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Popular education and the logics of schooling

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In this article, I compare two distinct uses of “Popular Education” that emerged in Tlaxcala in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. I examine archival and oral evidence to reconstruct the situated meanings and political rationales that led to the use of the term in each case, beyond their contrasting pedagogical content. In 1917, a revolutionary faction promoted “popular education” by providing elementary schools throughout regions under its control, in order to secure legitimacy as a transitional government. In the late 1930s, the post-revolutionary federal state launched a campaign of “popular education” ostensibly to promote adult literacy, which served to control radical teachers and consolidate a popular front in support of the incoming conservative presidential candidate. Simultaneously, the traditional rural pueblos negotiated and appropriated schooling and literacy for their own ends, in ways that at times went counter to those deployed by governing authorities. Noting the ambiguities of the terms *pueblo* and *pueblos* in Mexican history, I reconstruct both the logic of schooling for the people and the logic of schooling of the people. These particular histories point to the multiple rationales sustaining popular education projects, linked to the political and social movements that produced or resisted their actual implementation.

Keywords: Popular education; literacy; schooling; Mexican revolution; citizenship

We must therefore return to the inassimilable practices that lay deep within a specific place.¹

As many of my generation, I had early on learned to read the term “popular education” through the legacy of Paulo Freire, with its accent on a radical opposition to formal state-controlled schooling and proposal of *concientización* through adult literacy, born through the struggle against a despotic military regime in Brazil in the 1960s. However, in my historical work on schooling during the revolutionary period in Mexico, I came across two uses of the term that were quite distant from the Freirian understanding. These became the starting points for the elaboration of this article.²

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¹Michel de Certeau, *La toma de la palabra y otros escritos políticos* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1995), 220 (my translation).

²The text was originally presented as a plenary lecture at the 31st International Standing Conference on History of Education (ISCHE) Conference in Utrecht, August 28, 2009. I thank María Elena Maruri, Lourdes Solares and Claudia Garay Molina for their help with locating archival and documentary information for this paper and my colleagues Ariadna Acevedo and Eugenia Roldán for helpful comments, as well as the Cinvestav for research support.

The stories I offer took place in the small state of Tlaxcala, populated by the descendants of a people who had allied with the Spanish to defeat the Aztec empire, and thereafter received privileges from the Crown. Although I will refer to the post-revolutionary period, 1917–1940, it is well to keep in mind that long before the time of Charles V (Carlos I of Spain), central Tlaxcala had a strong tradition of formal education and written culture. Its language, customs and laws coexisted and merged with those imposed during the three centuries of Colonial rule and one of National rule. Tlaxcalans, mixed by blood and custom with successive waves of immigration, have since struggled to defend their land and political autonomy. Throughout these years they continued to appropriate writing for use in various domains, legal, administrative, religious and domestic; their native language, Nahuatl, although still the mother tongue of a million Mexicans, in Tlaxcala is now only spoken by the elders in a few pueblos.

After the 1910 Mexican revolution, the term *popular education* appeared in Tlaxcala on two occasions: one was in relation to a state *Law for Primary Instruction* decreed in 1917, in which the term referred to formal elementary schooling for children. The second use arrived in 1937 from the nation's capital in the form of a *Campaign for Popular Education*, organised allegedly to alphabetise adults. I wondered how the notion of popular education had mutated in such a short lapse, and whether it reflected sporadic adoptions of international fashions or deeper currents of local thought. I pursue such questions by beginning with evidence located in circumscribed places, and tracking it over relatively long periods of time – a sort of combination of micro-history and the *longue durée* which I consider most fruitful in the history of education. As I searched through layers of past discourse and political networks, the situated meanings and practical rationales of the term began to emerge. In what follows, I first consider some conceptual issues related to “the popular” and then examine in turn each local incidence of the term.

Popular education and the logics of schooling

Although the Mexican revolution is often credited with honouring a popular demand for schooling, particularly in the rural regions of the nation, a closer analysis of the post-revolutionary period reveals the continual tension between different logics. By “logics of schooling” I refer to the way words and acts are articulated around the social and political processes that cross through and reshape formal education. A number of logics have been identified in the literature on schooling: evangelisation, civilisation, nation-building, citizen formation, modernisation, state-formation, social reproduction, and cultural resistance, among others.³ Strangely, diverse logics may take place under similar forms of schooling, even under similar pedagogical discourses. A search for the *logics of schooling* unearths the changing social contents underlying the progression towards the “*forme scolaire*” or “grammar of educationalisation” of society.⁴

In this paper, I consider the logics of schooling that distinguish between “*the State's uses of schooling for the people*” and “*the people's uses of State schooling*”.⁵ By logics

³Elsie Rockwell, “Recovering History in the Study of Schooling: from the *Longue Durée* to Everyday Co-construction,” *Human Development* 42, no. 3 (1999): 113–128.

⁴See Guy Vincent, *L'Éducation prisonnière de la forme scolaire* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1994) and Mark Depaepe, *Order in Progress. Everyday Education Practice in Primary Schools – Belgium 1880–1970* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000).

⁵Although I cannot address here the conceptual problems of capitalising “State”, which suggests a monolithic separate entity, I follow the convention here to mark the distinction with “state” as a political subdivision.

of schooling *for* the people, I refer to the rationales governing the extension of elementary schooling, particularly literacy, to the “popular classes”, largely justified as educating the citizen and closely tied to state-formation. By logics of schooling *of* the people, I refer to the multiple explicit or implicit rationales underlying popular appropriations of schooling and literacy, often embedded in the exercise of full citizenship rights.

People is of course a notoriously problematic term;⁶ in this case, I offer clarification through the historically diverse meanings of the word *pueblo* in Mexico, as found in my sources and most clearly reconstructed by my colleague Eugenia Roldán:

Pueblo has a particular polysemy in Spanish that was both exploited and confounded in discourse: The modern meaning of People – as a group of individuals equal under the law and the holder of national sovereignty – coexisted throughout this period with earlier meanings of the concept, both the People as the lower layer of society, and collectively as the Pueblos, holders of a plural notion of sovereignty, bound by allegiance to a legitimate king only through an explicit pact.⁷

These contested meanings were most evident during the decades of the struggle for Independence; after the abdication of the Bourbon King of Spain (1808), different political actors debated how exactly sovereignty had reverted to the *Pueblo* within the domain of New Spain. In building the nation, the liberal sense of *the People* as the body of individual citizens paradoxically strengthened the age-old sense of *Pueblos* as corporate, autonomous, political units, able to transfer their sovereignty by specific contract or pact to a legitimate Ruler.⁸ Furthermore, Roldán continues, the meaning of the people as holders of sovereignty in either the corporate or the liberal sense clashed with the meaning attached to the term as equivalent to the *plebs*, the ignorant “lower layers of society”, those who, in the words of precursor of the Independence Fray Melchor de Talamantes, “never enjoy the rights to citizenship” but rather must depend upon “illustrated and powerful men”.⁹

The “illustrated and powerful men” who ruled over the new nation, particularly those of liberal inclinations, nevertheless believed that the people could be redeemed through education. From their perspective, full citizenship rights were to be deferred to a time when the people – an amalgam of the lower strata of society with the lofty depository of sovereignty – were to become fully educated as citizens.¹⁰ The promise of an enlightened “new man” is a common theme in modern history, echoed endlessly in educational discourse; in Mexico as in most post-colonial contexts, it was riddled with racist connotations.¹¹

⁶A discussion is found in Ernest Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁷Eugenia Roldán, “Pueblo y Pueblos en México, 1750–1850: un ensayo de historia conceptual,” *Araucaria* 9, no. 17 (2007): 268–288, 269 (my translation).

⁸Tlaxcala, although covering barely 4000 square kilometres, had 110 *pueblos* at the time of Independence, and other settlements would continually claim the status.

⁹Melchor de Talamantes, “Discurso Filosófico ... 1808”, in *Documentos Históricos Mexicanos*, vol 2, ed. Genaro García (México: Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnología, 1910), 249, cited in Roldán, “Pueblo y pueblos en México,” 274.

¹⁰I thank A. Acevedo for pointing out that, nevertheless, in Mexico, in contrast with other emerging nations of the Americas, the initial proposal to limit voting rights to literate adult men was overturned by subsequent regulations.

¹¹See, for example, Marcelo Caruso, “Changing Meanings of the ‘Popular’: Popular Education in the City of Buenos Aires at the Beginning of the Liberal Era (1853–1872),” paper presented at the 31st International Standing Conference on History of Education, August 26–29, Utrecht, 2009.

In 1867, forty years after the contested and thorny birth of the Mexican nation with its sequel of civil wars and invasions, President Benito Juárez restored the Republic, reinstating the 1857 liberal Constitution and Reform Laws. His government promulgated two laws for Public Instruction, which for the first time declared schooling “free for the poor” and compulsory for all. These laws paradoxically went against the grain of the Constitution’s Third Article, which had “liberated” education from the shackles of the Catholic Church, leaving it to the free agency of family, local government and civil society. Public instruction, by then deeply linked to educating citizens, was too delicate a matter to leave to such unpredictable forces, and would progressively be entrusted to local governments.

The meanings of *pueblo* and *popular* continued to evolve throughout the nineteenth century, as the liberal promise of instruction for the people penetrated multiple laws, debates and publications. Towards the end of the century, in 1889–1891, the terms were discursively renewed during two Pedagogical Conferences which claimed to “constitute the National Mexican School”. The commission that drew up the resolutions proposed the term popular education, rather than elementary instruction, as more comprehensive; “it does not define a certain grade of instruction, but rather refers to the general culture that is considered indispensable for the people in all civilized countries”.¹² Enrique Rebsamen, intellectual leader of the Conference, put it succinctly: “popular education educates, not only instructs, and shapes citizens, not only men”.¹³

These Conferences buttressed the emerging notion of State responsibility in guaranteeing free compulsory schooling for all. However, 20 years of dictatorship and 10 of revolution would pass before this project was seriously undertaken by the federal government, through the founding of a national Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) in 1921. Before that watershed, however, the notion of popular education had surfaced again in the unsettled currents of the revolutionary movement.

Popular education in Tlaxcala in times of the revolution: 1917

It is difficult to summarise the Mexican revolution, but some information is in order. Convened by moderate politicians in 1910 to “overthrow the tyranny of Porfirio Díaz”, by then in his seventh term as president, the movement soon became a complicated sequence of armed battles and political manoeuvres among several factions, with different outcomes in the various regions of the country, all of which are still the object of intense debate.¹⁴ Some scholars have disqualified what occurred as a revolution, arguing that the emerging State concentrated even greater power than the one it deposed. Others vindicate it as an exemplary peasant revolution, the first of the twentieth century, led by the emblematic figures of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who were both defeated by the victorious factions. A complex mixture of continuity

¹²Isidro Castillo, *Mexico: sus Revoluciones Sociales y la Educación*, Vol. 2 (Morelia Michoacán: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional y Libros EDDI, 2002), 210.

¹³Enrique C. Rebsamen, “Dictamen sobre la primera pregunta del cuestionario de instrucción elemental obligatoria,” in *Obras Completa de Enrique C. Rebsamen*, ed. Angel J. Hermida Ruiz, vol. VI (Jalapa: Secretaría de Educación y Cultura del Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1998), 13–41. “... un sistema de educación popular ... en la que no sólo se instruya, sino que se eduque, y en la que se forme no sólo al hombre, sino al ciudadano”. Cited in Castillo, *México*, 213.

¹⁴For a comprehensive history, see Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

and change marks the armed decade (1910–1920), as opposing forces alternately occupied federal and state governments, and decreed diverse plans for the country, claiming legitimate representation of “the Revolution”. By 1915, the well-supplied Constitutionalist army of Venustiano Carranza held power in the south-eastern part of the country, obtained US backing, and eventually overcame the more radical forces of Villa and Zapata. General Carranza promulgated a reformed Constitution in 1917, was elected President, eliminated Zapata, and in 1920 was in turn assassinated by a dissident Northern faction. The outcome was a profound transformation of the social order and, subsequently, the creation of a formidable corporate structure, based on a sole political party, which ruled for 70 years and is strong to this day.

The minuscule state of Tlaxcala, located on the strategic route between the nation’s Capital and the Gulf port of Veracruz, was immersed in the armed movement. Many pueblos in this state actively fought for redress of long felt grievances, including the lack of schooling. For over a century, most pueblos had hired schoolteachers for the boys, primarily through local contributions. The liberal governor Miguel Lira y Ortega supported further schooling, and scandalised the conservative forces by claiming: “Indians have as much right to instruction as do the sons of those who ignore their origins and still believe they dominate this country”.¹⁵ By 1874, of some 200 towns and villages, 180 had a teacher and Tlaxcala’s ratio of schools per population was second only to the Federal District,¹⁶ a position it was soon to lose. The six-term pre-revolutionary governor Próspero Cahuatzzi, after channelling funds to municipal head town schools and opening girls’ schools, closed and consolidated the rural schools, a move that produced stricter age-grading of students and normalised whole class teaching, in accord with the modern grammar of schooling. He instated a clear logic of distinction between rural and urban children by separating first, second and third class schools, as well as offering exemptions for children who were tutored at home. The total number of localities with public schools fell from 182 to 122 by 1907. Given this trend, in 1910 the demand for schooling was voiced by men who had probably seen or enjoyed greater possibilities of education in the past.¹⁷

During the first five years of the revolutionary movement (1910–1914), schools in Tlaxcala continued to operate as before, with the same teachers and similar routines, following the 1898 bylaws. In the archival correspondence, hardly a mention is made of the surrounding battles – educators tend to be oblivious of ongoing social changes it seems – though a few teachers resigned saying their lives were in danger, and dispatches reported that certain classrooms had been raided by so-called bandits. In 1914, the last governor of the ancient regime, Manuel Cuellar, closed over 50 state schools and transferred the funds to his armed guards in an effort to “establish peace”. Meanwhile, a noted principal, Isabel Gracia, urged authorities to reopen schools and place them under professional control, in order to “combat the enemy, ignorance, the

¹⁵Andrés Angulo, “Prólogo,” in *Herencia política del Coronel Miguel Lira y Ortega* (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1956), 11.

¹⁶Miguel Schultz, *Cuadro preparado por la Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes. Sección de archivo, estadística e información*, Mexico, December 1909, Archivo Histórico del Estado de Tlaxcala (AHET), Siglo XX, Fondo Revolución y Régimen Obregonista (FRRO), caja 301, expediente 75.

¹⁷Much of the information on Tlaxcala in this article is documented in my book, Elsie Rockwell, *Hacer escuela, hacer Estado: La educación posrevolucionaria vista desde Tlaxcala* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2007), so I include only new archival references.

cause of civil commotions".¹⁸ Yet other voices attacked public instruction for the masses, claiming schools were "seedbeds of Zapatistas". The fact that many teachers became involved in the revolutionary effort, against all prohibition of participating in politics, gave credibility to this claim.

The dust had not yet settled on the battlefields when the term popular education appeared in Tlaxcala. When Carranza's Constitutionalist forces took Tlaxcala, establishing a de facto government in Chiautempan, they closed down the previous school system, "pending reorganization of this important government function". Much of the state was still under control of a different faction, led by the Arenas brothers, branded as "illiterates" by those who controlled the main cities.¹⁹ Schools became battlefields of the revolution. At times literally so, by being turned into barracks for either side. More often politically, as each side offered schools to strengthen its claim to legitimate governing. While scarce documentation survives for the Arenista territory, the Constitutionalist faction left a few traces in the state archives.

In 1915, General Carranza designated Porfirio del Castillo, a Constitutionalist Coronel and former teacher, as provisional governor of Tlaxcala. After a futile attempt to strengthen municipal governance, del Castillo grasped the political advantage of offering popular education throughout the countryside. He launched a full-scale initiative, to be financed through a new tax on alcoholic beverages, to establish state schools in all towns "at least in the regions that are under our control". Rather than promoting consolidated schools for boys and girls, the governing faction sought to establish as many one-room mixed schools as possible, penetrating the hinterlands with a network of teachers whose allegiance was increasingly to turn towards the Constitutionalist band. The expansion of one-room schools undermined previous attempts to regulate normalised age groups and a standard curriculum. First used by state governments, this strategy was exploited by the federal government in the 1920s, as it struggled for legitimisation in the face of ongoing rebellions in the countryside.

Del Castillo projected a new sense of "the revolution". For the first time, the term was used not to justify the closure of schools but to flaunt their re-opening: "Schools are one of the principal orientations of the Revolution ... With them should arrive the exaltation of the Fatherland."²⁰ In 1916, he convened a Pedagogical Conference, and invited many young teachers from the Capital and nearby cities. Trained in innovative pedagogical ideas during the end of ancient regime Normal schools, the delegates had mastered the liberal discourse of popular education, stressing citizenship, uniform elementary schooling and gratuity. Among them was a young Tlaxcalan teacher, Pedro Suárez, who had just finished his studies at the prestigious National School for Teachers in Mexico City, where he had sided with the radical sector of students. There, he had surely been exposed to the ideas of Enrique Rebsamen, cited above, who had headed Normal education in Mexico until his death in 1904.

In 1917, Suárez helped draw up the new state *Law of Primary Instruction*. A draft of this law offers a rare insight into the local debates on the "urgent need to give the

¹⁸"Exposición pedagógica que rinde el C. Prof. Isabel Gracia," January 14, 1914, AHET FRRO, caja 329 expediente 15.

¹⁹"Informe presentado ... por el Gobernador del Estado Libre y Soberano de Tlaxcala, Coronel Porfirio del Castillo," 31 de diciembre, 1915. AHET-Folletería caja 4 expediente 140.

²⁰Porfirio del Castillo, *Puebla y Tlaxcala en los Días de la Revolución* (México, s/e, 1953), 210–211.

greatest possible impulse to popular education”.²¹ The law reflects the consensus of the Pedagogical Conference of 1891, synthesised by Rebsamen, where popular education meant nationalist, free, compulsory schooling and was considered “essentially educative”, that is, it was not deemed to be “mere instruction”. In one draft, the first article reads:

The state recognizes the Home’s natural right to educate the family, but has the obligation to demand that (no child) be left without education because of the parents’ apathy, so it therefore institutes official schools for primary education where all children who cannot be educated at home should attend.

This wording acknowledged the liberal “freedom of education”, as well as stressing the need to “educate the people”, including those who could not learn to read, write and acquire urbane manners at home, the people in the sense of the *plebs*. By mandating instruction in geography, history, civics and science, it also reflected the widespread criticism of the “rudimentary” rural schools limited to teaching the three Rs (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic).²²

The final version of this law, published under military governor Daniel Ríos Zertuche on September 27, 1917, was completed with the help of José María Bonilla, an educator from Mexico City. Significantly, the reference to popular education was eliminated and rewritten as: “in order to lead the people towards its evolutionary perfection” (“*para encarrillar al pueblo por la vía de su perfeccionamiento evolutivo*”), a strikingly positivist rendering of reasons to educate “the people”. The law further displaced the option of home schooling, presented as exceptional, to the final section, leaving in the first article a clear statement of compulsory schooling: “All inhabitants of the state have the obligation to make their children attend public or private schools”.²³ Countering the 1917 constitutional provision of municipal jurisdiction over schools, this law laid the groundwork for a state-run school administration.

However, the revolution was not yet over. Famine and plague marked the following years; tax revenues fell, and the network of rural schools initiated by the new regime was weakened. The term popular education did not survive the decade, nor did the initial thrust it had provided to the extension of schooling during the armed struggle. School statistics and funds fell drastically during the presidency of Carranza (1917–1920). When the Northern faction took over in 1921, the new federal ministry of education launched the programme of Mexican Rural Schools, with its discourse of “education for life”, which overshadowed the states’ systems. Yet that is another story, one amply covered in histories of Mexican education.

The logic of schooling of the people

Throughout the period that immediately preceded and followed the revolutionary struggle, the State met on the ground with an older impulse from below, a logic of

²¹This and the following citations to drafts of the law are from documents in “Borradores de la Ley de Educación” in AHET-FRRO, Instrucción Pública, caja 344 expediente 36 and AHET Siglo XX, Educación Pública, caja 23 expediente 4, 1917.

²²In 1917, critiques against this “rudimentary” school programme were published in Alberto Pani, *Una Encuesta sobre Educación Popular* (México: Senado de la República, [1917] 2005).

²³*Ley de Educación Primaria para las Escuelas del Estado de Tlaxcala* (Tlaxcala: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1917) and *Periodo Oficial del Estado de Tlaxcala*, 30 de septiembre, 1917.

schooling sustained by the *pueblos*, traditional holders of sovereignty in their territories, who had not fully assimilated the liberal view of “the people” as a body of individual citizens. The *pueblos*’ obligation and right to establish a local school dated at least from the late eighteenth century when the Bourbon Kings of Spain had ordered each town to hire a teacher with community funds.²⁴ Although instated from above, this practice had been appropriated and reproduced from below in indigenous communities well beyond the collapse of the Colonial order. It was a logic closely intermeshed with the sense of *pueblo* as an autonomous corporation.

The logic of schooling of the *pueblos* had a double purpose: the political function from below often transcended its educational function, as Ariadna Acevedo has argued.²⁵ After Independence, in their struggle to attain and maintain the status of *pueblo*, indigenous communities hired teachers in order to secure a group of literate adults able to hold office. This logic was evident in Tlaxcala during the revolutionary movement. While learning to read and write in Spanish was needed for managing self-government, the incipient contact with written Spanish during school years does not account for the relatively high levels of literacy achieved by many men through a life-long process of learning.²⁶ In fact, evidence suggests the contrary: it was the exercise of citizenship within the *pueblos* that led to the appropriation of literacy, in a clear reversal of the liberal dictum of literacy as a prerequisite to citizenship. As the demand from below and the promotion of schooling from above converged, the expansion of schooling became increasingly possible.

Following the decrease of rural schools during the Cahuantzi regime and the closure of schools during the armed conflicts, some *pueblos* chose to continue to pay a teacher. After 1914, villages rephrased their petitions for schooling as “a right gained by having aided the overthrow of the Tyranny”, while they simultaneously resisted paying the burdensome instruction taxes of the pre-revolutionary regime. The demand for schooling was expressed through a flood of petitions soliciting the reopening of the schools. In the face of this demand, the state government in 1916, and the federal government after 1921, began to offer schooling as a “revolutionary conquest”.

Rural communities, seeking release from excessive contributions to municipal schools (in money, kind and labour), welcomed state and federal teachers offering of a one-room school. More importantly, the process of establishing a school supported local autonomy by providing a direct connection with higher authorities. In their transactions, communities often bypassed the municipal government in an attempt to gain official recognition. For example, Aztatla villagers demanded in writing the recognition of their local “municipal agent” in the same letter in which they requested a teacher. State and federal authorities, eager to reach the rural communities, proffered with pedagogical arguments the one-room mixed schools that allowed them to spread the system over a larger terrain. Through the coming years, communities solicited

²⁴Dorothy Tanck de Estrada, *Pueblos de Indios y Educación en el México Colonial 1750–1821* (México: El Colegio de México, 1999).

²⁵Ariadna Acevedo, “Struggles for Citizenship? Peasant Negotiation of Schooling in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, México, 1921–1933,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 2 (2004): 181–197.

²⁶Elsie Rockwell, “Learning from Life or Learning from Books: Reading Practices in Mexican Rural Schools,” *Paedagogica Historica* 38, no. 1 (2002): 113–135; Elsie Rockwell, “L’appropriation de l’écriture dans deux villages nahua du centre du Mexique,” *Langage et Société* 134 (2010) in press.

teachers, often committing local resources for the construction of the classroom in exchange for public schooling. Elpidio López, federal director in Tlaxcala in the late 1920s, reported that he was able to open 10 schools in addition to those specified in the budget by convincing villagers that it was in their interest to pay teacher salaries, while offering them books and training by the federal staff. In doing so, he was appealing to a long-standing precedent, a tradition of citizenship and selective adult literacy that in fact contributed to the expansion of post-revolutionary public education.²⁷

Popular education and the fabrication of the Mexican Revolution: 1934–1940

Many things occurred between the 1917 call to popular education and the second moment, the 1937 *Campaign for Popular Education*, which I will not be able to detail. The *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP) founded in 1921 was to become an icon of the post-revolutionary federal regime's educational project; it grew in size and momentum despite the lack of legal jurisdiction in a domain that the 1857 and 1917 constitutions had reserved for the individual states. The forgers of the post-revolutionary national State had established the principle that power should not be shared. In 1929, they constructed an overarching political structure, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), which drew together hundreds of local political organisations of all regions and inclinations. They also progressively eliminated all dissident revolutionary forces in various parts of the country.²⁸

Twenty years after its outbreak, the revolutionary movement of 1910 became the Mexican Revolution, with capital M and R, erasing all memory of previous revolutions in the nation. The official doctrine of the Mexican Revolution served to weld together the fragmentary structures of governance after armed rebellions were phased out or finally repressed by the winning faction. In 1934, the contested but successful political campaign of Lázaro Cárdenas, with its radical Six-year Plan, allowed the national congress to amend the Third Article of the Constitution: although the explicit purpose was to decree a socialist orientation for education, its lasting effect was to sanction the jurisdiction of the federal ministry over all the nation's schools.

As president Cárdenas was intent upon gaining the power needed to license part of the revolutionary armies and nationalise the oil industry, he renewed the discourse of the Mexican Revolution and promised compliance with its constitutional triumphs, including land reform and labour laws. Federal teachers were charged with spreading the word to rural communities, armed with texts written expressly for "the people". This impulse had taken root especially among teachers who had joined the Communist Party and worked to organise peasants and workers for a future class-less society. Conservative forces in the country feared that these teachers had taken the mystique too far, provoking conflicts with landowners and priests.²⁹

²⁷This coincides with studies in France, see F. Furet and M. Ozouf, *Reading and Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁸On this process, see Alan Knight, "The Weight of the State in Modern Mexico," in *Studies in the Formation of the Nation-state in Latin American*, ed. James Dunkerley (London: University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies, 2002), 212–253.

²⁹Susana Quntanilla and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Educación y sociedad en el periodo cardenista* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997); Marco Antonio Calderón Mólgora, "Ciudadanos e indígenas en el estado populista," in *Ciudadanía, cultura política y reforma del estado en América Latina*, ed. M.A. Calderón, W. Assies and T. Salman (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2002), 103–123.

The second use of the term *popular education* in Tlaxcala occurred in 1937, three years after a controversial constitutional reform had decreed socialist education. As opposition to the constitutional reform mounted throughout the nation, Cárdenas began to reorient the political definition of his regime and plan the presidential succession. At the time, it must be recalled, war was brewing in Europe and the allied nations joined forces with the Soviet Union; the resulting National Popular Fronts influenced Mexico. In 1937, the regime abandoned the radical aspects of socialist education, particularly the anti-religious rhetoric, and prepared the way for a conciliation of various forces. Facing internal and international pressure, in 1938 Cárdenas forged a new sort of political party which integrated the peasant, worker and military sectors of society in a sturdy corporate structure, transforming the PNR into the PRM, the Party of the Mexican Revolution. The *National Campaign for Popular Education* was instrumental in this shift.

A precedent for the campaign was *First International Conference on Primary Instruction and Popular Education* held in July 1937 in Paris, under the French Popular Front government. Mexico's delegate was Coronel Adalberto Tejeda, then Ambassador to France, former revolutionary and radical governor of Veracruz, and promoter of socialist education and agrarian reform in that state.³⁰ Other educators in Mexico were aware of the movement of popular education organised by Republican forces in Spain; in 1939 many Spanish intellectuals and educators identified with the Republic and found refuge in México, welcomed by president Cárdenas.

In Mexico City, Secretary of Education Gonzalo Vázquez Vela and his undersecretary, Luis Chavez Orozco, both noted for their socialist militancy, launched the campaign, ostensibly aimed at "liquidating illiteracy in México".³¹ First, in November 1937, they organised several *Popular Culture Festivals* and convened a *Conference Pro-Popular Education*.³² The *Federación Mexicana de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza*, the official teacher union, figured prominently in the organisation of the conference. Cabinet members were individually invited to the inauguration, to be held in the new *Palacio de Bellas Artes*. Participants included teachers and educators, along with representatives of many government agencies, the Army, various institutes and political organisations, labour unions and civic associations. Communist Party delegates described the conference as "a true assembly of the Popular Front". The wide range of organisations involved reflects the political purpose of the campaign.

The conference theme, which clearly separated primary instruction and popular education, became an umbrella concept that admitted papers on an array of topics; proposals to commit entrepreneurs to provide elementary education for their workers shared the podium with exhortations to renew liberator Simón Bolívar's policies for a united Spanish America. A few participants also demanded compliance with the constitutional mandate for socialist education in public schools. However, the central message of the conference was aimed at the mobilisation of social forces in support of Cárdenas. Plenary addresses redefined the revolutionary movement as: "The revolution such as it is now enacted by President Lázaro Cárdenas" (*La revolución, tal como*

³⁰Telegram to Adalberto Tejeda on the Conference in Paris. Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (AHSEP), Sección Subsecretaría, caja 12 expediente 21.

³¹Campana de liquidación del analfabetismo en México, Plan General, 1937. AHSEP, Sección Subsecretaría. Serie Primer Congreso Pro Educación Popular, 1937, México DF, caja 12, expediente 22, folio 117.

³²Congreso Pro Educación Popular, 1937, AHSEP, Sección Subsecretaría, Serie Primer Congreso Pro Educación Popular, 1937, México DF, caja 12, expediente 22.

la realiza hoy la presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas). These were early expressions of “revolutionary nationalism”, the banner of the official party for most of the twentieth century. Popular education was to provide political orientation in order to correct “the deviations from this ideology”. One of the evident strategic acts of the conference was a letter congratulating the Armed Forces on its support of literacy classes for soldiers; the letter was addressed to Manuel Avila Camacho, then undersecretary of Defence, who was emerging at the time as the presidential candidate of the conservative wing of the official party, the PRM, and was in fact elected in 1940.

The *National Campaign for Popular Education* was initiated in close affiliation with the official political party and its leaders. Correspondence indicates that it was carried out largely through the teacher and worker unions affiliated with the PRM. The Campaign soon acquired an autonomous structure within the SEP, and continued to operate until 1940, with ample discretionary funding, under the direction of Rubén Rodríguez Lozano. Chávez Orozco supported the campaign from his new post as head of the National Department of Indigenous Affairs, as did the secretaries of education and social action of the PRM. Through the Campaign’s programme, the discourse on popular education was refashioned in an avalanche of pamphlets for the “working classes” and profuse correspondence to educational authorities and teachers throughout the country.

In 1938, the Communist Party held its own *Pedagogical Conference*, and fully endorsed the Campaign for Popular Education, presenting it as the way to advance the socialist education mandated by the constitution.³³ Official delegates at the conference attacked the radical contents taught under socialist education, attributing them to “errors” of the anarchist tendencies in México’s labour unions. They presented statistics showing that less than 5% of the children finished sixth grade, arguing that the educational system was serving the bourgeoisie, and therefore urged teachers to “sacrifice their own interests” in the struggle for extending education to all the people. Communist party leaders advised teachers to abandon leftist demagoguery and concentrate on their work within the classroom. They outlined the principles of a true “socialist” pedagogy, including a common school (*Escuela única*) for all classes and all regions, the unity of theory and practice, the use of collective over individual methods, the importance of night literacy classes and sports events in the communities. They pleaded for respect for local cultures, including religious celebrations, tempering the anti-clerical aspects of the previous period. Hernán Laborde, then head of the Communist Party, alluded to the need to block international fascism and prevent war, by creating a “United National Front”. Urging teachers to take their work seriously, he cited Lenin: “Communism becomes an empty phrase, is a mere bluff, if the communist has not elaborated in his consciousness the whole heritage of human knowledge.”³⁴ The maxim became: “A teacher who does not study and work well does not deserve to be called a revolutionary”.

In Tlaxcala, the shift in the national educational policy in 1937 coincided with other changes. As in other parts of the country, federal teachers in Tlaxcala between 1934 and 1936 had concentrated on organising hacienda labourers and

³³ Conferencia Pedagógica del Partido Comunista, *Hacia una educación al servicio del Pueblo. Resoluciones y principales estudios presentados en la Conferencia Pedagógica del Partido Comunista* (México: Ediciones Sociales Internacionales, 1938).

³⁴ Hernán Laborde, “Discurso Inaugural,” in *Hacia una educación al servicio del Pueblo*, 15. On the Communist Party, see Daniela Spenser, *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional en México durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas* (México: CIESAS, 2007).

railway workers under the aegis of unions linked to the PNR. The doctrine of socialist education unleashed reprisals from priests and notables, yet beneath the ideological clashes, opposition was often motivated by the age-old defence of local autonomy, now threatened by these agents of the federal government intent upon “organising” the people. Alfonso Bonilla, the conservative state governor during the first years of the Cárdenas regime, turned these reactions to his benefit, and purged the state of the teachers who were affiliated with the local Socialist Party or with the Communist Party. He also succeeded in suspending courses on socialist education for in-service teachers.

In 1937, Cárdenas chose the incoming governor of Tlaxcala, Isidro Candia, and placed the local teachers under federal control, just as the Popular Education Campaign was being launched. The state’s historical archives preserve abundant correspondence sent by the national campaign committee. Teachers were ordered to collect censuses of illiterate adults in their towns. Inspectors then offered them stipends to give night literacy classes, a duty that had previously been part of their normal obligations. They were also asked to constitute a “Child Army for Popular Culture”, by training their older students to teach adults to read. The national headquarters sent out pamphlets and literacy materials, all in Spanish, and extended printed credentials to each member of these literacy brigades, the first to be issued, at least in Tlaxcala, with individual photographs.

The campaign in Tlaxcala did not reflect the role projected by the Communist Party, but rather the more conservative profile that Rodríguez Lozano had orchestrated. The campaign’s correspondence filed in the state archives reveals the increasingly political nature of the actions. Circular letters stated outright that the objective was to “combat leftist ideologies that are foreign to the Mexican Revolution”, and warned that “socialist education” referred only to the “socialist ideology of the Mexican Revolution”. Although popular education had initially been projected as equivalent to socialist education, these documents suggest that the campaign effectively buried the intent of the constitutional reform, installing in its place the “national ideology of the Mexican Revolution”.³⁵

By offering teachers stipends for literacy work and dissuading radical activism, the campaign contributed to the demobilisation of the teacher corps that had backed agrarian reform and labour organisation during the early Cárdenas years. Authorities convinced teachers to join the national teacher union, under control of the official party, and abandon their ties to the Communist Party. Dissident teacher collectives resisted, however in the long run the official party’s strategies were effective against these alternative organisations. In fact, it was Rodríguez Lozano who in 1943 headed the session in which national delegates dissolved the major teacher associations (including the FMTE) and agreed to establish the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (SNTE).³⁶ Thus, the Campaign for Popular Education figures in the origins of one of the most characteristic patterns of

³⁵Circulares de la Campaña Nacional Pro Educación Popular, AHET Siglo XX, Educación Pública, caja 459 expediente 12, caja 467 expediente 6, and caja 469 expedientes 3 y 4, 1938–1939. My translation.

³⁶“Acta del Congreso Constituyente del SNTE del 26 de diciembre, 1943,” signed by Rodríguez Lozano and other leaders, <http://www.wenceslao.com.mx/snte32/actasnte43.htm> (accessed August 19, 2009).

the Mexican political system, the clientelist and electoral practices of its official teacher union.³⁷

Despite the display of propaganda, there is little evidence of the actual results of the campaign. Literacy rates, at least in Tlaxcala, did not show any spectacular increase during the decade of the 1930s. In fact, the campaign was subsequently forgotten. Isidro Castillo, a contemporary and historian of the period, commented briefly: “it was not called to last, due to its artificial organization, the superficiality of its program, and the accentuated tone of propaganda imprinted upon the campaign”.³⁸ Although many teachers continued to espouse socialist principles for years thereafter, many were also drawn over to the official party through the structure and discourse of the campaign. Its propaganda explicitly backed PRM candidate Manuel Avila Camacho, and called on teachers to engage in political proselytism in favour of his election. As president, Avila Camacho cancelled the Campaign for Popular Education and, a few years later, eliminated the constitutional reference to socialist education.

The logic of schooling of the people during this period

A few documents from the Tlaxcala archive reveal something of the perspective of the pueblos during the Cárdenas regime. Communities either rejected the incursion of federal teachers into local political arrangements or, alternately, formed alliances with them, seeking the resources and recognition that they had not obtained from municipal and state authorities. The alliances were particularly strong in those communities requesting land grants and towns where rural factory workers were being incorporated into labour unions linked to the governing party. Nevertheless, the tradition of the pueblos often prevailed; for example, the director of the model school in a textile centre, Santa Cruz, complained that leaders of a town meeting convened to discuss whether to accept the new socialist education had forced him to leave, considering it to be a matter for local deliberation. In another conflict, parents of the Tepeyanco school countered their teacher’s assertion that he would only abide by the law [of socialist education], by insisting that they knew of no law that ordered schools to teach children not to respect their parents. Elders also challenged this teacher’s claim to a “revolutionary” identity, asking to see his rifle. In the ensuing confrontation, both villagers and teachers appealed to the authority of president Cárdenas to back their positions. Such clues suggest a deeper level of deliberation at the community level and reveal the multiple interpretations of the president’s charismatic leadership.³⁹

Yet few local confrontations openly engaged socialist education or the 1937 campaign as such. Community petitions concern the management of the physical space of schools and their agricultural plots, the celebration of patriotic days and the content of yearly evaluations. Photographs suggest that students eagerly embraced

³⁷Unlike other teacher unions in Latin America, the SNTE has been one of the mainstays of the parties in power. There are, however, multiple dissident teacher organisations, such as those involved in the APPO (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca) movement of 2006–2009.

³⁸Del Castillo, *Mexico*, 143 (my translation).

³⁹On these incidents, see Elsie Rockwell, 2009 “Between the Community and the State: the Changing Role of the “*director de escuela*” in Post-revolutionary Mexico,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 41, no. 3 (2009): 267–283; and Elsie Rockwell, “Walls, Fences and Keys: the Enclosure of Rural Indigenous Schools,” in *Materialities of Schooling*, ed. M. Lawn and I. Grosvenor (Oxford: Symposium Books 2005), 19–45.

some aspects of the reform, such as the sports events and the campaigns against alcoholism and illiteracy. Through teachers, the adults solicited reading materials such as the agrarian reform codes. These references imply that a popular logic of schooling was in play, one which differed from one village to the next, and is difficult to capture.

My conversations with village elders who were students in the 1930s in the indigenuous region of Tlaxcala offer further evidence. For example, in the village of Cuautenco, Concepción Flores, recognised as one of the more knowledgeable leaders of his community, recounted his experience during his sole year of formal schooling. Son of a local peasant and ex-revolutionary soldier, he was enrolled in 1939 when he was 11, and claims he knew no Spanish when he arrived. Two older girls who had Spanish-speaking relatives took him under their care and unofficially tutored him throughout the year. Concepción raced through three graded readers of the *Simiente* series published by the SEP at the outset of socialist education, which had arrived to this remote classroom. At the end of the school year, the teacher chose him to represent the class in the regional competition: “I spoke up clearly, and read straight away, without hesitations, marking periods, commas, question marks ... my teacher had explained everything to me very well.” He surpassed the city students who looked down on him: “I was barefoot and with my white cotton pants ... and they were all well-kept ... and, well I was the *Indito* [a scornful diminutive] who had come to enhance my teacher’s reputation.” The teacher – apparently still in line with the socialist education programme – had awarded him a copy of Teja Zabre’s *History of Mexico*, the most radical history text produced in the 1930s, which Concepción lamented having lost.

When Concepción began his second year, this teacher had been transferred and the girls had finished, and he had to face a series of harsh teachers who lasted at most a few weeks in the local school. In order to escape their rod, he would hide in a near-by gully during school hours, studying textbooks on his own; when discovered, he pleaded not to be sent back to school. Significantly, the sole year with a committed teacher was sufficient for him to continue to read and write and study history for the rest of his life. When I met him, he still recalled word for word the speech he had memorised from Teja Zabre’s text and details from the *Simiente* readers. I later took him copies of these books, which he leafed through with delight, recognising familiar passages and images. By then, his readings had gone way beyond this elementary level, spurred by his continuing search of documents relevant to the governance and territorial delimitation of his community. Concepción has since been an ally in my own attempts to fathom the history of this period, often confronting my assertions and interpretations.

Dozens of similar testimonies support the argument that the logic of schooling enacted by the pueblos in the post-revolutionary period was distinct from the logic of schooling undertaken by the State at the time. Such conversations give rare insights into the lived experience of schooling and show how local rationales followed multiple courses. Many versions signal an acute awareness of the strong logics of distinction that have pervaded even the most radical projects aimed at providing a uniform, equal, public education for the people. However, they also offer insights into the significant appropriations of knowledge that can occur within public schools, although elders in this region constantly refer to their capacity to “teach themselves to read and write”, years after being in school, as they pursued civil and political rights.

Final remarks

What might we gather from these histories of the uses of *popular education*, as wielded by political forces seeking to strengthen their claims to legitimate rule of “the People” within the post-revolutionary context of Mexico? The long-term ambiguity inherent in the notion of *pueblo* in México influenced the discourse on popular education, supporting the implicit association between the original holders of national sovereignty (the *pueblos*) and the citizen body of the nation (el *pueblo*), alternately glorified and disdained. This counterpoint serves well to trace the realities beneath successive educational policies.

Towards the end of the Cárdenas regime, schooling was still a rare experience for the majority of children of the popular classes. In fact, the indigenous *pueblos*, named at the outset as the beneficiaries of post-revolutionary education, were to lag far behind in the statistics of schooling and literacy. The initial trend towards establishing one-room rural schools was reversed as authorities began to favour the growth of urban schools and bring them closer to the model, graded structure. Thereafter, the logic of distinction pervading public education for “the people” contributed increasingly to the inequalities perpetuated during the rest of the century.⁴⁰ Yet these shortcomings did not necessarily hamper the exercise of citizen rights. My analysis would counter the argument that the indigenous *pueblos* resisted schooling, rejected the liberal model of citizenship, or failed to espouse the radical demands of the revolutionary movement and the Cárdenas regime. Rather, following a different logic, the *pueblos* continued to appropriate schooling, changing and maintaining it, using it selectively (for some children, not for all), while their members (mostly men) became fully literate in the course of their adult lives through the exercise of their civic duties.

On another level, analysis of the practices beneath pedagogical and political discourse reveals the contingent and political nature of popular education projects. The two moments examined above show some contrasts in meaning – between free, universal public schooling for children and literacy campaigns for adults, for example – but both evince the prevailing military and political logics of the moment. In the first instance, popular education points to the strategy of providing elementary schooling as a conquest of the revolutionary movement, in order to legitimise the claims of emerging governing forces. In the second, popular education served as a term to convene a gamut of political and social sectors as a prelude to forming the official party of the State (known in Mexico as the *Partido de Estado*) during the early twentieth century in Mexico. It further served to bring under control a teacher corps that had overstepped the bounds by taking seriously a discourse designed to forge State legitimacy by acknowledging revolutionary demands.

The meanings of popular education in this period in Mexico, together with other uses found in Latin America, contrast with the vision celebrated by Paulo Freire. It must force us to situate clearly the concept minted by this radical thinker and put in practice by a number of organisations, largely in resistance to the military dictatorships of the continent. Nonetheless, both this tradition and earlier uses reflect the expansion of the European Enlightenment ideal of a public sphere of literate free citizens. Each use of the term contains traces of the educational discourses that have crossed the seas, in both directions, discourses dear to educators who favour pedagogical traditions relevant to civic and political life. This meaning cuts across some of the

⁴⁰Elsie Rockwell, *Hacer Escuela, Hacer Estado*, chap. 6.

evident differences in the uses of the term, such as the distinction between elementary schooling and adult literacy campaigns, as in both cases the intention is to make available contents that are not purely instrumental, but rather relate to the “lived world”.

Finally, I would stress the importance of thinking in terms of the various logics of schooling (often found to be in conflict with overt aims) that in fact articulate the programmes and actions undertaken in the name of such terms as *popular education*. These logics cross through the bounded entities we call schools, to connect what occurs in society at large with what happens within the classroom. Among these logics, we might recover one that is often disregarded: the significant learning that humans always and everywhere engage in. Of course, such learning also takes place in classrooms, but at times through peer relations as much as through teacher mediation. Often, it occurs elsewhere, and belies the claim that the spread of literacy is always a direct consequence of schooling. More fundamentally, this logic challenges the presumption that popular education is a necessary prerequisite to the exercise of citizenship. Beyond the confines of literacy classes and campaigns appear multiple alternative paths towards the constitution of both local and national polities as holders of a sovereignty that is still continually denied by the State.

Notes on contributor

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