

The Philosophy of Education in the Official Educational Programs in Mexico: A Reconstruction of Epochal Philosophies

Maria Teresa Yurén

Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos

In this essay I will present the results of research¹ carried out on what I have called “The Epochal Philosophy of Education.”² By these terms, I do not refer to the works of a philosopher or a group of intellectuals who subscribe to a particular line of thinking, nor to any collection of ideas and values that direct the actions of this or that sector of the population. I refer to the combination of all these elements, converging to guide educational practices. What is presented herein is the result of the reconstruction and critique of the philosophy of epochal education contained in the official educational projects of Mexico.

The first part of the essay is dedicated to elucidating the expression “The Philosophy of Epochal Education” and to presenting the analysis and critique methodology. The second part analyzes the Philosophy of Epochal Education in the nineteenth century, and the third does the same for the twentieth century. I shall end this essay with several conclusions.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN THE OFFICIAL EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

By “philosophy of epochal education,” I mean the objectives, principles, and values that correspond to a certain way of conceiving education in a given historical moment and that result in educational policies that confer a given direction and meaning to educational practices.

The philosophy of epochal education is not a philosophy in the strictest sense and it is not found in the works of philosophers, but in representations found in society. These representations have their origins, in part, in academic philosophy, from which a set of ideas and concepts have been gathered, decontextualized and recontextualized by a process that converts abstract elements into figurative elements.³ Considering the above, the critique is directed not so much at academic philosophies as to the figurative elements resulting from the decontextualization and recontextualization that has been done and that constitute an educational project.

Following Agnes Heller, I use the term “epochal” to refer to symbols and values that originated in a given historical period and that are significant in the present era.⁴ From my critical perspective, I attempt not to reconstruct history, but to use history as a foundation to understand elements that are significant for the present era.⁵ In this sense, what is in question is not the historical past but an epoch, present/past. Thus, we learn the lesson of the past in order to envisage ourselves in the present/present epoch, and to foresee the present/future epoch.

The philosophy of epochal education in Mexico overlaps educational policies that emerge from the state apparatus. The philosophy and the policies give structure to official educational projects in which three dimensions come into play: theoretic, regulatory, and ideological. An official educational project gives way to another

when power relationships are modified and there are new social forces that redefine the values and meaning of the project, or when there is a change in the philosophical choices from which the representations come. Modifications also occur when resistance to educational practices forces change.

Since we cannot question the protagonists of history in order to reconstruct the philosophy of epochal education, it was necessary to examine the written discourse in order to analyze representations that are presented as legitimate and that, because of forces prevalent at the time, were imposed with normative force.

In order to determine how many projects there were and what the official projects were during the course of Mexican history, I have taken into consideration that the goals and principles in those projects contained social values. The value that operates as the structuring and articulating element was identified and called the "axiological criterion." The historic period was determined by examining the moment in which that value emerges as the articulator, reaches a climax, and loses its articulating force, giving way to another that follows the same process.

The research identified six educational projects with their corresponding philosophies. Three of these were developed with the emergence and consolidation of the first national Mexican state: the enlightening project (1821–1833), the civilizing project (1833–1867), and the positivist project (1867–1917). In the twentieth century, together with the emergence of the second national state, three other projects were developed: The revolutionary project (1917–1939), the developmental project (1939–1988), and the modernizing project. This last project began in 1988 and continues through the present, demonstrating indicators of a new restructuring of the form of the state.

The discourse from which the educational projects were reconstructed was not homogenous, but responded to what Foucault called "strategies," or forms of production, distribution and consumption of the discourse.⁶ In this case, the judicial discourse, created in laws, regulations, decrees, and accords; the management discourse, carried out in plans, programs, and reports of the government; the political discourse expressed through the social forces of the day and reported by the media and declarations of various conditions; and the philosophical discourse expressly stated in the works of professional philosophers. The analysis showed that the latter was reinterpreted and incorporated into the previous discourses.

To define and characterize each educational project, two levels of process were taken into consideration: the structural and the circumstantial. In the first instance, the shape of the government that developed over time, as well as the prevalent economic structure and social forces in the competition for hegemony, were taken into consideration. Among the circumstantial aspects, social movements as well as the decisions and political events that made it possible to reorganize the sets of values in the educational projects were taken into consideration as well. Also considered were the truly philosophical theories that, in each case, were present in the judicial process of negotiation and politics.

Through this process, it was possible to reconstruct the philosophy of epochal education contained in each educational project. Such reconstruction became what T.W. Moore called “practical theory” because it contains a premise that expresses a valuable goal, others that refer to the means and principles to achieve the goal under given circumstances, and a conclusion indicating what should be done to achieve that goal.⁷ The critique of the philosophy of epochal education thus reconstructed and, consequently, the project it encompasses, required the examination of the congruence of the arguments and the justification of each supposition.

In order to judge each educational project, the criteria of moral justification established by Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez were applied.⁸ Thus, it was considered that each project has social validity if it responds to societal needs, especially for those whose dignity has been taken away in some form; it has practical validity if conditions exist for carrying it out. It has logical validity if there is no contradiction within the arguments; it has scientific validity if the ends and means are not opposed to the advances of scientific knowledge, and it has dialectic validity if it contributes to the dignity of life of each particular individual, and at the same time contributes to guaranteeing the human condition. Founded on the theory of radical necessities of Heller, it was proposed that to “dignify life” means to overcome the obstacles that prevent one from becoming a free, conscious, culturally creative member of society; that is, an individual who is the product of his own design and seeks to be recognized as such.⁹

THE EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS OF THE FIRST STATE

THE ENLIGHTENING PROJECT (1821–1833)

With the independence movement that emerged in 1810 and triumphed in 1821, an educational project began which would carry the stamp of enlightenment. This surged together with a capitalist economy based on commerce, and coexisted with pre-capitalist relationships.

On breaking the colonial connection, a new State was developed with a constitutional orientation styled on landholdings (from which women, illiterates, and the poor were excluded from citizenship), and which maintained the rights of the estates based on ethnic criteria.

The social forces that came into play were clearly distinguishable. On the one hand, the colonial reactionary group insisted on returning to the past. The conservative movement was confident that independence would help them maintain their privileges. The liberal movement, which included intellectual creoles, was inspired by the works of the enlightened. Finally, there was the popular revolutionary movement, which consisted of laborers from the farms and cities, mixed with radical intellectuals and the military who had made the triumph of that movement possible.

Autonomy was the axiological criterion of the project. This was shown in several ways through the social forces. For some, it was an aberration, and for others it was a necessity to replace the missing king, and for others it was more a means of achieving self-determination, as the seeds planted by Rousseau, of achieving civil

and moral liberty.¹⁰ For members of the popular movement, it was a possibility of forming a country and developing an identity for themselves.¹¹

In the project, education appeared as a process having consistency in the instruction and formation of customs for the advantage of the nation. They sought the formation of those who would continue to forge the new nation, promote the public moral, and the exercise of citizenship. As principles, they established a free and uniform public education for all citizens, and the promotion of learning of all that was necessary.

The enlightening project was a critical project that denied the dependence and submission of the colonial order, but did not give up being exclusive because it was based on a landholder order and because the axiological criterion did not have the significance conferred by popular forces.

THE CIVILIZING PROJECT (1833–1867)

In 1833, Congress conceded to the executive power the authorization to organize public teaching in Mexico City and the federal territories. This marked the beginning of a new educational project organized towards a new value: civilization.

The period was characterized by a transition to dependent capitalism with a self-consuming agriculture, for the most part, an incipient manufacturing industry, and legal and illegal foreign businesses accompanied by a process of disentanglement and redistribution of land. Although the State adopted the liberal-estate tax form characterized by constitutionalism, federalism, the division of powers, and the guarantee of human rights, it endeavored to concentrate political power, and the state became the driving force of industrial activity connected to foreign capital.

The land ownership struggles of the indigenous communities, the peasants and the developing proletariat that resisted overexploitation were repressed. What emerged was a hegemonic group formed by an alliance of middle classes with a few of the provincial oligarchies who promoted a liberal federalist project. A third force was the traditional oligarchy, who hoarded fortunes through the accumulation of rents and attempted to maintain centralist politics that would guarantee the privileges of the corporations.

The new nation was now convulsing in this period due to various events: the war with the United States in 1837, the constant conflicts between liberals and conservatives, the War of the Reform following the new liberal Constitution of 1857, and the imperial French adventure that ended in 1867.

The vivid tensions were reflected in the educational project. Faced with the choice of “civilization or barbarism,” the first was chosen. The project assumed the liberal trend, but with peculiarities that would impact education: they tried to overcome a shameful past — indigenous and colonial — by emulating advanced countries, such as the United States and France. The ideologists insisted that it was necessary to “change the blood and the mind” through European immigration and the building of a new identity. Society became secularized and was driven by patriotism, understood as an attitude of sovereignty and commitment to the new nation.

Education was seen as a liberating process that included moral and civic instruction and training, as well as the promotion of learning and habits of research for scientific training. The objective was to lay the foundations of a thinking, sovereign, and civilized society for which training moral, industrious, and happy citizens was required.

In accordance with liberal ideology, the principles that were established were freedom of teaching, and mandatory and free elementary public education. Its usefulness was another central principle, not solely in the sense of eliminating what was useless or what would hinder the achievement of civilization, but also in the utilitarian sense of “achieving the greater amount of goods” for the majority.

The incorporation of European methods, the multiplication schools, the teaching of languages, and the attention given to educating women and the native people were policies that, on the one hand, contributed to the desired level of civilization; and, on the other, tended to overcome, at least in part, the exclusion of many. Nevertheless, the project had few possibilities of succeeding in its progressive aspects and was based on an illusory universality by presenting the ideal of civilization that was convenient to some social forces, as if it were universal. In this aspect, it lost social and dialectical validity.

THE POSITIVIST PROJECT (1867–1917)

“Order and progress” were the axiological criterion articulated by the elements of the positivist educational project that begun in 1867. That project had, as a structural condition, a dependent capitalism that consolidated because of the primitive accumulation of capital, the process of disentanglement, foreign investment, expansion of exports, and a strong concentration of income.

México City emerged as an economic pole and political center of what would become the first National State, which emerged with a structural contradiction: it was liberal in its judicial-political relations, yet in practice, it was oligarchic. Oligarchic practices were encouraged by capitalists connected with transnational enclaves, as well as by those with interests in agriculture, mining, and local banking. Capitalists with interests in the emerging agroexport industry, small proprietors, free professionals, and teachers promoted the liberal ideology. It is not surprising that peasants and workers, who were excluded from the benefits and were the object of economic and extraeconomic coercion, would become, years later, the revolutionary social forces who would detonate the movement of 1910.

These conditions engendered an educational project inspired by a positivism with evolutionary shades, according to which Mexican society had to fully enter the world of freedom in order to promote progress. Freedom was conceived as a scientific, religious, and political emancipation. It was thought that each individual and institution had a specific function for the conservation of the social organism. Continuing immigration and imitating cultural patterns from other lands were still seen as convenient.

In this project, education was understood as the integral development of the physical, intellectual, moral, and esthetic faculties. The goal was to achieve order in

peoples' consciences to have order in society; to forge a social morality that would strengthen social institutions — nation, family, and property — and contribute to mental emancipation.

The principles of free and mandatory primary education were authenticated. The principle of freedom of education was controlled by establishing a nationwide standard education in order to unify the national speech and teach a “common foundation of truths.” As a derivative from the separation of the Church and State, the principle of secularization of education was applied. As part of the policies, religious lessons were eliminated, while the teaching of exact and natural sciences was promoted. A preparatory school was created as well as the first normal schools and schools for adults.

These accomplishments left much to be desired and, in contrast with the previous project, this project sacrificed freedom for the sake of order and material progress. The latter was sophisticatedly identified with national unity and reduced the social and dialectic validity of the project.

THE EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

THE REVOLUTIONARY PROJECT (1917–1939)

The revolutionary movement, which concluded with the Constitution of 1917, prepared for a transformation of structural conditions. The main economic role adopted by the new State was that of auditor. The State was reconstituted on the basis of social rights and its profile was nationalistic, presidential, and semi-corporate. Furthermore, the conditions that would allow it to function as an arbitrator-State and an employer-State were prepared.

The cultural project was characterized by a nationalism that was initially manifested as anti-foreign and in favor of national sovereignty and, subsequently, as anti-imperialist and protectionist. That project combined the demands expressed in two revolutionary mottos: “effective suffrage, not reelection” and “land and freedom.” At least four social forces entered into action: those who sought liberal political reform (liberal reformists); those who touted agrarian reform (social reformists); those who, in discourse, defended liberal institutions and, in actions, strengthened a central and presidential system (nationalist current); and those who acted against the advances of the revolution (traditional current).

The revolutionary educational project was defined in several ways, but in all of them social justice was the axiological criterion that organized goals and principles. Initially, this was understood as redemption of the oppressed, although later it became the right of the Mexican people to carry out a dignified living in a political and judicial world that guarantees the exercise of individual and social rights.

Education was conceived as a process that liberated energy, socialized and trained people for productive work; it was seen as an instrument of social mobility, of the development of conscience and dignity. To educate meant training the citizen who would work for the glory of the nation; freeing the people from fanaticism and ignorance; forging a linguistic and cultural identity; improving the conditions of the

Indians and peasants; incorporating all into the democratic processes; overcoming individualism; and forging the new man and a new society.

The principles of freedom, secularism, and free education were ratified and enveloped in a cultural mystique that conferred the status of apostle to the teacher. The project acquired various schemes depending upon the educational programs at hand. Initially, under the influence of a Bergsonian style of spiritualism, the emphasis was placed on nationalistic and popular education open to universal culture. Later on, the influence of Dewey was revealed in the school of action and of learning by doing. The period concluded with a program that, inspired by Marxism, placed the emphasis on the equality of educational opportunities and on education for work. The battle against illiteracy, the priority of attention to the indigenous and rural population, and technical education were characteristic of this period.

The revolutionary project was a critical project, but its potential for engendering dignity was constrained by the practical difficulties that hindered its coming to fruition, and by the resistance of the social forces that provoked its decline.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT (1939–1982)

From the forties, development was the criterion of not just the educational project, but the national project as well. The period was endeavored to achieve capitalist development with a nationalist stamp and maintained economic dependency through public and private debt, and technology imports. Politically, it brought to life the surge of the second National State fully characterized by the employer-State, semi-corporate and presidential. To legitimize itself, the State flaunted itself as the guarantor of social rights and, to centralized power, required negotiation, repression, concession, and agreement.

It was a period characterized by a rearrangement of political forces, constrained by its foreign relations and the polarization engendered by the cold war. Several Latin American revolutionary movements, such as the independent trade unions movement and the so-called “68 movement,” were also influential in the rearrangement period.

The educational project was organized around the idea that economic development was necessary as a way to peace and happiness for all. It combined, not without contradictions, both social liberalism and individual liberalism. It was oriented to the promotion of social harmony, national unity, and the achievement of a democracy restricted to exercising the right to vote. It was considered that education consisted in promoting the harmonious development of the faculties of the human being while, at the same time, it was seen as a training process to transform individuals into a force for progress. The influence of Deweyesque pragmatism was imprinted with the idea that education was an investment and a means of choice and social promotion. From this perspective, the explicitly defined goals oscillated between the advancement of suitable habits and values to modern society and the formation of citizens who would contribute to the conservation of political and economic independence, increasing culture and promoting democracy and the exercise of individual and social rights. To these immediate goals, other concerns

were added: the production of wealth through the expansion of production and technical capacity, and the search for improvements of the quality of life to combat inequality.

According to the times, the recognition of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic plurality was added to duty, gratuitousness, and secularism. However, the principle of homogeneity of educational content in basic education continued to be applied.

In terms of deeds, the educational project was dominated by two goals: to take control of the revolutionary educational project and to transform education into a catalyst of economic development. For its quantitative achievements, the project appeared to be successful, but its qualitative achievements foretold what years later would be considered a silent catastrophe.¹² It is thus possible to surmise that the contradictions within the philosophy of epochal education that structured the educational project were not innocuous and that the reported accomplishments served to veil the lack of social and dialectic validity of the project.

THE MODERNIZER PROJECT (1982 TO PRESENT)

From the eighties, Mexico entered into globalization, slowly but deliberately. As if confirming what was said by Ulrich Beck, globalization eroded the foundations of the economy and the national State.¹³

In order to enter fully into globalization, modernization was necessary, and that implied increasing productivity and efficiency. Modernization emerged as the axiological criterion of the educational project, productivity as the main principle of policies, and efficiency *per se*, as a goal that, in fact, has been superimposed over the goals expounded in official documents, which are, fundamentally, equality and democracy.

The ideal mechanism to achieve the application of the principles and the achievement of those goals has been, since then, competitiveness. Since the eighties, strategies and mechanisms have been established in the various educational levels in order to compete and obtain resources. Everything is appraised (schools, programs, organization, academic productivity, and ties to society), and financing depends upon that appraisal.

In order to arrive at this, a reform of an administrative nature was sought, which produced formal decentralization for the sake of centralization of control. Attempts were made to rationalize costs and to organize the mechanisms for administration, to open organizational alternatives and financing. In fact, the anticipated catastrophe came to pass. A contributing factor was an increase in poverty.

The discourse that emphasized efficiency was losing legitimacy. Because of this, without ceasing to be the modernizer, the official educational project is now covered by the discourse of life-long education originating in UNESCO, which reedit the principles of the educators of the *new school*, as well as the philosophies of Rousseau and Dewey, and introduces the discourse of training, self-training, and co-training or inter-training, which in its most existential version, is inspired in Heidegger, and collects echoes of the philosophies of Habermas and Levinas.¹⁴

In the educational project, functional rationality conflicts with underlying existential concern. This is revealed through inaccuracies and contradictions that are only partially attributable to the UNESCO discourse. This organization insists on an education that encompasses the dimensions of knowing, knowing how to do, knowing how to coexist, and knowing how to be, but has left behind the emphasis on permanent education — understood as sustained self-training to prioritize technical and theoretic knowledge — to insist on a life-long education as a process concerned primarily with knowing how to co-exist and how to exist.¹⁵ Additionally, from insisting on a society of knowledge based on a society of information, it has changed to maintain the need to move towards a society of education, built on the foundation of self-training with an existential meaning.

Meanwhile, the Mexican educational project of the last few years would appear to have been built upon the conviction of the inevitability of the catastrophe and the belief that, because of inaccuracies and false identifications, it is possible to overcome the fragility of its practical, social, and dialectic validity.

CONCLUSIONS

Examination of the educational projects and the philosophy of epochal education they contain makes it possible to state that the official educational projects were fed by diverse philosophies. The way they were “read” and appropriated followed the logic of the struggle for hegemony. The philosophies present in the official educational projects in Mexico are diverse. A quick inventory revealed the marks of enlightened, liberal, utilitarian, positivist, pragmatist, spiritualist, Marxist, and existentialist thoughts.

The presence of academic philosophy in the educational projects is less evident starting from the forties of the last century, which makes one suppose that the educational project lost the relative independence it had in relation to structural factors and suffers from excessive influence by the economic area and management.

The principles operating surreptitiously in the organization of the goals and principles of education are the illusory universality and the maintenance of privileges for the already privileged, which results in the exclusion of the benefits of a dignifying education for a large portion of the population.

Even in the less progressive projects such as order and progress, there are philosophical elements of epochal education that are worth salvaging in order to adapt to an educational philosophy that is guided by the principle of dignification. We trust that the reconstruction we have done will contribute to that end.

1. Teresa Yurén, *La Filosofía de la Educación en México: Principios, Fines y Valores* (México: Trillas, 1994), 259.

2. The idea of “philosophy of an era” is taken from Antonio Gramsci, *El Materialismo Histórico y la Filosofía de B. Croce*, trans. I. Flambaum, Cuadernos de la cárcel, no. 3 (México: Juan Pablos, 1975), 256–259.

3. This operation is called “objetivación” by Serge Moscovici, “Introducción” in *Psicología Social*, vol. 1 (Barcelona: Paidós, 1986), 17–41.

4. Agnes Heller, *Teoría de la Historia*, trans. J. Honorato (Barcelona: Fontamara, 1984), 47–48.
5. The perspective from which I see this was initially built on the works of Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Agnes Heller. Later on, I incorporated the thesis and guidelines of Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, among others, to the critical procedures.
6. Michel Foucault, *Arqueología del Saber*, 12th ed., trans. A. Garzón (Mexico: XXI Century, 1987) 355–103.
7. T.W. Moore, *Introducción a la Teoría de la Educación*, trans. M. Quintanilla (Madrid: Alianza, 1974), 128.
8. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Ética*, 22d ed. (México: Grijalbo, 1979), 207–210.
9. Agnes Heller, *Teoría de las Necesidades en Marx*, trans. J. Ivars (Barcelona: Península, 1977), 182.
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *El Contrato Social*, trans. E. Azcoaga (México: Sarpe, 1983), 208.
11. The identity or vindicated identity of oneself is opposed to the identity of another. See, for example, Claude Dubar. *La Crise des Identités^o: L'interprétation d'une Mutation* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 257.
12. Gilberto Guevara Niebla (comp.), *La Catástrofe Silenciosa* (México: FCE, 1992), 336.
13. Ulrich Beck, *¿Qué es la Globalización? Falacias del Globalismo: Respuestas a la Glogalización*, trans. B. Moreno and R. Borrás (Barcelona: Paidós, 1998), 26–32.
14. See as an example Bernard Honoré, *Vers l'ouvre de Formation. L'ouverture à l'existence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), 250.
15. UNESCO, *La Educación Encierra un Tesoro. Informe a la UNESCO de la Comisión Internacional sobre la Educación para el siglo XXI, Presidida por Jacques Delors* (México: UNESCO, 1996), 302.