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Medical Progress and Social Revolution: David Alfaro Siqueiros' Mural for the Centro Médico Nacional

Alex Winiger

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1 Around the time state sponsorship of murals in the tradition of the "Mexican School" was abandoned, the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the National Autonomous University of Mexico launched a series of inquiries, performed by students within the framework of a seminar and published as "El muralismo, producto de la revolución Mexicana", *Crónicas* (1998—), <http://www.revistas.unam.mx/index.php/cronicas/> (accessed January 3, 2021). This has contributed to a new generation of scholars in Mexico who, together with a growing number of specialists in the United States, have focused academic (and sometimes official) attention on this heritage. Nevertheless, many works or their original architectural context have disappeared.

fig.1 (a-c) Centro Médico Siglo XXI, entrance hall with David Alfaro Siqueiros' painting, 2018
Source: Otto Cázarez, Mexico City

2 The genesis of Siqueiros's painting is retraced by Leticia López Orozco et al., "Siqueiros y la victoria de la medicina sobre el cáncer," *Crónicas* 10–11 (2010), 73–98. For Yáñez's work, including the Hospital de Oncología, see Rafael López Rangel, *Enrique Yáñez en la cultura arquitectónica mexicana* (Mexico City: Editorial Limusa, 1989). A complementary documentation of Siqueiros's work can be found at <https://www.mural.ch> (site maintained by the author, accessed April 8, 2021).

3 Original title: *Apología de la futura victoria de la ciencia médica contra el cáncer: Paralelismo histórico de la revolución científica y la revolución social.*

In 2004, while visiting the Centro Médico Siglo XXI complex in Mexico City in search of historic and newer building decorations, I discovered a large frieze, strangely hovering in the space, placed awkwardly in the main entrance hall built after 1990. ^{fig.1 a-c} This was, I realized, a major work of David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), one of the so-called "tres grandes" of Mexican muralism. ¹

Siqueiros created this mural, 26 meters long and 2.4 meters high and painted on wooden panels, towards the end of 1958 for a foyer near the main entrance of the oncology hospital, part of the Centro Médico Nacional, then newly built by Enrique Yáñez de la Fuente. ² ^{fig.2} The medical center, initiated in the 1930s by the Ministry of Health and Assistance, had been rebuilt during the 1950s in the Doctores neighborhood as an autonomous urban satellite. Together with the Ciudad Universitaria in Coyoacán and the Ministry of Communication and Transport in Narvarte – other *grands projets* of the same decade – the Centro Médico demonstrated the ambition of postwar Mexico to catch up with international technological progress and aesthetics. Yáñez, who had traveled in the Netherlands, France, and Germany during the 1930s, designed the masterplan of the compound in a rationalist manner, providing high-rise buildings for the wards, lower ones for research and teaching, and a huge cylinder (built by José Vil-



lagrán García) for congresses. The slab high-rise, dedicated to the treatment of cancer patients, was a concrete frame with two finely structured glass facades. The floor plans show an alignment of rooms along spinal corridors, forming a cross with lower annexes. The visitor accessed this building coming from an exterior U-drive to the waiting zone behind the main entrance: a rather low but quite deep space where Siqueiros' epic painting filled the back wall. The mural wrapped around two corners and was divided by three columns and perforated by a large passage to the treatment rooms.

The work, entitled *Advocacy for the Future Victory of Medical Science against Cancer: The Historical Parallel between the Scientific Revolution and the Social Revolution*, ³ ^{fig.3} shows a

multi-figured, dynamic movement, generally from the right to the left. It is commonly divided by scholars into four segments: humanity's prehistory, the ancient world, the present, and the future.⁴ The first part shows a mass of human beings struggling and suffering helplessly on a barren landscape, while one figure frees himself from the mass and jumps towards the foreground through skeletal remains. Antiquity is introduced with sharply contrasting priests in white. Behind the priests, the still-faceless humans now push forward towards the center of the painting, which arches over the passage door. In the center of the painting, a red flag

4 Raquel Tibol, *Siqueiros: Vida y obra* (Mexico City: Departamento del Distrito Federal, Secretaría de Obras y Servicios, 1973), 152.



marks the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Constitution of 1917. From this turmoil a flame-like woman in an orange gown emerges, imploring a medical doctor dressed in white. The doctor is the first of a formation of medical personnel oriented towards the doorway. Alongside them stands the famous "Cobalt

fig 2 Oncology Hospital, Mexico City, main facade, around 1958
Source: Rafael López Rangel, *Enrique Yáñez en la cultura arquitectónica mexicana* (Mexico City: Editorial Limusa, 1989), 181

Bomb,"⁵ a radiation machine that had been introduced into medical practice a few years earlier. It seems about to engulf the recumbent body of a dark woman, perhaps the same figure who was previously addressing the medic. Towards the left, the machine is extended into a barrel, a fanciful elaboration of its real construction. This points at a monstrous, bony, and veiny being with blind eyes, followed by a second deformed organism with tentacles, ulcerations, and a gelatinous head. Carcasses around it illustrate its devastating work and link the end of the mural to the wasteland at the beginning. Above the barrel of the Cobalt Bomb, a row of men and women are marching to the left, implicitly joining the historical struggle. Their colors and order contrast with the brownish disorder of the mass of figures on the right.

5 The "Cobalt Bomb" primarily means a nuclear weapon designed to contaminate a maximal area. The term was also ambiguously used for medical radiation devices, more often in German than in English. See Nancy Z. Tausky, *Cultural Heritage Assessment: Buildings in the South Street Hospital Complex, London, Ontario* (London, Ont.: City of London, 2011). For the same use of the term, see López Orozco et al., "Siqueiros," 92.

The overall movement is one of pushing and pulling, with complex overlaps. The right-hand portion of the mural refers to the past, whereas the medical doctor (who, let us not forget, faces a doorway through which living patients and medical professionals pass) refers to the present. The portion on the left shows a future in the midst of being formed, and in its foreground we see another struggle of movements.

The barrel of the machine is ambiguous: it pierces the red organ next to the bony creature, but it can also be read as emanating from there. Seen this way, the therapeutic radiation unit can be understood as both a weapon against but also a product of, monsters: the monster of cancer tamed by the monster of nuclear fission. Siqueiros had created a mural called *Man Master Not Slave of Technology* in 1952,⁶ where one hand growing out of the machine is held strongly by a second one. **fig.4** Whether he

6 Original title: *El hombre amo y no esclavo de la tecnología*, Instituto Politécnico Nacional (today: Escuela Nacional De Ciencias Biológicas), Mexico City.



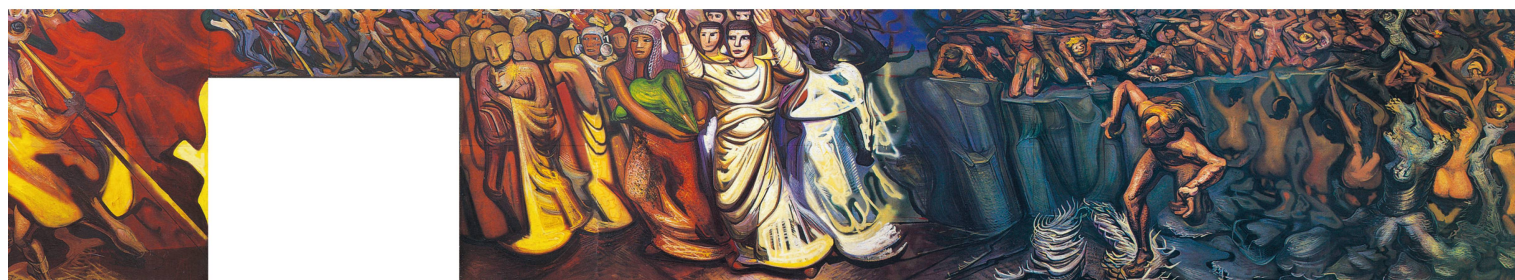


fig.3 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Apología de la futura victoria de la ciencia médica contra el cáncer: Paralelismo histórico de la revolución científica y la revolución social*, 1958, acrylics on plywood, ca. 2.35 × 30 m: Centro Médico Siglo XXI (main entrance), Aves. Cuauhtémoc and Dr. Morones Prieto, col. Doctores, Mexico City
Source: Agustín Arteaga, Shifra M. Goldman, and Raquel Tibol, *Los murales de Siqueiros* (Mexico D.F.: CONACULTA/INBA, 1998), 258–260

7 Tibol, *Siqueiros*, 152; Antonio Rodríguez, *Der Mensch in Flammen: Wandmalerei in Mexiko von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1967), 195. In these interpretations, the two monsters are characterized as the "social and physical tumors" or the "cancer of the human and of the social body, which humanity must extirpate."

fig. 4 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *El hombre amo y no esclavo de la tecnología* (detail), 1952, pyroxaline on aluminium, 4 × 18 m: National Polytechnic Institute, Plan de Ayala, col. Casco de San Tomás, Mexico City
Source: Bob Schalkwijk

had a similar ambiguity in mind for the later hospital painting is not documented. Biographies of Siqueiros present the monsters as simply "the enemy,"⁷ but Siqueiros was obviously sensitive to ambivalent readings.

As his subtitle — *The Historical Parallel between the Scientific Revolution and the Social Revolution* — indicates, Siqueiros embedded medical progress in a historically determined dialectic. But he also interspersed it with personal inventions and myths. While in the beginning humanity is a uniform crowd in Siqueiros's painting, history starts with the emancipation of an individual from this mass. The formation of antique society that follows gives rise to social functions: individualized priests preside over a mass of humans, now differentiated by colors representing nationalities. In the intermediary phase preceding revolution, humanity is depicted as figures without individual features moving forward.

The revolution stage itself is populated by humans wearing headscarves, fezzes, or turbans, their faces brown. In this visualization, the impulse for revolution comes from the colonized nations, rather than the industrial workers. The woman addressing the medical doctor is



a member of post-revolutionary society and has adopted its fiery color. Medical personnel are distinguished by the priestly white of their dresses, suppressing their national diversity, while their homogenized faces demonstrate the alliance of ethnicities and sexes in the effort for medical progress. The recumbent patient, deprived of individual features, is clearly characterized as a mestizo woman, recalling that a main goal of the Mexican Revolution was to benefit this oppressed group. The militants marching into the future wear the complete color spectrum: in order to conquer the monsters of disease and social deformation, all nations have to unite. The facial features of the people of the future, unlike those of the masses of the past, are distinguishable but also conform to an idealized norm. Individual tragedy and collective consolation are tied together: the sick have their part to play in the historical evolution of humankind, and historical evolution is in favor of the sick.

Nicknaming a therapeutic radiation machine the Cobalt Bomb (or the Cobalt Ray-Gun) indicates that winning the fight against cancer required an appropriate weapon. When Siqueiros's

painter colleague Diego Rivera returned from cobalt therapy in the Soviet Union in 1956, his daughters, Lupe and Ruth, welcomed him with the following song: “He was cured with cobalt, which is used to make bombs, but will now be used to make men well.”⁸ Rivera, who originally had the commission to design the mural in the oncology center before Siqueiros, declared his intention to “paint an advocacy for medicine and for the medics who fight against cancer.”⁹ Despite his radiation therapy, Diego Rivera died soon afterwards, at the end of 1957. In early 1958, Siqueiros was appointed to paint a mural for the Medical Center two-and-a-half times the size of *Advocacy*. He called it *Death for Life*;¹⁰ the painting was intended for the auditorium of the research department of the Anatómo-Clínicas, not a part of the hospital patients would have visited.¹¹ After investing two months of work in the project, the commission was cancelled, and Siqueiros



was instead asked to paint the mural Rivera was unable to undertake. One can assume that Siqueiros adapted elements of his drafts for *Death for Life* with Rivera's project for an *Advocacy* for those who fought cancer.¹²

Siqueiros was able to give monsters a face.

While he characterized the patricides in the Ex-Aduana de Santo Domingo traditionally (but still inventively) as devils, he found the form for the invisible threat of cancer from randomly created spray-gun spots.¹³ Visually, he needed the two creatures to draw the spectator's attention to the climax of his drama with the desired drive. According to his assistant and biographer, Philip Stein, Siqueiros chose his combative solution for the “dread” interior of the hospital after some hesitation.¹⁴ The journalist Julio Scherer García (1926–2015) anticipated critical questions:

“Why, precisely in this room, speak of cancer, especially with brushes? Why mention this subject to the sick of the Cancer Section of the Medical Center? Why hammer away at the anguish of the sick? ... Is it not possible to imagine something that would distract the cancer victims from their terrible drama?”¹⁵

Siqueiros's militant attitude was inevitable — he was, after all, a committed revolutionary soldier. A cadet in the constitutionalist army of Venustiano Carranza during the Mexican Revolution, Siqueiros became a communist after his Paris sojourn in 1919 and joined the Republican Army in Spain in 1937. His political activism

⁸ Gladys March and Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Citadel Press, 1960; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 181. Citation refers to the Dover edition.

⁹ March and Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 75.

¹⁰ Original title: *La muerte para la vida*.

¹¹ López Orozco et al., “Siqueiros,” 80. These drafts probably exist in the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros in Polanco, Mexico City. The author could not investigate them as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions.

fig. 5 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *La Marcha de la Humanidad en la Tierra y hacia el Cosmos*, 1965–1971, acrylic on asbestos cement mounted on iron frames with attached sculpted fiberglass elements, 2165 m². Polyforum cultural Siqueiros, Avenida Insurgentes sur 701, col. Nápoles, Mexico City. Source: MXCity

¹² The complex genesis of Siqueiros' work is retraced in López Orozco et al., “Siqueiros,” 78–81.

¹³ López Orozco et al., “Siqueiros,” 84–85.

¹⁴ Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 248.

¹⁵ Julio Scherer García, “Siqueiros con la pistola en la mano,” *Excelsior: Diorama de la Cultura*, January 11, 1959. Cited in Stein, *Siqueiros*, 248. The original article can be accessed at <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/796090> (accessed January 9, 2021).

16 Stein, *Siqueiros*, 350.

17 David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Integración plástica," *David Alfaro Siqueiros* [printed supplement of vinyl record] (Mexico City: UNAM, 1967), 5.

18 From this resulted a manifesto called "Three Appeals for the Current Guidance of the New Generation of Painters and Sculptors" with a cubo-futurist flavor. See David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Tres llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación de América," *Vida americana* (May 1921), 2–3. The original Spanish version of the text is reprinted in Gilberto Mendonça Teles and Klaus Müller-Bergh, *Vanguardia Latinoamericana: Historia crítica y documentos. Tomo I México y América Central* (Madrid: Vervuert, 2000), 96–98. See also the English translation in Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramirez, eds., *Inverted Utopias: Avant-garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 458–59.

19 See, for example, David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Como se pinta un mural* (Mexico: Ediciones mexicanas, 1951; repr. La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1985), 181. Citation refers to the Editorial Arte y Literatura edition. The artist explained the principle in a filmed interview in J. Martínez Gómez, *Mujeres para una Época: Angélica Arenal y David Alfaro Siqueiros* (Televisión Española, May 21, 1985), <https://youtu.be/sF2GjnR34zo> (accessed January 8, 2021).


20 Siqueiros, *Como se pinta un mural*, 195.


21 See, for example, the murals for the Ex-Aduana de Santo Domingo (1945–1966) and the La Raza Hospital (1951–1954).

brought him six years of detention in the infamous Lecumberri prison in Mexico City and years of exile. He was not a man afraid of confrontation, except when it came to his own sickness. His wife, Angélica Arenal, insisted upon his stoicism shortly after his death: "he was the enemy of doctors and clinics of the whole world. So he said, 'No, comrades, I feel very good.'" 16

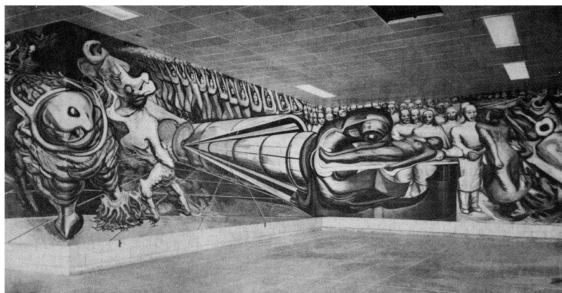
Siqueiros was also polemical in his views on the appropriate form of a mural:

"For me, a functionalist in war as in the arts, defense is offensive because it is counteroffensive; it implies mobility ad infinitum. ... [W]e functionalists defend a zone, fortify a zone, flush a zone with traps. ... [The functionalist's] defensive traffic touches totally and absolutely the whole platform of his zone, the whole platform of his problem, in any direction and interconnecting in a movement all possible lines and arabesques." 17

This passage was informed by Siqueiros's military and avant-gardist past. Traveling to France, Italy, and Spain between 1919 and 1921 formed his artistic orientation between Cubism (Léger), Futurism (Carrà) and his admiration of the Renaissance (Masaccio). 18 In the early 1930s he started to experiment with the anticipation of multiple spectators' viewpoints, which he called "polyangularity." 19 He later added the deformation of the architectonic space to this. In a further step, he extended the surface by relief parts, which he called "escultopintura." 20 This escalation of his means of expression was accompanied by a shift in the work to use spray guns, synthetic paint like pyroxiline, vinyl acetate, and acrylics, as well as supports like plywood or asbestos panels—all culminating in his final *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Polyforum* (1966–1971). 21  fig.5

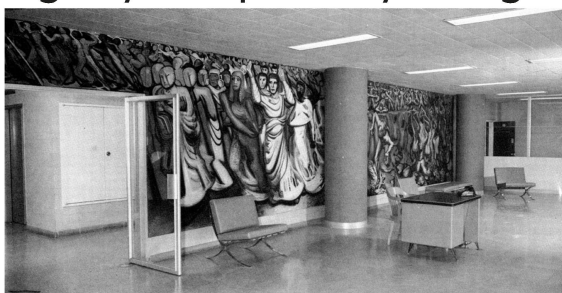
In the case of the *Advocacy* mural, Siqueiros incorporated the architectural context in a simple and efficient way.  fig.6 a-c As the historical photographs and ground floor plan show, the phases of human development on the right hand side of the mural were framed by the columns. Siqueiros directed the movement over the doorway to the red flag at its left side. This produced an intersection where actual medical personnel entered the waiting room or

rushed back into the service corridor, making visible the equation of the medics with the revolutionaries, as expressed in the subtitle of the work. The artist furthermore skillfully instrumentalized the meandering of the wall, ending the mural on a protruding short section. The monsters thereby appeared to jump into the



space, toward the visitor coming from the entrance, and thus immediately drew attention to themselves. They manifested the patient's fears: seen from the protruding corner's side, the barrel element was foreshortened,

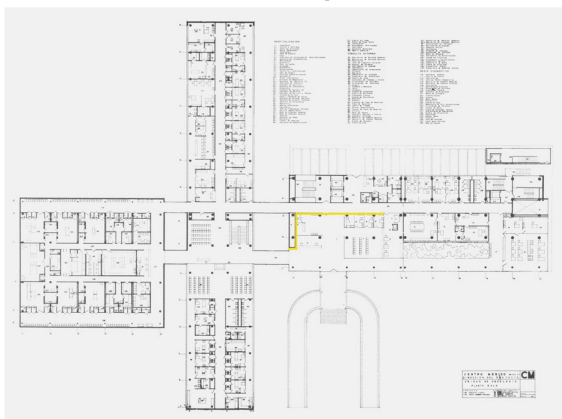
producing an immediate relation between the monsters and the recumbent patient in the machine. Entering the waiting bay and probably sitting down near the back wall, ²² the



visitor would become aware of the waving masses in their rainbow colors and then see a much longer barrel and more of the receding bony monster than of the attacking one. Siqueiros's "polyangularity" produced shift-

ing focuses in this way, enhancing the threat of disease for the newcomer but comforting the waiting patient.

The subsequent course of history would in many ways



undermine Siqueiros' intentions. In 1961, due to the state's financial difficulties, the Medical Center was sold by the Ministry of Health to the Mexican Social Security Institute. ²³ Siqueiros's message, an appeal to the country's whole population, was thereafter accessible only to the privileged insured. The terrible

earthquake on September 19, 1985, destroyed many symbols of a thriving welfare state whose glory had already faded by that time. Yáñez' oncology hospital was torn down the same year. Siqueiros' painting fortunately survived, thanks in part to the fact that it was painted on a wooden support that could easily be removed from the walls. ²⁴ The symbols of social progress that Siqueiros used in his imagery, however, lost their footing with the collapse of the existing socialism of the Soviet world shortly after. The panels were reinstalled in the entrance hall of the new Centro Médico Siglo XXI in 1997. The building complex, however, possesses little of the

fig. 6a Oncology Hospital with David Alfaro Siqueiros' painting (detail), ca. 1958

Source: Guillermo Zamora, *Acervo Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros/CONACULTA/INBA*

²² The disposition of the seats can be seen in photographs by Desmond Rochfort captured in the 1970s. See Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 213.

fig. 6b Oncology Hospital with David Alfaro Siqueiros' painting (detail), around 1958

Source: López Rangel, Enrique Yáñez, 184

fig. 6c Oncology Hospital, Mexico City, ground floor, ca. 1955. The position of Siqueiros' painting is marked in yellow

Source: Rafael López Rangel, *Enrique Yáñez en la cultura arquitectónica mexicana* (Mexico City: Editorial Limusa, 1989), 183

²³ The Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) is a government institution funded by employees, employers, and the government that insures the employed of the private sector. Public employees are insured by the Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers (ISSSTE). These organizations possess their own hospitals, accessible to their respective clientele.

²⁴ Alejandro Horacio Morfin Faure, "Memorias de conservación extrema, septiembre de 1985," *Nierika* 4 (2013), http://revistas.iberomex.mx/artes/uploads/volumenes/4/pdf/Nierika_4-1.pdf (accessed January 9, 2021).

elegance of its predecessor. Siqueiros' work now hovers aloft in an atrium, interrupted by a balustrade and protruding into a passage. The work cannot be observed up close, and its spatial dynamism and close integration with the architecture are lost.

In 1974, Siqueiros succumbed to his own cancer. His home in Polanco, Mexico City, and his workshop in Cuernavaca became part of a donation to the state (*fideicomiso*), with the aim of encouraging and instructing the next generation of artists. By the time his wife, Angélica Arenal, died in 1989, the house and the archives were in a bad state. The Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (since 2015 the Secretaría de Cultura) and the Instituto de Bellas Artes — two agencies which support a large share of Mexican cultural manifestations — transformed and professionalized the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros into a museum and research facility, whereas its founders had rather imagined a workshop for artists and activists of the left. ²⁵

²⁵ Itala Schmelz, "La Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros," *Crónicas* 8–9 (2005), 177–88.