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CHAPTER SIX

El Niño Proletario

Jesús Sansón Flores and the New
Revolutionary Redeemer, 1935–1938

Elena Jackson Albarrán

The Socialist Education Experiment in Revolutionary Mexico

While children occupied the center of nation-building projects since the late nineteenth century, Porfirian educational policymakers saw them as objects rather than agents of reform. Scholars attendant to the history of Mexican education acknowledge that textbook authors, schoolteachers, editorial houses, and educational administrators focused their energies on cultivating future citizens by “protecting, educating, and disciplining him.”¹⁰ But the Revolution ushered in a discursive shift among educational officials, who, drawing inspiration from new international pedagogical models, sought to harness the energy and ingenuity in the moment rather than wait to harvest children’s potential in their adulthood. Rather than scientific overtures to redeem the child, then, for a brief space, the child was poised to redeem the nation.

The Proletarian Child was born out of education reform that evolved in the first decade and a half after the Revolution to take on a decidedly socialist nature by 1934. Ideas about introducing socialism at the

elementary school level had been percolating long before Cárdenas made it a state mandate in 1934. At a 1915 Pedagogy Conference (Congreso Pedagógico) in Mérida, promoters of a new Rationalist School (Escuela Racionalista) excoriated the traditional pedagogical approach, which they dubbed the “school-prison” system. At its core, the Rationalist School promoted an educational environment that would be secular (and actively antireligious), science-based, student-directed, coeducational (*mixta*), and oriented toward productivity. It struck a balance between nineteenth-century positivism’s attempts to perfect humankind, and a modern economic structure that valued physical labor and nationalist production.¹¹ Article 3 of the Constitution of 1917 made provisions for a free, obligatory, and secular education roughly along these lines, but did not designate the Rationalist School as the official state curriculum. Beginning in 1917 and throughout the 1920s, Rationalist Schools dotted twenty-one states across the nation, to the celebration of some and the consternation of others. Indeed, the secularization of the education system met with impassioned, staunch resistance from many Catholic parents. A 1922 endorsement of the schools by the left-wing national labor union, the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM), established the political orientation of their unique pedagogical approach. In a statement issued at the union’s convention, a delegate proclaimed that the Rationalist School promoted collective over individual will, and espoused a model of socialization based on solidarity, with an ideological emphasis on uplifting the conditions of the working classes—presumably by reflecting the structures of their lives in the curriculum.

Much of the impetus for a radical restructuring of education came from the south of the country, and the resulting reforms gained the most traction in the states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Tabasco. Yucatán’s governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1922–1924), headed the Socialist Party of the Southeast and the peasant Leagues of Resistance, and gave free reign to the Rationalist School in his state. In nearby Tabasco, the “laboratory of the Revolution,” Governor Tomás Garrido Canabal (1922–1935) led the most strident reform program, characterized by excessive anticlerical measures. In 1929, Garrido Canabal published “The Socialist ABCs” for rural schoolchildren, a primer of sorts that defined their position as exploited members of the working class, and warned against the rapacious advances of capitalism, priests, and alcohol.¹² In this document, he directly addressed the Proletarian Child: “You, who have been born in this century of liberties and compensations, must obtain for the proletarian family the right to enjoy all that which you produce.”¹³ Tabascan teachers took

their charge seriously and literally; they eschewed school competitions (in such areas as essay and spelling contests) as fostering jealousies and emulation, a departure from the Rationalist School's self-guided learning.¹⁴

The assault on religious instruction continued as the Rationalist School gained currency. In the throes of the *cristero* backlash against such secularizing tendencies, in 1928, the National League of Rationalist Teachers sent a petition to the national legislature to amend Article 3 to implement the system nationwide, based on an insistence that the school should be "free of dogmas, prejudices, and fanaticisms."¹⁵ They saw the child as the agent best poised to hoist the nation out of centuries of entrenched superstition. On September 6, 1934, Cárdenas expanded upon the vigorously funded rural education system championed by predecessors Obregón and Calles, by branding it for the first time as "socialist education" through a modification of Article 3 of the Constitution.¹⁶ The premise of the socialist turn during the first half of the Cárdenas administration was that the Revolution had not yet reached the protagonists of the armed movement: the glorified, anonymous Proletariat. While this designation lasted only until 1945, suffered hazy definition, and elicited strong negative reactions almost from its inception, the choice of terminology signaled Cárdenas's ideological position toward the nation's youth. Ironically, the institutionalization of socialist education crushed its organic momentum, and galvanized its opposition among the religious sector, effectively guaranteeing its demise after a few short years. The emphasis here, then, lies in the brief span during the Cárdenas years in which socialism, and its idealization of the proletariat, enjoyed state sponsorship in the national spotlight.