



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1994), pp. 48-62

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1360574>

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Utopia Will Not Be Televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center

ROBERT LINSLEY

The circumstances surrounding the creation and later destruction of Diego Rivera's mural in Rockefeller Center are well known and have been exhaustively documented,¹ but there has been as yet no analysis of the historical significance of the mural or of its fate. As an act of censorship and as a catalyst of rhetoric on both sides of the political spectrum, the affair of the Rivera mural seems almost a prefiguring of a number of famous art world scandals in America in the eighties and nineties. That historical studies of the mural have so far been journalistic accounts without interpretation is perhaps a reflection of the level of much current discourse on the relationship between art and politics. This paper suggests that the contretemps around Rivera's mural has actually obscured the important historical material, and that the complex motives of Rivera's patrons, both in commissioning and destroying the work, have remained unexamined. Further, the whole experience was educational for the patrons; it taught them important lessons about the uses and dangers of both publicity and art, and it helped to crystallize their position on issues towards which they had hitherto maintained an exploratory openness. In this view, the Rockefellers were not the only significant parties, but so were the major tenants in the Center, notably The Radio Corporation of America and its president, David Sarnoff.

From 1930–34 Rivera lived in the United States where he was extensively patronised by the country's business elite. Capitalists such as the Rockefellers, concerned about the threatened nationalization of the Mexican oil industry (which eventually did occur in 1938),² were exploring the political uses of arts patronage, and the Rockefellers played a leading role in the formation of a group of prominent social and business figures concerned to develop support for and interest in Mexican art.³ As one of Mexico's most famous artists, Rivera was the recipient of a number of highly visible commissions in San Francisco, Detroit and New York. At the same time Rivera, who was a harsh critic of Stalin, had been expelled from the Mexican Communist party in 1930 because of his support for Trotsky. His execution of such commissions as two covers for *Fortune* magazine in 1931 and 1932, and murals at the Detroit Museum of Fine Arts, which were supported by local magnate Edsel Ford, laid Rivera open to attack from the Stalinist left. A need to assert his socialist credentials against accusations that he was a capitalist pet must have played a part in determining a choice of imagery for the Radio City mural

that his patrons would certainly have found hard to accept; when the portrait of Lenin appeared on the wall of the R.C.A. building, it didn't take long for the right wing press and the Rockefellers themselves to react. Rivera was caught between the demands of his patrons to remove the offensive figure, and pressure from his close associates on the left, including and especially one of his assistants, Ben Shahn, not to back down.⁴ In the end the whole affair has an unreal flavour. One wonders how Rivera expected to get away with painting not only a portrait of Lenin, but a Mayday parade on Red Square past Lenin's tomb and labour unrest in depression America in a prominent location in a major commercial development, and further one that was an important source of construction jobs in a stalled economy. All accounts so far have concluded that the event was a misunderstanding from the start, a collision of conflicting motives. Rivera's presentation sketches did not contain anything provocative,⁵ and yet it is clear that he did not set out to fool anyone either. Rivera was fulfilling the terms of his commission, the theme of which had been presented to him at the outset: 'Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future.'

Rivera's feelings about American capitalism were not entirely negative; he believed that the new productive forces released in modern industry would bring about a better world, this much is clear from his Detroit murals,⁶ but the specifically historical nature of the theme for the Rockefeller commission was an invitation to express all the messianic and utopian features of Rivera's socialism. In the event, Rockefeller's motives in cancelling the mural are plausibly found in the desire to avoid bad publicity, but here the explanation, though reasonable and sufficient, acts the same way that publicity itself does; it conceals more than it tells us. Certainly Rockefeller's understandable desire to see the mural altered met Rivera's politically motivated intransigence. These historical 'facts' are enough to account for why the mural was destroyed, but they don't begin to suggest the full historical resonance of the piece, a resonance set into vibration by its destruction. The memory of Rivera's mural today crystallizes for us a complex network of relationships in the history of science, the history of utopian thought, economic and social history, and the history of popular culture.

I would like to start by looking at the Rockefeller family and at John D. Rockefeller Jr's intense pre-

occupation with his own and the family's public image. The name Rockefeller has always had a special aura in the history of American capitalism. In 1904, when Standard Oil controlled 95% of the American oil industry, the vogue for muckraking exposés was initiated by Ida Tarbell's book *The History of the Standard Oil Co.*,⁷ which painted John D. Rockefeller Sr, as the archetype of the evil monopolist. The family's image hit bottom in 1913, at a time when John D. Rockefeller Jr was coming into his own and taking over the management of the family's affairs from his father, with the infamous Ludlow massacre. Forty striking miners and thirteen women and children had been killed by gunmen employed by the Colorado Iron and Fuel Co., forty per cent owned by John D. Jr who had personally appointed its officers. A congressional commission later brought to light correspondence that showed that Mr Junior, as he was known, had supported the use of force to suppress the strike.⁸ He himself said later that Ludlow was 'one of the most important things that ever happened to the family'.⁹ From this point on Junior thought it wise to withdraw from active involvement in business and instead devote his energies to philanthropic causes. By 1930 he had successfully wiped out the stain of Ludlow, and was known to the world as a great social benefactor and philanthropist.¹⁰ He was helped in this metamorphosis by Ivy Lee, one of the first modern professional public relations experts,¹¹ originally hired to help counteract the damage caused by Ludlow.¹² Rockefeller Center was actually the first and only business venture initiated by John D. Rockefeller Junior. However, while convincing the world that he was a full time philanthropist, Junior in fact laid the foundation for the later post-war expansion of the Rockefeller empire, of which Rockefeller Center became both the cornerstone and an important symbol.

In the fifties and sixties the Center was a catalyst of real estate development in mid-town Manhattan. Spanning four blocks between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, it faces toward Fifth. In the thirties Sixth Avenue was an undesirable address, but this changed after the war, not least because of the addition to the Center of three office towers on that street which became the lynch pin for the redevelopment of Sixth Avenue between 48th Street and Central Park.¹³ But this shrewd real estate investment, made by a man obsessed with controlling his public image and hiding the extent of his holdings and of his influence from public scrutiny, is also an investment in the image business. Rockefeller Center is the heart of the culture industry on the east coast, and it was built at a moment when that industry was preparing for a major expansion into the new area of television. The Center contains the corporate headquarters of RCA, its former subsidiary NBC, Time-Life, Warner Communications, McGraw-Hill Publishing, and Associated Press, to mention only those media and entertainment businesses that wear

their names on prominent buildings in the complex. There are also numerous other magazine and book publishers, literary agents, and local New York radio and T.V. stations in both the Center and the adjoining office towers whose construction was stimulated by its success.¹⁴ Post-war Sixth Avenue developments include the corporate headquarters of both ABC and CBS; all three major networks are within four short blocks of each other. As we will see, Rivera's mural brought to the surface conflicting visions of the relationship between science and social change at a sensitive moment in the formation of a new social constellation of consumerism, technology and mass media, a constellation that the Rockefellers were instrumental in bringing together, with Radio City as its mediating centre.

The Center was originally proposed as a new home for the Metropolitan Opera, but in RCA the Rockefellers found a tenant who would ensure the commercial viability of the project and give it a character as the home of all that was new and progressive in American society. RCA's commitment to come in as the major tenant in the most prominent building of the complex was the guarantee that the project would go ahead.¹⁵ Nelson Rockefeller, responsible for renting most of the space in the Center said:

The answer was Radio. Opera was the great old art, radio the new — the latest thing in this contemporary world of ours, the newest miracle of the scientific age.¹⁶

The major tenants of the Center all shared this visionary posture. Henry Luce of Time Inc. said in 1941: 'The true spirit of tomorrow lives here in Rockefeller Center.'¹⁷ However, David Sarnoff, president of RCA was particularly forward looking. As early as 1924 he was predicting television,¹⁸ and in 1930 he was pushing forward plans for television broadcasting studios in Rockefeller Center, not only before construction had begun, but before the equipment had even been developed.¹⁹

In addition to a real estate investment, and an investment in the emerging mass culture of America, Rockefeller Center was also an opportunity to cement ties with international business. In its original conception, prior to the new national alignments brought about by the war, the Center contained four 'international buildings': British, French, German and Italian. They were intended to draw capital from these countries and provide space for the American corporate office of European business.²⁰ It would not be far off to suggest that all the post-war activities of the third generation of Rockefellers, the five sons of John D. Junior — in high-technology investments (particularly electronics and defence), politics, philanthropy, and international banking — were developments out of the original convergence of social and economic powers that took place at Rockefeller Center under the guiding vision of their father.²¹

I would now like to take a look at how the imagery of Rivera's mural signified within the rapidly condensing social configuration outlined above. I will refer both to the surviving photos of the original mural, situated above the elevator banks at the front entrance of the RCA building, and to the copy painted by Rivera in the Fine Arts Museum in Mexico City in 1934 (*Fig. 1*). This will not be an exhaustive iconographic study, but one that considers a few specific elements in order to illuminate the relation between the social conflicts of the period and scientific utopianism.

The central section of the mural is a vision of the entirety of nature, from the astronomical universe down to the atom and the cell, thoroughly penetrated and transformed by technology. In the middle of the image a large hand holding a glowing sphere emerges from some ambiguous machine. Inside this sphere are schematic renderings of atomic nuclei and of cell division. This sets out one of the major themes of the piece: the interrelationship of the organic and inorganic, of the biological world and the physical universe, and ultimately of mankind and the machine. The sphere is placed against a sectional backdrop illustrating the political and social struggles of the thirties. A benign scientific domination of nature is clearly situated in the mural as a product of the dialectic of history, as a component of a world also transformed socially. From this sphere radiate clusters of wavy white lines. These white tendrils have a ropy smoothness that allows us to read them as a network of roots. Yet in the upper corner of the left hand panel of the original mural, which was around the side of the elevators (*Fig. 2*), Rivera used the same kind of lines to describe what is clearly a bolt of lightning being captured by electrical equipment. This suggests that the radiations from the sphere are meant to be seen

as an electrical discharge. I believe both readings, an organic and an electrical, apply, but for the moment I will focus only on the second.

Images of spheres and electrical discharges like those used by Rivera were widespread in popular culture during the thirties, particularly in science fiction illustrations, and it is quite likely that both forms have a common source in mass culture renderings of real scientific experiments. *Figs. 3* and *4* are photos taken in January 1900 in the Colorado Springs laboratory of Nikola Tesla. These streamers of artificially created lightning have a stringy quality when captured on the photographic plate reminiscent of Rivera's mural. Tesla's work at Colorado Springs was concerned with the possibility of global wireless transmission of energy.²² Having already perfected the technology of radio long before Marconi,²³ Tesla had left his invention on the shelf, so to speak, and failed to develop its commercial potential. Instead, he tried to continue his researches into the broader area of energy transmission, and these led to the construction of the Wardencllyffe tower on Long Island (*Fig. 5*), intended as both a transatlantic radio station and a centre for the wireless broadcast of energy. The notion of broadcast energy is thoroughly utopian. Unlimited energy free to be drawn out of the air anywhere would transform the world, eliminating at a stroke all developmental and economic differences. Such an invention would permit decentralization of the economy and hence a break up of existing power structures. It was also totally impractical under the current social order, for the cost of generating the power to be broadcast could never be recouped from the users. The energy could not be sold. Tesla's backer, J. P. Morgan, who was interested in the communications possibilities of Tesla's project, but not in the utopian fantasy of

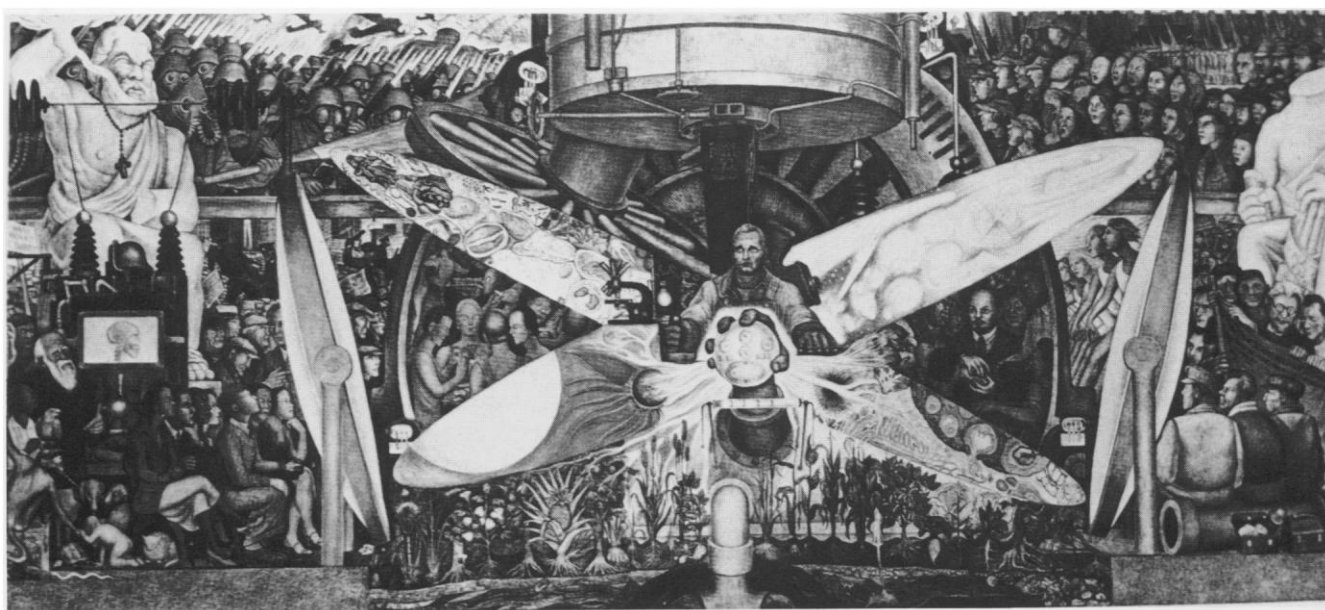


Fig. 1. Diego Rivera, 'Man at the Crossroads', mural (fresco), 1934. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City.

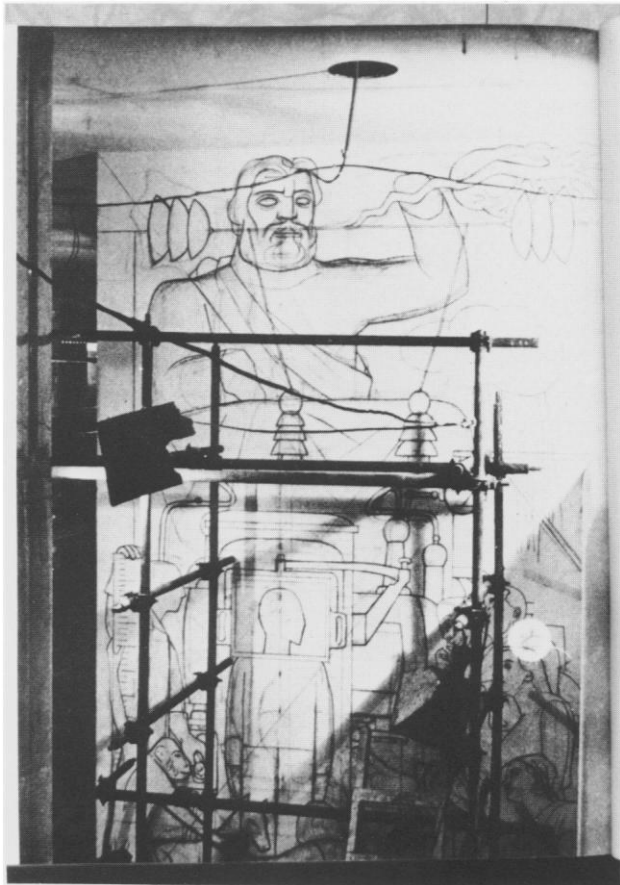
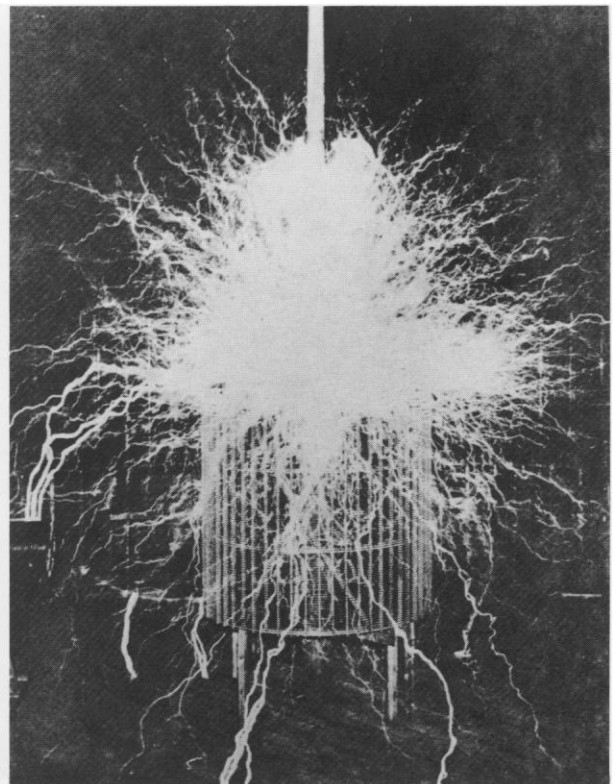
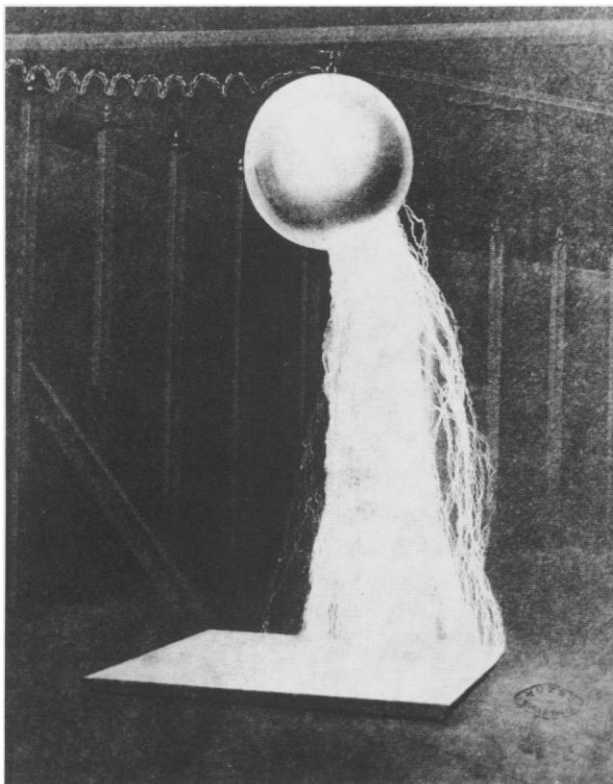


Fig. 2. Diego Rivera, 'Liquidation of Superstition' section of 'Man at the Crossroads', fresco in progress, 1933. New York City. Reprinted with permission from Lucienne Bloch.

broadcast energy, dropped out of the project,²⁴ and the tower was never completed.²⁵

However, Tesla's work was frequently written up in the popular press, and in the public mind he became a stereotype of the scientist/inventor.²⁶ Famous photographs of his experiments provided a repertoire of images that occur again and again in mass culture right up to the present. An important conduit for these images and the ideas they represented was publisher Hugo Gernsback, founder of the American mass market science fiction. His pulp magazines featured frequent articles on Tesla and fantastic illustrations of a future world transformed by the famous inventor's work.²⁷ (Fig. 6) Imagery drawn from Tesla's experiments became clichés of popular culture and, as such, available to Rivera. (Fig. 7) However, it is not just a case of high art feeding off popular culture; the science fiction magazine cover reproduced here, dating from 1937, could easily have drawn from the Radio City mural. As symbols of a science that still remains mysterious to most people, these images of spheres and lightning bolts circulate through the culture, acquiring meaning from the contexts in which they appear, one of the more significant certainly being Rivera's famous piece.

What the magazine cover shares with the earlier work and with the genre of science fiction it illustrates is an attempt to represent technology as an evolutionary force in human history. But the authors of science fiction stories that addressed such broad themes had to conform to literary convention and



Figs. 3 and 4. Nikola Tesla, photographs of experiments, 1900. Nolit Publishing, Yugoslavia.



Fig. 5. Photograph of Tesla's Wardencliff tower, constructed 1901–1903. Courtesy of Leland Anderson, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc.

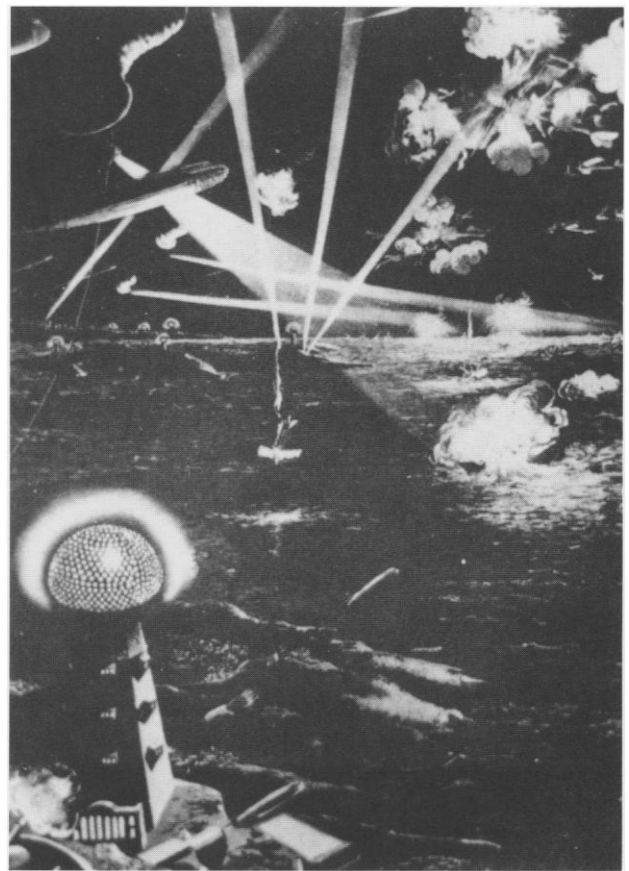


Fig. 6. Tesla's concept of the war of the future, as illustrated in the Gernsback magazine 'Science and Invention'. Reprinted with permission from Gernsback Publications Inc.

the demands of their audience by placing an individual at the centre of the narrative. The average pulp science fiction story featured an inane adventure plot with a few grandiose ideas about the cosmos tacked on to answer the conventions of the genre, or, alternatively, grandiose ideas about time, space and human destiny (some of which were also rather interesting) with an inane adventure plot tacked on to meet the demands of the market. The contradiction between the utopian theme and the need to construct a story around the experiences of individuals is usually the most awkward feature of pre-war science fiction; even the works of the more accomplished writers, such as H. G. Wells, often seem strained and artificial as they try to negotiate this structural problem. At the same time, the problem itself points to the underlying, if often unconscious theme of such writing — the historical conflicts generated by the progress of science in a social order resistant to change. Within the more restricted narrative scope of a picture, Rivera can perhaps find a solution more easily than the science fiction writer. The worker holding the controls at the centre of the composition, noticeably larger in scale than the other figures, is meant as a collective portrait of the working class. He is a social type

rather than a stock literary figure. Unlike most of the American pulp writers, and like other socialists such as H. G. Wells,²⁸ Rivera's political education gave him the means of reaching at least a symbolic resolution in the collectivist rhetoric of socialism.

I hope to indicate here a set of points that demarcate the boundaries of a cultural field within which Rivera's mural functions. These landmarks include the scientific utopianism of inventors such as Tesla, pulp science fiction, and later I will mention advertising, utopian literature, and of course the other artworks at Rockefeller Center. Like a surveyor we can get a fix on Rivera's mural by taking sightings from other known points. Though I think it is plausible to suggest that sources for Rivera's imagery can be found in popular culture, or even in Tesla's own original photographs, the significance of these connections can only be understood with reference to yet another such marker, specifically Rivera's Leninism and Leninist attitudes toward science and technology in general.

Sectarian debates within messianic movements are always debates over orthodoxy, and Rivera had been put on the defensive by the Stalinist establishment. Articles in *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* in 1929 had claimed that Rivera had never

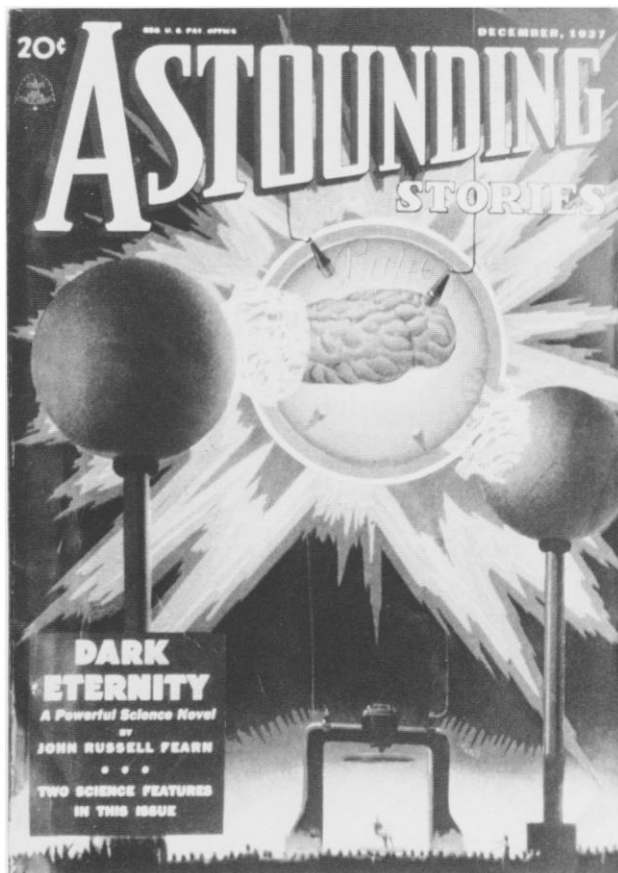


Fig. 7. Magazine cover, 'Astounding Stories', December 1937. Reprinted with permission from Dell Magazines.

been a true Leninist but only a 'petit bourgeois agrarian Zapatista'.²⁹ At the Eighth Congress of Soviets in 1920 Lenin had declared that 'Communism is Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country'.³⁰ Rivera's picture of an electrified cosmos is his endorsement of a Leninist faith in the necessary unity of technological and social change. As an associate of Trotsky, Rivera would naturally lay claim to an authentic Leninism, in opposition to Stalin's encouragement of the cult of Lenin as legitimation for his own power. It is significant that Stalin used the cult of Lenin in his propaganda for the build up of industrial power during the five-year plans. Rivera's Leninism remains utopian — he tries to capture the themes of centralized planning and industrialization at an earlier moment when the hope for a total transformation of the world had not yet been reduced to calls for increased output of tractors. This link between Rivera and Leninism is supported by Klucis' famous poster for the electrification congress (Fig. 8), which has many parallels with the mural — the same circle radiating lines over the composition, and the same heroic individual at the centre, here Lenin himself, representing the collective man.

Charles Steinmetz is another figure who can help us to understand how, for Rivera, Leninist techno-

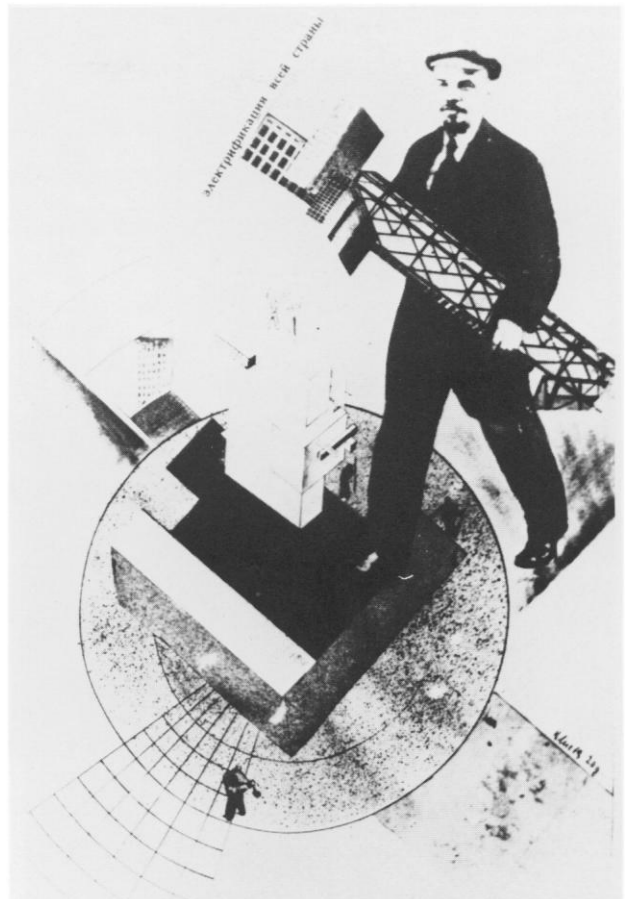


Fig. 8. Gustav Klucis, Poster design: *The Electrification of the Entire Country*, 1920, photo copyright 1981 George Costakis.

logical utopianism could be an appropriate posture within capitalist America. Chief engineer at General Electric, and a holder of important radio patents, Steinmetz was an avowed communist.³¹ He corresponded with Lenin, offering his help with the Soviet electrification programme.³² While doing invaluable work for G.E., Steinmetz was convinced that he was really working for the greater good of humanity. He thought that the vast American industrial concerns were accumulations of social capital, and of course of socialized labour, on such a scale that they represented transitional stages toward an inevitable socialism.³³ These ideas were similar to those held by Rivera.³⁴ They were also the kind of thoughts that would be pondered by the owners of American business, at least the more open minded, and those more experienced in profiting from new technologies, such as the Rockefellers and David Sarnoff, as they wondered how to protect their own position in a world that seemed to be rapidly changing. I will clarify this point by examining the antagonistic relationship between the utopian science of Tesla and the kind of science that interested the tenants of Rockefeller Center.

A documentary photo of the opening of the RCA Transatlantic cable station in 1921 (Fig. 9) features many important scientific personalities of the



Fig. 9. Photograph from the opening of the RCA Transatlantic cable station, 1921. Courtesy of RCA and the Sony Corp. of America.

period, such as Einstein, Tesla, and Charles Steinmetz, side by side with David Sarnoff, president of RCA Here together are the inventor whose experiments, perhaps indirectly, gave Rivera his imagery, and the capitalist in whose building the mural was painted. They were, in fact, antagonists at this time; Tesla was in litigation over the primacy of his radio patents over Marconi's, a claim that was upheld by the courts after his death.³⁵ Sarnoff, whose corporation had absorbed the Marconi company,³⁶ was busily exploiting the broadcasting technology originally developed by Tesla. However, perhaps it is not so much antagonism, as a case of completely different agendas. Though both Tesla and Steinmetz on different occasions had vaguely discussed the idea of widespread distribution of radio receivers, neither of them had pursued it because they could not see that it had any important practical use.³⁷ For the inventors, radio was primarily a form of two-way communication: wireless telegraphy. It was Sarnoff who arrived independently at the idea of mass produced home radio sets receiving broadcasts of music and advertising, and he more than anyone is responsible for the institution of broadcasting as we know it today.³⁸ For a utopian like Tesla, radio was a spin-off from the more important project of wireless power transmission. For a capitalist such as Sarnoff, wireless energy transmission was an impractical pipe dream, whereas radio was eminently exploitable. The difference between these two points of view is dramatized by a newspaper debate between Sarnoff and the professional utopian vision-

ary, H. G. Wells. In 1927, commenting on the puerility of radio programming, Wells had said:

My opinion (is) that the future of broadcasting is like the future of crossword puzzles and Oxford trousers, a very trivial future indeed.³⁹

Sarnoff saw things somewhat differently: 'In broadcasting we have a force, an instrumentality greater than any that has yet come to mankind.'⁴⁰ Some of Sarnoff's recorded statements give us a clearer indication of what he was thinking of:

[T]hrough the institution of broadcasting, radio is the first universal system of *one-way communication* developed by man. No other agency can speak with a single voice at the same instant to millions of people. . . . The greatest problem of mass communication that is likely to face us in the next national emergency is the problem of counteracting the deluge of enemy propaganda that might pour in on us through the air.⁴¹ (*emphasis mine*)

Sarnoff shows an early awareness of the propagandistic possibilities of broadcasting, framed within an internationalism that would resonate with Rockefeller's own. From its formation, The Radio Corporation of America had been a nexus of cooperation between business and government; RCA was doing weapons related research in electronics throughout the thirties.⁴² According to Sarnoff, 'Our destiny as a company was one of preparedness to win the Second World war',⁴³ and in 1965 he summed up his views:

The principal lesson these years have taught me is that the power to communicate is the power to lead. The nation which achieves the greater mastery of this power is equipped for leadership in many other areas of national and international endeavour.⁴⁴

If Rivera's mural is a utopian fantasy of the left, as Sarnoff's comments show, when capitalists dream of the future, they dream of centralized control and one-way communication.

This clash of agendas is also clearly present in all kinds of visual material; Rivera's mural is perhaps the most important example of the utopian position in art. On the other hand, an advertisement from the *Saturday Evening Post* of 1930, could be taken as representative of what we might call capitalist utopianism (Fig. 10). It shows a futuristic traffic controller directing the flows of the city by radio. But more directly in dialogue with Rivera's work is the gigantic photo mural of radio transmission equipment by Margaret Bourke-White that formerly hung in the lobby of the NBC offices in the RCA building. The central panel shows a huge radio microphone superimposed on a cluster of radiating light beams, a clear parallel to Rivera's piece (Fig. 11). It is the isomorphism of Tesla's photos, Rivera's and Bourke-White's murals, and Klucis' poster that points to profound conflicts over the relationship of social and technological power in the pre World War II period, and to the way that utopian and futuristic imagery in general mediated these con-

flicts. Since Bourke-White's mural was not only acceptable to RCA, but positioned precisely in the space where the public met the Corporation, it is important to clarify how she handles the imagery of broadcasting differently from Rivera.

Both Bourke-White's and Rivera's images are fantasies of centralized technological change, but the radiations from Rivera's sphere don't move in one direction only; the electrical discharges could also be read as the roots of a plant. There is an implied pulsation, alternatively drawing in toward the centre and discharging outward. This is a symbolic dialectical interpenetration of nature and machine in the progressive evolution of domination. In Bourke-White's mural, the microphone is solely a source, and the hugeness of the image gives the apparatus a threatening anthropomorphism. Bourke-White's photo mystifies social domination through technology by elevating the instrument of control while revealing nothing of the social interests that use it. At least Rivera imagines an abstract, generalized humanity in control of its own destiny, in the form of the worker at the centre of the picture. This is not to deny that Rivera's work may also have a blind spot regarding power, but this is a reflection of a broader problem. However excellent its proposals for the reorganization of the economy might have been, the socialist movement could not solve the problem of power. A blindness to the problem of power also characterizes the fantasies of a world state found in the writings of utopians such as Wells. Nevertheless,



Fig. 10. 'Saturday Evening Post' advertisement, November 29, 1930. Courtesy of the Saturday Evening Post.



Fig. 11. Margaret Bourke-White, photo mural, date unknown. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

like literary utopias of the 20s and 30s, Rivera's picture has genuinely positive features. The radiation goes into the earth, transforming nature into a productive paradise or garden. In comparison, the sterility of corporate directed imagery is evident, fixated as it is on the fetish image of the microphone as the instrument of centralized control and one-way communication. A page layout from a *Fortune* article on advertising in the broadcast industry of 1932 clearly demonstrates this — microphones with their station call letters are juxtaposed against the products the stations advertise (Fig. 12).

The owners of Rockefeller Center may have been unpleasantly surprised to see a portrait of Lenin on the most prominent wall in the complex, but what was really at issue were conflicting visions of the future. The comparison of Bourke-White's photo and Rivera's mural makes this clear, but one can also find traces of this debate in other elements of the decorative programme in the RCA building. The dominant features of the front of the building are Paul Manship's sculpture, *Prometheus*, and Lee Lawrie's relief over the door (Fig. 13). Just inside the entrance, if it had been completed, would be Rivera's mural. I suggest that Manship's and Lawrie's pieces are the remnants of an incomplete decorative programme concerned with the power of science to transform society. With them, the absent piece would complete a chronological progression



Fig. 12. Page from 'Fortune', September 1932. Courtesy of Fortune, copyright 1932 Time Inc.



Fig. 13. Rockefeller Center, 1936. East facade of the RCA building showing Paul Manship's sculpture, 'Prometheus' and Lee Lawrie's relief, 'Genius, which Interprets to the Human Race the Laws and Cycles of the Cosmic Forces of the Universe, Making the Cycles of Light and Sound'. Courtesy of the Rockefeller Group Inc.

from a classical, to a Protestant-Christian, to a contemporary and forward looking image, and a formal progression from freestanding sculpture, to relief, to painting. There are indications that such a programme was put into effect in the early phases of the Center's construction, but abandoned before it could be completely realized.⁴⁵ The appropriateness

of the Prometheus and of Rivera's mural to this programme is clear, but the relevance of the relief is perhaps less so, and it is here, after the removal of the mural, that the patrons of the project clarified their position. Lawrie's relief is based on Blake's 'Ancient of Days',⁴⁶ God the geometer circumscribing the boundaries of the universe, which is itself related to

Blake's painting of Isaac Newton. Associations with science are bound into the image, but more clearly focused by the inscription. No fewer than 43 inscriptions and 13 biblical quotations were suggested for Lawrie's relief, all personally vetted by John D. Rockefeller Jr, before one was chosen.⁴⁷ Such a careful decision calls for equally careful scrutiny for it not only reveals the precise message Rockefeller and his associates wanted to convey, but also something of their anxieties. The final inscription reads 'Wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy time'. Stability is, of course, the highest corporate value, but it is a strange inversion of utopianism that sees scientific progress as creating stability rather than change. Rivera's position is diametrically opposed to this.

With the affair of the Rivera mural, the Rockefellers and their associates in the Center, including above all David Sarnoff, realized that the theme 'Man at the Crossroads' was an open invitation to contest the future of technology. Rivera's socialist vision of a future in which technical progress is inextricably bonded to social change was incompatible with the ambitions of businessmen who wanted to exploit technology within capitalism.

In 1934 Rivera remembered the theme of the mural as 'Man at the Crossroads Looking with Uncertainty but with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a Course Leading to a New and Better Future'. The motif of uncertainty was already present in early formulations of the commission as it was given to Rivera,⁴⁸ but after 1933 their particular uncertainties, those of Rivera and those of the patrons, were somewhat different. In 1933 business was not at all sure that socialism would not prevail, and very aware that the power to frame images of the future is a necessary precondition of the power to determine what the future will be. This is the *raison d'être* of Rockefeller Center.

Here the shadow of David Sarnoff begins to take on sharper edges. The combination of his enormous social consequence as one of the founders of the broadcasting industry, and his relative invisibility as a public figure makes him one of the great emblematic figures of our time. It would, perhaps, not be correct to suggest that he remained hidden, rather, he was a master at presenting a carefully controlled and manicured public image. His official biography is a case in point. As with the histories of Rockefeller Center produced with the Corporation's help, one is confronted with an exhaustive array of facts carefully arranged to emphasize the circumstantial nature of all events. The major architects of the present are seen to be just riding the flow of history without any large agenda, except where their 'vision' is proven to be right in the long run. The present status quo justifies the actions of the molders of that status quo, whose formative influence is denied by the presumed inevitability of history.

Such a view is not entirely false. Everyone was responding to events outside of their control, and

learning from them at the same time. But the overriding goal of the businessmen brought together in Rockefeller Centre was to maintain their social power through a period of what seemed to be epochal social change. Since 1917 the culture had been saturated with utopianism in a variety of forms; the best thinkers of the time were predicting the immanent collapse of the old order. Marx had predicted that capitalism would pass away through its own internal contradictions, and the crash of 1929 seemed to be the most dramatic proof of the inherent instability of the system. The task was to position oneself at the front edge of change, the better to ride it out, and here the Rockefellers also emerge as important emblematic figures by virtue of their sustained ability, over three generations, to learn from history and to adapt to historical change.

Firstly, John D. Sr had controlled over 90% of the American oil industry *before* the appearance of the automobile, an event which he had not anticipated, but of course profited from immensely.⁴⁹ From this, the Rockefellers learned the importance of staying ahead of technological developments, a lesson put to good use after World War II in their investments in aircraft, electronics and missiles. Secondly, the Ludlow affair had taught them how to manage publicity in order to create a benign public image, and how to manage labour by making careful concessions. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the Rockefellers learned a lot from the enforcement of the Sherman Antitrust Act by Theodore Roosevelt in 1911. The break up of Standard Oil was meant to limit the power of the great monopolistic trusts, but it merely had the effect of dispersing that power and rendering it less visible, while at the same time generating huge profits from the stock split.⁵⁰ This is the historical experience that led up to Rockefeller Center and determined its role as a device for co-ordinating social and economic powers, and this brings us back to the history of the Radio Corporation itself.

The company was founded virtually by government edict in 1919 as a co-operative venture between the corporations that owned the various radio patents.⁵¹ The patents necessary to assemble a radio set were so widely dispersed, among GE, Westinghouse, AT&T and United Fruit, that no one company could easily or profitably do it. The immediate stimulus was the experience of the Great War, which had demonstrated the military value of radio technology. It was clearly in the interests of the parties to disregard Tesla's original patents entirely, and therefore by extension any other agenda regarding the uses of the technology; but really it was not the technology itself that mattered so much, but the need for closer co-operation between industry, government and the military, and it was the first media conglomerate, the Radio Corporation of America, that was the nexus of this co-operation.

These two historical developments, the enforcement of anti-trust legislation, and its complement,

the coming together of diverse economic interests in technological joint ventures, established the pattern of the present, in which social power is dispersed through a network of competing bodies that yet work synergistically to maintain their collective existence. American business forms a spontaneous collectivity, and central to the emergence of this collectivity was the corporatized mass media. The possibility that the working class could also form such a spontaneous collectivity on the basis of a similar recognition of the identity of individual and class interests was the dream of the left, but this dream has been frustrated in America by a variety of causes, not the least of which is the 'consensus building' power of these same mass media. With respect to the fate of the Radio City mural, it is then not insignificant that it contained Rivera's own projection of the uses of television.⁵² His earliest sketches contained both film and television screens, and in his own written proposal to the architects, Rivera included '... a television [giving] an image of War; as in the case of unemployment the result of the evolution of Technical Power unaccompanied by a corresponding ethical development'.⁵³ This description, which also testifies to Rivera's belief in the necessary unity of technological and social change, refers to what is now the upper register of the mural in which massed soldiers on one side confront May Day marchers in Red Square on the other. Yet in the final mural there is no indication that these pictures within the picture are necessarily television images. As he clarified and condensed the design, the television moved into the centre. In both wings of the mural groups of people are watching images projected inside the circular casing spanning the central section. On the right workers on their lunch break, instructed by a pantheon of Marxist heroes, watch Lenin join the hands of soldier, peasant and worker (this was the ostensibly offensive scene). On the left, students and young people watch the life styles of the dissolute rich against the backdrop of a demonstration of the unemployed taking place on Wall Street. Rivera sees television as revelatory and educational; he seems to have a perception of its propagandistic potential that is as vivid as Sarnoff's, but very different in content.

The issue of the educational potential of television intersects with the corporate history I've outlined in a way that helps to explain the mural's disappearance. Facing antitrust action, the corporate partners in RCA had voluntarily divided their interests in November of 1932. Coming into Radio City, Sarnoff's company was on the ascendant and technologically in a strong position; it had just reached full autonomy with undisputed possession of its needed patents and Sarnoff could now turn his attention fully toward the development of television. But with Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, new political pressures came to bear. Since 1929, the educational uses of radio had been a controversial public issue. The large number of educational stations that had

sprung up in the early years of broadcasting were being squeezed out by commercial channels. Nineteen thirty saw the formation of a National Committee on Education by Radio '... to save or recover for the uses of education a fair share of the radio broadcasting frequencies'.⁵⁴ The same year a Rockefeller grant enabled the setting up of a counter organization, the National Council on Radio in Education, as a platform for business views.⁵⁵ This fight to preserve a non-commercial role for broadcasting, which received new impetus with a democratic administration, culminated in a proposed amendment to the upcoming Communications Act that would reserve twenty-five per cent of channels for non-profit groups and educational purposes. This reservation would have applied to television once it appeared, and in 1933 it seemed to be just around the corner.⁵⁶ During the whole period in which the mural was under wraps pending the final decision on its removal, these debates were intensifying; the actual destruction of the mural, in February of 1934, was undertaken quietly during a period of intense lobbying by both sides leading up to the defeat of the amendment.⁵⁷ The whole affair has to be seen in the light of RCA's emergent position. The period between late 1932, when the commission was awarded, and early 1934, when the mural was destroyed, was a sensitive one. Sarnoff had only just acquired the power to begin to assert his vision of the future of broadcasting, and was facing a political fight to preserve its commercial nature.⁵⁸

The capping of the decorative programme with the inscription on Lawrie's relief indicates that at this particular crossroads the patrons realized that the way to avoid contests over the future was to avoid raising the subject in a form that enabled that contestation. Their anxiety is betrayed as much by the fact that they broke the plaster fresco off the wall rather than simply covering it up, as it is by the inscription. In fact, these two events should be read together as the final riposte to Rivera's image; a simultaneous silencing of a whole tradition of discourse on the future and an affirmation of the status quo. From this point on capitalists would no longer dream about the future in public; the public would do all the dreaming.

Rockefeller Center is perhaps the last coherent thematically organized decorative programme in a private development. The fact that its patrons decided to abandon the programme before it could be completed reveals to us clearly the nature of the social contests that have changed the character of public art since World War II. In later developments in which art plays an important role, such as the recent Equitable Center, which in many ways is modeled on its close neighbour, Rockefeller Center, the art is eclectic and purely decorative; for the patrons of this project the notion of an iconographic programme, of some kind of public 'message', was inconceivable from the beginning. If the patronage of Rivera by American business in the thirties

marked the emergence of a new kind of involvement in culture on the part of the liberal elite of America, it also taught the members of this elite that if they hoped to make use of art to reinforce their values in the public sphere, they would have to find a different kind of art. The history of Rivera's mural helps illuminate the social and historical basis of the intense antagonism toward Social Realism that characterized the New York scene during the ascendant years of Abstract Expressionism; with the end of the WPA by 1940 artists in New York faced a crisis of patronage, and the destruction of the mural a few short years before had made it clear that this kind of art would never find support among the establishment.⁵⁹

But Rivera is also uncertain of the future, and uncertainty, even pessimism, permeates the picture's structure. The mural is divided in two. The viewers left side — the right side for the worker in the centre — is the 'bad' side, with images of war and violence in the streets, but also with important references to science and education. In general terms the left side is the present. The right half — left for the worker — is the 'good' side, a fantasy of realized socialism; this represents the future. The right/left, negative/positive split also carries over into the two ellipses, representing the microcosmic and macrocosmic worlds delivered up by the telescope and microscope centred in the composition just behind the worker. The negative side of the macrocosmic ellipse contains the moon, a dead planet, and an eclipse of the sun. The biological ellipse on the same side contains samples of various diseases. More significantly, on the positive side of the biological ellipse a mass of dark cancer cells is visible near the centre of the crossroads. In Rivera's own words, this is 'the cancerous cell [of] Stalinism . . . invading a great ideal'.⁶⁰ Rivera's utopianism must be understood in relation to the real collapse of the socialist movement, which he was living through. It is the mix of pessimistic and affirmative elements in the mural that makes it work as a utopian image.

The central images of the mural are inside what resembles a casing for a generator or other piece of electrical equipment; behind the worker's head are electrical coils that suggest either a generator or a motor. This dynamo of history implies a circular movement from the negative side of the mural to the positive side, from the negative to the positive in history. The implied spinning motion given to the ellipses perfectly complements the pulsations suggested by the radiations from the sphere; pulsation is biological rhythm, spinning the movement of the planets and of subatomic particles. But further, rotation implies a dialectical understanding of history that sees the seeds of progress in every setback, and vice versa. The symbols of present defeat on the left side of the picture are balanced by the appearance at the upper end of the cosmic ellipse of a hammer and sickle floating in the stellar reaches. This grandiose prophecy of fulfilled history at a

moment of defeat is paralleled in socialist utopian literature of the 20s and 30s, such as the novels of H. G. Wells, and particularly those of Olaf Stapledon, whose *Last and First Men*, published in 1930, was very widely read in the United States and discussed in the mass circulation press.⁶¹ This book is perhaps the most hyperbolic and even delirious of all Hegelian fantasies. It projects the struggle of humanity to take control of its own evolution over a period of 2 billion years, through 18 distinct species on three planets, moving upward toward the ultimate union of consciousness and the universe. Like Rivera's mural, Stapledon's novel is at once the testament and gravestone of the now forgotten utopianism of the pre-war period, and like Rivera's mural, its message is that in the fullness of time all present defeats will be understood as necessary moments of an eventual victory. But this hope is so abstract that it signifies more than anything else that the battle is already lost, that the invocation of Lenin is in the face of the failure of the Leninist party to fulfill its promise.

It is this utopian theme of hope that in fact allows Rivera's painting to function today as the prototype for an entire genre of contemporary mural painting. In black and Latin neighbourhoods, often the neglected quarters of North American cities, there is a, if not flourishing, certainly persistent school of painting known as the community murals movement. The artists who make these pictures often consciously link themselves to the Mexican tradition. If, in 1933, a spectre was haunting Rockefeller Center, now the ghost of Rivera's mural haunts the abandoned or undeveloped sections of the city. Needless to say the affirmative utopianism of these works is in direct proportion to the desperation of the communities they speak to and for. Yet they have to be acknowledged as images of hope belonging to the dispossessed of capitalism. Not only the crudeness of these community murals, but above all the heavy handed and tendentious nature of their affirmations, a strong link to the tradition of Rivera, mark them as a genuinely popular art, quite apart from the slick productions of the culture industry. Though many of these murals, in Chicano districts especially, have agrarian motifs that hark back to peasant communities of origin, they also often contain naive memories of an earlier faith in the transformative power of technology (*Fig. 14*). The patrons of Rockefeller Center could not have known what appears clear to us now with hindsight, that the best way to neutralize the socialist and utopian features of the mural was to leave it where it was. The destruction of the mural allows its image of technical progress bonded to social change to appear as a suppressed utopian alternative rather than a rather quaintly naive and earnest phase in a new streamlined history of corporate science. Further, the Garden of Eden motif in the lower register of Rivera's mural shows us that universalist technological utopian fantasies at their origin are inter-



Fig. 14. Cityarts Workshop mural, 'Seeds for Progressive Change', 1975, New York City. Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf Inc., New York.

woven throughout with motifs from premodern agricultural world views. There is perhaps even justification for asserting that such fantasies are generated by over-rapid modernization of agricultural societies. Michael Taussig's observations on this matter are so interesting they deserve quotation:

Societies on the threshold of capitalist development necessarily interpret that development in terms of pre-capitalist beliefs and practices. . . . In short, the meaning of capitalism will be subject to precapitalist meanings, and the conflict expressed in such a confrontation will be one in which man is seen as the aim of production, and not production as the aim of man.

Although the insights that are intrinsic to such a reaction seem inevitably to pass away with time and the progressive institutionalization of capitalist structures and common sense eventually accepts the new conditions as natural ones, certain bodies of thought, as well as enormous social movements, have kept them alive and functioning as a critical world force. Marxism and Marxist revolutionary movements in the modern era represent the 'rationalization' of the early precapitalist outrage at the expansion of the capitalist system.⁶²

In this view, Marxism itself could be seen as an ultra-modern critique of modernity from the position of the losers, the victims of the modernization process. Here the concept of history as a dialectic, when expressed in images, takes on strong aspects of a fantasized return to an idealized premodern past. In

the writings of Wells and many others, the future can only be imagined as a return to innocence, to the garden, and traces of the same vision can be found in Rivera's cosmic dialectics; the peace and justice which has been forever lost can only exist now in the very farthest future of the imagination, the more so as there is no immediate prospect of their return. But this history should also discourage us from romantically and one-sidedly equating difference within modernity with resistance to a so-called dominant culture. The utopian energies of the developing world have played an active role in the production of modernity, a modernity that yet carries the memory, as it carries the scars, of the social struggles out of which it was born.

Notes

1. See Irene Herner de Larrea, *Diego Rivera's Mural at the Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City, 1990) for the most complete accounting of the historical material directly relevant to the mural and its destruction.
2. Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (London, 1976), p. 209.
3. de Larrea, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
4. Lucienne Bloch, 'On Location With Diego Rivera', *Art in America*, 74 (February 1986), p. 116.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
6. See, for example, de Larrea, p. 40, p. 43.
7. Ida Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York, 1904).
8. An account of the incident is found in Collier and Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
10. Collier and Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
11. John Ensor Harr and Peter Johnson, *The Rockefeller Century* (New York, 1988), p. 129. Harr and Johnson refer to Lee as 'the father of public relations'.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
13. Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Rockefeller Center* (Oxford, 1978), p. 5.
14. Another neighbour, and also former Rockefeller property, is the Museum of Modern Art. At one stage it was proposed to extend the Center northward to include the museum. Allen Balfour, *Rockefeller Center* (New York, 1978), p. 57.
15. Krinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
16. Jules Abels, *The Rockefeller Billions* (New York, 1965), p. 313.
17. Balfour, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
18. Eugene Lyons, *David Sarnoff: A Biography* (New York, 1966), p. 125.
19. Balfour, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
20. Balfour, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
21. See Collier and Horowitz, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3.
22. Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man Out of Time* (New York, 1981), p. 157.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
27. *Ibid.*
28. A story by Wells that both illustrates the problem I'm describing and points to the same sort of solution adopted by Rivera is *The Sleeper Wakes* of 1899.
29. Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (New York and London, 1943), p. 253.
30. Sender Garlin, *Charles P. Steinmetz: Scientist and Socialist (1865-1923)* (New York, 1977), p. 15.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

34. Desmond Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera* (London, 1987), p. 67.
35. Cheney, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
36. Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 71, p. 97.
39. H. G. Wells, 'The Remarkable Vogue of Broadcasting: Will It Continue?' in *The Way The World Is Going: Guesses & Forecasts of the Years Ahead* (London, 1928), p. 177.
40. Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
41. Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 221–2.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 351–2.
45. The Rockefellers engaged Hartley Burr Alexander, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, to develop a decorative theme. Alexander's first suggestion was 'Homo Faber, Man the Builder'. He then changed this to 'Frontiers of Time', which was modified by the Rockefellers and their advisors to the final theme of 'New Frontiers and the March of Civilisation'. Balfour, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–40.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
48. Balfour, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
49. Collier and Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
50. Collier and Horowitz, pp. 58–9. In 1912 Roosevelt said: 'Wall Street's prayer now is: "Oh Merciful Providence, give us another dissolution".'
51. A good brief account of this history is given in Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (New York, 1975).
52. Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
53. Cited in Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
54. Erik Barnouw, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States Vol. I: A Tower in Babel* (New York, 1966), p. 261.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
57. Erik Barnouw, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States Vol. II: The Golden Web* (New York, 1968), p. 24.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–76.
59. It was in the 1940s that utopian and millenarian themes began to disappear from American science fiction, to be replaced by the technological problem story. But more significantly, the typical future evoked in American examples of the genre (in Europe things were a little different) was of a technically advanced feudal society. This motif did exist in the thirties, but after the war it almost submerged the alternative utopian stream that had tried to deal with the social evolution of humanity in general. In broad terms, Rivera's utopia was replaced by Star Wars, the high tech militaristic fantasy of the culture industry.
60. Cited in Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
61. Sam Moskowitz, *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction* (Westport, Conn., 1963), p. 264.
62. Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), p. 11.