

“Forging the Fatherland”: Work and vocational education in Argentina during Peronism (1944–1955)

Verónica Oelsner

To cite this article: Verónica Oelsner (2013) “Forging the Fatherland”: Work and vocational education in Argentina during Peronism (1944–1955), *Paedagogica Historica*, 49:3, 382-401, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2012.695378](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2012.695378)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2012.695378>



Published online: 24 Jul 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 280



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

“Forging the Fatherland”: Work and vocational education in Argentina during Peronism (1944–1955)

Verónica Oelsner*

Centre of Comparative Education, Humboldt-University, Berlin, Germany

(Received 25 October 2011; final version received 17 April 2012)

This article focuses on the reforms in the field of vocational education, as well as on representations related to work, in Argentina during Perón’s political leadership. In the framework of far-reaching economic reforms and social transformations, while in the position of secretary of labour (1943–1945) Perón started a vocational education system, which grew notably during his presidency (1946–1952 and 1952–1955). At the same time, his government not only defined the worker as the protagonist of its policy but deliberately constructed and broadly disseminated positive representations of manual work, the worker, the apprentice and his training that were aimed at replacing older ones. After Perón’s overthrow in 1955, the succeeding governments brought the political centrality of the worker to an end and repressed all symbology related to him. In the following years, the vocational education system created during the Peronist era gradually fell apart.

This article analyses the relationship between these phenomena. It assumes that vocational education is not just shaped by economic demands or technological development. It rather believes that, as the analysis of the Peronist case shows, social representations related to work and education can also play an important role, supporting, hindering or impeding the establishment or development of specific vocational education models.

Keywords: vocational education; representations of work; Peronism; Argentina.

Did we not say that the greatness of a country expresses itself through work? Therefore we must dignify work. And how could we dignify work without dignifying the worker who carries it out?¹

As the quotation from a 1950 speech by Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974) suggests, the worker and manual work, as well as the apprentice and his training, played a central role in Perón’s policy during his time as secretary of labour (1943–1945) and subsequently as president of Argentina (1946–1952 and 1952–1955). Together with far-reaching economic, political and social reforms, the Peronist

*Email: veronica.oelsner@rz.hu-berlin.de

¹From a speech by Juan D. Perón from June 10, 1950, cited in República Argentina, *Berufsertüchtigung des Arbeiters* ([1952?]). Original in German. As in the case of the source of this quotation, the Peronist government translated some self-portrayal materials in other languages.

government constructed and disseminated representations related to work that aimed to replace previous ones. During his time as secretary of labour, Perón started a vocational education system that would grow notably during his presidency. After the overthrow of Perón in 1955, the succeeding governments broke with the political centrality of the worker-figure. In the following years, the vocational education system created during the Peronist era gradually fell apart.²

This article concentrates on these phenomena. It distances itself from a theoretical perspective that sees vocational education as predominantly connected with economic demands or technological development.³ It rather follows a German stream of research which emphasises that the values, convictions and concepts related to work and education that are dominant at a given time and in a given society act as “structural and mental premises”⁴ for designing vocational education.⁵ In line with this view and in the framework of a broader comparative research project,⁶ the article assumes that, besides the role of economic or technological demands, social representations related to work can also support, hinder or impede the establishment and development of specific vocational education models. Accordingly, it explores the role of deliberately constructed and disseminated representations related to work, the worker, the apprentice and vocational education in the design and implementation of vocational education structures in Argentina during the period of 1944–1955, in which Perón was first secretary of labour and then president of the country. It is argued that, serving as its semantic base, these representations contributed to the magnitude and popularity achieved by vocational education during the Peronist period.

²Vocational education refers to preparation for specific manual or practical professions or occupations, such as craftsmen and skilled workers. Depending on the country, this kind of education is more or less formal and takes place at vocational schools, in the workplace or both. Vocational education is different from polytechnic education, which encompasses a broader and more theoretical scientific and technological preparation that usually takes place at secondary schools and colleges of higher education, aiming at qualifying technicians to plan and steer work processes.

³See discussion line from Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964) to Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin 2002).

⁴Klaus Harney and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, “Berufsbildung und industrielles Ausbildungsverhältnis: Zur Genese, Formalisierung und Pädagogisierung beruflicher Ausbildung in Preussen bis 1914,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 32, no. 1 (1986): 9–14.

⁵See also Ute Clement, “Vom Sinn beruflicher Bildung: Zur Modellbildung in der vergleichenden Berufsbildungsforschung,” *Zeitschrift für Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik* 6, no. 92 (1996): 617–626; Thomas Deißinger, *Beruflichkeit als ‘organisierendes Prinzip’ der deutschen Berufsbildung* (Marktschaben: Eusl, 1998); Klaus Harney, “Zum Beginn von Anfang und Ende: Tradition und Kontingenz der Berufsausbildung am Beispiel schwerindustrieller Betriebsformen,” in *Zwischen Anfang und Ende. Fragen an die Pädagogik*, ed. Niklas Luhmann and Karl Eberhard Schorr (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 206–227; Jürgen Schriewer, “Alternativen in Europa: Frankreich. Lehrlingsausbildung unter dem Anspruch von Theorie und Systematik,” in *Sekundarstufe II – Jugendbildung zwischen Schule und Beruf*, vol. 9 of *Enzyklopädie Erziehungswissenschaft*, ed. Herwig Blankertz et al. (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1995), 250–285; Barbara Schulte, “Zur Rettung des Landes”. *Bildung und Beruf im China der Republikzeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2008).

⁶The comparative project focuses on the relationship between, on the one side, social representations related to professions, work and education and, on the other side, structures of vocational education in different historical and socio-cultural contexts, <http://www.sfb-repraesentationen.de/teilprojekte/c2/english> (accessed January 30, 2012).

The article first presents the Peronist governments and the far-reaching political, economic and social changes they entailed. Second, it expounds Peronist representations of work, the worker, the apprentice and vocational education, and some of the ways they were staged. Third, it portrays the vocational education system developed during the Peronist period and analyses the relationship between this system and the disseminated representations. This relationship is also analysed in the fourth part of the article, which focuses on the symbolic and institutional transformations that occurred after Perón's overthrow.

Economic crisis, social transformations and far-reaching reforms

Perón's rise was related to the crisis of the Argentinean agrarian export economy. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Argentinean export of agrarian products dropped substantially. The country could no longer afford to import finished products and did not have the infrastructure to produce them by itself. Against this background, the then government started a policy of industrialisation through import substitution.⁷ As a result, factories, industrial branches and employment in the industrial sector multiplied within a few years.⁸ This shift from agriculture to import substitution not only had consequences for the industrial sector, but also led to the so-called "internal migration" of rural workers to urban centres, in particular the capital of the country, Buenos Aires, causing the emergence of an urban-industrial working class.⁹

The political rise of Perón was connected with these transformations.¹⁰ Perón and his advisors saw the growing urban working class as a great instrument of power,¹¹ since it could serve as the social basis for their political movement. Accordingly, they sought to conquer this social group by transforming it into the protagonist of their policy.¹² As the head of the National Department of Labour (*Departamento Nacional de Trabajo*) during the military government between

⁷Walther L. Bernecker, "Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung Lateinamerikas in der Neuzeit," in *Lateinamerika. Geschichte und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Kaller-Dietrich, Potthast and Tobler (Wien: Promedia, 2004), 55–76.

⁸Horacio Chitarroni Maceyra, *El ciclo peronista: apogeo y crisis* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Universitario, 1997), 28; Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto: Un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1998), 143–144.

⁹Maria Seoane, *Argentina: El siglo de progreso y la oscuridad (1900-2003)* (Buenos Aires: Crítica, 2004), 66; Ruth A. García, "La década del Treinta," in *Argentina en busca de una nueva estabilidad (1930-1966)*, ed. Horacio Gaggero (Buenos Aires: Proyecto Editorial, 2005), 13, 16; Gerchunoff and Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión*, 145; Chitarroni Maceyra, *El ciclo peronista: apogeo y crisis*, 31.

¹⁰See Peter Waldmann, *Der Peronismus 1943-1955* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1976); Mark Falcoff, "Was war der Peronismus von 1946-1955?," *Berichte zur Entwicklung in Spanien, Portugal, Lateinamerika* 1, no. 4 (1976): 3–17; Robert A. Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina: 1928-1945* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1981); Miguel Murmis and Juan C. Portantiero, *Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2004); Horacio Gaggero, "La etapa populista (1943-1955)," in *Argentina en busca de una nueva estabilidad (1930-1966)*, ed. Horacio Gaggero (Buenos Aires: Proyecto Editorial, 2005), 47–82.

¹¹See Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1981), 78.

¹²See Chitarroni Maceyra, *El ciclo peronista*, 32–35; Seoane, *Argentina*, 75.

1943 and 1946, Perón initiated a labour policy without precedent in Argentina. From there, he also started the vocational education policies that were developed during his presidency. In this position, Perón increasingly won support from workers and their organisations and eventually became the most popular and powerful figure of the military regime. In 1946 Perón was elected as president of Argentina, with 56% of the votes.¹³

The new president and his followers presented themselves as “agents of a revolution” who would shape a “new Argentina” and a “new Argentine citizen”.¹⁴ In order to achieve that, they created a new nationalist ideological basis. As an advertising spot from that time disseminated, this ideology was “neither communist nor capitalist”, but “*justicialista*”.¹⁵ The basic principles of the *justicialismo* – also called “national” or “Peronist doctrine”¹⁶ – were “economic independence” from abroad, “political sovereignty” of the country as well as of the working classes, and “social justice”, defined as protection of the economically weakest parts of society from “exploitation” by the “strongest” parts and as promotion of the “welfare of the workers”.¹⁷ Following these principles, Perón’s government implemented significant reforms benefiting workers.

Perón’s hegemony and great reform capacity was due not only to his popular measures, but also to his “political style”.¹⁸ Similar to fascism and National Socialism, both of which he experienced during his time in Italy and Germany between 1939 and 1941, Perón resorted to practices of “ceremonial pedagogy”. As defined by Schriewer, these practices aimed at “moulding the ‘hearts’ and ‘minds’, the ‘impressions’ and ‘sensations’ as well as the ‘senses’ and ‘imagination’” of the people. Through slogans, images, monuments and mass events his government sought “to visually impress, to emotionally overwhelm and thus to holistically affect the consciousness of the new born ‘citizen’”.¹⁹

Against this background, vocational education was seen from a new perspective and developed in the form of a comprehensive system. Before then, vocational education was simply a residual sort of education. The existing schools did not aim principally at forming precise professional profiles or meeting concrete demands from the labour market; rather, they represented a “compromise solution” to iterative claims of reforming the formal, so-called “encyclopaedic” school system.²⁰

¹³See Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*.

¹⁴Mónica E. Rein, *Politics and Education in Argentina, 1946-1962* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 19.

¹⁵See Gerchunoff and Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión*, 170.

¹⁶See Raúl A. Mende, *Der Justizialismus: Peronistische Doktrin und Tatsache* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta López, 1952); Cristian Buchrucker, *Nationalismus, Faschismus und Peronismus 1927-1955: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politischen Ideen in Argentinien* (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 1982), 444.

¹⁷See Buchrucker, *Nationalismus, Faschismus und Peronismus 1927-1955*, 439.

¹⁸George Mosse, *Die Nationalisierung der Massen: Politische Symbolik und Massenbewegung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zum Dritten Reich* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1993).

¹⁹Jürgen Schriewer, “Ceremonial Pedagogy’ in Revolutionary Societies: Public Staging and Aesthetic Mass Inculcation in Meiji Japan, the Early Soviet Union and Post-1910 Mexico,” in *Remodelling Social Order through the Conquest of Public Space: Myths, Ceremonies and Visual Representations in Revolutionary Societies*, ed. Jürgen Schriewer (Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl. 2009), 9, 12.

²⁰See Verónica Oelsner, “*Produzenten statt Parasiten*” (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

On the contrary, vocational education appeared to Perón and his followers as an instrument that could fulfil multiple aims. As a number of studies have already argued, it served first as preparation of the labour force for the promoted process of industrialisation, second as a mechanism of social inclusion by contributing to a material and moral improvement of the situation of the working class, and – in doing so – third as a means of strengthening the political hegemony of the government.²¹ Nevertheless, the magnitude and relative success achieved by the Peronist system of vocational education was not only due to its role in the broader reform programme of the government. As the present article argues, its institutional development was also favoured by the representations of work, the worker, the apprentice and vocational education that were deliberately constructed and disseminated by the Peronist government.²²

Although there is extensive literature on Peronism, there are still only a few works concentrating on its symbolic dimension in general, including in relation to vocational education.²³ In particular, graphic representations of the workers have been studied so far only by Marcela Gené.²⁴ The relationship between these and other symbolic representations related to work and vocational education has not been considered by researchers at all. Accordingly, the following sections concentrate on such representations, relating them afterwards with the Peronist system of vocational education.

²¹See Juan Balduzzi, “Peronismo, saber y poder,” in *Hacia una pedagogía de la imaginación para América Latina*, ed. Puiggrós, José and Balduzzi (Buenos Aires: Editorial Contrapunto, 1988), 175, 191; David L. Wiñar, *Poder político y educación: El peronismo y la Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1970), 32–36; Miguel Somoza Rodríguez, *Educación y política en Argentina (1946-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2006), 37–38.

²²In turn, the development of vocational education surely reinforced these representations since it contributed to upgrading and dignifying manual work, workers, apprentices and their training.

Explicit motives for the construction of such representations could not be traced back in this research, neither in the sources nor in the existing literature. Nevertheless, this article assumes that while the representations of work and the worker had, without a doubt, the more general purpose of moulding the identity of the working masses and winning them as the foundation of both governmental hegemony and planned industrialisation, the representations of the apprentice and his training were most likely also moulded in direct connection with the vocational education reforms.

²³See Mariano Plotkin, *Mañana es San Perón. Propaganda, rituales políticos y educación en el régimen peronista (1946-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1993); Matthew B. Karush and Oscar Chamosa, eds., *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Cecilia Pitelli and Miguel Somoza Rodríguez, “Peronismo: Notas acerca de la producción y el control de símbolos. La historia y sus usos,” in *Discursos pedagógicos e imaginario social en el peronismo (1945-1955)*, ed. Adriana Puiggrós (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1995), 205–258. For vocational education see Pablo Pineau, “Peronism, Secondary Schooling and Work (Argentina, 1944-1955): An Approach through Cultural Hierarchies,” *Paedagogica Historica* 40, no. 1 & 2 (2004): 183–191; Adriana Puiggrós and Rafael Gagliano, eds., *La fábrica del conocimiento: los saberes socialmente productivos en América Latina* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens, 2004).

²⁴See Marcela Gené, *Un mundo feliz. Imágenes de los trabajadores en el primer peronismo. 1946-1955* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

Peronist representations

The worker as national hero

And we already see that the new laurels, that are to be added to the ones conquered by our ancestors, will be pulled up every day by the callused hands of our workers, who are the ones that are building the future greatness of Argentina.²⁵

As the quotation suggests, the Peronist government not only favoured the worker through new rights and reforms, but also enhanced him symbolically. The worker became discursively the central figure of the planned economic and social change, and was stylised through different means as the hero of the “Peronist revolution”²⁶ (this worker-figure was male, since women were generally discouraged to leave home for work and persuaded to fulfil their “innate” mission of spouse and mother, instead; as Evita wrote, women “were born to constitute homes”²⁷).

A paradigmatic symbolisation of the greatness that the Peronist government attributed to the worker is represented by the planned monument of the “shirtless” worker.²⁸ The first plans for this can be traced back to 1946.²⁹ Although the monument was never completed, the architectural plan itself and its partial construction illustrate the representations of the workers that were being modelled and disseminated by the government. The statue of the worker was to have the colossal height of 137 metres (the Statue of Liberty is 46 metres), a staircase 100 metres in diameter around the base of the monument, and 14 lifts to the head of the figure (Figure 1).^{30,31}

An official publication stated that this would be “the tallest monument of the world” and “will become its eighth wonder, due to its greatness and beauty”³². In so doing, it should explicitly fulfil a pedagogical function. In one of his speeches, Perón said:

²⁵From a speech of Perón in 1953 at an event for apprentices, in Juan D. Perón, *Obras Completas*, vol. XVII, 1 (Buenos Aires: Fundación pro Universidad de la Producción y del Trabajo – Fundación Universidad a Distancia “Hernandarias”, 1997), 334.

²⁶See Gené, *Un mundo feliz*, 65.

²⁷Eva Perón, *La razón de mi vida*, 9th ed. (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1951), 276. See also Gené, *Un mundo feliz*, 130–140.

²⁸The Peronist discourse portrayed the worker primarily as “shirtless” (*descamisado*). The shirtless embodied in the first place the industrial worker, but sometimes also the rural helper, and often the worker in general as a hitherto socially excluded and disadvantaged individual (Gené, *Un mundo feliz*, 66). In the words of Perón, “the shirtless is a poor worker who has fought for an ideal for a long time and has achieved it”. In her speeches, Evita, the spouse of Perón, emphasised that “the working men and women are always and in the first place shirtless”, adding: “I see in each worker a shirtless and a Peronist” (Pitelli and Somoza Rodríguez, “Peronismo: Notas acerca de la producción y el control de símbolos,” 210).

²⁹See Congreso Nacional, *Cámara de Diputados*, vol. VI, 1946, 394–395. After the death of Evita in 1952, the government decided to also turn this monument into a mausoleum for her. In that way, according to the ideas after 1952, the statue should fulfil two functions: it should serve as a mausoleum for Evita and honour the workers at the same time. See Anahí Ballent, *Las huellas de la política: vivienda, ciudad, peronismo en Buenos Aires, 1943-1955* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes – Prometeo, 2005), 177–178.

³⁰*Panoramas de actualidad* (Ciudad Eva Perón: A. Domínguez e Hijo, 1953-1954, Edición 6° Extraordinaria), 14.

³¹Presidencia de la Nación, *Monumento a Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires: 1955). Images of this model can also be found before 1955 in other publications.

³²*Panoramas de actualidad*, 14.

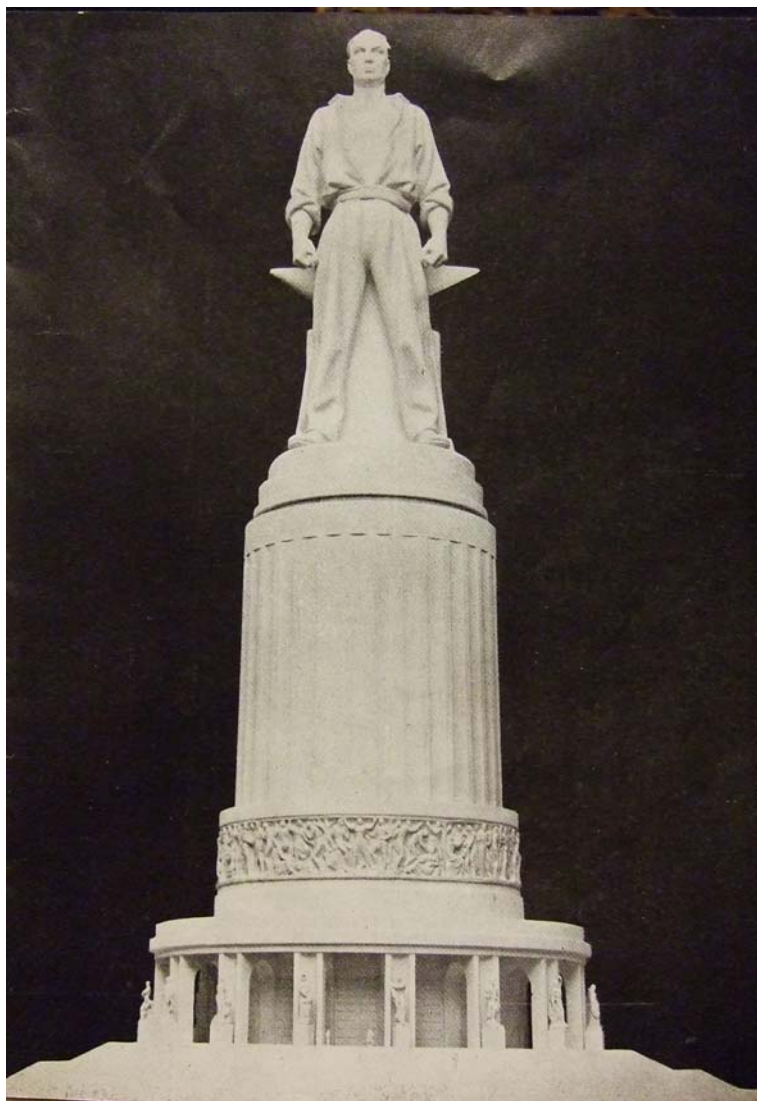


Figure 1. Model “Monument to the shirtless”.

I think, the challenge is to construct a profoundly evocative monument given that it will be an eminently popular monument, which has to be easily interpreted in its form and conception. It must not be complicated but something that the people understand, [...] and they understand what impresses well their senses and feelings.³³

In compliance with this function, the monument should not only be colossal but also erected in the central Plaza de Mayo, in front of the main government building – later plans located it adjacent to the presidential residence.³⁴ This would embody the centrality of the worker in the new social order.

³³*El Líder*, July 25, 1947, 12.

³⁴Congreso Nacional, *Cámara de Diputados*, vol. VI, 1946, 393; *Panoramas de actualidad*.

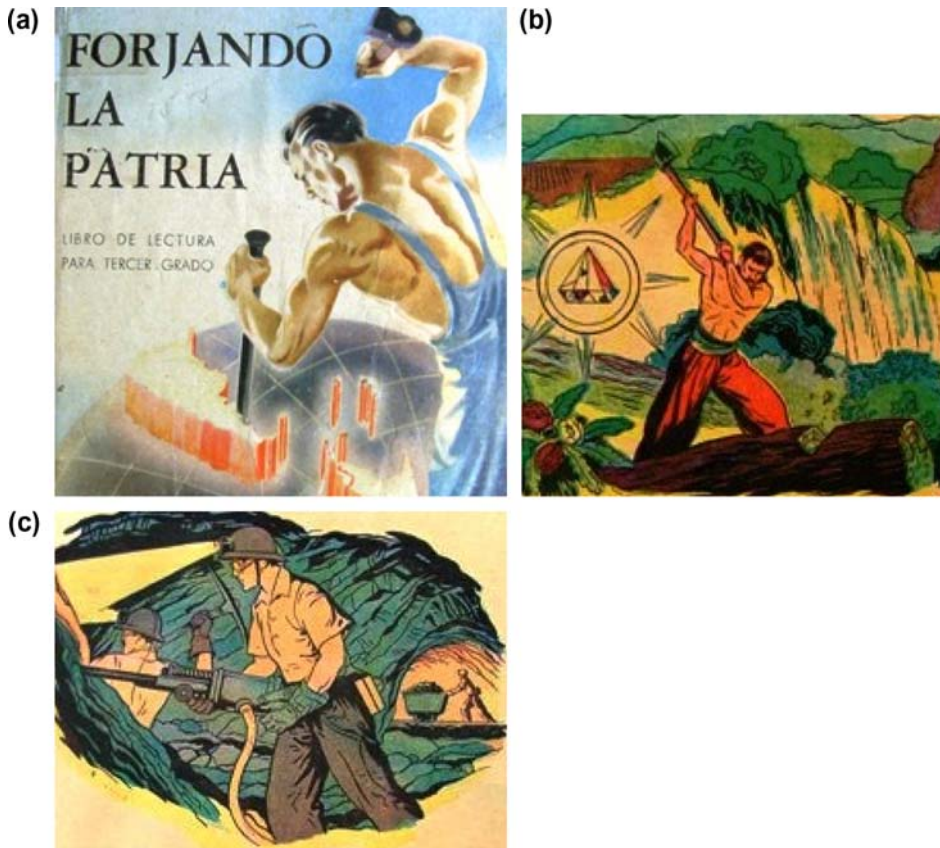


Figure 2. Heroic workers.

Furthermore, the Peronist graphic presented the worker as a strong, modern and industrious man who contributed heroically to the prosperity of the nation. Glorifying images of this kind appeared often, for instance, in school books published during Peronism. One book cover shows a well built worker who is literally “forging the Fatherland”. Another presents a lumberjack with a strong, nude upper body in the middle of a green landscape with mountains, a waterfall and a cultivated field; the value of his work is symbolised by a large, shining diamond. The same book shows a modern equipped mine worker, “in search of the mineral riches” of the country (Figure 2).³⁵

The Peronist government symbolised this recognition of the formerly unappreciated worker not only through monuments and pictures, but also through public ceremonies, such as the celebrations of Labour Day, which were seen as a convenient means to anchor the new representations in the minds of the people. Mass festivities not only staged these new representations but made them also tangible to

³⁵María A. De Silveira, *Forjando la patria: libro de lectura para tercer grado* (Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1953), book cover; María L. Falcone, *Madre Tierra: libro de lectura para cuarto grado* (Buenos Aires: Estrada, 1955), 39, 51.

the participants. In fact, the festivities starting on 1 May were imposing and organised in detail. They lasted many days, took place in squares and streets, included visits to industrial factories and contained ceremonial elements such as speeches by Perón, Evita and other government members, parades with national flags and performances of the national anthem and the hymn of work composed by the government. All this was transmitted via radio and television.

Manual work as source of dignity

Blessed be work, which strengthens the muscles, wakes the intelligence, elevates the spirit, and dignifies men and peoples.

Blessed be work, which brings happiness to the homes, embellishes the cities, fertilizes the fields, and forges progress.³⁶

This praise to work was included in a Peronist school book for fourth-graders. The Peronist government also aimed at changing representations of manual work. Previously, due to the colonial legacy, manual work was considered to be degrading or even enslaving.³⁷ In contrast, the Peronist government adopted the slogan “work dignifies” (*el trabajo dignifica*), as well as further practices of ceremonial pedagogy to glorify work.

One of the strategies used to increase the value of manual work was abolition of the separation and even inversion of the hierarchy of manual and intellectual work that was firmly anchored in the collective representation. Taking up the hitherto dominant educational ideal, Perón emphasised in his speeches, as for instance in 1949, the importance of “men who can do and not talk” (*hombres que sepan hacer y no decir*).³⁸ The so-called “Peronist Atlas”, which was published in 1950 by the government and presented the Peronist doctrine and achievements alongside appealing images, propagated the abolition of old hierarchies between different professions. “In the past” the physician had occupied the highest and the rural worker the lowest grade in this hierarchy, but “now” the physician, the official, the industrial worker and further simple workers were all at the same level (Figure 3).³⁹

The new meaning that Perón’s government ascribed to manual work was also manifested in the events on the occasion of the Labour Day. As the Ministry of Education’s document “Labour Celebration: Guidelines for its Celebration” from the year 1950 shows, work should be celebrated ceremonially and on a large scale in the streets of Buenos Aires, the capital of the country. The government determined, for instance, the participation of 80 flag holders and 6000 students, residents and worker representatives of factories. It also composed a celebration

³⁶Falcone, *Madre Tierra*, 37.

³⁷Oelsner, “*Produzenten statt Parasiten*”.

³⁸Juan D. Perón, *El trabajo a través del pensamiento de Perón* (Subsecretaría de Prensa y Difusión, 1955).

³⁹Presidencia de la Nación, *La Nación Argentina: justa, libre y soberana* (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1950), 154.



Figure 3. “Dignifying the worker”: Abolition of the traditional professional hierarchy in the Peronist complex of representations.

programme, including the national anthem, speeches about the “profound justicialist meaning of the celebrated day”, awards for outstanding workers and acknowledgements by different representatives, as well as singing the Peronist hymn to work, accompanied by the military band. An “allegoric representation” of the

Workers Theatre of the federation of trade unions was also part of the programme.⁴⁰

The government also planned in detail what participants should see and which representations of work should be inculcated:

In this ambiance, which offers the spectator the dynamic vision of the effort of the Argentine workers in the port, the means of transportation (land, maritime, and aerial), the monumental constructions for social work (Railway Hospital), the grain elevators, the state railway building, the Mint, and the big skyscraper of the city, consciousness among young students will be spontaneously rising that WORK DIGNIFIES...⁴¹

The government also determined activities on the occasion of Labour Day for schools. It ordered not only that the day was to be celebrated, but also how it should be celebrated, commanding that “the head teacher confine himself to carrying out the following programme”:

- 1°) National anthem.
- 2°) Words by the head teacher or by the teacher he appoints, explaining the meaning of the tribute to the worker. (Maximal length: 10 minutes)
- 3°) Words by a student. (These can be replaced by reciting something regarding work)
- 4°) Song to work.⁴²

It also planned pedagogical excursions to workplaces close to schools and instructed that if a visit of that kind was not possible, the work theme should be prioritised in class at Labour Day, and dictated the corresponding teaching topics.⁴³

The apprentice as “definitive hope of the fatherland”

Forward! We have to advance happily, with eagerness to learn and to know! Let’s work! Let’s work, apprentices, since the school is also workshop! Ambition, young people! Discipline! Willingness to serve to make our Fatherland with the plan of the New Argentina greater than yesterday!⁴⁴

These are lines of the song to the apprentice which was composed by the Peronist government. Until this time, in Argentina, the concept “apprentice” (*aprendiz*) rarely referred to a young person who was being trained in a profession. “Apprentice”

⁴⁰Ministerio de Educación, *Suplemento del Boletín de Informaciones* 113, April 18, 1950, 4–6. The Workers Theatre, as many other cultural institutions of that time, was founded by the Peronist government to offer the workers entertainment and at the same time to instruct them and disseminate the government’s principles. See Yanina A. Leonardi, “Un teatro para los descamisados,” in *telondefondo. Revista de teoría y crítica teatral* 7 (2008), <http://www.telondefondo.org/numeros-antteriores/numero7/articulo/131/un-teatro-para-los-descamisados.html> (accessed September 19, 2011).

⁴¹Ministerio de Educación, *Suplemento del Boletín de Informaciones* 113, April 18, 1950, 5; block capitals in original.

⁴²Ministerio de Educación, *Suplemento del Boletín de Informaciones* 113, April 18, 1950, 2.

⁴³Ministerio de Educación, *Suplemento del Boletín de Informaciones* 113, April 18, 1950, 1–2.

⁴⁴Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Canción del Aprendiz,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 2, May 1952, 25.

was rather the term for unskilled workers, often women and children, who carried out simple tasks and got a low payment under the pretext of their young age or their apprentice status.⁴⁵ The Peronist government took up this category and overwrote it with positive meaning, describing the apprentice as “the definitive hope of the Fatherland”⁴⁶ and transforming it in a further component of the semantic basis of the Peronist vocational education system.⁴⁷

Perón emphasised the “pride”, “dignity”, “honour” and “morals” that were associated with being an apprentice. In a public ceremony in 1953, for example – which was transmitted by radio, as were most of the ceremonies – Perón explained in front of factory-school apprentices that:

...when we designed the basis of the vocational education for the required manpower for the industrial future of Argentina in 1944, we dreamed of a legion of decided young Argentines, who could feel the pride of wearing the most honourable uniform: the humble but grandiose uniform of the worker.⁴⁸

During the same ceremony, Perón said that the apprentices formed “the avant-garde of the army that will make the glories of our Argentina memorable”, “the avant-garde of the only moral that leads the great societies: the one of self-sacrificing work of every day”.⁴⁹

Further, a new celebration was created to honour the apprentice, following the Labour Day celebration of the worker. In 1945, while still secretary of labour, Perón introduced the “Apprentice Day”.⁵⁰ The chosen day was 3 June – the day on which, in 1944, the National Commission for Vocational Education (*Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional*, CNAOP) was established to organise the future vocational education system. The Apprentice Day would commemorate this institutional foundation and at the same time, as the decree argued, “make the apprentices conscious of their place in society”. From then on, 3 June was to become a holiday for the apprentices, with the National Commission for Vocational Education organising the corresponding festivities each year.^{51,52}

The aim of the celebrations was to consolidate the new representations of the apprentice in the minds of the people. For their part, the participating apprentices, who were in fact pieces of the celebration’s arrangements, could experience their new meaning themselves. The ceremony of 1953, for instance, included participation

⁴⁵Hilda Sabato and Luis A. Romero, *Los trabajadores de Buenos Aires: La experiencia del mercado: 1850-1880* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1992).

⁴⁶Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “El día del aprendiz,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 2, May 1952, 1.

⁴⁷Although there were some women apprentices who, as an example below shows, were included in ceremonial practices, the apprentice discourse and the corresponding representations were predominantly related to male youth. In front of apprentices of both sexes, Perón used to talk almost exclusively about “young men” (*muchachos*). Also in the graphic material, the apprentice is usually a male figure (see, for instance, the covers of the magazine *Aprendizaje*).

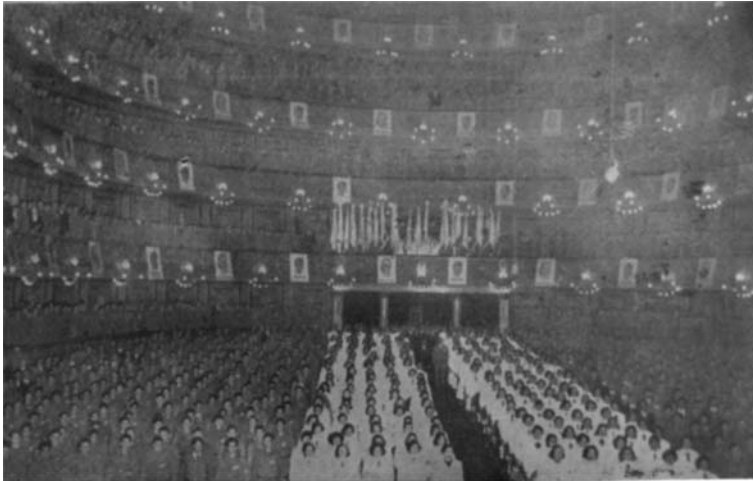
⁴⁸Perón, *Obras Completas*, 333.

⁴⁹Perón, *Obras Completas*, 334.

⁵⁰Decree no. 8487, April 23, 1945.

⁵¹República Argentina, *Boletín Oficial*, May 3, 1945.

⁵²Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “La celebración del Día del Aprendiz,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 8, 1953, 5.



Vista del Teatro Colón, en cuya platea aparecen, formando la bandera azul y blanca, los aprendices de ambos sexos

Figure 4. Apprentices at the celebration of Apprentice Day at the Colón Theatre.

from Perón, the minister of education; the mayor of the city of Buenos Aires; the president of the National Commission for Vocational Education; the principal officer of the Workers University; a number of military authorities; and representatives of the federation of trade unions and state officials. As Figure 4 shows, the stalls of the theatre in which the celebration took place were full of apprentices. The girls, located in the middle, wore white pinafores while the boys, sitting at the sides, wore blue overalls. With these colours and locations, the apprentices embodied the Argentine national flag. These arrangements were not confined to the apprentices. The speeches were transmitted by radio in the whole country and pictures were published in different media.

A 1952 report in *Aprendizaje*, the magazine of the National Commission for Vocational Education, illustrates how imposing and calculated the exaltation of the apprentice was, disseminating at the same time the new representation of this figure. In the words of the magazine, on the celebration day, “the legions that wear the uniform of the factory schools”, authorities of the National Commission for Vocational Education, school personnel and workers came together at the Plazas de Mayo and Colón (around the Presidential Palace). After a tribute to Evita and singing the national anthem, “the parade of apprentices began in a perfect formation and with a rhythmic pace”.⁵³ The “fervour of the people” was documented by the magazine with photos (see Figure 5).⁵⁴ According to the article:

It is impossible for us to give the slightest image of the grandeur of the parade of the future great technicians, who will proudly put our country among the industrially most developed nations of the earth very soon. The young workers, the legions of young people of both sexes that will consolidate the greatness of the Nation through the con-

⁵³ Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Los actos realizados en la Capital Federal el Día del Aprendiz,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 3, June 1952, 16.

⁵⁴ Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Los actos realizados en la Capital Federal el Día del Aprendiz,” 15.



Figure 5. Celebrations in Buenos Aires on Apprentice Day.

structive fight of the effort, had the virtue to make the hearts of the people pound with patriotic enthusiasm, which applauded incessantly...^{55,56}

⁵⁵Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, "Los actos realizados en la Capital Federal el Día del Aprendiz," 16.

⁵⁶Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, "Los actos realizados en la Capital Federal el Día del Aprendiz," 15.

The place chosen by the government to celebrate Apprentice Day illustrates the new higher meaning of the apprentice during the Peronist phase. The central celebration of 1953 took place in the Colón Theatre and was headed by Perón himself.⁵⁷ The Colón Theatre, in the centre of Buenos Aires, had been until then (and is also today) a symbol of culture and a meeting place for the upper classes, built for opera performances. A 1952 issue of the official magazine described this theatre as a “meeting place of the privileged in the past and place of leisure activities and popular meetings in the Justicialist era”.⁵⁸ The celebration of Apprentice Day – a symbol of the social achievement of the working classes and of the upgrading of manual work and vocational education – in the Colón Theatre, a symbol of the elitist culture, represented in this way the social upgrading of the apprentice, as well as the intended inversion of the conventional culture and education hierarchies.⁵⁹

Vocational education as a silver bullet to achieve the “New Argentina”

Alphabetisation in the past century; vocational education in the present.⁶⁰

As this article argues, the representations of work, the worker and the apprentice constructed and disseminated by the Peronist government conferred a new meaning on vocational education. While the very creation of the vocational education system stressed this new significance, the newly constructed representations of vocational education also played an important role.

Perón’s government explicitly rejected the use of vocational education as a simple auxiliary means to confront social problems like unemployment.⁶¹ Quite the contrary, the government presented vocational education as an act of “social justice” itself and at the same time as a silver bullet to realise the wide reform programme, including the proclaimed “economic independence” and “political sovereignty”. As stated in an official publication, thanks to the systematisation of vocational education the youth would no longer learn a profession “with pain” in the limited space of the workshop, but would instead receive “technical and scientific training”.⁶² In the process, young people would improve their cultural and moral situation. Furthermore, systematised vocational education would improve the performance of workers and consequently foster Argentina’s economic success. As a result, wages would increase and workers would become materially and socially better off.⁶³

In order to transmit a tangible view of the relevance of vocational education, from 1947 onward, the government organised annual exhibitions of products fin-

⁵⁷Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “La celebración del Día del Aprendiz,” 4.

⁵⁸Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Entrega de diplomas a los primeros egresados del ciclo técnico,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 6, [1953?], 6.

⁵⁹About the inversion of knowledge hierarchies during the Peronist governments see also Pineau, “Peronism, Secondary Schooling and Work (Argentina, 1944-1955).”

⁶⁰Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Día del Aprendiz,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 3, June 1952, 8.

⁶¹República Argentina, *Berufsertüchtigung des Arbeiters*, 6.

⁶²Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “Entrega de diplomas a los primeros egresados del ciclo técnico,” 7.

⁶³See speech by Perón in República Argentina, *Berufsertüchtigung des Arbeiters*, 21.

ished by apprentices in factory schools and reported them in the press. As in the case of the Apprentice Day ceremonies, these exhibitions took place in central buildings in Buenos Aires and were attended by high-ranking government members, including Perón. The magazine *Aprendizaje* reported about the 1951 exhibition in the Post and Telecommunications Palace that visitors, who numbered around 150,000, were

... pleasantly impressed by the revelation of the technical and manual improvement achieved step by step by our apprentices and manifested every year in the general realisation and in the details of the exposed work.

The magazine stated once more that the schools of the commission were forming “the specialised workers that will enlarge the phalanx of native technicians that will foster and upgrade our industries in the near future”.⁶⁴

The Peronist vocational education system

In the 1930s, before the political rise of Perón and in connection with reform of the country’s economic model, the state, a variety of companies, community and religious organisations and some trade unions began to promote technical and vocational institutions more intensively. Also before the Peronist government, at the beginning of the 1940s, the “problem of apprenticeship” (*problema del aprendizaje*) and the “problem of industrial training” (*problema de la enseñanza industrial*), emerged, as documented by issues of the Argentine Industrial Union’s (UIA) magazine published between 1940 and 1943. In 1942, a socialist representative even proposed a comprehensive system of vocational training (the later system of the Peronist National Commission of Vocational Education would have much in common with this first project).⁶⁵ But it was Perón who, integrating these debates in a stronger and broader political discourse, first centralised the existing institutional developments and transformed this field in an expanding system of vocational education.⁶⁶

During the first decades of the twentieth century, negative representations related to work had enabled only a modest institutional configuration of vocational education. In contrast, during the Peronist government, vocational education was underpinned by new representations that contributed to its high grade of systematisation, its large scale and its social acceptance. On the one side, the Peronist representations related to work presented above served as clear and positive reference points for the system’s organisation. On the other side, the upgrading of work, workers and apprentices conferred a higher value on vocational education, and vocational education itself was placed on at least the same level as general education.

⁶⁴Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, “La V exposición anual de nuestras escuelas-fábricas señala el alto grado de evolución alcanzado por los futuros obreros capacitados,” *Aprendizaje*, no. 1, April 1952, 26.

⁶⁵See Américo Ghioldi, *Oportunidad de formación profesional para los jóvenes: Normas de aprendizaje técnico* (Buenos Aires, 1942).

⁶⁶Adriana Puiggrós, “La educación argentina desde la reforma Saavedra Lamas hasta el fin de la década infame: Hipótesis para la discusión,” in *Escuela, democracia y orden (1916-1943)*, ed. Adriana Puiggrós (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1992), 65–67.

Table 1. Peronist system of vocational education.

Education level and duration	Institutional arrangement	Degree
First level (3 years) Prerequisite for admission in following level	Factory schools, vocational schools, half-day schools	Expert in the trade (<i>Experto en el oficio</i>)
Second level (4 years) Prerequisite for admission in following level	Evening courses for workers	Factory technician (<i>Técnico de fábrica</i>)
Third level (5 years)	Workers University	Factory engineer (<i>Ingeniero de fábrica</i>)

Specifically, Perón's government established a system of vocational education under the direction of the National Commission for Vocational Education in the Department of Labour.⁶⁷ This system was independent from the school system and its Department for Technical Education (*Dirección General de Educación Técnica*), which ran secondary technical schools for the formation of leading personnel as well as preparing students to continue studies at the university level – a sort of work-related education that corresponded better with the then dominant ideal of a relatively generalised and university-orientated education. Unlike this technical education, the new system was directed exclusively at the now privileged workers and apprentices, and encompassed three levels.⁶⁸ The first level offered three years of training in areas such as mechanics, joinery, forging, turnery, foundry, electro-techniques, motors, masonry, radio and telecommunication, installation and technical drawing.⁶⁹ There were different kinds of schools and courses. The most popular was the factory school (*escuela-fábrica*), which combined theoretical teaching and practical training. More than half of the 44 teaching hours per week were spent in the workshops. The teaching was based on detailed curricula elaborated by the National Commission of Vocational Education, as well as on officially approved schoolbooks.

As prescribed by the curriculum of 1950, the second level of the system trained factory technicians in the specialities of electro-techniques and mechanics. The prerequisite to participate in courses on this level was to have completed training either in the previous level, in institutions recognised by the National Commission or in the technical schools of the Ministry of Education. A further prerequisite was to be a worker. Training at this second level took 20 hours per week for four years. In this case as well, the National Commission provided centrally defined learning programmes.⁷⁰

⁶⁷In 1951, the Commission was transferred to the Ministry of Education.

⁶⁸This vocational system has been examined by different authors from different perspectives. See Daniel Weinberg, *La enseñanza técnica industrial en la Argentina, 1936-1965* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1967); Wiñar, *Poder político y educación*; Balduzzi, "Peronismo, saber y poder;" Inés Dussel and Pablo Pineau, "De cuando la clase obrera entró al paraíso: La educación técnica estatal en el primer peronismo," in *Discursos pedagógicos e imaginario social en el peronismo (1945-1955)*, ed. Adriana Puiggrós (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1995), 107–173; Héctor R. Cucuzza, *Estudios de historia de la educación durante el primer peronismo (1943-1955)* (Buenos Aires: Los Libros del Riel, 1997); Pineau, "Peronism, Secondary Schooling and Work (Argentina, 1944-1955)."

⁶⁹Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión, *Memoria Año 1947, 1948*, 589–593.

⁷⁰See Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, *Planes de estudio y programas del Ciclo Técnico*, 1950.

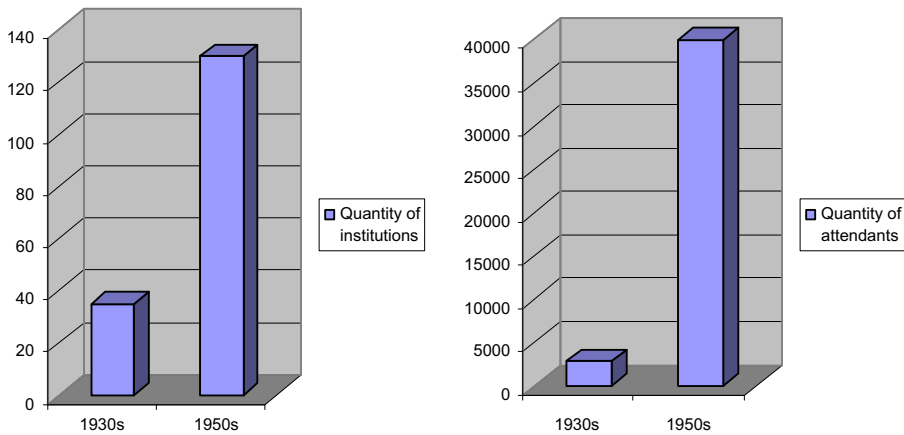


Figure 6. Quantity of vocational institutions and attendants in the 1930s and the 1950s.

The third and higher level of this system was the Workers University (*Universidad Obrera Nacional*), with its regional faculties for the formation of factory engineers. As with the second level, the conditions of admission were completion of the previous training level and being a factory worker.⁷¹ Depending on the region, the five-year education programme concentrated on construction, reinforced concrete, sanitation technology, mechanical engineering, vehicle construction, rail transport and mechanics, electric installations, electro-mechanics, aircraft construction or the textile industry.⁷² The courses took place in the evenings between 19:15 and 22:30.⁷³ In this way, until 1948 the Peronist government had designed a comprehensive system of vocational education for workers that would be implemented step by step until 1955 (see Table 1).⁷⁴

The Peronist system of vocational education was not only comprehensive; additionally, its coverage was large. While in the 1930s, before Perón, state figures indicated that there were 35 vocational schools with around 2800 attendees in the whole country, at the beginning of the 1950s, the Peronist National Commission of Vocational Education registered around 130 institutions at the first and second

⁷¹República Argentina, *Boletín Oficial*, August 31, 1948.

⁷²Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, *Universidad Obrera Nacional. Reglamento de Organización y Funcionamiento*, 1953, 45–46.

⁷³Comisión Nacional de Aprendizaje y Orientación Profesional, *Universidad Obrera Nacional*, 48–49.

⁷⁴The large majority of the attendants were male. The reason for the low female participation was presumably that, apart from the fact that most of the specialities were traditionally male domain, as stated above, the Peronist government generally discouraged women to leave home for work (exceptions were teachers and nurses, the latter labelled by Marcela Gené as the “female equivalent” of the industrial worker (Gené, *Un mundo feliz*, 134)). In fact, the Peronist government rather promoted the courses of professional schools for women (*escuelas de capacitación profesional para mujeres*) that concentrated on occupations practicable at home, like different fields of clothing manufacturing, sewing, weaving, cooking and decorative arts. Unlike the rest of the Peronist vocational education, these courses were short, informal and did not offer qualifying certificates. See María de los A. Álvarez, “La formación femenina en las Escuelas Profesionales: preparación educativa e inserción laboral en el período peronista” (paper presented at VI Encuentro de cátedras Ciencias Sociales y Humanísticas para Ciencias Económicas, Universidad Nacional de Salta, June 10–11, 1999).

levels, with approximately 40,000 apprentices and workers (see Figure 6).⁷⁵ For its part, the Workers University had 1887 registered students in 1955.⁷⁶

Repression of Peronist representation and disintegration of the vocational education system

Events after the fall of Perón's government manifest the existing relationship between, on the one side, representations related to work and education and, on the other, structures of vocational education. In September 1955, Perón was overthrown by a military coup. The new regime promptly withdrew the working-class privileges introduced by Perón. The goals of this self-labelled "Liberating Revolution" were the disintegration of the Peronist Party and "de-peronising" society.⁷⁷ The de facto president, Pedro E. Aramburu, banned Peronist publications of any kind, mention of Perón's name, and use of symbols, terms, songs, festivities and images related to the Peronist government.⁷⁸ His regime even destroyed the imposing Peronist sculptures and monuments. In the following years, the system of vocational education gradually fell apart. As this article argues, with the suppression of the centrality of the worker-figure and the corresponding glorifying representations, the system lost the symbolic elements that served as its *leitfiguren* and underpinned its relevance.

In fact, the post-Peronist governments replaced the politically loaded figure of the worker with that of the technician. Accordingly, the focus of vocational education was shifted from factory training for workers to polytechnic education for non-working youngsters.⁷⁹ In 1959, the government of the time merged the Peronist National Commission for Vocational Education with the Department for Technical Education (*Dirección General de Educación Técnica*) and its secondary technical schools. In so doing, the institutions of the National Commission were closed or transformed into secondary schools (now called *Escuelas Nacionales de Educación Técnica*). As David Wiñar maintains, this reform implied the "secondarisation" of vocational education:⁸⁰ by being annexed to the school system, the old vocational education adopted the characteristics of the other types of secondary education (general character, duration of five to six years and access to university). This implied also the "theoretisation" of vocational education:⁸¹ the focus was shifted from practice to theory and education moved away from the world of factories, companies and trade unions.⁸² Further, the profile for school leavers was no longer that of the skilled worker but rather the "polyvalent, all-encompassing and

⁷⁵See Wiñar, *Poder político y educación*, 26 and Weinberg, *La enseñanza técnica industrial en la Argentina*.

⁷⁶Dussel and Pineau, "De cuando la clase obrera entró al paraíso," 156.

⁷⁷See Robert A. Potash, *The Army and Politics in Argentina, 1945-1962: Perón to Frondizi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Seoane, *Argentina*, 85.

⁷⁸República Argentina, *Boletín Oficial*, March 9, 1956.

⁷⁹Roberto H. Albergucci, *Educación y Estado: Organización del Sistema Educativo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Docencia, 1996), 576-577. For a distinction between vocational and polytechnic education see footnote 2.

⁸⁰David L. Wiñar, "Educación técnica y estructura social en América Latina" (UNESCO-CEPAL-PNUD 1981), 3.

⁸¹Schriewer, "Alternativen in Europa," 254.

⁸²Oscar Nieva and Roberto Serrao, "Las actividades educativas del sindicalismo argentino," in *Boletín Cinterfor* 135 (April-June 1996): 70.

encyclopaedic technician”.⁸³ The flip side of this academisation process was the informalisation and marginalisation of vocational education for workers. The state did still organise training courses in different specialities; however, they had a different duration (generally between six months and two years), took place in heterogeneous institutional settings (training centres, penitentiaries, hospitals, caserns) and had no connection with other educational offers.⁸⁴

Final remarks

This article has shown how representations of work that were artificially constructed in order to support a specific political programme raised the social value of vocational education and served as a point of reference for its organisation. The result was a large-scale (although short-lived) system of vocational education with high attendance rates, oriented to the idealised worker. The article also shows that with the repression of the Peronist representations this system gradually dissolved, as its institutions were gradually closed or transformed according to the once again dominant educational ideals.

These findings not only deepen our knowledge about Peronist vocational education, but also add evidence to the theoretical approach endorsed by the article, which maintains that, in addition to the often explored economic or technological factors, semantic resources (i.e. representations, values, interpretations patterns or concepts) related to work and education also play an important role in the configuration of vocational education. In fact, the case discussed in this article serves as an example of how such semantic resources can favour or impede the establishment and development of specific models of vocational education. In doing so, it emphasises on the one hand this relationship between semantics and vocational education, and on the other, the context-dependency of both semantics and vocational education arrangements. In this way, the arguments put forward by this article contribute to a more complex view of the vocational education not only of Peronist Argentina, but also of other socio-cultural and historic cases.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Nicolás Arata (Universidad de Buenos Aires and DIE/CINVESTAV, Mexico) for generously sharing some of the visual material included in this article.

Notes on contributor

Verónica Oelsner is a research fellow at the collaborative research centre 640 “Representation of Changing Social Orders”, Humboldt-University Berlin, Germany, in a project that compares representations related to work and professions and structures of vocational education in Argentina, India and China. Between 1994 and 2002, she pursued undergraduate and graduate studies in educational sciences in Argentina at the Universities of Buenos Aires and San Andrés. Later she moved to Germany, where she completed her doctorate in the same discipline at the Humboldt-University in 2010 with a thesis on vocational education in modern Argentina. Her publications concentrate predominantly on history of vocational education and on educational assessment.

⁸³Gallart, “La racionalidad educativa,” 33.

⁸⁴Nieva and Serrao, “Las actividades educativas del sindicalismo argentino,” 66; Albergucci, *Educación y Estado*, 578.