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“The Religion for Their Country, the Apostleship of the School.”  
Progressive Education and the 1915 Mexican Commission of Teachers

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On 14 May 1915, in midst of the bloodiest throes of their country’s revolutionary civil war, fifty-two public schoolteachers from Mexico embarked on what they and their state sponsors billed as an “apostolic journey.”<sup>1</sup> Destined for Boston, they set sail from Veracruz, one of the few regions of Mexico under the command of Venustiano Carranza and the Constitutionalist revolutionary army. Six months earlier, after their break with the forces of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa at the Convention of Aguascalientes, “First Chief” Venustiano Carranza and several thousand of his supporters fled to the petroleum-rich gulf state of Veracruz, where they installed a provisional “government in exile.” One of the government’s first acts called for the creation of an official commission of schoolteachers directed to tour New England schools and report on “the best that exists in the line of education.” The teachers, all but six who had never before visited the United States, took up residence in Boston, where in “an atmosphere of advanced civilization” they intended to “elevate their intellectual level and modify their habits and customs in the sense of human progress.”<sup>2</sup> Accorded the “apostleship of the school” by the

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<sup>1</sup> “Jira cultural de maestros por algunos de los centros escolares más importantes de los Estados Unidos,” *Boletín de Educación: Órgano de la Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes* 1 (November 1915): 6. Also see *Carranza and Public Instruction in Mexico: Sixty Teachers Are Commissioned to Study in Boston* (New York: Mexican Bureau of Information, 1915).

<sup>2</sup> *Carranza and Public Instruction in Mexico*, 9.

provisional government, Commission members pledged to return with “the religion for the country” in order to “form the soul of the future generations of citizens.”<sup>3</sup>

That Constitutionals made such heavy use of messianic language was hardly accidental. Deliberate and pervasive, it reflected their veneration of revolutionary ideology as a secular religion. Capitalized to distinguish it from Mexico’s several other, seemingly less transcendent political upheavals, this “Revolution” belonged to the realm of the sacred and divine.<sup>4</sup> And public education, they believed, was the best means to impart its many lessons.<sup>5</sup> “We recognize,” declared an early Constitutionalist statement of purpose, “that it is education alone that can save our Republic.” Calling their revolution a “purifying cataclysm,” Constitutionals vowed to “root out completely old and obsolete methods” and “burn all those hidebound rules that chain our liberty in a prison built of iron.” Their educational campaign began in earnest with the departure of the fifty-two schoolteachers who, after two years of study in Boston, would return to Mexico as “new sap” ready to “infuse new life into organizations that had become old and withered” during the thirty-five-year dictatorship that the Revolution helped bring to an end.

Focused on the Mexican Commission of Teachers, this essay examines the relationship between “revolutionary” education in Mexico and “progressive education” in the United States. Scholars of Mexico have paid considerable attention to revolutionary

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<sup>3</sup> Carranza and *Public Instruction in Mexico*, 7, 9.

<sup>4</sup> This notion of the “Revolution” as spectral and sacral is developed in Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), xxxi.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, see the formative statement Felix Palavicini, whom Carranza appointed director of the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes in August 1914, published in *Problemas de la educación* (Valencia: F. Sempere y Compañía Editores, 1910), and the similar position he retains in *La patria por la escuela* (Mexico City: Linotipografía, 1916).

education. Two lines of argumentation predominate. The first, which emerged in the 1930s, celebrates the positive contributions progressive educators like John Dewey, who trained a number of a future government officials, made to revolutionary education in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> The second line of thought contends that, despite its emphasis on fomenting democracy and an active and informed citizenry, revolutionary education became a mechanism of social control through which state authorities consolidated and extended rule.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the opposing conclusions they reach, both lines of thought base their findings on the reforms implemented in the decade following the Commission members' return to Mexico. Forgotten in the scholarly literature, the 1915 expedition garnered considerable media attention in both the United States and Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Felix Palavicini, the Mexican official who organized the Commission, deemed the teachers valuable "revolutionary propagandists" for the Constitutionalist cause, which had yet to receive U.S. diplomatic recognition.<sup>9</sup> The Commission's importance, however, went beyond matters of propaganda. Constitutionlists intended them—above all others—to promote a

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<sup>6</sup> The seminal statement is Carleton Beals, *Mexico: An Interpretation* (New York: Huebsch, 1923), after which followed David Merrick Spaulding, "The Development of a National Program of Education," (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1928); James Brooks Blaisdell, "The Development of Education in Mexico," (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1931); Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933); Dorothy L. Ulrey, "The Federal Rural School in Mexico," (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1937); and Ernest Gruening, *Mexico and its Heritage* (New York: Appleton Century, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> The classic work in this vein is Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico, 1880-1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1982). Compare this with her much more nuanced, less turgidly Marxist interpretation in Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997). Critical but also nuanced is Stephen L. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> In the United States, see, for instance, *Boston Daily Globe* 5 Nov. 1915: 9, and 10 Feb. 1916: 9; *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1915: III 20; *Washington Post* 7 Feb. 1916: 6. In Mexico, see *El Pueblo*, *Mexican Herald*, *El Universal*.

<sup>9</sup> Felix P. Palavicini, *Diario de los Debates del Congreso Constituyente 1916-1917* v. 1 (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1960), 227.

national consciousness, a “unity of purpose” that, according to Palavicini, required “popular education” in which “all instruction, books, laboratories, libraries, and various experimental stations are free and open.” “This,” he concluded, “is the real revolution of the new government, more vital and more difficult than all that has been accomplished.”<sup>10</sup> Much of this difficulty, this essay argues, lay in the seemingly natural equivalences Commission members made between “progressive” education in the United States and “revolutionary” education in Mexico.

### *The Education “Problem”*

Although melodramatic, Constitutionalist’ comments on school deficiencies in Mexico reflected the historic condition of the country’s educational system. Like many social institutions in Mexico, education exhibited a wide gulf between the ideals it enshrined and the realities it practiced. When Mexico achieved its independence from Spain in 1824, its first constitution called for the creation of a state-sponsored educational system. Its development came in fits and starts, mired by incessant civil wars between Liberals, advocates of secular education, and Conservatives, proponents of Catholic Church-based schooling. Alternating ruling authorities consistently spent more on military expenditures than the entire federal government received in revenue each year, a circumstance that put Mexico deeply indebted to Great Britain and France. By 1851, Mexico City, the country’s educational center, counted four public schools, with a total enrollment of 288 students. Private schools numbered 118, with a total enrollment of 7348 students.<sup>1</sup> In 1867, under the command of Benito Juárez, Liberals militarily triumphed against Conservatives. That year, Juárez issued a decree that made public education

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<sup>10</sup> Washington *Post* 7 Feb. 1916: 6.

“compulsory, free, and secular.” Rarely, however, did officials commit the resources necessary to establish the schools they made compulsory. In an 1899 study that likely inflated its figures, the Secretaría de Justicia y Instrucción Pública reported 325 schools with 1,243 teachers serving 47,643 students in Mexico City, whose total population was approximately 350,000.<sup>11</sup> Outside of the capital, schools remained the province of the Catholic Church.

In 1901 the federal government made a more concerted effort to address the deficiencies in public education. That year, President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) created the Sub-Secretaría de Instrucción Pública and appointed Justo Sierra as its first head.<sup>12</sup> A longtime advocate of Indian education, Sierra rejected the prevailing wisdom of Mexican intellectuals, known as *científicos* because of their philosophical commitment to “scientific positivism,” that people of indigenous ancestry had innate, biological deficiencies that prevented them from becoming *gente de razón* (literally, people with reason).<sup>13</sup> Sierra averred that both the indigenous communities had the capacity to learn Spanish and the federal government had the responsibility to teach it to them.<sup>14</sup> Schools, he said, would “rescue the Indian families from their moral prostration, superstition, mental abjection, and ignorance” and foment a national culture based on a shared language, Western science, and civic responsibility to a commonly understood nation-

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<sup>11</sup> Secretaría de Justicia y Instrucción Pública, *Breve noticia de los establecimientos de instrucción* (Mexico City: Tipografía y Litografía "La Europa" de Aguilar Vera y Cia, 1900), 1-7.

<sup>12</sup> Blaisdell, “The Development of Education in Mexico,” 46.

<sup>13</sup> William D. Raat, “Los intelectuales, el positivismo y la cuestión indígena,” *Historia Mexicana* 20 (Jan. 1971): 412-7.

<sup>14</sup> Augustín Yañez, ed., *Obras completas del maestro Justo Sierra v. 12. La educación nacional* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1948), 37.

state.<sup>2</sup> Mexico's future, Sierra maintained, depended on the assimilation of Mexico's heterogeneous indigenous populations into a homogenous national culture. Eager to promote national unity, in 1905 Díaz elevated Sierra's position to presidential cabinet status. Nine years after Sierra took office, education specialist Francisco Flores reported that Mexico's Federal District boasted 374 schools with 2,149 teachers serving, 76,432 students; a thirty-seven percent increase in the number of enrolled students.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these strides, observers found much that needed improvement. Flores, for instance, commended the schools in Mexico City but noted that these defied the norm. The overwhelming majority of Mexicans living outside of the capital, he clarified, had no access to education, public or otherwise. In 1907, José Rodríguez y Cos published a study that reached the same conclusion. Its author called on Díaz to incorporate the masses of Mexico's population into the nation by federalizing the educational system. Only the federal government, Rodríguez y Cos argued, had the financial resources and institutional reach to "consolidate the national spirit." In 1909, Andrés Molina Enríquez, who within a few years was hailed as the "Rousseau of the Mexican Revolution," published *Las grandes problemas nacionales*. He ranked education among Mexico's top woes. Sierra too recognized the deficiencies on the part of the government agency he headed, particularly its challenges outside of the capital. To that end, he organized Mexico's first National Congress of Primary Education, whose convention coincided with the centennial celebrations of Mexican independence in September 1910. Drawn from across

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<sup>15</sup> Francisco A. Flores, *Algunos artículos publicados en la prensa con motivo del Centenario y dedicados al Señor Presidente de la República, General de División, Don Porfirio Díaz* (Mexico City: El Libro Mercantil, 1910).

the country, its delegates agreed on the pressing need to “elevate” the indigenous population from “rural isolation” and “mountains of ignorance.”<sup>16</sup>

Although participants committed to arranging a follow-up congress, revolutionary upheaval interfered. On 25 May 1911, after six months of unsuccessful resistance against the insurrectionary forces of wealthy landowner Francisco Madero, Porfirio Díaz resigned the presidency. Six days later, Francisco León de la Barra, Díaz’s foreign secretary who agreed to serve as interim president until new elections could be held in July, acceded to the demands of Mexico’s Chamber of Deputies and approved a plan for the creation and federal oversight of rural schools across the country. Francisco Madero, who assumed office in November 1911, had militated against Díaz, in part, because of the aging dictator’s disregard for Mexico’s uneducated masses. Despite Madero’s own education, which included a diploma from the *École des Hautes Etudes Commerciales de Paris* and an advanced degree from the University of California, Berkeley, he dedicated few resources to education. In fact, in his first year of office he reduced its funding to a level capable of supporting only fifty schools, all of them located in the Federal District. Although sympathetic to the idea of “integrating” Mexican peasants into Mexico’s market economy through education, Madero’s appointee to oversee the department, engineer Alberto Pani, worried that schooling in the countryside might “prepare an open field for demagogues” to “preach the agrarian socialism of the [Pascual] Orozco or [Emiliano] Zapata variety.”<sup>17</sup> This, in Pani’s view, would bring “destruction” to Mexico’s

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<sup>16</sup> Congreso Nacional de Educación Primaria, *Antecedentes, actas, debates y resoluciones. Informes correspondientes a los estados de Aguascalientes... Territorio de Baja California* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes, 1912), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Alberto J. Pani, *La instrucción rudimentaria en la república. Estudio presentado por vía de información al C. Ministerio del Ramo por el Ing. Alberto J. Pani, Subsecretario de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes, 1912), 21.

landowning class, to which Pani and Madero both belonged. Pani instead recommended increased vocational and technical training to prepare Mexican peasants for more technically advanced production jobs.

Madero faced opposition almost immediately. As early as November 1911, Zapatistas denounced him as a “traitor to the fatherland” for not “realizing the promises of the revolution of which he was the author.” Figures sympathetic to the *ancien régime* mounted an even greater challenge. After two coup attempts failed to oust Madero, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, conspired with General Victoriano Huerta to install the latter as president. Huerta replaced Madero’s cabinet members with individuals who served under Díaz, including Jorge Vera Estañol, who took command of the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes.

Huerta’s execution of Madero precipitated a revolutionary counterattack. In March 1913, Venustiano Carranza, a wealthy landowner from Coahuila who had supported Madero, issued the Plan de Guadalupe. Sparse on specific policy directives, the Plan called on the people to rise in arms against the “reactionary usurper” Huerta. Although they never formally signed the Plan, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata agreed to recognize Carranza as the commander of the Constitutional Army and “First Chief of the Revolution” in order to make common cause against Huerta. Once successful in ousting Huerta from power, their alliance, tenuous from the start, turned increasingly sour. Carranza insisted convoking a constitutional convention under his authority. Villa and Zapata, on the other hand, supported a constitutional convention but demanded it be sovereign and its members empowered to determine the future direction of the country.

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Deep philosophical differences split the two groups. Constitutionalists, who tended to come from the middle sectors and urban populations, typically dismissed Villistas and Zapatists as “barbarous,” “uncivilized,” and having “neither ideals nor program.”<sup>18</sup> In truth, Pancho Villa remained a staunch advocate of education. After a year of Villista rule, Chihuahua’s state governor Fidel Avila reported that more than one hundred new schools had been opened and that the state’s education budget was the largest it had ever been. Villista officials considered public education the most important revolutionary priority behind land reform.<sup>19</sup> Zapatistas, who also ranked land reform as their first priority, similarly valued education, particularly of a kind that allowed for religious instruction and community autonomy. Believers in the sanctity of individual property rights, Constitutionalists tended to trust that education, rather than programs aimed at redistributing landed property, alone could solve Mexico’s social inequalities. Education, they stressed, would promote the development of a “national consciousness” rooted in a shared culture that Constitutionalists naturally assumed would resemble their own cultural inclinations. In other words, education to Constitutionalists meant making Mexico’s diverse population correspond more closely to the cultural forms Constitutionalists most valued. And these cultural forms lay foremost in the United States.

*“A Healthy Bleeding”*

The Constitutionalists’ introduction to progressive education came via public school teacher Manuel Barranco. A native of Veracruz, Barranco graduated from the Escuela

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<sup>18</sup> Ramon Prida, *De la dictadura a la anarquía* (El Paso: El Paso del Norte, 1914), 333, 343, 344.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 418-419.

Normal Superior in Mexico City in 1899, after which he spent several years teaching primary school. In 1908, at the age of twenty-nine, he enrolled as an undergraduate student at Columbia University. After earning a bachelor of science and master of arts degree, Barranco entered the Ph.D. program at Columbia's Teachers College, where John Dewey supervised his doctoral dissertation. At the Teachers College since 1904, Dewey was the dean of progressive education. His groundbreaking scholarship, which cut across the social sciences, reconfigured the way people thought about the objectives and methods of education. Dewey took aim at the traditions of education based exclusively on rote learning imparted via books. The "New Education" he advocated spoke to the many social transformations the Industrial Revolution had wrought. "[I]nstead of being only a place to learn lessons having an abstract reference to some possible living to be done in the future," Dewey's model of schools offered a "chance to be a miniature community, an embryonic society[,]. . . . where he [sic] learns through directed living"<sup>20</sup>

Dewey's work registered a profound impact on Barranco. Entitled "Mexico: Its Educational Problems—Suggestions for Their Solution," his doctoral dissertation offered a series of recommendations taken directly from Dewey. Like his adviser, Barranco criticized the limitations of contemporary schooling for being out of touch with social realities. Just as Dewey called on the "range of the [educational] outlook . . . to be enlarged" to include "the community want[s] for all of its children," Barranco maintained that "school life and work should reflect the activities of the community." "It is more useful for the teachers to know what the Mexican Indians beyond the hills do and need," Barranco argued, "than to spend much time to become familiar with what a Spartan boy

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<sup>20</sup> John Dewey, *The School and Society: Being Three Lectures by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 103.

did two thousand years ago.” The “greatest need of the Mexican schools,” Barranco concluded, is to bring educators close to the people of the community,” with whom their relations in Mexico “have been practically nil.” Barranco held that “Mexican teachers must study, observe, and profit from the experiences of other educators.” Quoting Dewey, he cautioned that “a working model is not something to be copied; it is to afford a demonstration of the *feasibility* of the *principle* and of the *methods* which *make* it *feasible*.” Mexican teachers, Barranco concluded, “must *assimilate* those experiences and make them their own flesh.”

Barranco’s views resonated with those of Constitutionalist officials. They too professed a desire for education to bridge the cultural divide between instructors and villagers. Within days of seizing Mexico City from Huerta supporters at the end of July 1914, Carranza appointed former public schoolteacher and engineer Felix Palavicini to head the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes. In 1910, Palavicini published a widely disseminated study that, like Sierra’s work, pointed to the need to “integrate” into public education the vast indigenous population that remained “separated from the national consciousness.” Yet in contrast to Sierra and most contemporary reformers, Palavicini believed decentralization to be the key to success. He lambasted the bureaucratized character of French education, Mexico’s then-current exemplar, for its lack of sensitivity to local conditions. He pointed instead to the successes of the decentralized U.S. model. He took particular issue with federal oversight of schools and considered the office, a federal ministry headed by a presidential appointee, unduly involved in politics and therefore inappropriate for supervision of something as sacrosanct as educational policy. In one of his first acts as head of public instruction,

Palavicini announced that he intended to “commit [professional] suicide” by eliminating his position and the government agency to which it belonged. Although at war against the combined forces of Villa and Zapata, Carranza and his supporters moved forward with establishing institutions of government. In August 1914, a few months before his formal break with the Conventionists, Carranza appointed Felix Palavicini as the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes. An engineer by training who also spent time as a teacher, Palavicini published a study in 1910 that argued that the overwhelming majority of population that remained “separated from the national consciousness” represented Mexico’s greatest national problem.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to earlier reformers, Palavicini proposed de-centralizing Mexico’s educational system. Condemning the bureaucratized character of French education for its lack of sensitivity to local conditions, he pointed to the successes of the U.S. model. In one of his first acts as head of public instruction, Palavicini announced that he intended to “commit [professional] suicide” by eliminating his position and the government agency to which it belonged.<sup>22</sup> He maintained that, given its status as a presidential appointment, his position was necessarily political and therefore incompatible with school oversight responsibilities.

Palavicini’s next move was equally bold. In his estimation, Mexico’s revolutionary civil war represented “a healthy bleeding and not a mortal illness.”<sup>23</sup> Its outburst provided Constitutionlists an opportunity to seclude themselves in Veracruz, where they not only took control of the region’s highly profitable oil fields but also

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<sup>21</sup> Palavicini, *Problemas de la educación*, III.

<sup>22</sup> *Boletín de Educación* 1 (September 1914): 160.

<sup>23</sup> “Jira cultural,” 91.

issued a series of monumental reforms they appended to the Plan de Guadalupe. According to Palavicini, these additions “condensed the core of the Revolution” into a “revolutionary program that the Conventionists never could define.”<sup>24</sup> It included a renewed commitment to education, which Palavicini believed essential to preventing among the masses a “volcanic passion of envy to spill over with the force of numbers to envelop the model society and covet its future.”<sup>25</sup> Centered on social welfare provisions like the establishment of a national minimum wage and the right to unionize, their reforms elicited popular support. Teachers, in particular, rallied to the cause. When Constitutionalist vacated Mexico City at the end of November 1914, nearly two hundred public school teachers joined them on their trip to Veracruz. Lucio Tapia, one of the teachers who ventured to the gulf state with the Constitutionalist, likened their journey out of Mexico City to a passage through “the Revolutionary Sinai,” whereupon Carranza, the “Moses of the Mexican people,” delivered to the “unredeemed people” the “brand-new Ten Commandments.”<sup>26</sup> Palavicini considered the teachers’ presence in Veracruz a propaganda boon. With funds derived from U.S. and British purchases of Veracruz crude oil, Palavicini arranged for the teachers to embark on a lengthy study of the “finest institutions of learning” in the United States so that they might “transmit to Mexico the best systems of teaching and preparing teachers for primary schools.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Felix F. Palavicini, ed., *El Primer Jefe* (Mexico City, 1916), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Palavicini, *Problemas*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Lucio Tapia and Dr. Arnoldo Krumm-Heller, *Trilogía heroica: historia condensada del último movimiento libertario en México* (Mexico City: Andres Botas, 1916), 49-50.

<sup>27</sup> “Jira cultural,” 70.

The first expedition of its kind, the mission had two objectives. First, teachers were to serve as cultural ambassadors of Constitutionalism to the people of the United States. Despite Constitutionalists' lavish expenditures on contrived media reports favorable to the First Chief, many in the United States held a low opinion of the famously obdurate and nationalistic Carranza. Woodrow Wilson confided to Secretary of State Robert Lansing that he had "never known of a man more difficult to deal with on human principles" than Carranza.<sup>28</sup> Palavicini, who was aware of Carranza's reputation, hoped to present the teachers as dutiful representatives of Constitutionalists and well-mannered alternatives to the "barbarous" and "uncivilized" Conventionists. Second, Palavicini hoped that, through a detailed investigation of pedagogical practices and instructor preparation, the teachers would "find their moral and cultural perfection." Perhaps because of Carranza's nationalist rhetoric, officials within the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública and Bellas Artes made clear their partiality for U.S. culture. Alfonso Cravioto, a lawyer and Attic poet who headed the Mexican Commission of Teachers, explained to the group's hosts in Boston that they had come "to assimilate something of the spirit of the United States in order to carry it with us to Mexico, so that it helps us cement a better life for our people."<sup>29</sup>

Cravioto's comments were more than mere flattery. The Commission necessarily comprised only those teachers willing to spend a minimum of twelve uninterrupted months in Boston. Little information exists as to the specific reasons individual teachers opted to take on the assignment. Surely, many considered it a valuable opportunity to

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<sup>28</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, State Department, Record Group 59, file 812.00/15409, Wilson to Lansing, 2 July 1915.

<sup>29</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 May 1915, p. 3.

strengthen their pedagogy, learn English at official expense, and demonstrate a spirit of revolutionary dedication to their nascent government. Some may have seen the expedition as a way to escape the tumult of the civil war. Also unclear is what prompted the teachers to leave their homes and venture with the Constitutionals to Veracruz. A review of their individual backgrounds establishes a few points. (See Appendix One for a list of members' names, ages, and places of birth.) They ranged in age from seventeen to fifty-six years. Among the female teachers, the median age was twenty-five years; among the men twenty-eight years. Of the sixty teachers who made up the Commission (the fifty-two teachers who departed in May 1915 met up with eight others who arrived on an earlier voyage), twenty-five (42%) hailed from north and north-central Mexico (Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Nuevo León, Aguascalientes, and San Luis Potosí). Twenty (33%) were from central Mexico (understood as the Federal District, the State of Mexico, and Puebla). Eight (13%) came from western Mexico (Jalisco). Seven (12%) hailed from southern Mexico (Chiapas, Veracruz, Yucatán, and Oaxaca). These data reflect the preponderance of northerners among the ranks of Constitutionals. Drawn most heavily from Mexico's northern regions, their supporters tended to look more favorably upon cultural influences emanating from the United States, with which northerners had a lengthier and more intense relationship of commerce and cultural exchange. The large number of teachers from central Mexico also is indicative of the Constitutionals' urban bias. Indeed, Constitutionalist leaders framed much of their rhetoric in ways that contrasted Mexico's urban populations with its "backward" and "primitive" peasantry. Of the sixty teachers, forty-one (68%) were female. This number may in part be a product of the dynamics of war, in which males were more apt to be

militarily engaged than involved in a profession like teaching. The percentage certainly corresponds to the demographics of the teaching profession in Mexico at the time. Although historically the profession boasted a large percentage of male instructors, especially among those with degrees, during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz that percentage began to shrink. In 1907, for instance, females made up seventy-eight percent of population enrolled in normal schools and preparing for the teaching profession. This number increased as the 1910 revolution continued, not only because of the disproportionate number of men killed during the armed struggle but also because of the efforts of women to make the revolutionary project include women's rights.<sup>30</sup>

*"Forces of Instruction and Justice"*

Women's participation in the mission gave them an unprecedented role in shaping revolutionary education. Government officials considered their work of vital national importance. As delegates of the revamped educational system, they decided which of the "novel pedagogies," "innovative methodologies, and "useful practices" should be "applied and adapted to our conditions."<sup>31</sup> Although two of the women traveled to Boston with their mothers, the others arrived without the accompaniment of family members. This included two seventeen-year-old female teachers, María de la Luz Serradell and Helda Novelo, who headed subcommittees charged respectively with investigating instruction and literacy among kindergarten students. After their return, several of the women from the Commission went on to secure high-ranking positions in

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<sup>30</sup> Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico*, 70, 202.

<sup>31</sup> "Jira cultural," 70.

Mexico's new Secretaría de Educación Pública, established in 1921. Their efforts, said Palavicini, were helping to build in Mexico a "modern society" by promoting "the great forces known as 'Instruction' and 'Justice,' the first of which was generated by a rich intellectual life and the second regulated by a life in common."<sup>32</sup>

Despite these nods to a "life in common," male officials oversaw the Commission and its work. Its head was the attorney Alfonso Cravioto, whose father was the governor of the state of Hidalgo during Díaz's dictatorship. In 1903, Cravioto spent six months as a prisoner in the notorious Belén prison for protesting Díaz. Following Madero's ascension to the presidency in 1911, Cravioto became a member of the National Congress, where he allied with the reformist group known as the *Bloque Renovadores*. Cravioto tapped Dr. Manuel Barranco to serve as the Commission's facilitator in the United States. Although not a formal member of the Commission, Barranco's influence on it was considerable. A high school teacher who worked in both Boston and New York, he organized the particulars of their time on the East Coast and selected the schools where Commission members conducted their investigations. These included the New York Commerce High School, where Barranco was a teacher of Spanish; Boston Latin High School; Newton High School, Brockton High School, and Bridgewater State Teachers' College. They also took four trips to Harvard.

The year preceding the Commission's arrival, Barranco completed a Ph.D. at Columbia University under the direction of John Dewey. Barranco's dissertation, entitled "Mexico: Its Educational Problems—Suggestions for Their Solution," had much in common with the pronouncements and prescriptions Felix Palavicini made in 1910. It

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 96.

described education as “the first, last, and only remedy” for Mexico.... The school is the only potent factor of reform.”<sup>33</sup> His research owed a heavy intellectual debt to Dewey. Like Dewey’s work, it took particular issue with the limitations of contemporary schooling. Just as Dewey called on the “range of the [educational] outlook...to be enlarged” to include “the community want[s] for all of its children,” Barranco maintained that “school life and work should reflect the activities of the community.”<sup>34</sup> “It is more useful for the teachers to know what the Mexican Indians beyond the hills do and need,” Barranco argued, “than to spend much time to become familiar with what a Spartan boy did two thousand years ago.”<sup>35</sup> The “greatest need of the Mexican schools,” Barranco concluded, is to bring them close to the people of the community,” with whom their relations in Mexico “have been practically nil.”<sup>36</sup> Barranco held that “Mexican teachers must study, observe, and profit from the experiences of other educators.” Quoting Dewey, he cautioned that “a working model is not something to be copied; it is to afford a demonstration of the *feasibility* of the *principle* and of the *methods* which *make it feasible*.”<sup>37</sup> Mexican teachers, Barranco concluded, “must *assimilate* those experiences and make them their own flesh.”<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, teachers first intended to devote themselves to learning the English language. In order to do so, the teachers conversed with host teachers and studied Huber Gray Buehler’s primer, *Practical Exercises in*

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<sup>33</sup> Manuel Barranco, *Mexico: Its Educational Problems—Suggestions for Their Solution* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, Contributions to Education, No.73, 1915), iv, 73.

<sup>34</sup> John Dewey, *The School and Society*, 19; Barranco, *Mexico*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Barranco, *Mexico*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 62; Dewey’s quote is from *The School and Society*, 110 [emphasis in original].

<sup>38</sup> Barranco, *Mexico*, 62.

*English*.<sup>39</sup> The “strong understanding of the English language,” teachers believed, would allow them “rapidly and easily to assimilate the American pedagogical doctrines.”<sup>40</sup>

Instructed to study the “most advanced American methods...so as to adapt and apply them to our conditions,” Commissions members split into several subcommittees based on members’ areas of expertise.<sup>41</sup> The categories offer an indication of Mexican educators’ concerns (See Appendix Two for a list of these subcommittees.) That Commission members devoted two subcommittees to geography is telling. Like Dewey, who believed that “the unity of all sciences is found in geography,” Mexican educators put tremendous stress on the importance of geographical knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Its absence in Mexico contributed to what Barranco and Constitutionalist officials considered the lack of a “strong national character.” Without a solid foundation in geography and history, Mexican citizens had “not crystallized a culture of its own.”<sup>43</sup> According to Constitutionalist officials, public schoolteachers were to become the purveyors and transmitters of a national culture and consciousness,” the bedrock of which was to be found in a shared understanding of Mexico’s geography and history as a nation-state.

Members marveled at the differences between schools in Boston and Mexico. They expressed surprise at the role of the school principal, to whom their only comparison in Mexico was the Professor of General Methodology. They wondered whether teachers received pensions upon retirement, how they were insured against

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<sup>39</sup> Huber Gray Buehler, *Practical Exercises in English* (New York: ABC Book Company, 1895).

<sup>40</sup> “Jira cultural,” 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, *The School and Society*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Barranco, *Mexico*, 69.

accidents, and how schools were inspected and regulated. They took particular note that U.S. school teachers took work home with them at night and yet were paid salaries equivalent to those of teachers in Mexico, where the implication was they did not take work home with them at night. They also applauded the decentralized character of schools in Boston. “The organization of schools here, in which everyone takes on a principle role,” noted Eliseo García, “is so different than ours....wherein almost every branch of our schools everything is improvised.”<sup>44</sup> They commended that instead of a federal-level Secretaría de Instrucción Pública, communities had local school boards that were under the jurisdiction of a state Board of Education, whose head the governor appointed and which had “ultimate authority over schooling”<sup>45</sup>

Their admiration for U.S. schools bespoke an underlying tension between progressive education as practiced in the United States and contemporary conditions in Mexico. Dewey devised “what roughly may be termed the ‘New Education’ in the light of larger changes in society....a revolution in all history so rapid, so extensive, so complete...[that] the face of the earth is making over.”<sup>46</sup> In Mexico, however, this revolution had yet to happen. Not only was Mexico still largely agrarian and peasant-based. It still had had huge swaths of people who labored under debt peonage. In fact, only the month before the Mexican teachers arrived in Boston did President Carranza formally outlaw debt peonage. To this day, people in southern Mexico still refer to the period prior to April 1915 as *la época de esclavitud* (“times of slavery”). A place where

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<sup>44</sup> “Jira cultural,” 122.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Dewey, *The School and Society*, 20, 22.

the “factory system” had yet to emerge hardly constituted the context for which Dewey devised the New Education. The “quality of work” that, according to Dewey, forms “the genuine community standard of value” differed entirely in Mexico, which historically has comprised “many Mexicos.”<sup>47</sup> These dissimilarities mattered little to the revolutionary educators. Revolutionary educators sought to adopt Deweyan principles not so much because they made sense for Mexico but more because, in the words of educator Máximo Martínez, a “new pedagogy will repress the ‘savage violence’” of Mexico’s peasantry and make them “more productive” beings. Gregorio Torres Quintero, who traveled to the United States with Dewey’s Ph.D. student Moisés Sáenz in 1920, concluded, “We have to adopt the competitor’s system in order to survive.” Indeed, revolutionary educators strayed from Dewey’s notion of making education a “direct relation to the concrete problems of life” and instead concentrated on ways of making Mexican into “productive citizens” who sufficiently internalized rituals of “accommodation and habituation.”<sup>48</sup>

*“Work in Common and Cooperation”*

Initially, Dewey’s progressive education failed to take root in Mexico, despite the assiduous attention Commission members gave it. When the teachers returned to Mexico in late 1916, they found Palavicini had implemented very few reforms. A staunch believer in decentralized education, which Commission members reported worked well in the United States, Carranza and Palavicini issued a decree in February 1916 that place education entirely under the control of regional officials. In April 1917, Carranza

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<sup>47</sup> Lesley Bird Simpson enshrined what was already conventional wisdom in famously titled study, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley: University of California, 1941).

<sup>48</sup> John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962), 180; Salvador Lima and Marcelina Rentería quoted in Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico*, 174.

formally abolished the Secretaría de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes. This left education at the discretion of local officials and community members, a seeming fulfillment of Deweyan ideals.

Scholars, however, tend to agree that this move had more to do with the promulgation of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 than it did with support for progressive education. Intended to reduce radically the influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico, Article Three of Mexico's 1917 Constitution required lay education in both private and public schools. Reluctant to enforce a provision that he suspected would spark civil war, Carranza opted to follow Palavicini's suggestion and dissolve the Secretaría. By that point, Palavicini had left government office to start *El Universal*, one of Mexico's most influential newspapers. Cravioto, one of the Constitutional delegates who help draft Article Three, had become governor of his home state of Hidalgo. What is more, a debate erupted between proponents of university education and normal schools. As part of his April 1917 decree, President Carranza placed normal school officials, several of whom were Commission members newly returned from the United States and taken with Deweyan progressivism, in charge of Mexican education, including the National University. In the process, one of the University's most prestigious centers of inquiry, the School of Advanced Studies, became transformed into a teachers' college that trained professionals in "national culture." Enrollment soared from ninety to over seven hundred students, most of whom were female.<sup>49</sup> Tensions, however, continued. Not until 1921, when José Vasconcelos became first head of the new Secretaría de Educación Pública, immediately after having been the rector of the National University. Although

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<sup>49</sup> Michael E. Burke, "The University of Mexico and the Revolution, 1910-1920," *The Americas* 34 (October 1972): 256.

highly critical of Deweyan progressivism, Vasconcelos appointed to his office several disciples of Dewey and members of the 1915 Commission. As Eulalia Gúzman, who at the age of twenty-four learned of the New Education in Boston, said ten years later when given charge of a Dewey-inspired *Escuela de Acción* (Action School), these institutions were meant to serve as a “means of developing individual effectiveness and work in common and cooperation in social life as a means of awakening a spirit of fraternity and mutual service which is the preparation of a future social order.”<sup>50</sup>

This cooperative social order was not to be. Dispatched into the countryside, in many cases progressive educators encountered a population uninterested in schooling they considered coming from outside and on high. Cultural condescension no doubt made matters worse. Moisés Sáenz, for instance, considered peasant idleness “laziness,” and Rafael Ramírez, who in 1923 formed the Office of Cultural Missions, saw fit to teach peasants who tended to go barefoot how to make shoe polish.<sup>51</sup> The cultural dissonance reached new heights in 1926, when the Mexican government enforced a longstanding federal that required all churches and religious groupings to register with the state government and made criminal the wearing of religious garb in public. Resistance to this law’s enforcement erupted into the three-year-long Cristero War. The same month that the government began to enforce the anti-clerical law, John Dewey arrived in Mexico. Invited by his former student Sáenz, who now headed the Secretaría de Educación Pública, Dewey spent several weeks in the summer of 1926 touring Mexico. Although he “never found much evidence in support of this belief that new countries, educationally

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<sup>50</sup> Eulalia Gúzman quoted in Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico*, 173; originally quoted in *Boletín de Secretaría de Educación Pública* 5-6 (1923-1924): 294-295.

<sup>51</sup> This is detailed in Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico*, 184.

new, can start afresh, with the most enlightened theories and practices of the most educationally advanced countries,” Dewey said the schools of Mexico “revived [his] faith.” Finding “vitality, energy, [and] sacrificial devotion, he concluded that “there is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more of the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in this Mexican development.”<sup>52</sup> Dewey acknowledged the complexity and contradictions of Mexico, which made “impossible any generalization except that regarding the combination of the most stiff-necked conservatism and the most unrestrained and radical experimentalism.”<sup>53</sup> His observations rang true. Within weeks of Dewey’s departure, *Cristero* peasants across western Mexico rose up, burned schools, attacked teachers, and ran them out of their villages. Many public schoolteachers responded in kind, taking up arms against the same people they had pledged to teach.

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<sup>52</sup> John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World: Mexico, China, Turkey, 1929* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University Bureau of Publications, 1964 [1929]), 124, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Dewey, *Impressions*, 131-132.

## Appendix One

## Members of the 1915 Mexican Commission of Teachers

Alfonso Cravioto 31, born in Pachuca  
 Carmen Reyes, 23, Amecameca  
 Soledad Sánchez, 35, Hueyapoxtla  
 Ambrosio R. Belmont, 26, San Angel  
 Eduardo Gariel, 54, Professor, Monterrey  
 Francisco García, 24, Zacatecas  
 Hermelinda Gutiérrez, 27 (sister), Guadalajara  
 Esther Gutiérrez, 23 (sister), Guadalajara  
 Maria de la Luz Rivera, 23, Mexico DF  
 Luz Serradel, 17, Teacher, Mexico DF  
 Maria Isabel Rodríguez, 23, San Luis Potosi  
 Maria G. Cisneros, 24, Guadalajara  
 Martina Gómez, 28, Texatitlan  
 Maria de Jesus Maciel, 29, La Barca  
 Celfina Alcaraz, 23, Tuxtla  
 Paula Vela González, 20, Nuevo Leon  
 Maria Trinidad Rodríguez, 28, Guadala  
 Maria G.M. Hesse, 24, San Luis Potosi  
 Maria Dolores Mendoza, 24, Mexico DF  
 Beatriz Cervantes, 27, Jimapan  
 Concepcion Morfin, 25, Guanajuato  
 Felisa Anguiano, 29, Atoyac  
 Antonia López, 25, Guadala  
 Josefina Arredondo, 20, Guanajuato  
 Eudoxia Torres Preciado, 26, Tenanxtlan  
 René Rodríguez, female, 24, San Luis Potosi  
 Dolores Sotomayor, 25, Mexico DF  
 Maria del Refugio Barrueta, 25, Guadalajara  
 Esther Rodríguez Rebollado, 22, Jalapa  
 María de la Luz Alvarez, 27, Zacatecas  
 María Luna, 24, Zacatecas  
 Sara Salinas, 28, Tenancingo  
 Eva López, 30, Tepeaca  
 Helda Novela, 17, Merida  
 Ernestina Medina Alvarado, 28, Guat City  
 Alfonso M. Taboado, 28, Pachuca  
 Alberto Guevara, 27, Puebla  
 Javier Mejía, 26, Pachuca  
 Vicente Velasco, 28, Oaxaca  
 Angela Calderón, 33, Mexico  
 Elena Cosio Pinal, 20, Mexico  
 Helda Brito, 22, Merida

Saul Rivera, 25, Male, Zacatlan  
Rafael Ramírez, 27, male, Puebla  
Braulio Rodríguez, 31, male, Yahualica  
Carlos Barrios, 22, male Zacatlan  
Otilio Saldaña Rebolledo, 22, male, Jalapa  
Fernando Ximello, 22, male, Tehuacan  
Agustin Loera Chávez, 22, male, Aguascalientes  
Enrique Carrillo, 29, male, Zacatecas  
Gonzálo Mercado, 28, male, Tantoyuca  
Guillermo de la Rosa, 38, Mexico  
María Arias Bernal, 28, Mexico  
Eliseo Garcia, 30, Zacatecas  
Guadalupe F. de García, 38, Zacatecas  
Eulalia Gúzman, 24, Zacatecas  
Eloisa Espinosa, 27, Guanajuato  
Olivia Espinosa, 26, Guanajuato  
Maria Martínez, 23, Zacatecas  
Maria de la Sol Olivas, 25, Mexico

## Appendix Two

### 1915 Mexican Commission of Teachers Subcommittees of Study

#### Libraries

Political Economy and *Labores Femeniles* (“Women’s Work”)

Arithmetic and Geography

Moral and Civic Education

Musical Education

*Niños Anormales y Retardados* (“Abnormal and Retarded Children”)

Drawing and Manual Labor

Kindergarten

Physical and Natural Science

Geography and History

Reading and Writing

Industrial Education and Industrial Schools

Normal and Primary Schools

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel Barranco