difficult because of debates between Left Oppositionists and Stalinists over "socialism in one country" versus "permanent revolution." Moreover, Modotti's works, to be truly dynamic, had to deviate from the Stalinist position requiring the suppression of one's ego for the service of the party. Her work had to combine individual expression, a bourgeois anti-Stalinist attitude, with political symbolic constructions to attain such dynamism.

Ultimately, this fusion of “straight” apolitical formalistic discourse combined with revolutionary symbolism mapped onto indigenous communities and others distinguished Modotti’s photography in Mexico and beyond. It also saved her work from serving a position of pure propaganda as entirely different audiences could address its component parts. These audiences could include those who read *Creative Arts* and *Mexican Folkways*, or *New Masses* and *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*. However, this did not mean that the work was entirely open for as many interpretations as we would like to place on it. It produced tensions in each venue, as the writers of each publication were required to suppress discussion of Modotti’s work which strayed from their editorial mandates.

Like Modotti’s photographic constructions, Mexican culture possessed a hybrid past that continued through to the period under investigation. Modotti’s hybridity was in terms of the combination of “straight” production from north of the border to cultural and revolutionary constructions particular to Mexico. The hybridity of Mexican culture was clearly a product of centuries of colonialism and imperialism. As Sáenz stated

Our wealth [prior to the Revolution] was foreign -- Spanish the land, North American the railroads, English the mines. The schools were inadequate, cold and formal. *Art, to be recognized, had to have a foreign stamp.* Appreciation for the tradition of Mexico had become a matter of expediency. As we made the discovery of our world, chaos once more seemed the only reality.¹⁹ [Emphasis mine]

In this quotation, Sáenz discussed a constructed homogenous community, Mexicans, and its prior inability to build identity due to the hegemony of former imperial powers. “Art . . . had to have a foreign stamp”; this belief required Rivera to seek out the environment of Paris before he could be recognized in Mexico and abroad. Even Manuel Alvarez Bravo, an internationally recognized modernist photographer from Mexico, required associations with Modotti, Weston, Sergei Eisenstein, Strand and

André Breton to gain acceptance. Bravo produced an indigenous form of modernist photography that adapted and transformed the formalist positions of “straight” and Surrealist production to his specific environment. In Mexico City, photography was defined by a diversity of tactics from Bravo’s Parisian influenced Surrealism, to the American-defined “straight” production of Modotti and Strand.

Following Modotti’s exhibition, artistic expression in Mexico entered into a new era where the censorship of anti-government expression altered national and Revolutionary discourses. The government suppressed the Mexican Communist Party in February, 1930; the government also placed a ban on the party’s presses thus forcing *El Machete* underground. Consequently, with this development, the party’s newspaper took on the new name *El Machete Ilegal*. Party members began to reorganize at this time and actively pursued trade unions to get across their message. As discussed above, the government deported Modotti along with several other foreign communists during February of 1930. Since there was a suppression of political expression in the nation, news about its occurrence came predominantly through foreign sources. The *Labor Defender* of New York published graphic coverage of the repression in February, 1930 with photographs taken by Modotti.

In this new Mexican political environment, free from the critiques of Communist revolutionaries, a new era of bourgeois discourse on the state filled the void. Along with the writings of Sáenz, Vasconcelos, Caso and Reyes, a written discourse on the Indian, in the defining national identity, was also pursued by Samuel Ramos. Ramos wrote two articles on the new nationalism which were published in *Contemporáneos* in 1930 (the essays were entitled “*El sueño de Diego*” and “*El sueño de México*”). To give an indication of his writing we can notice the influence of Carl Jung, the psychoanalyst, on his work. Ramos used Jung’s “collective unconscious” to create Mexican identity through the development of the social types that Ramos called *creole*, *pelado*, *mestizo* and Indian. With each category, he ascribed behavioral, social and

mental characteristics that all in the social group supposedly shared. By taking heterogeneous groups and essentializing them under labels such as "Indian" and "*pelado*," Ramos developed types which he explained using Jung's psychoanalytic discourse. The other contribution that Ramos made to the new conceptualization of the Mexican was his proposal for a new form of Mexican national culture. Ramos stressed that the production of cultural works should be secondary to the process involved in building a stronger Mexican identity. He felt that communication amongst Mexicans was important to educate a multiplicity of communities about their shared heritage in the nation.

According to Ramos, the state was an enlarged image of the individual; the state that he was interested in constructing was that of Revolutionary Mexico. Ramos used this conceptualization to argue that the Mexican behaved in his private world the same way that he did in public life. Subsequently, he wrote that the urban Mexican imitated modes of European civilization to feel that he was equal to the European. Ramos' Mexican established in his and her cities a privileged group cohesion which considered itself superior to all rural Mexicans.²⁰ Here, Ramos used not only the Jungian "collective unconscious" but combined it with a reading of Plato to identify the individual as a metonymy for the state. Also, he outlined a bourgeois notion amongst some in the *mestizo* population who were content with passively imitating European culture.

Of interest to Ramos, in his national construction, was the *pelado* which he identified as the proletariat on the border between rural and urban environments. Ramos observed that several parties constituted the *pelado* as the most elemental and clearly defined expression of national sensibility in 1930 and 1931. Through a derogatory portrayal of the *pelado* as removed from reality in his conscious dealings with the world, Ramos demonstrated his bourgeois subjectivity. He created the *pelado* as an "other" when he noted that

In the *pelado* a man who triumphs in any activity, anywhere, owes his success to his "balls." . . . The phallus suggests to the *pelado* the idea of power. From this he has derived a very impoverished concept of man. Since he is, in effect, a being without substance, he tries to fill his void with the only suggestive force accessible to him: that of the male animal.²¹

Through this passage, Ramos attempted to relegate his conception of the *pelado* to a position of "otherness" by associating him with the animal. Furthermore, Ramos' comparison of the *pelado* with the male animal suggested that the *pelado's machismo* constituted him solely as a sexual force devoid of any ability to think. Interestingly, Ramos' classifying of social groups such as the *pelado* into national identity was important because it was consistent with other formulators of the national psyche. Ramos' *pelado* was not different from Sáenz's Indian in their suggestions that these symbols were connected to a larger framework associated with a national objective. Modotti differed from them in that she did not locate the *pelado*, Indian or peasant in this national framework.

Ramos constructed Mexican nationalism as the belief that the nation was complete in form, with a symbolic "national physiognomy" that artists only needed to reveal. He emphasized that this belief was supported by artists' inclinations to show the "picturesque -- mountain scenes, dotted with Indian figures in their typical white cotton suits and with cactus plants." Through this "picturesque" Indian (as well as "picturesque" *pelado*) we can make a connection to its marketability to both a bourgeois class in urban Mexico and tourists. On the commodification of the Mexican environment, Ramos made an excellent observation:

Recent art has undertaken an amplification -- as in a resounding box -- of the 'picturesque' dimensions that have found wide acceptance, especially among Yankee tourists. But this Mexico of the *charro* (Mexican horsemen) and the Mexico of the *china poblana* (colorful style of women's regional dress), as well as the Mexico of the legendary savage. . . constitute a Mexico for export which is just as false as the romantic Spain of the tambourine.²²

We can see here that there had obviously been an intellectual awareness of the commodification of Mexico for a market abroad. In this context, the “picturesque” was removed by some artists from any sense of modern, contemporary Mexico. In this position, both he and Modotti were in agreement. They both used the examples of the *charro* and *china poblana* as examples of clichéd elements used in visual production. Both photographer and writer, in this context, called for a complexifying of the idea of a Mexican environment rendered in visual form.

Ramos proposed that the most important direction for Mexicans to look towards for national “Revolutionary” constructions was the overlooked *creole* culture of the nation. *Creole* culture, like that of *mestizo* culture, had functioned in a position different from that of indigenous cultures in Mexico. In the defining of national symbols both *creoles* and *mestizos* shared a similar position in their equating of the indigenous body with the goals of the Mexican Revolution. Ramos’ essay “*La cultura criolla*” was published in a 1931 edition of *Contemporáneos*. A revised version of the essay appeared later in his book entitled *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* of 1934. To give a sense of this social group, we should examine the 1931 Mexican government census. Here, the government defined the *creole* population as a group with seven-eighths caucasian ancestry or greater to one-eighth Indian ancestry or less (roughly fifteen percent of the population). This group’s culture, Ramos felt, should be the focus of study on the direction of Mexicanness as it represented an unexamined “Europeanism” on Mexican soil.

Ramos emphasized that although indigenous communities constituted Mexico’s greatest population, their “state of mind” had prevented them “from freeing themselves from nature.”²³ He continued by noting that “tied to nature, they [lived] in an atmosphere of primitivism. . . .” Further, Ramos found that the concepts of family, religion, and morality in the *creole / mestizo* urban middle class were defined by *creole*

culture.²⁴ Through such a position, Ramos attempted to link the bourgeois sentiments of this group to that of their European equivalent. Commenting on the *creole* population, he stressed that as “*men* they have reached the highest level to which a Hispanic American can aspire. Their spiritual growth would have been impossible without the nourishment of European culture, . . . [this has] bound their ideal interests to their native soil.”²⁵ Most importantly, there was a certain irony in Ramos’ construction of *creole* culture as central to a future definition of “Revolutionary” Mexicanness. This irony dealt with Ramos’ focus on *creole* culture where the expression of European qualities took a privileged position over indigenous qualities.

The *creole* population served Ramos’ position of spiritual leadership the same way that the *mestizo* population served Sáenz’s in his study. Modotti also advocated a group, the proletariat bordering the urban and rural environment which for her served the position of spiritual leadership. In the context of the years 1929 to 1931, Ramos’, Sáenz’s and Modotti’s positions referred to dramatically different political affiliations. The idea of leadership was discussed by the Mexican government and the Communist Party; it also crossed the revolutionary discourses of Stalinism and Left Oppositionism. For Ramos to locate leadership in the *creole* population as compared to the *pelado* or indigenous groups was really to advocate the status quo in Mexico. His position neither challenged the political structure of the nation nor transformed it. Sáenz was more skillful in that he used the rhetoric of the “Revolution” to argue for the social progressivity of the social democratic Mexican government.

For Modotti’s work, such positions articulated by Sáenz and Ramos in 1930 and 1931 gave a strong indication of how a photographer could critique their positions. With Modotti, there was a championing of what Ramos derogatorily referred to as the Mexican *pelado* and which she characterized as the proletariat-urbanized Indian. Though her images appeared months before either Sáenz’s or Ramos’ writings, they articulated a critical attitude by their focus on the valorization of this group. With the

brutal suppression of the Communist Party in Mexico from January to June 1930, such a critical position was ultimately suppressed in the process. The discursive field surrounding the indigenous body within Mexico was not large enough for both positions to coexist as contesting yet important elements of democratic debate. Moreover, this suppression meant that no photographer like Modotti entered into these dialogues, with the same vigor, for several years.

The government sent the artistic environment in Mexico, from January, 1930 onward, into a fundamentally different direction than it had been throughout the previous decade. Overall, the government had entrenched its position and heavily censored its perceived opposition. Most of its opposition had come from intellectuals and artists associated with the Leninist Left. For it not to be perceived as insular, the government increased its contacts with other Latin American nations, and after 1931 increased its cultural ties with the United States. Also, with the censorship of Leftist expression, the issues that artists had engaged in during the previous decade, such as the significance of the permanent revolution, had declined in importance. Most importantly, the emphasis in artistic production had now generally shifted towards the greater symbolic representation of the labor movement and pre-Columbian Indian constructions.

One discourse of the early 1920s, that immediately followed the defeat of the Zapatista revolutionaries, focused on incorporating indigenous groups more actively into the nation; these discussions emerged again in the early 1930s. The various institutions that mediated identity in Mexico City (for example, *El Universal*, the Secretariat of Education, and *Contemporáneos*) defined the socio-economic interests of the urban *mestizo* middle class. Ideologically, the views of this social group became the main focus of these venues. When examining national popular culture, one should see it not as a national folklore, but as the myth medium of the victorious party in an extended historical struggle.²⁶ In the case of the Mexican government, those in power

had largely drawn their support from all the previous governments from 1919 onward. The defeat of the Zapatistas by the Constitutionalists in 1919 was also the defeat of their objective commonly known as "land and liberty." Though the Constitutionalists promised greater land redistribution to peasants, they were extremely slow in their reforms. To advance a theory of the state, it is indispensable to examine the extensions of the state that Louis Althusser referred to as "ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)."²⁷ To apply Althusser's conception of ISAs, in this context, is to recognize that several private institutions supported the ideals of the social democratic Mexican government. These private institutions represented the values of the bourgeois classes and appealed to the liberal and so-called "revolutionary" ideals of this group. In the bourgeois classes' attitudes towards art, it was helpful when Rivera, the most prominent of the Mexican muralists, was expelled from the Communist Party. This demonstrated that it was the government, the commissioner of several Rivera murals, that was the true leader in support of the arts.

The policy called "Cultural Incorporation" was part of the Mexican government's attempt to bring indigenous communities into the construction of the new revolutionary state. By 1920, Sáenz noted that the Mexican Revolution evolved, if not a theory about the "Indian," at least an ideal that concerned him. "Cultural Incorporation" of the "Indian" became the stated purpose of one of the bureaus of the newly instituted National Department of Education in 1920.²⁸ The criticism of the program included the argument that it was too one-sided; aspects of it were as bad as the program of "Americanization" of Mexican-Americans in the United States. When approaching the Indian, Sáenz noted that "... we [were] too imbued with an idea of superiority. We [had] our Mexican complexes; we [were] interested only in making of every Indian a good Mexican."²⁹ The government's position was that if the state was to triumph, it would be because it conserved the spirit of the Indian while it simultaneously advanced science. Narciso Bassols, Minister of Education, noted that

“we [wanted] to obtain the external forms rather than the spiritual elements of the European utilitarian civilization. . . .” He added, “but we [tried] to save in the soul of the Indian all the virtues that beyond doubt surpass the morality of contemporary capitalism.”³⁰

Chapter Two: Controlled Perceptions:
Paul Strand's Pan-American Indian and the Co-opted Revolution

New York "Straight" Photography (Re)Defined:

The Importance of the Mexican Revolution to Strand's Renewed Modernism

No worker respecting his medium would so much as recognize the mongrel manipulated "effects" offered as photographs. Any method which changes the quality of the original negative is a bastard process without classification. 31

Edward Weston (1931)

When photography takes itself out of the contexts established by Sander, Germaine Krull or Blossfeldt and frees itself from physiognomic, political and scientific interests, then it becomes creative. . . . "The spirit that has mastered mechanics turns the most exact results into parables of life.' . . . The creative in photography is the latter's responsiveness to fashion. *The world is beautiful* -- that precisely is its motto. 32

Walter Benjamin (1930)

What follows may appear to be a dramatic shift away from the Mexican government's incorporation of the Indian into Revolutionary mythology towards photography in New York. However, there is an important continuity. This continuity deals with the particular ways that American photographers working in Mexico conceptualized the Mexican Indian as a revolutionary figure. We cannot find the roots of this visual conceptualization exclusively in Mexico City; the roots had some basis beyond, most notably in New York. The formalism that Modotti used to construct her images functioned in a predominantly American type of production referred to as "straight" photography. Several photographers who exhibited in New York, including individuals like Strand, promoted this discursive practice; the dealer Julien Levy recurrently featured "straight" production in his gallery.

“Straight” imagery was part of a different discourse than the archive of knowledge which photography had served in Mexico prior to Weston’s and Modotti’s arrival. The “straight” image isolated while at the same time emphasized the characteristics of the subjects that photographers recorded. Even though most “straight” photographers denied their status as artists, their concentration on formal details such as texture, light, repetition, mass, point of view, size, scale, framing, contrast, and symbolism placed their concerns parallel to that of other artists. The “straight” image sharply delineated its subject while simultaneously it tried to evoke multiple interpretations through asymmetrical compositions which did not exclusively rely on factual recording. Also many “straight” photographers tightly controlled the space that they recorded on film. The photographer’s control of space created a critical focus on formal concerns, yet at the same time the photographer skillfully edited the viewing parameters for audiences.

“Straight” photographers could be seen in at least two perspectives: as those concerned solely with issues of form, and those whose experimentation was politically committed. By 1931, experimental photographers like Rodchenko were denounced by some in the communist press as formalists and therefore uncommitted to the Stalinist revolution. Photographers like Modotti largely stopped photographing after 1930 due to the new pressures placed on her by leaders in the Communist Party in Moscow. The pressures of party life often coerced her into faceless non-experimental documentary production for the service of the party. In New York and Mexico City, politically committed photographers positioned themselves in relation to shifting conceptions of the Revolution. Stalinism, unlike Trotskyism, increasingly demanded that artists abandon bourgeois subjectivity expressed through experimentation. This bourgeois experimentation was to be replaced by a selfless commitment to the new socialist order in terms of artists’ focus on “realism.” “Liberalism” in New York, in comparison to revolutionary politics in Moscow, defined the attitudes of some of the politically

committed “straight” photographers. To some degree, this liberalism defined the subjects of photography in terms of the paternalistic agent of a social democratic ideal.

Weston wrote a central essay that constructed “straight” photography as a discourse that communicated ideas about subjects differently from other media. This essay was entitled *A Tyro's Annual* and was published in the periodical *The Left* in 1931. In this essay, he responded to a recently held exhibition of photographic works and denounced these works as the very antithesis of what modern photographic practice should be. The photographs of the *Tyro's Annual* leant very heavily on both mythological and narrative strategies, as well as on soft focus and darkroom manipulated images. The darkroom manipulations, Weston argued, were an attempt to position “pictorial” photography as a “fine art” equivalent to painting. He asserted that such a stance was a bastardization for both mediums, particularly because it validated photography only for its ability to ape painting. He declared that this aping of painting entirely defeated the modernist potential implicit in a medium born of the modern age.

His solution to this aping was to advance a positivistic, non-mythological practice that denounced manipulation and granted photography an autonomous status from painting. Weston's writings produced a theoretical framework that defined photography as materialist and positivistic by stating that the photographic image was complete at the time in which the aperture exposed the film inside the camera to light. No further manipulation was acceptable to the medium. His essay was also a denunciation of “pictorialist” photography; his alternative solution for modernism was the “straight” image. The implication of this new materialist and positivistic stance was that the physical world, divorced from the supernatural or the unexplainable, was to be the central focus of photography. In the context of Mexico, the subject of the Indian would be defined by “straight” photography through its location in contemporary space as contrasted to it being located in either the supernatural realm

or a mythologized past. The new ideal was also claimed within Modotti's strategies when she, in her essay *On Photography* of December, 1929, also denounced mythology, exoticism and kitsch within "pictorialist" photographic representation, and instead placed contemporaneity and materialism in its place. However, Modotti moved in a trajectory away from her mentor Weston through her attempt to realize the revolutionary and avant garde potential of this positivistic and materialist practice in terms of her own Leninist position.

Weston noted that the photographs presented in the *Tyro's Annual* exhibition space turned the medium into a poor imitation of "grocery store 'Calendar Art.'" He saw the exhibition as a degradation of the medium that made it the equivalent of china-painting by grandmothers, or burnt-leather work and boudoir batiks. He had no problem with these forms of folk art and kitsch, but realized that "pictorial" photography had broken into the realm of the museum, and furthermore was entrenching itself as a "fine art." 33 Through such a viewpoint, Weston tried to differentiate forms of photographic practice to define what should be presented in the gallery and museum contexts and what should not be included in these environments. In this assertion, he suppressed the integration of a perceived low visual production (folk art, "pictorial" photography, and so forth) within a cultured and bourgeois context. The vision articulated here privileged a Euro-American bourgeois class perspective in that perceived low cultural production had dangerously crossed the barrier into a pure and sanctified space. An immediate question would be how would cultural forms such as this work photographed by Strand (*Christo, Tlacochoaya, Oaxaca*, 1933 (figure 10)) be allowed to function in Weston's conceptualization of the space of the art gallery? The "straight" photography that Weston advanced as the new model of production was neither kitsch and commercially mass-produced like "calendar art," nor was it decoration, folk art or any other type of object associated with the feminine, domestic sphere which he identified with grandmothers painting china-

plates. Therefore, his proposal was to define "straight" photography as a "fine art that rejected those other possible alternatives for the medium.

Weston noted that no "worker" who respected his medium should recognize "mongrel manipulated 'effects' offered as photographs." Any method which changed the "quality of the original negative" was a "bastard process" without classification.³⁴ Proceeding to the role of the photographer, Weston constituted him or her as a "worker" as compared to an artist. Potentially this carried a whole different set of characteristics to its definition. The former term "worker" could be defined as one who was engaged in either physical or mental tasks for remuneration; it could alternatively carry Leninist overtones that drew from the concept of the proletariat. The term also had a certain class distinction that was not necessarily implicit within the latter term, "artist." However, the terms "worker" and "artist" were not mutually exclusive, but differed in more complex and subtle ways. The initial definition of the worker would better explain Weston's usage rather than the latter, as he was more concerned with the professional recognition of the medium as important work as opposed to it being championed as an extension of a proletarian struggle. The "straight" photograph also rested on the unmanipulated quality of its original negative that when disturbed became "mongrel." The opposite position of this mongrelization would be pure, undisturbed form. By combining a vocabulary of formal purity with a subject, the Indian, valued because of his or her own purity of origin, photographers could initiate ideal symbolic constructions. What is denied, however, in this definition, is any notion of modernity since purity of both form and subject is contradictory to the hybridity which more closely characterized modern forms and subjects. Indigenous groups in Mexico in 1931 functioned in a semi-industrialized nation, and therefore the space they inhabited could never be viewed as entirely pure but instead as a hybridized environment.

Moreover, Weston wrote in his *Tyro's Annual* essay that authentic photography needed no defense; it stood alone and "vital." Photography, he noted, had revolutionized contemporary painting by destroying forever the bourgeois art of a "decadent culture."³⁵ The "decadent culture" that Weston attacked was the nineteenth century Salon audience. Therefore, this indicates that the "fine art" status in which he wishes to locate photography as a medium is within a modernist anti-academic notion of art; however, Weston's modernism did not fall within an avant garde critique of bourgeois values outside of those that concerned the formal issues surrounding art. Weston noted that the recording of objective physical facts of things "does not preclude a communication in the finished work of the primal subjective motive. An abstract idea can be conveyed through exact reproduction: photography can be used as a means."³⁶ Abstract ideas could involve the physical object or subject framed for emphasis to evoke its status as a symbol. Weston constructed the photograph as a carrier of "abstract ideas" which was communicated through the representation of physical form -- this was common to contemporary painting which also emphasized the transmission of ideas through formal concerns other than subject matter and narrative.

Throughout this essay, Weston presented an alternative vision for the medium that de-emphasized the skill of the hand (for example, seen through montage or darkroom manipulation), and privileged the eye in relation to the construction of the photograph. This had implications for the subjects recorded on film as we, the viewers, are cognizant of the constructed nature of the space before our eyes only if we identify with the photograph in its totality. By de-emphasizing the hand's involvement in the production of the photographic image, unlike "pictorial" production, he further defined the distinction between the mediums of photography and painting. The two media were not at war with each other, but they worked reciprocally by liberating the other form from the constraints of mimetic representation. This may have explained the active dialogue that these photographers engaged in with the early American

abstractionists such as John Marin. Weston's proposal redefined the craft of photography on the relationship between the eye and the camera frame or aperture. In doing this, the body of the photographer withdrew from the construction of the image and was replaced by the documenting or surveilling, disembodied eye. This was in contradistinction to the "pictorialists."

The importance of Weston and his position in modernist American photography was also marked by the publication of *The Art of Edward Weston* which was released in New York in 1932; it included an essay by him entitled *A Contemporary Means to Creative Expression*. In this essay, Weston discussed the distinction between photographic vision and "realism" to construct photographic vision as not a sole reproduction of reality or the physical world. He attacked "self-expression" by referring to it as an illusion in which the artist imagines that he or she can conceive of and create non-existent forms. Since all form exists in physical space, the photographer can only edit this space through emphasis and framing to evoke emotive, symbolic or analogous states. Furthermore, all form, according to Weston, was derived from nature and could not be autonomously constructed without a reference to nature. Therefore, the binary between realism and abstraction was collapsed in this essay as abstraction itself was always based on referentiality in its relationship to nature. He noted that "a photograph may approximate reality, but cannot attain unqualified realism. By contrast, extreme departure from factual recording is possible and relevant to "straight" photography."³⁷ Through such a statement, Weston articulated that the most non-representative or non-object centered image was just as much about "straight" photography as the representational or object centered image. Thus, there arose a distinction between the photograph as document (documentary photography) and the "straight" image. The documentary photograph depended on an object-centered image in which the viewer interpolated a focal point for the reading of the image to be successful, whereas the "straight" image did not require this focal point. The "straight"

photograph could just as easily be defined as an absence of the object or a de-centering of this object along the picture plane. The ambiguity of locating the focal point for the viewing audience allowed for a multiplicity of readings, and consequently it opened the photograph to multiple interpretations.

The proposal for “straight” photography that Weston advanced should be analyzed in relation to other avant garde strategies that involved the medium elsewhere. Such a contrast in positions better highlights the importance of materialism to the photographic movement in America. Further, it shows that Weston’s position was very much open for debate during the period in which he wrote his essays. The debate itself centered on the camera’s relationship to the physical environment and which strategies were more appropriate to the production of a modernist work. In the Mexican context, this debate would shape photographers’ attitudes towards both indigenous groups and their surroundings, and what was the most constructive and modern way to evoke a symbolic body. Weston’s proposal was for a direct unmediated relationship to nature and the physical environment, whereas theorists in Europe such as Walter Benjamin contested this position of “straight” photography and instead heavily advocated montage and manipulated photography. Benjamin did not address Weston directly in his essays of 1931, but the positions he advanced became central to understanding the photographic production introduced from Paris into New York on January 29, 1932. At this time, the first Surrealist photographic production was shown to a New York audience at the Julien Levy Gallery. This introduction of Surrealist photography caused a debate over modernism in New York and had some bearing on subsequent photographic production in the city.

In an article entitled “A Short History of Photography” which was published in *Literarische Welt* in September and October, 1931, Benjamin quoted Berthold Brecht who had earlier written that the situation of photography was:

complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up. 38

Benjamin praised the

. . . achievement of the Surrealists to have trained the pioneers of such photographic construction. A further stage in this contest between creative and constructive photography is marked by the Russian film. One cannot underline enough the fact that the great achievements of its directors were only possible in a country where photography started not from stimulus and suggestion, but from experiment and instruction. 39

The critical aspect to this quotation is the idea of experiment and instruction since in Mexico the government actively commissioned muralists, painters, and photographers to paint subjects like the Indian as part of educational objectives. Benjamin constructed a relationship between the "creative" and the "constructive" in photography, where the former fell under what he termed as "the world is beautiful." When using the term "the world is beautiful", some art historians have felt that he was referring to a book produced in Germany entitled, *Die Welt ist Schön: Einhundert Photographische Aufnahmen von Albert Renger-Patzsch* of 1928. Unlike the constructed and manipulated photography of Bauhaus and other photographers in the German republic, Patzsch's work was part of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement which shared similarities with "straight" production in New York with its focus on the primacy of the unmanipulated photographic surface. Benjamin, when critiquing "*Die Welt ist Schön* (The World is Beautiful)" equated it with the "creative" and the apolitical, in comparison with Surrealist photography which he constructed as having an internal "political" structure in its rhetoric. What Benjamin and Brecht underlined in this text was that the more constructed the photographic image was, the more it moved away from the "creative," and moved towards the "political." Through such a

position, Benjamin condemned naturalistic photography and instead championed a surrealist vision as the antidote.

The positioning of galleries in New York was important in an emerging dialogue between nationalism and internationalism that emerged in the city in 1932. An American Place gallery represented American modernism influenced by the Parisian avant gardism of the period 1913 to 1917, and continued on this tradition by hybridizing it with an American sensibility that developed from the end of the Great War and intensified after the Stock Market Crash of October, 1929. The Levy Gallery represented the latest of avant garde visual practice coming out of Paris and therefore claimed a position of internationalism with the greatest ties to contemporary avant garde practice of the two galleries. Another form of international modernism was featured in the recently opened Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The museum served as a conduit for exhibiting modern Mexican works of art and focused especially on the Muralist movement. It featured an exhibition of works by Rivera that was shown from December 23, 1931 to January 27, 1932. I mention the MOMA exhibition to show that internationalism in New York was now no longer exclusively defined by its relationship to Paris, but was defined as well by its relationship to Mexico City. Furthermore, this could be seen in the publishing of a portfolio of works by José Clemente Orozco by Delphic Studios in New York which was released in 1932. Moreover, this slight shift towards a New York-Mexico City orientation caused a shift in the subjects of representation which now focused on the indigenous cultures of the Americas. By 1932, the Indian as a focus carried a renewed symbolism that transcended borders and altered prior notions of the Revolution. The shift in subject matter and internationalist dialogues replaced prior focuses of avant garde attention.

Internationalists in New York resisted the equally strong movement advanced by other artists and critics towards an internal looking nationalist and regionalist attitude towards cultural representation. With the more nationalistic position of some

artists and critics, the media responded by trying to define an “American” modernism distinct from Paris most notably highlighted in an essay by Katherine Grant Sterne entitled *American versus European Photography* of March, 1932. In her essay, she proposed that photography was distinctively different from other arts. It was unlike painting where the “centuries-old European tradition constitutes a condition impossible to parallel in this country.” The relatively new medium of photography could claim a “common age” between New York, Paris and other centers. 40 However, a medium without a substantial history would still, out of necessity, draw its conventions of form from established media. With a position that conceded the impossibility of comparing American painting with that of Paris, photography would be the alternative medium for America. Sterne posited photographic practice defined along national characteristics, noting that there seemed to be an intrinsically American style, that she referred to as *Sachlichkeit* (ironically a label taken from photographic practice in Berlin). Sterne posited photographic practice in Europe as preoccupied with manipulated characteristics. This discussion was important as it positioned “straight” photography within a nationalistic discourse which not only Sterne advanced, but which Levy also touched on as well.

Within the framework of the relationship between New York and Mexico City, there was a connecting philosophical attitude towards nationalism. In some respect, this was a rejection of European cultural hegemony, but more importantly, this nationalism allowed for a specificity of social circumstances that were particular to the North American continent. What the United States and Mexico shared in common, as compared to Europe, was indigenous cultures whose presence defined the North American environment as a space apart from Europe. In this context, the Indian functioned symbolically as an “other” to European culture and could be championed as a way to mark out a Pan-American identity separate from European identity. Probably, the fundamental difference between the manifestation of nationalism in the

United States and that in Mexico was that in the latter nation, several artists and writers framed its nationalism as an extension of post-colonialism. In the United States, those that advocated a nationalist position were often either regionalists or isolationists (for example, Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood) as compared to universalists. Modotti and Strand functioned as internationalists by rejecting a nationalist model for an alternative one, whether that be of the permanent revolution or Pan-Americanism.

Furthermore, Sterne emphasized that comparisons, especially national comparisons had a “bad reputation.” She referred to a recently held debate at the Whitney Museum entitled “Nationalism in Art -- Is It An Advantage?” to support her position and to provide evidence that nationalism was currently being discussed in terms of cultural production. She affirmed her own position that nationalism was not necessarily a bad thing for the purposes of visual artistic production. She proceeded to present a whole history of American art from the late nineteenth century to the present to support her point of view. Sterne argued that the:

Russo-German cult of *Sachlichkeit* is essentially an American invention. If the Germans have been the prophets of the “new objectivity” in art, and the Russians its economic and ethical exponents, it is the Americans who, *without bothering much with aesthetic theories or manifestoes*, have developed the notion until it could safely be transplanted to an alien soil. 41 (Emphasis mine.)

Instead of recognizing *Sachlichkeit* as the practice of photographers associated with Weimar Berlin, Sterne erroneously posited the American formalism of “straight” photography as the basis of *Sachlichkeit* exported to various nations.

The second significant aspect of this quotation was the rejection for American formalism of manifestoes historically associated with the European avant garde. Her critique of avant garde photographic practice out of Paris was that it too self-consciously tried to “lift photography from the realm of record to the realm of fine art”

and therefore produced bad photography which was imitative or derivative of painting practice. She noted that the European craftsman played with “abstract pattern and psychological expressiveness; experimented with montage, multiple exposure, negative printing, photogramy, solarization and melodramatic subject matter in order to elevate the medium.” To Sterne, the American photographer was content to remain within the limitation of the *camera obscura*. This proposal for a true aesthetic position based on a materialist based notion of truth to materials and medium was similar to that proposed by Weston. The only difference between their positions was that Weston never articulated that the “straight” photograph was necessarily a nationalistic practice, but instead believed it to have universal applications. A debate over much art production in the United States centered on regionalist, nationalist and internationalist arguments regarding form and subject matter. These debates shaped “straight” photographic production by hierarchizing the importance of various subjects that were recorded. In this context, the strength of Pan-Americanism allowed for an exchange of dialogue amongst cultures, especially American and Mexican, and a defining of common themes that bridged these cultures.

Subject matter in early 1930s modernism was enunciated within at least two trends: with the exploration of the subconscious by the Surrealists in Paris, and alternatively in the representation of contemporary life in America. Photographers placed an emphasis on the subject of workers and indigenous groups in New York, the southern United States and Mexico City. In Paris, those involved in defining modernist approaches included Hans Bellmer, Brassai, J.A. Boiffard, André Kertész, Roger Parry, Man Ray and Maurice Tabard. In New York, the southern United States and Mexico City, strategies that involved the subject of indigenous groups and workers were implemented in the works of Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Paul Strand. The subject of the worker became the paramount focus of photographers associated with the Farms Securities

Administration in 1935. Beyond the artistic objectives of these photographers, there were external ideological forces at play. The federal governments in Mexico City and Washington employed a focus on peasantry to consolidate power and looked at the *homo mexicanus* in rural Mexico, and the “forgotten man” in the United States.

Some members of the New York modernist movement, including Strand, made a transition from the individualist attitudes of several modernists prior to 1929 towards a socially engaged humanist stance that emerged in 1932. Strand took up this renewed philosophy of humanism in his representations of rural Mexican indigenous groups and peasantry that engendered a strong dynamic by combining social concerns with the formalistic interests of modernism. The term “humanism” is often used pejoratively today within critical theory, yet it was a central philosophical belief amongst many artists and intellectuals of the early 1930s. Progressive humanism in the United States functioned in place of the revolutionary philosophies that characterized intellectual discourse in nations like Mexico. The expression of either the Indian or worker as a symbol of revolutionary struggle in a Leninist conception was largely antithetical to the individualism that was still at the core of much American philosophy. Formalism prior to 1929 was most often marked by a preoccupation with the importance of pure form within a tradition of art for art’s sake. In formal terms, this modernism translated into an abstracted language that often focused on the surface of the two dimensional work of art. This surface was dissected by planes -- contemplation included the appreciation of pure form separated from the consideration of subject matter.

The equivalent of Cubist dissection could be seen in Strand’s photograph entitled *Driftwood, Maine* of 1928 (figure 11). Instead of viewing the subject in its surrounding geography to give the viewer some comprehension of its scale, the photographer eliminated anything extraneous to it. Under a formalist reading, one appreciated it through its concentration on the rough textures of the bark on the far left and upper

right corners of the photograph; these textures are contrasted to the smooth and flowing rhythm created by the rings of the indigenous tree from which the driftwood originated. One also noticed the play of light cast on the two sloping masses of wood descending from the upper edge of the frame down to the lower right edge of it; this was juxtaposed against the dark cavernous appearance of the space between these two sloping masses. The driftwood failed to recede in space therefore flattening the area so the object was parallel to the picture plane. Narrative was also absent from the piece with the exception of its title *Driftwood, Maine* which alludes to a geographical space and the antecedent status of the object; through its reference to the title, the viewer could deduce that it had a relation to natural death. The image was modernist in the photographer's insistence that the medium, in its purest form, was not exclusively about the documentation of events. It was also modernist due to the appreciation of form for its own sake outside of social considerations.

Unlike Modotti who had identified with the Mexican Communist party, I argue that Strand shared the ideals of the bourgeois *mestizo* political class in Mexico City, and therefore questions of anti-government strategies never surfaced. Strand's work negotiated a Pan-Americanist ideal that was embodied in the American Good Neighbor Policy of March, 1933 (42) where a nexus of predominantly Euro-American and *mestizo* intellectuals formed a representation of the *homo mexicanus* tied to these ideals. I argue that Mexicanness defined via Pan-Americanism took as its opposition fascism. Representation, increasingly, whether in rural Mexico or the southern United States focused on an identification with the subaltern. The subalterns in the southern United States were from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, whether Hispanic, Afro-American or working class white farmers, and they were embodied in the photography of people like Ben Shahn for the Farm Securities Administration. Meanwhile, the photography of Strand, amongst others for the Mexican government, focused on the subaltern in rural Mexico -- the Indian. These representations stood in sharp contrast

to representations in fascist Germany which stressed purity of race and absence of hybridity.

The importance of race to the official liberal ideology of the Roosevelt administration was ambiguous because there were few policies that exclusively focused on racial issues. However, groups of progressive or reform liberal intellectuals increasingly discussed race issues. 43 A nexus of New York reform liberal intellectuals focused on a representation of the perceived margins of society, whether American or Mexican, to demonstrate the hardships brought on to various people by so-called *laissez-faire* liberal economics. The Indian and worker could be used as symbols by photographers to highlight one sense of community. Even though the communities they stand in place of had been manipulated by the forces of corporate structures and capitalism, they retained a notion of integrity. The term "liberal" in late 1932 should not be confused with its usage within the United States in the 1990s. In the early 1930s, the term was highly contested and was claimed by intellectuals throughout the political Left *and* Right. Politicians in Washington, whether they were Democrat *or* Republican claimed the term. For Republicans, liberalism signified a market economy's ability to function effectively in times of expansion or contraction without the interference of government. For Democrats, liberalism meant that the government had an active role to play in the stabilization of a market economy during contraction -- this was the antithetical position of the Republicans.

Traditionally, art historical writing on Strand's photographs have focused on how they functioned within a modernist aesthetic. What has not been discussed, to the same degree, is how Strand's photographs have also mediated amongst different publics with often contesting ideological positions. Furthermore, in Mexico these ideological positions were established in relation to a discourse surrounding the Indian. Strand's image *Man, Tenancingo* (figure 2) consists of a rural man identified as a worker by his adoption of modern work dress to allow him to function in urban sites.

(Indian dress for men was perceived by urban Mexicans as a curiosity in the 1930s.(44)) He is situated in the center of the frame with his upper body turned slightly to the right. His face is turned slightly to the left with his eyes fixed on a point to the left of the viewer's position. Strand's emphasis on the labor of the individual is seen through his representation and inclusion of the worker's left hand which shows signs of extensive manual labor. The dignity of the subject is given by the photographer through the viewer's position relative to him; the viewer looks up at his face from a position of around his chest level. The individual is anonymously indicated by the title *Man, Tenancingo*; he represents a group of individuals, similar to himself, that form a position of manual labor within rural Mexican society. The universal conception of this man is given by the title and its exclusion of his name; for Strand's lens, he is emblematic of the Indian within rural Mexico. When Strand represented women it often corresponded to the Virgin Mary/fallen woman paradigm, but in the case of men they were often identified with *their labor power*. This labor power was primarily constructed through their costume and the emphasis on physical characteristics associated with work such as the condition of their hands.

Comparing this image to that of Modotti's entitled *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete* (figure 6), we find that she produces an image that deals with revolution within a highly formalist visual vocabulary, and a vantage point (from a height of at least seven feet or higher above ground level) that is rare to find within Strand's body of work throughout the period of 1929 to 1933. We see the permanent revolution that she calls upon through her motifs -- in this image by her inclusion of *El Machete*. Comparatively, at the heart of Strand's image is his emphasis on humanist ideals where formalism takes a less prominent position to subject matter relative to Modotti's work. In this case, Man is central to the definition of the photograph. The viewer cannot associate any motif in Strand's work even remotely to a communist revolution or ideal. In comparison, Modotti also uses modern work dress in her representation of

these men and therefore locates them in the present. However, in contrast to Strand's image, she locates her subjects in the urban environment. The posture of the men in Modotti's image is downplayed by the visual predominance of the sombreros, the resulting effect submerges her subjects under a formalist but highly symbolic network of motifs (sombros) shown in repetition. The gaze of Strand's subject stares towards some progressive future; furthermore, we as viewers of the photograph are neither his superior nor inferior as a result of this positioning. The gaze of Modotti's subjects are somewhat more ambiguous with the exception of one peasant in the upper center of the image whose gaze falls slightly to the right of the viewer. Both Modotti and Strand represent the importance of labor in their respective photographs; Strand by focusing on the dried, callused hand of his subject, while Modotti focusing on her subjects' commitment to revolution by their education through *El Machete*. The viewer's point of view places an emphasis on the dignity of the individual Strand represents, while Modotti places a greater emphasis on the centrality of *El Machete* as an educational device. Consequently, her subjects are placed in a subservient position relative to this newspaper, and further by our point of view relative to them. Individualism plays a role in the subject of Strand's photograph through Strand's choice of a single subject compared to a group and furthermore with Strand's emphasis on sharp physiognomic detail. Through Modotti's image we see a different subjectivity with less emphasis placed on individualism and more emphasis placed on strong community. Also within Modotti's image there is a feeling of implied group force. Physicality is emphasized in Strand's image, while abstracted form (brought about by the geometric arrangement of the sombreros and the newspaper) plays the dominant emphasis in Modotti's image.

Both formally and by subject matter, each photographer places forward their respective attitudes towards the revolutionary symbol mapped out onto the indigenous body. Formally, Modotti's image subscribes to many of the ideals of the permanent revolution outlined earlier. First, her visual vocabulary evokes those of other

committed communist photographers like Rodchenko by emphasizing unconventional viewpoints that emphasize vertical constructions as well as aerial and ground level views. These unconventional viewpoints can further be seen in other productions by her (for example, *A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street*, figure 5). *El Machete* evokes the position of the Indian, *Pelado*, and worker in relation to the permanent revolution by focusing on attitudes regarding spiritual leadership within Left Oppositionism and Leninism. In the movement, the proletariat bordering the urban and rural environment was to serve the position of leadership. The newspaper that serves as the axis of the image disseminates information and education outward from a center point standing in place of the Party.

Strand's revolutionary symbol mapped onto the indigenous body demonstrates clearly his attitude towards the revolution. Unlike Modotti's groups of Indians and workers in either *A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street* (figure 5) or *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete* (figure 6), Strand more frequently isolates his subjects into single portraits like *Man, Tenancingo* (figure 2). Through this isolation of subject, Strand preserves the model of individualism which is at the core of progressive humanism, distinguishing it from Stalinism.

“Dog-Eat-Dog Individualism” and the Marginalized “Other”:
The Building of a Revolutionary Pan-American Intelligensia

In response to the developing entrenchment of the depression, a number of New York artists, some associated with the American Communist Party, began to rethink their attitudes toward subject matter during the winter of 1932/33. One of the central movements amongst several photographers, filmmakers, theatre groups and writers in the city was to organize themselves collectively to explore new subjects. Much of the impetus towards collective organization came through the theatre group referred to as Group Theatre organized by Harold Clurman. Clurman and Strand corresponded frequently throughout the period of 1932 to 1933 about the Group philosophy. Clurman gave a lecture in 1931 in which he stated:

If the theatre is an art, if it has any value beyond decorating the emptiness of our existence, it too, collective art though it be, must have an analogous singleness of meaning and direction. . . . it too must create from the chaos which is the common experience of its members, an expression that will have, like that of the individual artist, an identity and significance with which people, sharing the common experience, may sense their kinship and to which they can attach themselves. 45

This proposal largely rejected the individualism that characterized much 1920s artistic production, and alternatively it proposed a new focus on the lived experience of the common man which was to carry larger social and philosophical ramifications.

This trend against individualism was further developed by some writers in the United States during the autumn of 1932. Louis Adamic, author of *The Native's Return* and *Grandsons*, proposed an alternative to this individualism in the United States in an essay appropriately entitled “The Passing of American Individualism” which was published in the journal *The American Scholar* in October, 1932. In his text, Adamic noted that contemporary writers were aware of the problems of “dog-eat-dog individualism” as it developed in the years leading up to the Great Depression. Adamic

looked at individualism within “capitalist democracy” in the “machine age.” Through this pre-depression period, he observed that only a few people had risen to great economic and political power while the “vainly aspiring masses” were “standardized.”⁴⁶ He concluded that the “dog-eat-dog individualism” which placed one person’s interests against another within capitalist democracy was responsible for the current position that the United States faced. He argued that writers and other artists needed to recognize this fact, and move towards the expression of a collectivist position in their writing. Furthermore, not only writers but many artists, in both the United States and Mexico, explored a new subject which would shortly be referred to as the “forgotten man.”

Adamic emphasized that, “It is probable that, in an effort to stabilize business, financial and industrial interests will attempt a fascist *régime* in the United States. Such a *régime* will be motivated by fear, not intelligence. If it succeeds in establishing itself, its life will be short. Fascism is of necessity ninety per cent repression and ten per cent concession.” In October 1932, several intellectuals discussed the possibility of fascism in the United States if the depression was not shortly alleviated by some initiative. Increasingly, many artists saw the instability in the United States as a sign that a complete shift in the American political system would occur either towards communism or fascism. These artists, often liberals, leaned towards the acceptance of a communist revolution in the United States. This coincided with the increasing registration of artists and writers into the growing American Communist Party.

It was inevitable to even Adamic that the revolution would come to the United States. Although slightly more Left of mainstream analysis in the United States in 1932, Adamic shared similar positions to some intellectuals in Mexico City. Overall, the text was important in its stressing of “individualism” which he believed was waning amongst artists in New York. This was consistent in the circles in which Modotti participated in late 1929, and which Strand participated in after his partial

break with Stieglitz and his circle in May of 1932. The individualism that propelled most “straight” photography prior to 1931 was now somewhat fractured into at least two investigative areas. Relatively apolitical photographers like Stieglitz and Weston maintained individualist sentiments, and photographers like Strand and others articulated more socially concerned positions.

Shortly upon Strand’s entry into Mexico City, in the autumn of 1932, the Mexican Secretary of Public Education offered him an opportunity to exhibit his photographs at the art gallery associated with the Ministry. The exhibition occurred in February of 1933, and following the opening a review of the show appeared on the second page of the daily newspaper *El Universal* in an article entitled, “*La Exposición de Fotografías de Paul Strand.*” This was the first time since Modotti’s expulsion in February of 1930 that a well known “straight” photographer from the United States had presented an exhibition in the city. Interestingly, this review made no mention of Modotti or the photography of Weston which predated Strand’s entry into Mexico by several years. As part of the intellectual and artistic entry of foreign artists into Mexico City, Strand was relatively late in coming to the capital. He faced an environment vastly different from that of Modotti due to the suppression of the Communist Party in Mexico. Instead of challenging this governmental repression, *El Universal* openly pointed out the persistence of Communist “mobs” not only in Mexico City but also abroad.

The review on Strand’s exhibition noted that photography had earned its place alongside other forms of art. Photography was engaged with new elements of abstraction in its form and that one of the initiators of the movement to express the dignity of the medium as an artistic form was the American Paul Strand.⁴⁷ The location of the exhibition was curious in relation to that of Modotti’s earlier show in that Strand’s exhibition was shown within a branch of the federal government. Modotti’s exhibition was shown in an institution that had marked its independence from direct federal control. The reviewer continued by noting that Strand had begun

his photographic works twenty five years earlier and that he consciously used an abstract element in his work. The reviewer also observed that, within the context of this current exhibition, Strand chose to abandon both the human figure, and the studio set of commercial photography, to concentrate his attention on nature, natural light, and ambiance.⁴⁸ The exhibition focused predominantly on his work from New Mexico and parts of Maine that he photographed throughout the years of 1928 to 1932. This work demonstrates that his shift in emphasis away from environmental scenes towards portraiture occurred roughly at the same time as his professional break from Stieglitz (May of 1932). The tactics that Strand would use in Mexico, immediately following this exhibition in February, 1933, would be decisive in shaping the rest of his career from 1933 up until his death in Orgeval, France in 1977.

The reviewer of Strand's exhibition further defined "straight" imagery in terms of natural light as differentiated from the use of artificial lighting used in commercial photography. This description helped to define "straight" photography in contrast to press and documentary photography taken in Mexico City during this time by photographers such as Augustin Victor Casasola. Casasola employed flash photography which tended to wash out the person photographed, and simultaneously projected an artificially obtained heavy shadow immediately behind this subject. This shadow was due to the flash located directly beside the camera. Beyond this technical working procedure, the description also contrasted "straight" production from commercial production in a way not widely described prior to this time. The latter practice of commercial photography was based on the complete organization of visual space represented by the control of artificial light and the production of props by human intervention. Thus, at the heart of the commercial image was *the complete domination* of the pictorial space by human involvement. The "straight" photographer, by Weston's definition, merged with nature in that nature predominantly determined the environment from which the photographer *extracted* an image. Strand's "straight"

imagery located the photograph as an active agent in the embodiment of a visual language; comparatively, the commercial and documentary photograph attempted to hide the artifice of the photographic plane in order to emphasize the subject.

The reviewer perceived that Strand isolated and provided the smallest details of objects in which the human eye often ignored or did not take the time to perceive. The reviewer specifically mentioned images of the knot of an old trunk (probably *Driftwood, Maine* of 1928, figure 11), the gloomy and aggressive profile of a rock (possibly *Rock, Georgetown, Maine* figure 12), and a spider's web soaked with beads of water from a rainstorm.⁴⁹ The review located Strand's production mostly in the delineation and recording of parts of an object to embody these parts with a sense of symbolism. Strand's abandonment of the human figure as a primary subject matter roughly from 1924 to 1932 changed with his adoption of the human figure as his central focus within his new aesthetic position that emerged as he circulated throughout Mexico in 1933. Unlike commercial photographers who shot portraits of individuals for commissions, Strand's portraiture of indigenous people and peasants was not commissioned in Mexico. The portrayal of nature that Strand engaged in within New Mexico and Maine featured older forms of architecture from the mid-nineteenth century and earlier. In itself, these images did not speak of modernity and deal with the new socio-political environment of the Great Depression.

Some photographers combined the rise of a more socially-oriented agenda with formalist strategies roughly around 1932. Even though Strand used commercial and documentary's preference for subject matter (portraiture), his new focus also brought about a fusion with formalism in that the image constructed followed the practices central to "straight" production. Strand's work emphasized tonal contrasts and gradations, surface and textural elements that were always on an equal relationship with the subject represented. These compositional elements differed from most commercial photography which produced imagery with less finesse and with a heavy

dependence on artificial light to construct the same image. Often the use of artificial light produced a stilted and forced effect. The human subject that reemerged in Strand's oeuvre spoke of a heightened consciousness to the exploitation of indigenous groups and workers. It did this primarily through Strand's very stable compositions that monumentalize many of his subjects within a tightly framed space. Furthermore, his subjects, in many cases, appear heroic especially with Strand's sharp focus that emphasizes the labor involved to produce the weathered features of the face and hands of these subjects. The rejection of pure formalism by Strand, artists associated with the Mexican, American, and Russian Communist Parties as well as muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, was a rejection of bourgeois individualism that refused to engage with issues surrounding marginalized groups. Strand's focus was partly due to the influence of Rivera and Orozco who worked in both Mexico City and the New York area in 1932 and 1933. As Siqueiros would later comment:

Our Mexican pictorial movement with its plastic concepts and new realism in open rebellion against formalism took as its basis Man, the physical world in which he moves, struggles, and dies . . . [Paul] Strand's point of view paralleled that of the pioneers of Mexican mural painting in their opposition to formalism. Both as a film maker and as a still photographer he has continued to develop his fundamentally humanist vision. . . . 50

The success of these muralists, who conveyed the universalism of the plight of indigenous groups and workers, gave Strand the incentive to shift from what he felt was one form of universalism ("art for art's sake") to another (humanism).

Another important aspect in the review on Strand was when the reviewer introduced the significance of Strand's recent photographs of New Mexico. He specifically noted how well Strand captured the sense of the arid terrain of the state.⁵¹ The reviewer associated Strand as an adventurer who was on an exploration of New Mexico from the urban space of New York. It is interesting that the reviewer constructed Strand as an adventurer as opposed to a tourist as the latter may have

had derogatory implications. An adventurer who explored new areas was very different from one who participated in an industry's construction of an exotic space for the urban traveler. However, the term adventurer was still problematic, since it implied that Strand was exploring some exotic region that had never been touched. The reviewer pointed out that the artifacts of the "primitive" man (*el hombre -- primitiva y áspera*) had attracted Strand the same way that it had penetrated the spirit of "the energetic adventurers that conquered the 'far west'" (*los enérgicos aventureros que conquistaron el "far west"*).⁵² Strand was invited by Carlos Chávez, a modernist composer, to become more active with federal government projects in Mexico. In late 1932, Strand began to travel through the rural regions immediately surrounding the capital to take photographs of the environment and its people. He traveled with Velásquez Chávez who traversed the rural regions as part of the federal Mexican government's initiatives to increase public education amongst Indians. Strand produced photographs taken from these rural regions that included the states of Michoacán, Hidalgo, Puebla, México, Oaxaca and Tlaxcala.⁵³

Bartra has discussed that in the 1930s, there were conflicting conceptions of time between Western industrialized societies and semi-industrialized societies and as a consequence this translated to representations that highlighted these differences. The use of "industrialized" and "industrializing" perpetuated a Westernized linear model of development that looked to the West as the penultimate stage. By looking at written ethnographic studies in the 1930s, we can appreciate the large diversity of conscious forms of time exhibited by so-called primitive people which were not homogenous. The romanticism of some intellectuals created homogeneity in non-Western societies through a process of exclusion in representation; some intellectuals considered any cultural manifestation that eluded industrial society to be part of a unique mythical time.⁵⁴ Bartra suggested that a modern "myth" about primeval time had emerged in the twentieth century which has employed the time of the modern age as a

counterpoint.⁵⁵ The sense of time and distance attributed to the Mexican by Western travelers was the same as that attributed to the *campesino* and the Indian by the urban Mexican.⁵⁶

We can note the timelessness of Strand's imagery of Mexican indigenous groups and peasants seen through photographs like that entitled *Man with Sombrero, Mexico*, of 1933 (figure 13). Strand gave his image a sense of mythical time through his omission of contemporary markers such as technology, and further he focused on drapery that emphasized relatively traditional dress as compared to a more hybridized style. To some degree the image perpetuates this distance between rural indigenous people and cosmopolitan subjectivity (whether in Mexico City or New York). This mythologizing of the rural subject is provided by his passivity of pose which appears frozen and united with the earth. The representation of the "Indian" that Strand projects here is similar to his other images which also often denied activity to the rural subject.

Through present day post-colonial theory, we now more readily perceive how paternalism was practiced in different historical contexts. These contexts included: the Mexican Secretary of Education's representations of indigenous groups, the American Farm Securities Administration's representations of unemployed rural peasants, and finally, progressive and Marxist attitudes amongst some New York intellectuals towards the disadvantaged. The subjects (those photographed) of this paternalistic gaze were made to take the position of "other" by their position relative to the paternalistic agent. The perception of "otherness" was not just one of difference but inherently one of hierarchy. Who constituted this "other"? According to the anthropologist Virginia Dominguez, "others" are not those one identifies with, but those one believes inferior or superior to oneself, or potentially subservient or dominant. In Mexico, "others" were significant to bourgeois subjectivity, even if its

rhetoric sought to deny that significance, because it was through a construction of the “Indian” precisely as a significant “other” that bourgeois subjectivity situated itself.⁵⁷

Constructions of the Indian as a revolutionary symbol mapped onto indigenous bodies often competed with other imagery that deviated from this symbol. Strand positioned himself as a modernist in his approach to both form and subject matter. The best arena in which to locate his work for comparison is one where other modernist photographers had either similar or contradictory approaches to his work. Henri Cartier-Bresson, known in New York as a modernist photographer, serves as an excellent juxtaposition against Strand’s work. Both photographers claimed a similar audience in New York and Mexico, and therefore their works entered into dialogue with each other in these contexts. Also, when comparing each photographer’s work, their political postures become increasingly apparent. Furthermore, they both approached the Mexican environment as outsiders, travelers and voyeurs who added new dimensions to already existing cultural practices in the nation.

Bartra’s definition of the *homo mexicanus* as well as discussions on various notions of Mexican subjectivity and identity were gender specific. Strand’s image entitled *Woman, Tenancingo* of 1933 (figure 14), and Henri Cartier-Bresson’s image *Calle Cuauhtemoczin, Mexico City*, 1934 (figure 15) represented competing notions of female subjectivity in Mexico, both from non-Mexican perspectives. Bartra examined the social position of women and how nationalism functioned to construct female identity. Representations often constructed Mexican women through at least two symbolic figures: (1) the Virgin Mother, protector of the helpless -- the *Guadalupe* and (2) the raped mother in her fertility, *la Chingada* -- the Malinche.⁵⁸ Some Mexicans viewed the Malinche and the Virgin of *Guadalupe* as two incarnations of the same original myth. Hybridity of female imagery was fundamental to the representation of Mexican women, and historians traced back this imagery as far back as Spanish contact with the Americas. Bartra noted:

. . . so occurred the first carnal exchange, both symbolic and material, of virgins and mothers between the Spanish and the Indians. Both were protective and maternal symbols; . . . The [Malinche] began the lineage of the *mestizos*; the second [the Virgin Mary] was reborn as the dark-skinned Indian Virgin [the Virgin of *Guadalupe*].⁵⁹

Spanish versus indigenous female imagery and archetypes and their eventual hybridization worked to circumscribe and control female subjectivity in Mexican society.⁶⁰ Control of female subjectivity, in rural and urban Mexico, as elsewhere, was often enforced through the binary model of the Virgin Mary/fallen woman which regulated behavior. Marina Warner later noted that the Virgin and Magdalene were a diptych expressing the patriarchal Christian vision of woman: "In the conceptual architecture of Christian society, there is no place for a single woman who is not either a virgin or a prostitute."⁶¹ Through Strand's *Woman, Tenancingo*, of 1933 (figure 14), we see the significance of the Virgin Mary reborn as the dark skinned Indian Virgin. Strand constructs a sense of nobility in his imaging of indigenous women as he did with his representations of indigenous men and *trabajadores*. The shawl draped over the head and extending over the shoulders and down the front was common dress for rural indigenous women of the period.⁶² Unlike men, women were more likely to maintain traditional forms of dress as the division of labor within Tenancingo, as elsewhere, restricted women to the village. To a large degree, Strand inscribed an image of machismo and virility onto the body of indigenous men; whereas he predominantly inscribed devoutness, faith, and either virginity or maternity onto the body of indigenous women through this symbol of the Indian Virgin. A question may arise that if the circumscription of gender identities in terms of costume was like this in 1933, then why are Strand's images problematic? Primarily it is a problem of context in relation to other images by Strand. Images like *Christo, Tlacochoaya, Oaxaca* (figure 10) when juxtaposed with *Woman, Tenancingo* (figure 15) emphasize a notion of Indianness with strong Catholic connections as compared to alternative

indigenous symbolic imagery. The emphasis on Catholicism ties the notion of Indianness much closer to a hybridized subjectivity associated with the *mestizo* communities of Mexico. Also, within a revolutionary discourse, this reference to Christianity greatly softens any potential Leninist overtones.

Looking at an alternative vision to the Indian Virgin, the symbol of the “fallen woman” was a predominant feature of Cartier-Bresson who shot images of Mexico City in 1934; the image *Calle Cuauhtemotzin, Mexico City, 1934* (figure 15) came from his studies. Here, the viewer saw a diametrically opposed subject to that of Strand’s devout and religious rural indigenous women. With Cartier-Bresson’s work, there was more of an emphasis on what constituted urban and contemporary Mexican life. Unlike Strand, there was no glossing over of the conditions in which peasants found themselves. With Cartier-Bresson’s work, there was an endeavor to represent a private side of society in Mexico City; a side where sexuality was available for a price through prostitution. In the image, two women peer out of the openings of two doors, the one on the right engaging us with an intense stare. The woman on the left leans out of the square opening that contains her. Both wear heavy amounts of makeup and display ample cleavage to us. Their architectural enclosure conceals what is inside and the openings emphasize the voyeuristic aspects of the viewer. The photograph locates us in an external space looking through an opening into an internal private space. The vantage point constructs the viewer as significantly higher than the two women and therefore emphasizes an unequal relationship between the viewer and those viewed. Within a formal modernist tradition, there was a flattening of pictorial space where Cartier-Bresson located all details near the picture plane, and moreover we appear in a very shallow space relative to the women represented. From this analysis, we can see the ways in which the representation of women, by both those in Mexico and from outside the nation, was constructed by some photographers through the binary relationship discussed above. Within this predominantly Catholic society, whether in

rural or urban Mexico, little latitude was given to women as subjects to articulate something that did not fall within this binary.

How does this notion of gender fit within the larger context of the *homo mexicanus* and the definition of Mexicanness within 1933 Mexico? First, it complicates the identity question by placing issues forward that were not entirely addressed within the discourses formulated by various parties. Within the earlier debates surrounding the Mexican Communist Party, labor had been discussed with the exception of domestic labor. The inequities between the socio-economic roles of men and women within the peasantry and the various indigenous communities in Mexico was also avoided in the Party. Within the more bourgeois discourses on nationalism, the secondary importance placed on gender meant that certain social hierarchies were entrenched. These hierarchies functioned in a time when the state was forcing power away from the church and towards its own educational programs.

To understand representations such as Strand's, it is necessary to look at the political objectives of the federal government during his stay there. Of the greatest importance to shaping cultural policy was the implementation of the "Six Year Party Plan" on July 18, 1933. The conservative President Rodriguez made government ministers and department heads collaborators in the plan and he stressed that the program should consider the four foremost problems of the nation. These problems were: public education, the agrarian program, labor, and communications in the nation's interior.⁶³ The "Six Year Party Plan" called for federal control over schools, and said that education was to be secular and socialistic.⁶⁴ The government's proposals were of the highest importance, not only to Mexico in 1933, but to the cultural policy under which Strand worked within the Secretariat of Education.

I see the function of photography as a tool of governmental policies as very important. Since the late 1920s, governments used photography to promote different political ends (for example, in the industrializing Soviet Union). They wanted to use a

visual language and medium that supposedly conveyed a sense of reality, but also one that was technologically based (this was important in nations that emphasized the need for technological progress). State authorities and bourgeois classes in Europe since the nineteenth century imagined the photograph to have, depending on its context, a power that was primarily affective, or a power that was primarily informative.⁶⁵ Hegemonic structures in the Mexican state in mid-1933 become significant to look at as they shaped cultural policy and marshaled a collective Mexican identity. In the area of cultural support for artists, a tacit symbiotic association developed between artists and the government whereby artists could express radical ideas in their work and receive support from the government via Department of Fine Arts projects. The Arts in turn often lent an air of practical and theoretical progressiveness to the otherwise conservative government.⁶⁶ Finally, within this environment, and because of Strand's connections with artists associated with the government, the Mexican Secretariat of Education and its Department of Fine Arts made him responsible for film production for the nation.

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Conclusion: After Modotti and Strand:

“Straight” Photographic Discourse in Lazaro Cardenas’ Revolutionary Mexico

This thesis has focused on the shift in a discourse on revolutionary Mexicanness during the Great Depression and how this shift was manifested in photography. Photographic practice has been a compelling site for investigation due to its rarity as an avenue for exploration into Mexicanness. Traditionally insights into Mexicanness have been drawn from the works of the three main muralists in Mexico: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Orozco. Both forms of media, photography and mural painting, participated within the public realm though they often engaged different audiences. Following the period under investigation, there was another dramatic shift in the discourse on revolutionary Mexicanness. With the Lazaro Cardenas administration that came to power in 1934, there was a leftward governmental shift which lifted the ban on Leftist discourse.

The initial focus of this thesis was on Modotti’s exhibition which was critical in defining tensions between the discourses of the Mexican Secretariat of Education and the Communist Party. I have focused on the writings of Samuel Ramos and Moisés Sáenz who were instrumental in defining discourses surrounding Mexicanness between 1929 and 1933. Their writings were an interesting juxtaposition against the photography of Modotti since all three party’s discourses on Mexicanness were divergent and contested the others’ positions. Modotti defined Mexicanness through the permanent revolution, while these non-Leninist writers articulated a bourgeois stance which wanted to solidify a class structure in Mexico. Following 1933, tensions between the Secretariat and the Communist Party eased due to the new government’s lifting of many of the prohibitions that had been placed on the party.

The notions of revolutionary identity construction have come principally from sites in Mexico City; most of the formal issues originated out of New York. The central

cross-cultural influence was initially Edward Weston's and Tina Modotti's introduction of the discourse on "straight" photography into the Mexican environment. This was extremely influential to image makers such as Manuel Bravo who modified the discourse to include elements of other modernist practices such as Surrealism. The second cross-cultural influence was Rivera's exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in December of 1931. This caused a reevaluation of theoretical revolutionary issues on the part of some photographers working within that city, including Paul Strand, towards a more socially committed practice. Strand's work within Mexico could be seen after four years of artistic, social and philosophical debates regarding Mexicanness and the Great Depression. His work in Mexico fell within the Pan-Americanist ideals of the new Roosevelt government.

One aspect of my analysis has been to explore the relationship of photography between Mexico and New York, and to see how production was informed by an international discourse. The dialogue continued throughout the mid 1930s as the influence of "straight" production continued in Mexico through Manuel Bravo and Henri Cartier-Bresson. They exhibited together on several occasions including a show at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City in 1934, and one at the Levy Gallery in 1935. Several studies that have looked at contemporary modern photography within Mexico have situated Bravo as the first modern photographer. These studies have constructed a lineage of modern practice from Bravo's work to the present day.

A move towards collectivism in New York in 1933 and 1934 took the formation of artists' associations. With Strand, there was a move towards the film collective of *Nykino*, and the Workers' Film and Photo League in 1935. By January of 1934, when film director Fred Zinnemann joined Strand in Veracruz to direct the film *Redes* he found Strand to be one of the most doctrinaire Marxists he had ever met. This shift in Strand's beliefs was because of the new interest in Marxism amongst New York liberal intellectuals starting in early 1933. Two events were examples of the *zeitgeist* from

1932 to 1935 where collective action was central to many artists' self identity; Serge Guilbaut has covered these areas looking at the formation of the Popular Front, an anti-fascist alliance, and secondly the First American Artists' Congress.⁶⁷

Photographers, painters, intellectuals, the government and others defined Mexicanness within and outside of the Mexican nation. Three hegemonic systems that emerged or were redefined during the Great Depression, imperialism, fascism, and communism, influenced the construction of the national psyche. The government defined Mexicanness or the *homo mexicanus* within the terrain of communism by carrying the notion of revolution but ultimately rejecting a Leninist revolution. The government favored a conception of revolution that appropriated the theme of class struggle and integrated it into the bourgeois state apparatus. Photographers and painters on the Left often rejected the government's representation of Mexicanness by actively incorporating visual motifs of a Soviet revolution in their work (Modotti being a prime example). Mexicanness defined via imperialism looked at the history of the people and pre-conquest visual imagery to institute a spirit autonomous of either capitalist or neo-colonialist structures such as the Monroe Doctrine. Photographers, painters and the government only differed in this representation of the *homo mexicanus* by degree but essentially shared similar positions. Finally, Mexicanness defined via Pan-Americanism and anti-fascism whether in Mexico City or Washington looked towards representing the subaltern of a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. This form of representation differed to that of Nazi Germany, which stressed purity of race and absence of hybridity.

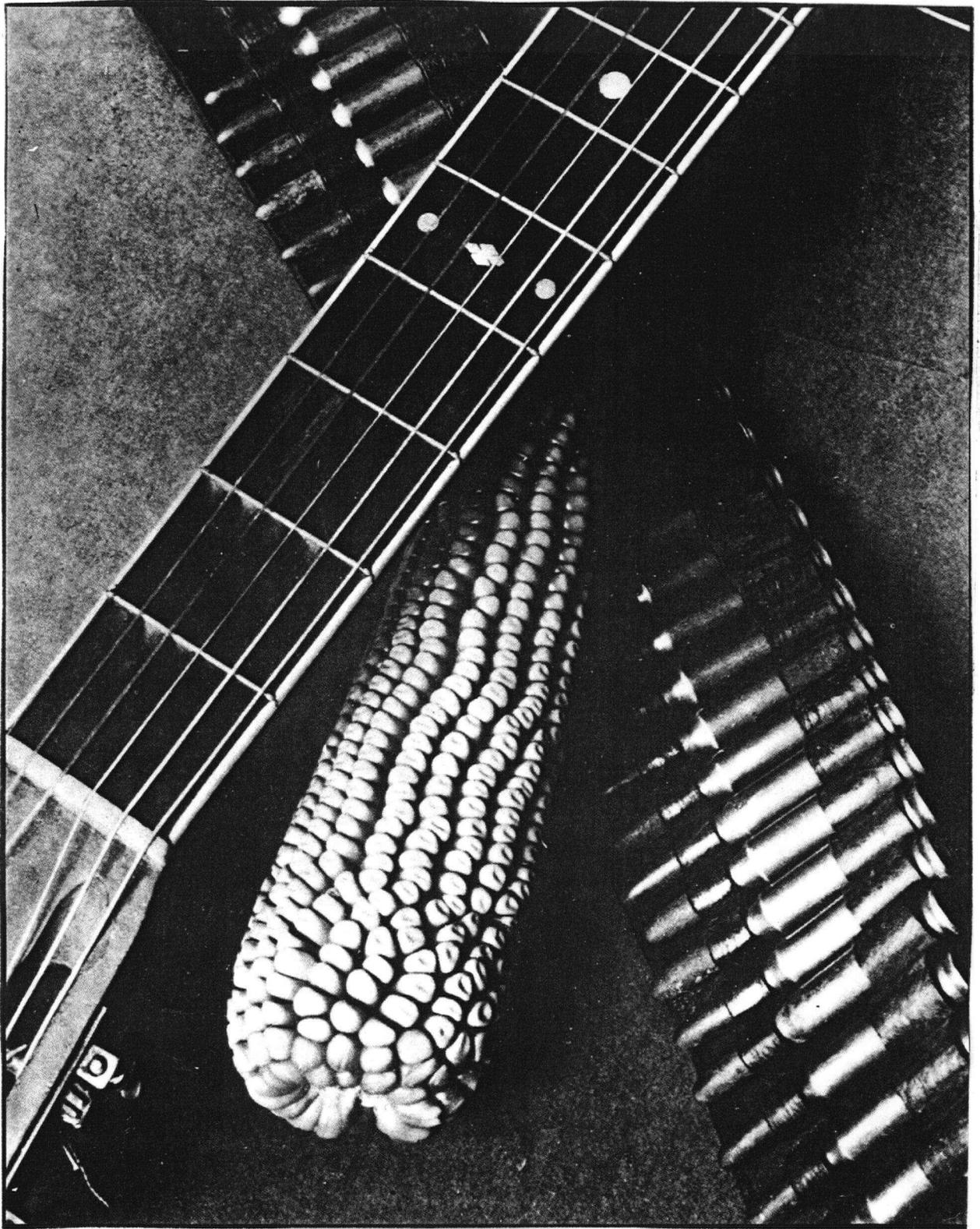


Figure 1. Tina Modotti, *Corn, Guitar, Cartridge*, c.1928.

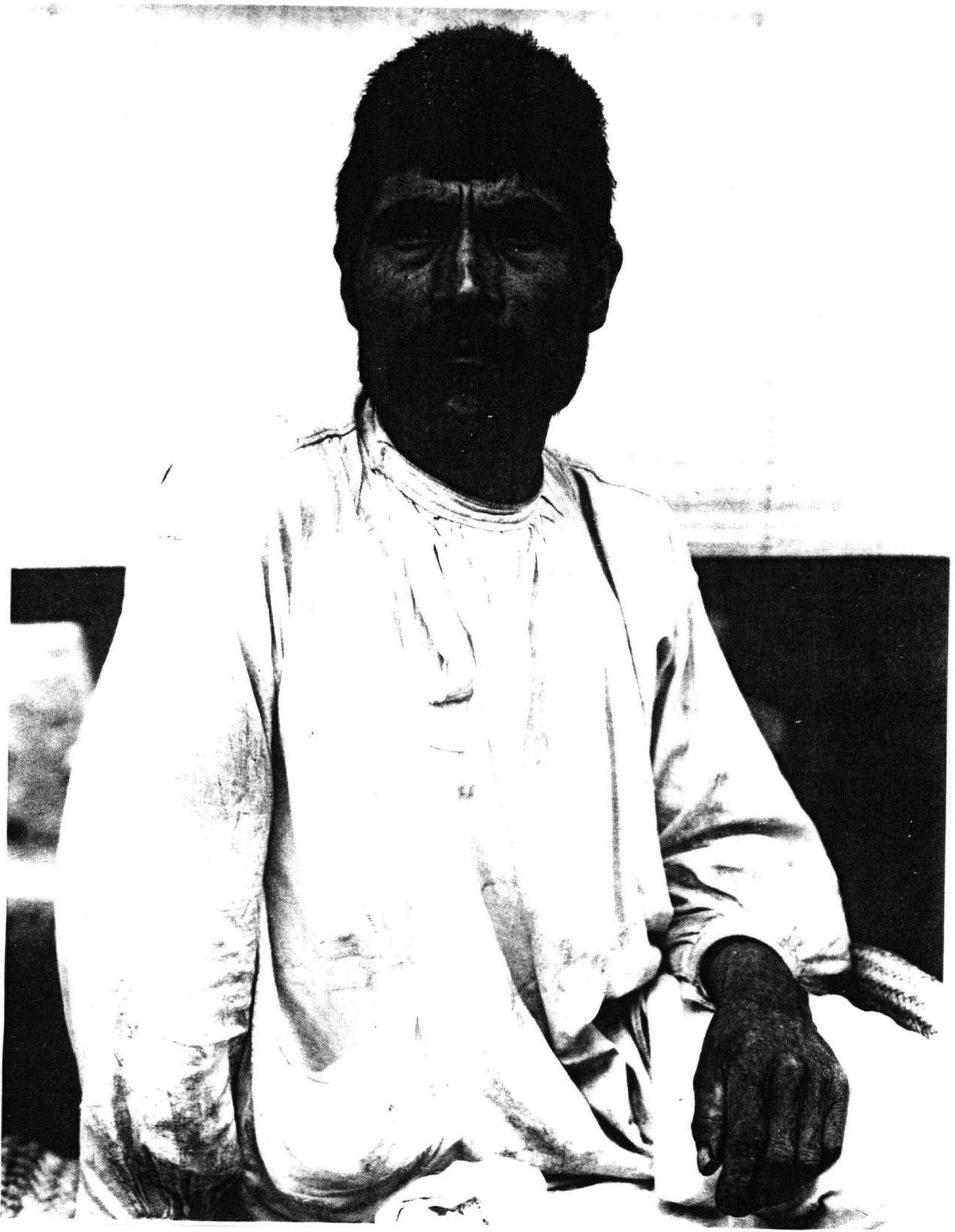


Figure 2. Paul Strand, *Man, Tenancingo*, 1933.



Figure 3. Tina Modotti, *Indian Mother Breastfeeding her Baby*, c.1928.

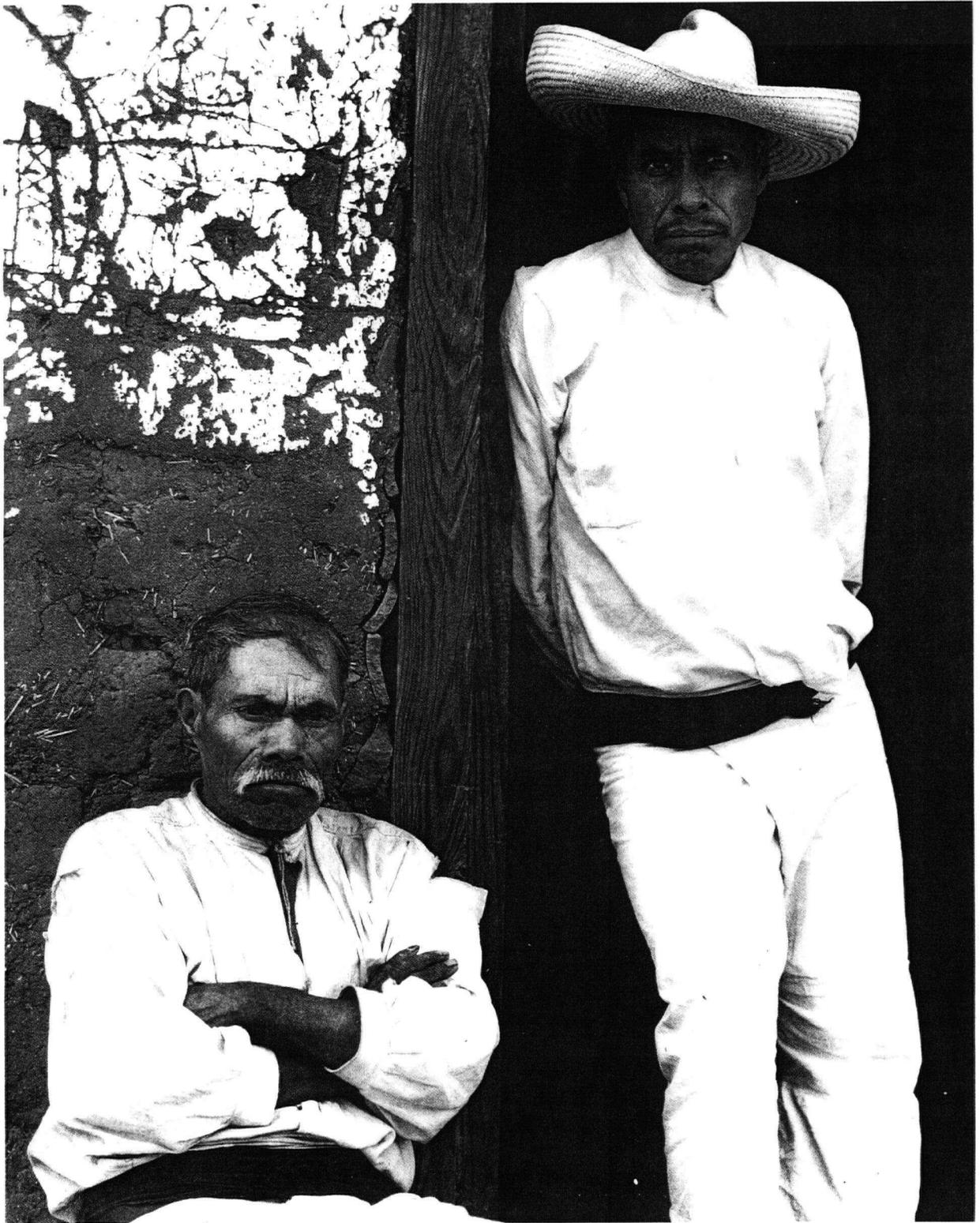


Figure 4. Paul Strand, *Men of Santa Ana, Michoacán*, 1933.



Figure 5. Tina Modotti, *A Big Group of Field Workers in the Street*, c.1928.



Figure 6. Tina Modotti, *Mexican Peasants Reading El Machete*, c.1924.



Figure 7. Tina Modotti, *Mella's Typewriter*, c.1929.

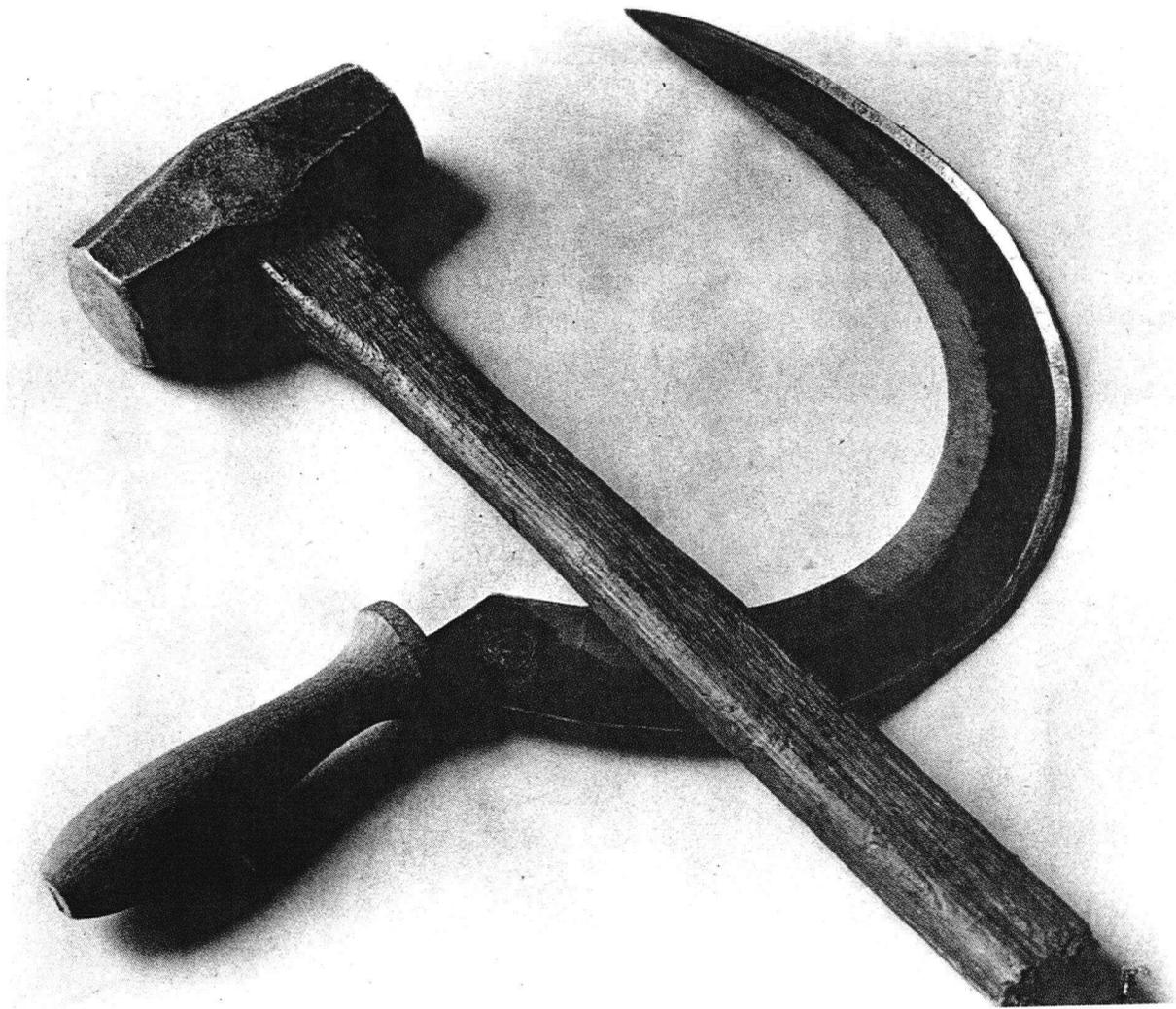


Figure 8. Tina Modotti, *Hammer and Sickle*, 1929.

EL CODIGO FEDERAL DEL TRABAJO,

TRABAJADORES DE TODAS
LAS TENDENCIAS: UNIOS EN
LA DEFENSA DE VUESTROS
INTERESES AMENAZADOS

UNA TRAMPA TENDIDA AL OBRERO



Nuestras palabras de orden tienen que ser claras y precisas: Hagamos el frente único de clase, para impedir la aprobación del Código Federal del Trabajo como lo proyecta el Gobierno; lucha sin tregua por la autonomía y libre funcionamiento de las organizaciones; ¡abajo el arbitraje obligatorio!; lucha sin descanso por el alza de los salarios y contra los reajustes de salario, de tiempo y de producción!

Figure 9. Tina Modotti, *El Código federal del trabajo, una trampa tendida al obrero*, 1929.

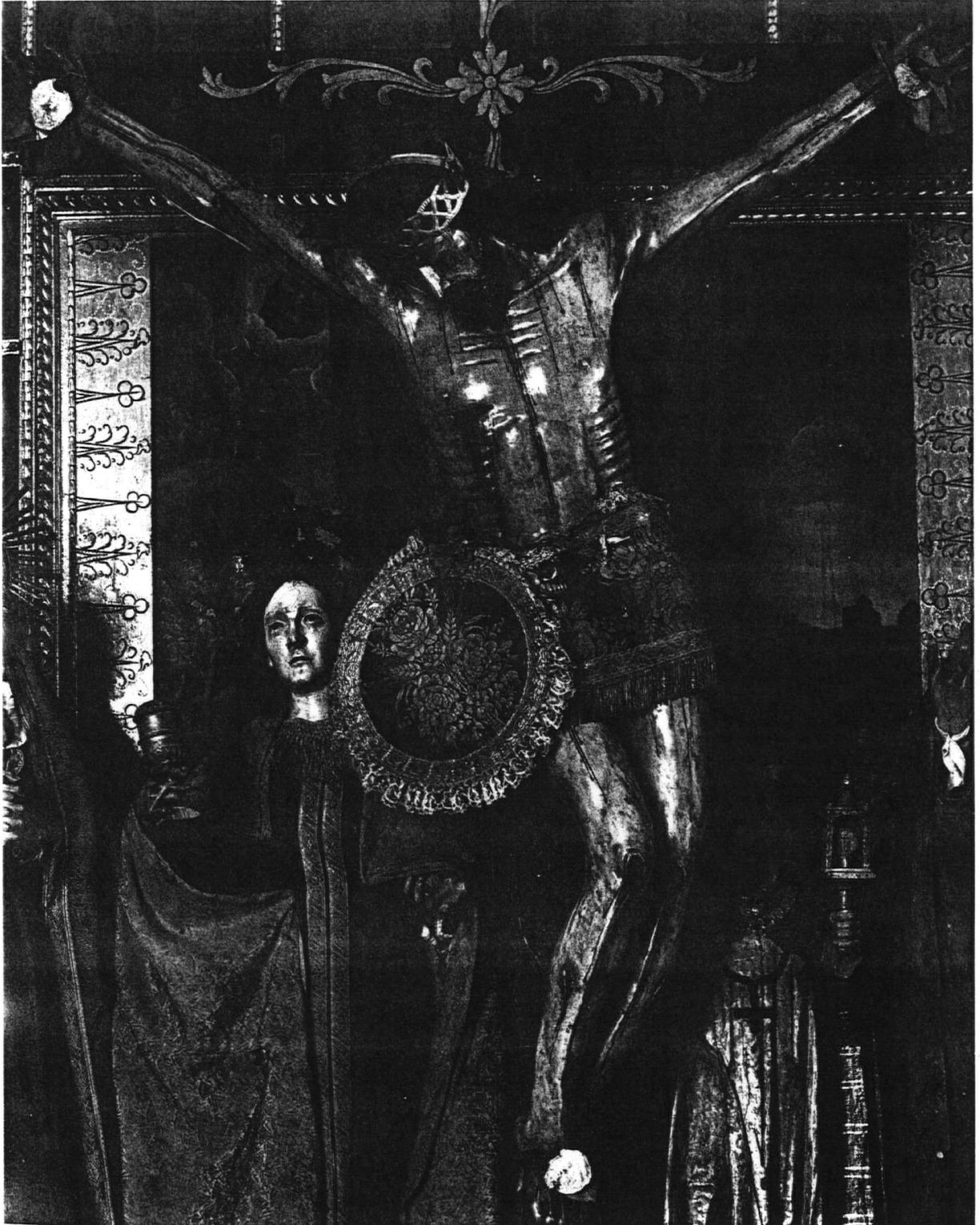


Figure 10. Paul Strand, *Christo, Tlacochoaya, Oaxaca*, 1933.

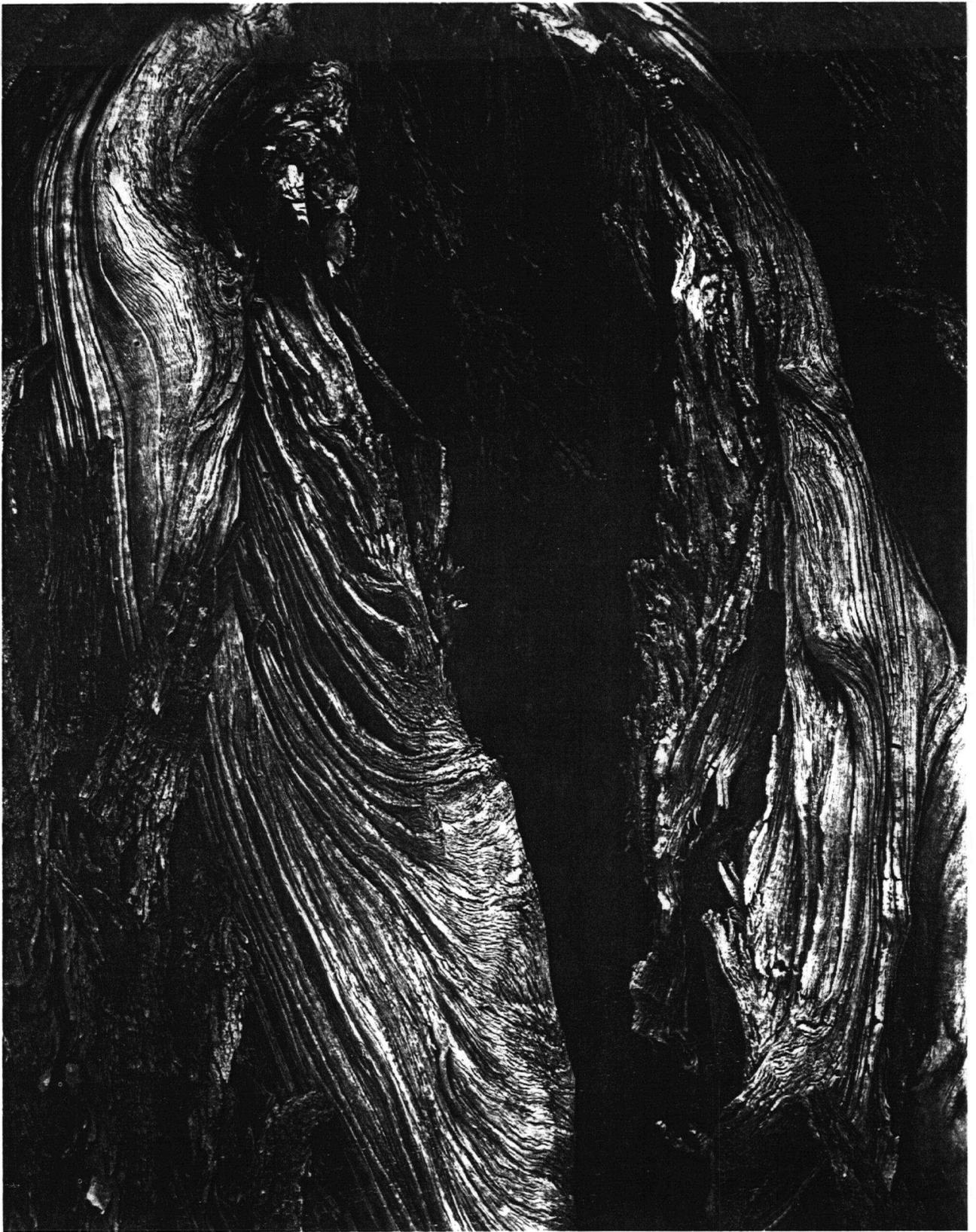


Figure 11. Paul Strand, *Driftwood, Maine*, 1928.

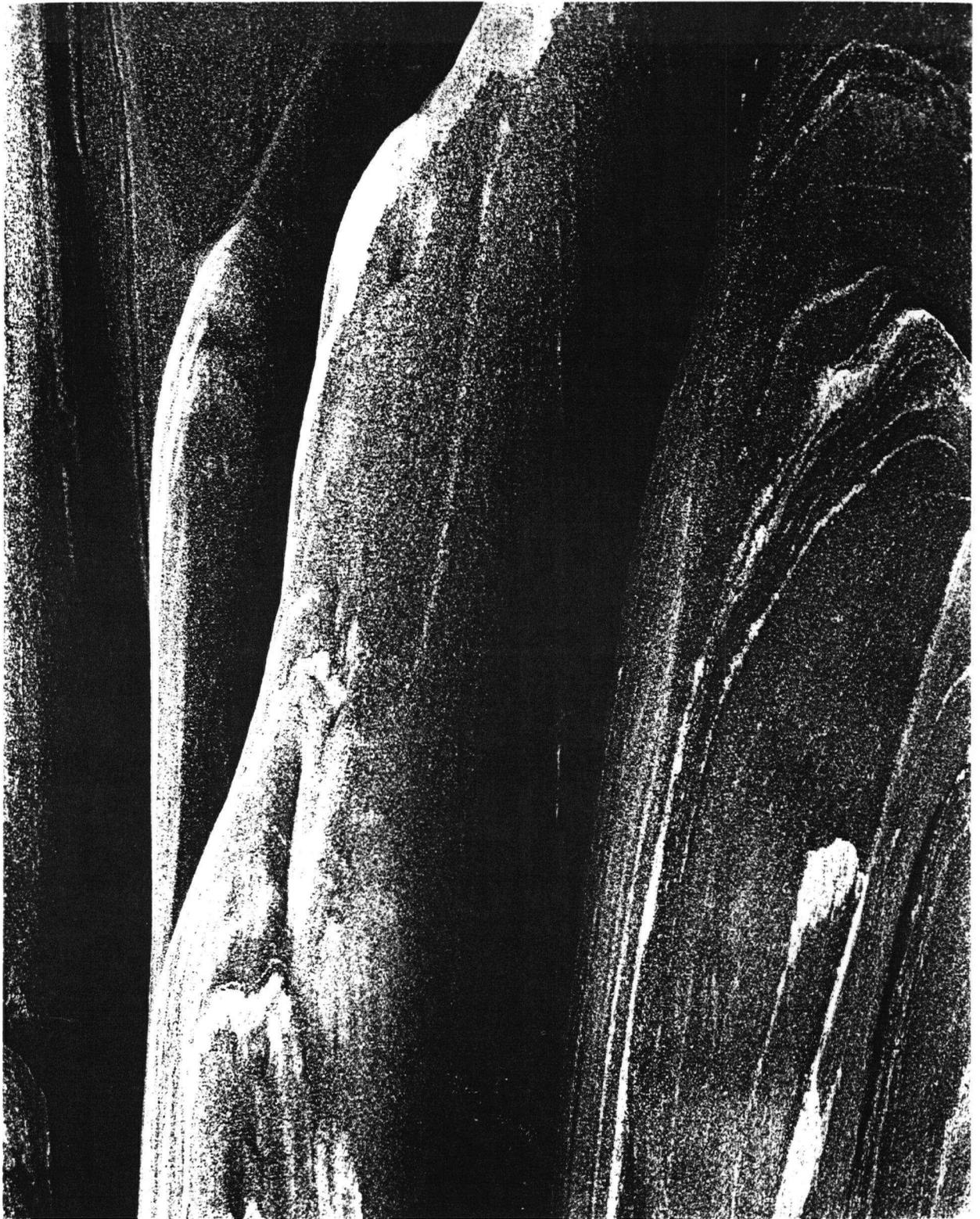


Figure 12. *Paul Strand, Rock, Georgetown, Maine, 1927*



Figure 13. Paul Strand, *Man with Sombrero*, 1933.



Figure 14. Paul Strand, *Woman, Tenancingo*, 1933.



Figure 15. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Calle Cuachtemoctzin, Mexico City, 1934.*

Notes

1. Furthermore, Bartra notes that: "This transition onto an imaginary past is similar to that which occurs in the reconstruction that modern mythology has made of the *homo mexicanus*, an android whose anatomy must be known, since in it we find the keys to what I call the institutionalization of the national soul" in *Oficio mexicano*, (Grijalbo, 1993), p.11.
2. Tina Modotti, 'Sobre la Fotografía/On Photography' in *Mexican Folkways*, vol.5, no.4, (October-December, 1929), p.196. As is noted further in my discussion, the clichéd symbols of charros and chinas poblanas appeared in a number of writings during the late 1920s and early 1930s.
3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, reprinted in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, Vieri Quilici ed., (Thames and Hudson, 1986), p.228.
4. *Ibid.*, p.222.
5. Margaret Hooks notes that the "curious inscription on the top right-hand corner [of the invitation was] the same quote on art and revolution that appears in . . . Mella's [T]ypewriter. The quote's . . . author was none other than Leon Trotsky, already the pariah of Communist Parties world-wide." *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary*, (Pandora, 1993), p.191.
6. Leon Trotsky, 'A Declaration of *La Verite*' in *La Verite* (September 13, 1929) reprinted in *The Writings of Leon Trotsky*, George Breitman and Sarah Lovell ed., (Pathfinder Press, Inc.), p.233.
7. *Ibid.*, p.231.
8. Diego Rivera, *Oposición de Izquierda*, (New York, [publisher unknown] 1930) reprinted in Alejandro Gálvez Cancino, 'Julio Antonio Mella: un marxista revolucionario' in *Críticas de la Economía Política*, no. 30, (1986), p.146-7.
9. Frances Toor, 'Exposicion de Fotografias de Tina Modotti' in *Mexican Folkways*, vol. 4, no. 5, (October-December, 1929), p.192.
10. Carleton Beals, 'Tina Modotti' in *Creative Arts*, vol. 4, no. 2, (February, 1929), quoted in Toors, *Mexican Folkways*, p.192.
11. Diego Rivera, from an article on Edward Weston and Tina Modotti in *Mexican Folkways* (April-May, 1926), quoted in Toors, *Mexican Folkways*, p.192.
12. Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, Christopher Hall trans., (Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.1.

13. Bartra notes: "It [the Mexican character] exists principally in the books and speeches that describe or exalt it, and it is possible to find there traces of the original: a powerful nationalist will bound to the unification and institutionalization of the modern capitalist state." *Ibid.*, p.3.
14. Alfonso Reyes' views were summarized by Bartra in *ibid.*, p.20.
15. For a further discussion on Vasconcelo's assertions see Bartra, *ibid.*, p.81.
16. The seminar was divided into twelve main sections that went under the following categories: (1) "The Genius of Mexican Life"; (2) "The Indian Heritage"; (3) "The Art of the Indian"; (4) "Education in Mexico"; (5) "Religious Forces"; (6) "Economic Problems"; (7) "The Agrarian and Labor Situation"; (8) "Social Problems"; (9) "Migration"; (10) "State and Federal Government in Mexico"; (11) "Relations Between the United States and Mexico" and (12) "A Summary and an Interpretation." Within this seminar and of particular interest to this thesis is Sáenz's speech "The Genius of Mexican Life" and the speeches that constituted the section entitled "The Art of the Indian." This latter section was composed of the speakers Mary Austin, René d'Harnoncourt, Diego Rivera, Carlos Merida and Carlos Chávez.
17. Moisés Sáenz's speech was transcribed and published as 'The Genius of Mexican Life' in *The Genius of Mexico: Lectures Delivered before the Fifth Seminar in Mexico, 1930*, Hubert C. Herring and Katherine Terill ed., (The Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America, 1931), p.11.
18. *Ibid.*, p.22.
19. *Ibid.*, p.26.
20. Samuel Ramos, *El perfil de hombre y la cultura en México*, (Imprenta Mundial, 1934), reprinted in Samuel Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, Peter G. Earle trans., (University of Texas Press, 1962), p.57.
21. *Ibid.*, p.58.
22. *Ibid.*, p.102-3.
23. *Ibid.*, p.75.
24. *Ibid.*, p.76.
25. *Ibid.*, p.76.
26. Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, (Atheneum, 1985), p.30.

27. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New Left Books, 1971), p.142.
28. Moisés Sáenz discussed this policy of "Cultural Incorporation" in a speech delivered in the summer of 1935. The speech was transcribed and published as 'Indian Mexico' in *Renascent Mexico*, Hubert Herring and Herbert Weinstock ed., (Covici, Friede, 1935), p.175.
29. *Ibid.*, p.177.
30. Narcisco Bassols, *Obras*, (*Fondo de Cultura Económica*, 1937) reprinted in Henry Schmidt, *The Roots of Lo Mexicano: Self and Society in Mexican Thought 1900-1934*, (Texas A&M University Press, 1978), p.112.
31. Edward Weston, 'A Tyro's Annual' in *The Left*, no. 1, (1931), p.62.
32. Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography' in *Literarische Welt* (1931), reprinted in *Screen*, vol. 13, no.1, (1972), p.24.
33. Weston, 'A Tyro's Annual,' p.64.
34. *Ibid.*, p.64.
35. *Ibid.*, p.65.
36. *Ibid.*, p.65.
37. Edward Weston, 'A Contemporary Means to Creative Expression' in *The Art of Edward Weston*, Merle Armitage ed., (E. Weyhe, 1932), p.7.
38. Berthold Brecht passage reprinted in Benjamin, 'A Short History,' p.24.
39. *Ibid.*, p.24.
40. Katharine Grant Sterne, 'American versus European Photography' in *Parnassus*, vol. 4, (March, 1932), p.16.
41. *Ibid.*, p.16.
42. Franklin Roosevelt understood that the American public would sanction measures to keep foreign aggression from the hemisphere. Instead of calling for unilateral intervention in Latin America in times of instability, the president chose to promote inter-American solidarity through the Good Neighbor policy. See Irwin Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy: United States Policies in Latin America, 1933-45*, (The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), p.12.

43. On reform liberal intellectuals see especially Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p.10.
44. Donald and Dorothy Cordry, *Mexican Indian Costumes*, (University of Texas Press, 1968), p.163.
45. Harold Clurman, 'Plans for a First Studio' (1931) reprinted in Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p.7.
46. Louis Adamic, 'The Passing of American Individualism' in *American Scholar*, no. 1, (October, 1932), p.423.
47. (Anon.), '*La Exposición de Fotografías de Paul Strand*' in *El Universal*, (February 5, 1933), p.2.
48. *Ibid.*, p.2.
49. *Ibid.*, p.2.
50. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Preface to *Paul Strand, The Mexican Portfolio*, (DaCapo Press, 1967), p.1.
51. '*La Exposición de Fotografías de Paul Strand*,' p.2.
52. *Ibid.*, p.2.
53. Katherine C. Ware, 'Photographs of Mexico, 1940' in *Paul Strand: Essays on his Life and Work*, Maren Stange ed., (Aperature Foundation, 1990), p.112.
54. Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy*, p. 40.
55. *Ibid.*, p.49.
56. *Ibid.*, p.49.
57. Virginia Dominguez, 'Of Other People' in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Hal Foster ed., (Bay Press, 1987), p.132.
58. Bartra, *Cage of Melancholy*, p.147.
59. *Ibid.*, p.148.
60. *Ibid.*, p.149.
61. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, (Knopf, 1976), p.235. Quotation reprinted in Bartra, *Cage of*

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62. Donald and Dorothy Cordry, *Mexican Indian Costumes*, p.163.
63. John W.F. Dulles, *Yesterday in Mexico: A Chronicle of the Revolution, 1919-1936*, (University of Texas Press, 1961), p.551.
64. *Ibid.*, p.567.
65. Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press, 1984), p.10.
66. Katherine Ware, 'Photographs of Mexico, 1940' in *Paul Strand: Essays on his Life and Work*, Maren Stange ed., (Aperature Foundation, 1990), p.110.
67. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, (University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.19.

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