

El renegado comunista

Diego Rivera, *La Liga de Obreros y Campesinos* and Mexican Repatriation in Detroit

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On 21 April 1932, Diego Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo, arrived in Detroit by train. Rivera had been commissioned by museum director Dr William Valentiner and industrialist Edsel Ford to paint a mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Significantly, Rivera would shortly decide that Detroit should best be represented through its legacy of human and mechanical labour, not through its management. In the eyes of Valentiner, Rivera was the ‘ideal artist’ to represent the industrial age, even though his radical political views regarding unionism were diametrically opposed to those held by Ford and his museum board.

Valentiner was a German émigré who had fled fascism and was the first professional museum director of the DIA. He had come to Detroit from a previous position at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.¹ Valentiner’s interest in Rivera arose during a business trip to California, when the two met in San Francisco at the Stock Exchange while Rivera was working on his frescoes there. In a letter to a colleague, Valentiner noted that he had ‘become well acquainted with Rivera [and] arranged with him for a small exhibition of his drawings and water colours’ to be held at the DIA in the early spring of 1931.² Through this exhibition, the Arts Commission gained unlikely support for the creation of a Rivera fresco in the Garden Court. For the subsequent fresco mural commission, Rivera was even given the option to paint any theme, as long as it was approved by the Ford-backed DIA Arts Commission. In deciding to represent the ‘people’s history’ of Detroit labour, Rivera chose to paint a mural at the DIA that embodied the history of Michigan industry from the ‘workers’ point-of-view’. This imagery of subtle understatement was an effective visual form to counter Edsel Ford and his ethnocentric, anti-union grip on Detroit. In doing so, Rivera felt he could adequately portray the working people of Detroit in a non-subordinate relationship within the workplace, even though Ford was the patron. On 26 May 1931, the fresco project was surprisingly

1. Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, W W Norton, New York, 1999, p 22.

2. Detroit Institute of Arts Archives, Valentiner 22/15, Letter dated 30 January 1931.

approved and Diego Rivera was commissioned to paint the North and South walls of the Garden Court for the sum of US\$10,000.

Little did the elite Arts Commission anticipate the contentious legacy that the mural would leave in its contested wake after its approval. Although scholars and art historians often write of the controversy surrounding the murals and their content, little attention has been paid to the role that Rivera played within the *colonia mexicana* in Detroit as a partisan of social justice and racial equality. Nor has the continued ambivalence of the Chicana/o community towards Rivera been thoroughly analysed.³ The purpose of this paper is to discuss the basic historical writings on Diego Rivera in Detroit and to extend the debate to the 'divisive' role that he played in the hardly uniform Mexican community, along with the much-debated legacy he has left among *miChicanas/os*.⁴

Unfortunately, Rivera's role within the Detroit Mexican community has often gone unquestioned, by both Anglo historians and Mexican scholars. A few Chicana/o academics have touched on the issue, but they usually focus on a more decentralised investigation of the *colonia mexicana* in Detroit during the 1930s. Often, when Anglo scholars have attempted to tackle Rivera's involvement in the Detroit Mexican community, the issues have become over-simplified, and the community itself made to seem uniform in relation to the mainstream society of Detroit and its hegemonic elite.

Through new primary sources, fresh archival research and overlooked oral histories, this essay will sketch the very complex controversy surrounding Diego Rivera within Southwest Detroit, the Mexican *barrio*. In fact, within the *colonia mexicana*, Diego Rivera's political dissidence and the McCarthy era intimidation would leave an unforgettable, if often unspoken, legacy that remains to this day – which is perhaps why no one else has reconstructed it in the art historical literature.⁵

MEXICANAS/OS IN DETROIT

Rivera and Kahlo's arrival was met by a large collective of community members, including Valentiner, Rivera's assistant Clifford Wright (an anarchist), the Mexican consul Ignacio Batiza and representatives from the Mexican organisation *El Centro Cultural*.⁶ A month prior to Rivera's arrival, Wright had sent a telegram to Valentiner inquiring about the Ford Workers' Parade and stating that Rivera 'must not miss it on any account'.⁷ As part of the 'parade', 5000 autoworkers, who had recently become unemployed, marched from Detroit to the Ford Company Rouge Plant in nearby Dearborn demanding economic relief. On their arrival at the Rouge Plant, the police began firing on the crowd and using other oppressive tactics to disperse the marchers, who were non-violent. Many autoworkers were injured and even murdered, leaving the incident to be remembered as one of the worst examples of labour repression in the 1930s. Rivera, whose sympathies with the workers were quite clear, arrived only after the horrific event had taken place. Nonetheless, the events of the Workers' Parade would have a prolonged impact on Rivera and on the images of labour's autonomy that he painted in Detroit. Unlike his stay in other North American cities

3. In Spanish, and its usage in English, the masculine Chicano usually refers to both male (Chicano) and female (Chicana) members of the Mexican-American community. Following patterns in recent literature, I prefer to use the non-phallogentric, gender-inclusive Chicana/o. Other words within the text follow this pattern of gender inclusivity (*mexicano/o*, *Latina/o*, *repatriada/o*). At times I will use either the masculine -o suffix (*mexicano*) or feminine -a suffix (*Latina*) to refer specifically to that gender.

4. *MiChicanas/os* is a term used by many radical Mexican-Americans as a self-identifying label for Chicanas/os living in Michigan.

5. This article is the first stage of a larger study I am conducting on the reasons for the legacy of 'silence' that surrounds the history of Michigan Chicanas/os and also the ongoing influence that Rivera has had on Michigan Chicana/o and Latina/o artists.

6. Burton Historical Archives, *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit, 22 April 1932.

7. Detroit Institute of Arts Archives, Valentiner Files 28/4, Western Union telegram dated 5 March 1932.

where he was insulated from local Mexican communities, Rivera would have an opportunity to work directly with the rank-and-file workers in the Detroit *barrio mexicano*.

The Chicana/o working-class has a long history in Michigan. A significant number initially came as agricultural labourers in the earlier part of the century, with all the precariousness that such a migrant position entails. Within Texas and Mexico, these workers usually came from a certain racialised location within society. Unlike European immigrant labourers, Mexican workers were not able to assimilate into Anglo North American society, because of their perceived racial difference. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines 'racialised' in this sense as either 'To differentiate or categorize according to race.... To impose a racial character or context on [or] To perceive or experience in racial terms'.⁸ So for Mexican workers, phenotypic difference marked them as 'inferior' and allowed for little, if any, class mobility.

While the majority of the Mexicans in Michigan belonged to a racialised, indigenous class of agricultural and industrial labourers, family members of many Latin American elites had also been sought out by Henry Ford and trained as management at the Ford Service School. Unlike the Mexican proletariat involved with Rivera during his Detroit visit, these elite students consisted of 'the son of the publisher of *El Mercurio*, a prominent magazine in Mexico, [another] was the son of a Supreme Court justice in Panama, while the best-placed was the nephew of [Mexican] President Calles'.⁹ Midwest Chicana/o labour historian Dennis Valdés writes that this 'group of Latinos with bourgeois pretensions and habits ... has gone practically unnoticed by historians'.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, due to ethnocentric labour practices and subsequent historical research, all Mexicans and Latin Americans became 'workers' in Detroit. Unlike current migrations northward, during the early part of the twentieth century both upper- and working-class immigration occurred, even though the latter was much more common. These professional 'middle-class' students began arriving in Detroit in 1918 and were quite influential in community activities.

Once in the United States, however, many of these former management students at the Ford Service School were forced to work as mere wage labourers. In Latin America, they represented the elites, but 'after migrating to Detroit and spending many years in training, they ended up perspiring on the line with unskilled, unlettered and untrained workers of diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds'.¹¹ Just as the elite *hispanos* and *californios* had been disenfranchised with westward North American expansion, so had the Latin American elite sometimes lost their class-based privileges once arriving in Detroit. Yet having these 'professionals' within the *colonia* nonetheless helped to establish both a linguistic and a cultural community that had access to literary skills and informational resources in Latin America. These resources notwithstanding, the professionals were simply seen as ethnic Mexicans and, unlike other immigrant communities in Detroit, the Mexican *barrio* had a huge influx of people as part of the 'cheap labour' channelled into the northern industrial United States. Given that a return to Mexico or the US Southwest was not always a viable solution, the community grew rapidly with frequent variations in population. In December 1920, the *colonia* had already grown to an estimated eight thousand members, yet two

8. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, fourth edition, New York, 2000.

9. Dennis Nodin Valdés, 'Perspiring capitalists: Latinos and the Henry Ford Service School, 1918–1928', *Aztlán*, 12:2, 1982, p 231.

10. *Ibid*, p 228.

11. *Ibid*, p 238.

months later it consisted of a mere twenty-five hundred.¹² The huge variation in population may have been due to the fact that the *colonia mexicana* was a migratory community difficult to enumerate for English-speaking census takers. Even so, the community no doubt experienced large movements of population due to the seasonal availability of jobs in diverse locations.

By the early 1920s, *mexicanas/os* had established an institutional framework within the city. In 1923, Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church was established, serving both the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. Southwest Detroit continued to entice *mexicana/o* labourers and their families through a vast array of kinship ties throughout Texas and Mexico. By 1929, on the eve of Rivera's arrival, there were an estimated 15,000 Mexicans living in Detroit.¹³ Chicano labour historian Zaragosa Vargas writes that:

Mexicans came to Detroit through the process of chain migration. They relied on relatives and friends already in Detroit from their home towns and villages to provide them with travel money and information about living conditions and to arrange for their initial housing and jobs.¹⁴

The Mexican community formed a large part of the working class within Detroit but were more susceptible to alienation because of ethnic stereotyping and lack of job security. In 1926, Charles Cameron reported in an issue of *Detroit Saturday Night* that:

The Mexican, more than any other racial representative, succeeds in making his stay temporary and transient... The result is shown in the fact that of our Mexican colony of 7,000 to 8,000 a great majority have been here five years. It is hard to find those who have been here 10 years, and the life of the colony... does not go back further.¹⁵

While the Anglo-American media were reporting on the migratory conditions facing the Mexican community, Ignacio Batiza, the Mexican consul in Detroit, would be forced to use similar rhetoric as the impetus for encouraging repatriation to Mexico. He argued too that:

...the Mexican colony is young. The majority of the 15,000 Mexicans have not been in the United States more than five years. They have not yet adapted themselves to the American ways and have been hit hard by the current depression.¹⁶

This social precariousness not excepted, there was still a vibrant Mexican community that included newspapers, radio programmes, restaurants, social organisations, *fiestas patrias* and other indicators of a permanent *comunidad mexicana*. Such was the situation during Rivera's year in Detroit. The Chicana/o and Borricua *barrio* remains in the same location today but its vitality was destroyed when, during the mid-twentieth century, the city 'fathers' planned and later constructed a highway through the heart of the community.

In 1922, at weekly meetings in St Mary's Church, the first Mexican community organisation was established. *El Círculo Mutualista Mexicano* was founded with 150 members each paying weekly dues, used to take care of less fortunate members of the community.¹⁷ Similar

12. Norman D Humphrey, 'Migration and settlement of Detroit Mexicans', *Economic Geography*, 19:4, October 1943, p 360.
13. Zaragosa Vargas, *Mexican Auto Workers at Ford Motor Company, 1918-1933*, PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1984, p 156.
14. *Ibid*, p 158.
15. Charles D Cameron, *Detroit Saturday Night*, Detroit, 16 October 1926.
16. Ignacio Batiza quoted in Humphrey, 'Migration and settlement', *op cit*, p 360.
17. Marietta Lynn Baba and Malvina Hauk Abony, *Mexicans of Detroit*, Detroit, 1979, p 52.

to other *mutualista* societies, *El Círculo* used an anarcho-syndicalist structure and functioned as an insurance policy in case of hard times or death. As the community expanded, so did the number and role of community organisations. While Rivera was in the city, then, the Mexican neighbourhood, even with the harsh effects of the depression, remained a dynamic working-class location.

DETROIT INDUSTRY

From early in its production, Rivera's mural created an uproar within elite sectors of Detroit. As early as October 1932, the murals were being sensationally reported by the Anglo-American media. On 23 October, the *Detroit Times* printed that 'the work in material, manner, and enormity is beyond the conception of the people outside the red drapes that cover the finished portions of the wall'.¹⁸ While the entrances to the Garden Court and occasionally portions of the fresco walls were covered to protect 'unwanted viewings', little is documented about the mural's reception by working-class *mexicanas/os* in the city.¹⁹ *Detroit Industry* is nonetheless one of the paintings that syncretically brought together Rivera's aesthetic and political engagements in one epic visual cycle. Rivera's success on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts, as well as his contradictory experiences with Mexican labourers in that city, marks *Detroit Industry* as one of the most important works of his career.

As auto worker and labour organiser Reuben Álvarez argues:

When we organized the union at Ford, we used to bring delegations down to see the murals. Those who lacked words brought people down here to sign them on [to the United Autoworkers Union].²⁰

18. *Detroit Times*, 23 October 1932.

19. I am currently conducting research into the complex historical and contemporary role that the mural plays for Michigan Latinas/os.

20. Voiceover to the film *The Age of Steel*, Ford Fund, 1978, as quoted in Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p 235.

21. The descriptive analysis of Stanton L Catlin's 'Mural Census' remains the source *par excellence* when writing a description of the murals. See Stanton L Catlin, 'Mural Census', in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, Founders' Society Detroit Institute of Arts, New York, 1986, pp 235–336.

While scholars often fixate on the controversy surrounding the mural cycle from a religious perspective, it is just as plausible that the class-mobilising efforts connected to the fresco frightened Detroit elites and thus increased the controversy. What were the images that so frightened management and proved equally incendiary for automotive workers?

Although the mural was initially only supposed to be painted on two walls of the Garden Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the entire architectural environment was engaged by Rivera. On entering the space from the west, the main entrance, one is completely drawn into the expansive mural, which covers nearly every available surface within the room. To the east, on the first wall encountered in the courtyard, Rivera has represented the beginnings of life, as well as the emergence of industrial technology: a foetus-like child surrounded by the tentacles of a plant bulb.²¹ These tentacles extend into the cross-section of a geological stratum containing the typical minerals of Michigan soil, materials used in the production of automobiles represented on the north and south walls. This geological matter is flanked by ploughshares on either side. Outside this central panel are the harvested crops of Michigan with two female nudes holding sheaves of wheat and the indigenous fruit of the Great Lakes region.

Directly across from the east wall, the themes continue to develop Rivera's trajectory from unharnessed 'raw materials' to finished

'industrial products'. The west wall's central panel is a monochromatic grey image depicting Michigan ore freighters, as well as their South American counterparts shipping rubber north. At the centre of the panel is a life-and-death mask of a type found in Central Mexico. This image, like the entire mural cycle, portrays the dualistic and dialectic nature of life. Surrounding the monochrome of this panel are the polychromatic images of the constructive and destructive abilities of modern technology. Here industrial labourers build both passenger and war planes, which reflect modernity's interdependent and contradictory uses of technology. Below the aeroplanes are their natural equivalents: peaceful and predatory birds. Below these creatures, at ground level, are the life-size portraits of Diego Rivera (labourer), of course on the left, and the composite Thomas Edison/Henry Ford figure (manager).

For working people, the north and south walls are the most politically timely within the cycle. As Stanton Catlin argues: 'The north and south walls are devoted to three sets of images: the representation of the races that shape North American culture and make up its work force, the automobile industry, and other industries of Detroit.'²² Across the top of these two walls are the black, red, yellow and white 'races' embodied as androgynous figures. Each figure clutches a recently unearthed mineral that chromatically corresponds to the phenotype of that figure. Directly below these horizontal panels are the similarly proportioned fresco panels of the geological strata. These mineral depictions create a circular pattern around the architectural space by connecting with the strata on the West wall.

In the upper right- and left-hand corners of the north wall a child is being vaccinated, while gas bombs are constructed. Similarly, on the south wall, medicinal products are contrasted with commercial chemicals. Again, as has been shown throughout the entire cycle, Rivera problematises modernity by playing its negative uses against its transformative abilities.

The largest panel on the north wall represents the construction of the V-8 engine. This demonstrates the construction of the interior workings of an automobile, while the main panel on the facing south wall depicts the construction of the automobile's exterior body. These panels depict countless working-peoples of multiple racial and phenotypical backgrounds. It was common practice in industrial Detroit to include women in the factory. Rivera succinctly portrays the agonising and hurried pace of the shop floor, articulating its horrific nature without romanticising it. Stanton Catlin sums up the profound nature of *Detroit Industry*: 'Rivera's portrayal is neither idealised nor condescending, realistically presenting the seriousness and perseverance that are required to perform a job at the Rouge [Automotive Plant in Dearborn, MI].'²³

POLITICS AND LA CRISIS

During the eleven months that Rivera worked on the mural, he played an influential role in the *colonia mexicana*. In Detroit, *el Maestro* spent much of his free time working with local Mexican organisations. His near-compulsive work ethic notwithstanding, he became a union leader

22. Ibid, p 289.

23. Ibid, p 291.

who mobilised workers into the class-based and ethnic-based organisation *La Liga de Obreros y Campesinos*. According to local educator Luis C Murillo:

Rivera is credited with helping to establish the League of Mexican Workers and Peasants [*Liga de Obreros y Campesinos*], which was the liaison organization between the members of the Mexican colony and state and city agencies attempting to carry out the Mexican Repatriation Campaign.²⁴

Within two weeks of incorporating the *Liga de Obreros y Campesinos*, the organisation boasted eight hundred and fifty members in Detroit alone.²⁵ In addition to its membership in Detroit, the organisation had chapters established across Michigan and northern Ohio.

Rivera believed in the revolutionary role of workers, yet in the United States he was generally not in a position to support movements of this nature. Terry Smith writes that: 'There is little evidence that Rivera himself engaged in these [working-class] struggles directly, with the exception of some activity within the large Mexican community in Detroit.'²⁶ While Smith rightly acknowledges Rivera's involvement, he understates Rivera's role in Mexican socialist organisations.

Rivera's involvement as a leftist in the repatriation of Michigan Mexicans is quite elusive and many historians describe it from various, often opposing, viewpoints. Some historians believe that Rivera arrived in Detroit advocating repatriation on seeing the workers' conditions in the Depression; yet after seeing how ineffectual it was, he changed his opinion. Others have written, conversely, that he was opposed to the idea, until seeing the dire conditions for local *mexicanas/os* in Detroit. George Vargas, a Michigan Chicano muralist and art historian, believes that Rivera was primarily against repatriation, but only advocated it as a way to ensure safe passage back to Mexico for marginalised, unwanted Mexican labourers. In his doctoral thesis on Latina/o arts in Michigan, Vargas writes that:

Rivera tried to persuade people to stay in Detroit, telling them that economic conditions were no better, maybe worse, in Mexico. He felt that their lives would improve if they stayed in Detroit and worked with other Americans who would help them make a better economic position for themselves. After failing to convince many, he directed his efforts toward helping these legal and illegal Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in their attempts to return.²⁷

This view, written by a Michigan Chicano, seems to counter the position argued by noted scholar Linda Bank Downs that Rivera was always pushing local Mexicans to return to Mexico and that Detroit Mexicans were happy to do so. In her recent book, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, Downs, former curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, writes that 'In Detroit, Rivera's assistance [in the repatriation] was seen as a kind gesture among the Mexican community'.²⁸ Without any basis in oral histories from the community, Downs claims that Rivera was always seen as a positive figure in Southwest Detroit, whatever the political views of the Detroit Mexican in question.

Yet repatriations to Mexico have not always been seen positively in Detroit. In their book, *Decade of Betrayal*, Francisco E Balderrama and

24. Luis C Murillo, *The Detroit Mexican colonia from 1920–1932: Implications for social and educational policy*, PhD dissertation, Michigan State University, 1981, p 143.

25. Norman D Humphrey, 'Mexican repatriation from Michigan: Public assistance in historical perspective', *Social Service Review*, XXV, 1941, p 501.

26. Smith, *Making the Modern*, op cit, p 209.

27. Vargas, op cit, p 125.

28. Downs, op cit, p 61.

Raymond Rodríguez outline some instances of forced repatriation or deportation in Detroit. They use the example of Pedro González, a ‘former Ford Motor Company employee [who] had been dragged out of his home and escorted to the train station by police officers’.²⁹ Other repatriations were equally forcible at times. Yet some writers, like Margaret Sterne, wrote about it in paradoxical terms:

Rivera has been making himself useful to his compatriots in Detroit. He has succeeded in getting the Welfare Commission to furnish funds to send some two or three thousand Mexicans back to their country. *This, of course, means in the end, a saving of the welfare that has had to support these people.*³⁰ (Emphasis added)

Instead of focusing on the inhumane, destructive practice of forced repatriation, Sterne placed her attention on the supposed strain that the impoverished *colonia mexicana* imposed on the City of Detroit. By solely focusing on brute economics as the impetus for Mexican repatriation, she continues a racist discourse that uses monetary pretences as a way to dispossess Mexican labour in the US.

A cost-effective way to encourage repatriation when cheap labour was no longer ‘needed’ was to isolate Mexicans by limiting their access to public assistance and forcing them to attend public cafeterias. During the Depression, just prior to the large waves of coerced repatriation, unemployed Mexicans were placed on cafeteria lists, as opposed to receiving monetary forms of relief. Although that only cut the per capita cost from fourteen cents to thirteen cents per meal, the decision to place *mexicanas/os* on the cafeteria list had additional ulterior motives. If the state could fragment and immiserate the Mexican community, repatriation efforts would incur much less resistance.

As part of the process of creating an environment in which the *mexicanas/os* wanted to return to Mexico, the Michigan State Welfare Department published a pamphlet titled *Repatriation*, arguing for a rather simple solution to the economic ills of the Depression:

With steady increases in the county relief lists, the problem of adequate care is becoming ever harder to solve; and it is obvious that any reduction in the relief load effective through repatriation service will be a significant factor toward the solution.³¹

According to rhetoric issued by the state of Michigan, the persistence of Mexicans in Michigan was a large strain on public funds during the early years of the Depression. Just as the State Welfare Department argued in favour of repatriation as the most effective ‘solution for combating economic troubles’, many Detroit newspapers suggested a similar ‘solution’. In 1932, the *Detroit News* began running frequent articles about the Mexican colony and the repatriation efforts. On 9 November, the paper featured a headline stating that ‘Mexican labor [is] leaving Michigan for [their] Homeland’ and that this ‘wholesale repatriation is solving [the] social problem which [has] vexed [the] state for 15 years’.³²

The repatriation in Detroit during the 1930s was in fact similar to the nationwide contemporary deportation of undocumented Mexican labour by the *Immigration and Naturalization Services* (INS). Recent

29. Francisco E Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1995, p 139.
30. Margaret Sterne, ‘Museum director and the artist: Valentiner and Diego Rivera in Detroit’, *Detroit in Perspective*, Detroit, Winter 1973, p 109.
31. An undated pamphlet published by the State Welfare Department quoted in Humphrey, ‘Mexican repatriation’, p 498.
32. *Detroit News*, 9 November 1932.

mainstream Anglo-American media have openly discussed the use of INS raids as a 'productive' manner to combat 'illegal' immigration, but such discussions were not always so forthright. In a 1932 memo written by John L Zurbrick, Detroit District Director of Immigration during the Mexican Repatriation Campaign, the clandestine nature of the 'repatriation' stands revealed:

It is suspected that a number of Mexicans will be found who are subject to voluntary departure or deportable but at the request of the Mexican Consul the deportation feature has been kept very much in the background and the voluntary removal under the Act of 1917 stressed in order that the Mexicans may not get the idea that *this is a deportation movement*.³³ (Emphasis added)

On the one hand, Diego Rivera and the *Liga de Obreros y Campesinos* were helping to fund the repatriation as a means of starting workers' collectives in Northern Mexico while, on the other hand, local, state and federal agencies had discriminatory agendas based on an ethnocentric form of disenfranchisement. The distinctive role played by the *Liga*, versus that played by the Mexican Consulate and the local Detroit and Michigan state governments, has become blurred over time as conservatives have tried to 'redefine' the original aims of these agencies.

While the repatriation efforts were under way, the *colonia mexicana* became divided along class, political and religious lines for various reasons. Working-class residents were often involved in the same organisations on the left as Rivera. Others on the Mexican-American right, within the Catholic Church, were vehemently against his political 'agitation'. During his stay in Detroit, Rivera worked with community leader Luis Gasca to start a socialist newspaper called *La Prensa Libre*. In addition to printing this newspaper, which often included anti-clerical writings, Gasca also published a small arts and literary review entitled *Arte y Letras*.³⁴ These important writings have not yet resurfaced to shed new light on Rivera's involvement.

As a retort to the revolutionary writing in Gasca's publications, Simón Muñoz, a conservative leader in the *colonia*, began publishing a bi-weekly newspaper in 1930 entitled *La Chispa*. For the next five years this lay Catholic publication attacked the leftist politics of Rivera and other working-class *mexicanas/os* not associated with the Catholic Church.³⁵ *La Chispa's* editorial staff did not simply attack Rivera and *la Liga* in the pages of the paper, but conducted a letter-writing campaign criticising Rivera and the Mexican socialists in the community. In the autumn of 1932, Muñoz and over fifty members of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish church wrote a letter to the Catholic Diocese attacking Rivera's politics and his work 'against' the Catholic Church:

The majority of our colony used to be good Catholics until a few months ago when a disastrous propaganda against our Faith was started ... by a society of Mexican working men which meets every Saturday and carry out every doctrine against our Holy Mother the Church, inducing Mexicans to become Communists. One of the leaders is that great Mexican painter, Diego Rivera, of whom you have perhaps read in the papers. He talks against the existence of God ... consequently denying everything pertaining to Religion.³⁶

33. National Archives, Record Group 85, File no 55784/585, Memo from John L Zurbrick (District Director of Immigration, Detroit District) to Commissioner General of Immigration, 20 October 1932.

34. Eduard Adam Skendzel, *Detroit's Pioneer Mexicans: A Historical Study of the Mexican Colony in Detroit*, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 1980, p 49.

35. *Ibid*, p 49.

36. Archdiocese of Detroit Archives, Letter from Simón Muñoz to the Catholic Diocese of Detroit, 18 October 1932.

The undersigned Catholics also made it a point to stress that they did not wish to be a part of the repatriation to Mexico, which, at least in Rivera's view, was linked to radical land-reform programmes starting to emerge in Mexico in relation to early instances of *Cardenismo*. In the final line of the letter written by Muñoz, the Catholic constituency pleads for the help of the Detroit Diocese and demands to remain in Michigan: 'Begging you, Most Illustrious Lord Bishop, to remedy our situation, and assuring you of our respect and sincerity in this letter as a duty of conscience, *we beg to remain*' (emphasis added).³⁷

The writers of the letter, being loyal Catholic *mexicanas/os*, believed they had reason to fear a return to Mexico, following the recent defeat of the Cristeros counter-revolution in which the Church and its allies had lost much of their power. Only a few years had passed since the uprising of reactionary Catholics in West-Central Mexico had been defeated by President Plutarco Calles and its legacy remained embedded in the collective memory of the Catholic community of Detroit.

The armed counter-resistance, known as the Cristeros Rebellion, which began in 1927 and continued until 1929, was a reaction to the post-Revolutionary legislation on behalf of secularisation enacted by then President Calles. Tens of thousands of people, both Federal soldiers and armed Catholic resisters, were killed as the government put down the growing right-wing, pro-Catholic army only after intense fighting. Having a self-identifying communist like Rivera in Detroit working for the repatriation only made those involved with the Church fear the worst in Mexico. Although Catholic religious practices were generally not affected by anti-clerical regulations in Mexico, the subordinate role of the Church in Mexican life certainly diverged from the role it played in the *colonia*.

In addition to the split along the lines of Catholic partisans and socialist activists within the *colonia* of Detroit, there was another division. The left itself became fragmented over the relationship of Rivera and the *Liga* with local, state and national state apparatuses. In the autumn of 1932, the International Labour Defence (ILD), an arm of the Communist Party, began openly criticising and attacking Rivera and the *Liga de Obreros y Campesinos*. While the Communist Party agreed with Rivera on the cause of the problem confronting Mexican labour, it differed from him and the *Liga* on how to solve it. Throughout the Mexican barrios of Detroit, the ILD began distributing flyers charging that 'Mexicans living in Michigan had been brought there by the automobile industry "so that they might work... at the least possible salary"'.³⁸ In addition to their attacks on the automobile industry, the ILD called Rivera a 'renegade from the Communist Party' and through their publication challenged the *Liga's* claims of the availability of land for workers' cooperatives in Mexico.³⁹ According to the 20 November 1932 issue of the *Michigan Worker*, 'this lie doesn't even have to be disproved. The peons now in Mexico starve to death by the thousands.'⁴⁰

Although sectarian in their attacks on Rivera and incipient *Cardenismo*, the ILD was correct in its conclusions as to why Henry and Edsel Ford had hired so many Mexicans. A known anti-Semite and anti-unionist, Henry Ford was notorious for exploiting 'ethnic' differences between workers as a way to retard the organising capabilities of the

37. Archdiocese of Detroit Archives, Letter from Simón Muñoz, 1932.

38. George Kiser and David Silverman, 'Mexican repatriation during the Great Depression', in *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives*, eds George C Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser, Albuquerque, 1979, p 60.

39. National Archives, Record Group 85, File no 55784/585, International Labour Defence, 'Down with Diego Rivera'.

40. *Michigan Worker*, 20 November 1932.

working class. Ford hired more Mexican and Chicana/o labour than any other employer in the United States because he knew they would be deportable when no longer 'needed'. According to Zaragosa Vargas:

Auto companies, in conjunction with the Employers Association of Detroit, would deliberately flood Detroit's labor market with a surplus of workers to keep wages down and, more important, to maintain worker discipline. Auto employers could control potentially rebellious workers or those refusing intensification in the work place with the threat of dismissal, a threat which was reinforced by the presence of many unemployed workers anxious to fill these jobs [in addition to the prospect of deportation].⁴¹

For *mexicana/o* labour, this threat was even greater than for Euro-American autoworkers. During the Depression, the Anglo media had built up stereotypes of Mexicans as lazy, improvident work-haters, in order completely to dispossess them from 'taking' the jobs of Euro-Americans.⁴² These ethnic stereotypes were also used by the state as a motivating force for raids on undocumented immigrants as a way to intimidate Mexican workers into leaving the country. Dennis Valdés writes that, as the unemployment rate rose in Michigan:

The Bureau of Immigration agents became involved. They staged raids throughout Michigan on several occasions between 1930 and 1932. District Immigration Director John Zubrick justified the raids on the grounds that Mexicans, 'have little to contribute to a community and frequently take much from it.' He boasted that one 1931 raid in the Mexican district of Saginaw resulted in the 'departure of many persons' who otherwise would have remained.⁴³

The US government was denying Mexican workers jobs and security at the very point when emerging *Cardenismo* in Mexico was promising jobs and security. Repatriation should therefore be seen as a criticism of inadequate US economic policies, not just as acquiescence to it.

As part of the repatriation campaign, the *Liga* and the Mexican government collaborated to give arable land to those willing to work it on returning to Mexico. Flyers distributed by the IDL referred to land offers in Mexico as a lie. The circular charged that 'this lie is evident. Actually in that fatherland thousands of workers will die of hunger.'⁴⁴ The ILD was accurate to an extent on the ineffectiveness of the repatriation, but it was overly simplistic in its presentation of Mexican workers trapped in a 'no-win situation' during the Depression. *Liga* members and other Detroit repatriates established four *colonias* in Mexico: El Coloso, Guerrero; San Antonio de los Coronados, San Luis Potosí; El Camarón, Nuevo León; and the former hacienda La Murga, Guerrero. According to Valdés, three of these communities were complete failures, while little has been uncovered about the fourth *colonia*.⁴⁵

Rivera and the *Liga* worked with both US and Mexican state apparatuses, but very reluctantly in order to protect Mexicans from racist policies in Detroit. According to Rivera's personal writings, he was ambivalent about repatriation and felt that it was at times quite ineffectual. In unpublished materials collected by Ciro Sepúlveda, Rivera soberly assessed the predicament as follows:

41. Vargas, op cit, p 44.

42. Humphrey, op cit, p 505.

43. Dennis Valdés, 'Mexican revolutionary nationalism and repatriation during the Great Depression', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 4:1, Winter 1988, p 7.

44. Ibid, p 7.

45. Ibid, pp 17-18.

I occupied the greater part of my time in attempting to help migratory Mexicans, of whom several hundred lived in Detroit, in constant dread of being deported... some among my former countrymen... thought conditions were better in Mexico... [and] dreamed of establishing agricultural colonies south of the Rio Grande... I tried to convince them... that a return to Mexico would not solve their problems; that having established roots in the United States, they must act with other Americans to achieve a betterment of their economic position. Unfortunately, I failed in my purpose... I gave them most of the money I had earned painting the Art Institute frescoes... they returned to Mexico and established three colonies. Only one... near Acapulco survived.⁴⁶

Rivera took an unorthodox stance, reluctantly working for the humane repatriation of labour when people desired it, while expressing doubts about the same programme. He ensured better treatment en route and was able to help establish four worker collectives in Mexico. Although ideologically against repatriation, he also understood that the communities would at least be offered a chance in post-Revolutionary Mexico, in contrast to the systematic racism the *mexicana/o* workers faced in Michigan. He knew why some *mexicana/o* workers and their families wished to return to Mexico for a fresh start, even while arguing for labour militancy in the United States.

Because of the role that government played in the repatriation, the *Liga* was left little option but to work for a more humane return and to transform the mass deportation into the establishment of productive communities made up of skilled workers. Yet, even with the monetary support Rivera offered in Detroit, the majority of the new worker communities in northern Mexico would fail. In El Coloso, the most widely known Detroit repatriate community and the first to be approved by the *Comité Nacional de Repatriación* for Detroiters, the government was unable to supply enough tools or adequate seed. In his study of the repatriation communities, Valdés writes that 'The Mexican government provided land, but failed to advance funds to enable the settlers to purchase tools and seed or to grant a loan the group requested'.⁴⁷ Within a few years the *colonias* would all be 'on the brink of collapse'.⁴⁸

The role Rivera played in repatriation has been used to overplay him as scapegoat or great saviour, depending on the historian's view. In fact, prior to Rivera's arrival in Detroit repatriation efforts had been under way for at least a full decade. Moreover, the repatriation scheme with heavy *Liga* participation only accounted for ten per cent of the total repatriation from Michigan during the Depression.⁴⁹ Mexicans were being relocated from Detroit as early as 1921 and, in this year alone, 512 *mexicanas/os* were transported by train to the Mexican border.⁵⁰ These efforts were not being conducted by government agencies but solely by Catholic Church societies, the same ones that, ironically, feared a return to Mexico in the 1930s. In 1921, nearly all of the costs were absorbed by the Detroit Society of St Vincent de Paul. The Society's annual report stated that it was:

made aware of the pitiable conditions, both spiritual and material, prevailing in the Mexican colony in Detroit at the beginning of 1921 [and] undertook to defray the expense of any worthy Mexican desiring to return to his own country. An arrangement was made with the Mexican

46. These materials are unavailable, thus I quote directly from the edited version published in Baba and Abony, *Mexicans of Detroit*, op cit, p 59.

47. Valdés, op cit, p 18.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid, p 20.

50. Vargas, *Mexican Auto Worker*, op cit, p 239.

Government whereby the Society undertook to defray transportation to the border and the Mexican Government to return those repatriated from the border to their respective homes.⁵¹

But *la crisis* continued, as the involvement of local and state governments grew. In fact, the role of the state apparatus in Michigan was far more advanced than anywhere else during the national repatriation campaign of the early 1930s. Kiser and Silverman argue that, because of state government involvement, the repatriation campaign in Michigan was less brutal than elsewhere in the nation. 'Michigan state officials appear to have played a more significant role than was the case in California... and because repatriation in Michigan was more governmentally supervised, the movement from Michigan appears to have been somewhat less inhumane than the exodus from California.'⁵²

Keeping the inevitable deportation at a 'humane level' may have been the goal behind the *Liga's* cooperation with state agencies during the Repatriation campaign. But it is arguable that the involvement of state agencies probably increased the intensity of mistreatment by making it 'inevitable' through force of law. The radical involvement and monetary support of Rivera and the Mexican socialists seemed the one force working to end the oppression – and they made the return contingent on popular inclination.

Almost as quickly as the repatriation had begun, *las/los repatriadas/os* were sending letters back complaining about the falsities of the claims of what to expect in the workers' collectives. The *repatriadas/os* often faced harsh treatment from the communities in Mexico. In some instances, the repatriates would have their livestock or other possessions stolen by locals. Chicanas/os, viewed as a non-assimilable community in Detroit, were greeted on their return as *pochos* and *agringados*.⁵³

Although local historians have not been able to calculate the number of repatriates who returned to Detroit, there are many examples of the elders in Detroit's *colonia mexicana* having returned to Michigan after repatriation.

For many of the *repatriadas/os* who returned to Detroit from Mexico, the deceit practised by the North American government was unacceptable. In the recent film, *Los Repatriados: Exiles from the Promised Land*, created by a collective of *MiChicana/o* community activists, elders recall stories of their experiences as children during the repatriation. Many people whose families had connections with Rivera and the *Liga* place the blame *not* on Rivera and the Mexican labour activists, but directly on the United States government. José López, a community elder who was repatriated with his family as a child in 1930, holds the US government responsible for the repatriation of thousands of Detroit Mexicans. In an oral testimony, he states:

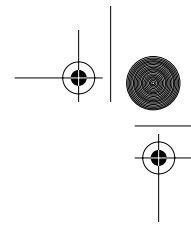
What I would like to say to the US government is that I hold them directly responsible for deporting me and all of the thousands of people who were deported [during the repatriation campaign of the 1920s and 1930s]... Deportation has continued down through the years [in Detroit], it is still going on now, only on a smaller scale, that is why we do not learn about it.⁵⁴

51. Archdiocese of Detroit Archives, Annual Report for 1921, The Society of St Vincent de Paul, Detroit.

52. Kiser and Silverman, *op cit*, p 63.

53. Interview with Lucile Cruz Gajec, Detroit, 3 August 2002.

54. Interview with José López by Elena Herrada from *Los Repatriados: Exiles from the Promised Land*, Detroit, 2001.



The role Rivera and the *Liga* played in Detroit is an important one, not only for the understanding of local Chicana/o histories, but also because the interactions between Rivera and Mexican workers in Detroit were unique in the United States. An understanding of the societal and political situation in Detroit during the 1930s will help us better to understand the politics of Rivera, the ‘philanthropy’ of the Fords, and the situation of *mexicana/o* labourers in the Great Lakes during intensive industrialisation.

