UNPACKING THE SCHOOL: TEXTBOOKS, TEACHERS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONHOOD IN MEXICO, ARGENTINA, AND PERU

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Abstract
This article examines trajectories of nationalism in 20th century Argentina, Mexico, and Peru through the analytical lens of schooling. I argue that textbooks reveal state-sponsored conceptions of nationhood. In turn, the outlooks and practices of teachers provide a window for understanding how state ideologies were received, translated, and reworked within society. During the late 19th century, textbooks in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru conceived of the nation as a political community, emphasized “civilization” for achieving national unity, and viewed elites as driving national history. During the 20th century textbooks eventually advanced a cultural understanding of the nation, envisioned national unity to be achieved through assimilation into a homogeneous national identity, and assigned historical agency to the masses. Yet, teacher responses to these changes varied. In Mexico under Cárdenas (1934-1940), teachers predominantly embraced textbooks that promoted a popular national culture. By contrast, teachers in Argentina under Perón (1946-1955) and in Peru under Velasco (1968-1975) largely opposed the new texts.

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This article examines trajectories of nationalism in 20th century Argentina, Mexico, and Peru through the analytical lens of schooling. The classical works on nationalism treat schools as a key site for cultivating national attachments and socializing the citizenry into national framings of everyday experience (e.g., Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1986). Yet, the specific mechanisms how national socialization unfolds in schools often remain obscure in this literature.¹ This article focuses on the role of textbooks and teachers in the construction of nationhood. School textbooks—especially those used in primary schools—reveal state-sponsored versions of national identity and history. In turn, schoolteachers’ worldviews and their use of textbooks provide a window for understanding how those official ideas are received, translated, and reworked at the interface between state and society.²

Over the last decades a number of studies have used textbooks to analyze official conceptions of nationhood in Latin America (e.g., Arnove 1995; Cucuzza and Somoza 2001; Nava 2006; Plotkin 2002; Portocarrero and Oliart 1989; Vaughan 1982; Vázquez 2000).³ Analogously, a substantial literature on the role of Latin American teachers in national socialization has emerged (e.g., Angell 1982; Contreras 1996; Luykx 1998; Rockwell 2007;)

¹ An important exception is Weber’s (1976) study of “nationalization” in 19th century rural France that carefully disentangles the role of teachers, textbooks, and classroom facilities.

² Other approaches to nationalism and schooling include analyzing curricula (e.g., Dávila 2003; Escudé 1990) or exploring the in-class performance of national discourses and practices (e.g., Levinson 2001). The particular advantage of textbooks is that they convey curricula contents that actually reach teachers and students. Moreover, historical data on teachers is often easier to obtain than comparable information on students. A focus on teachers is thus particularly appropriate when school ethnography is not possible.

³ For the concept of nationhood see Brubaker (1996).
Vaughan 1997). Yet, most of these studies are single-case studies or edited volumes (e.g., Ossenbach and Somoza 2001; Rieckenberg 1991) without a comparative perspective. A focus on Mexico, Argentina, and Peru provides the opportunity to address the relative absence of comparative studies on nationalism and schooling in Latin America.

The historical development of public education in the three countries represents extreme points within the region. During the early 20th century Argentina already marshaled a fairly extensive public education system, whereas in the other two cases public schooling remained in an embryonic stage. Mexico experienced a substantial expansion of public education during the 1930s and 1940s, in Peru comparable institutional developments unfolded much later, during the 1950s and 1960s (Bertoni 2001; Contreras 1996; Vaughan 1997).

Yet, from a comparative perspective, textbooks in these otherwise very different countries exhibited striking similarities. During the late 19th century textbooks in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru portrayed the nation as a political association, grounded in a social contract among citizens that was symbolized by a shared constitutional framework. This political-territorial understanding of the national community converged with the idea of creating a “civilized nation.” Mexican, Argentinean, and Peruvian textbooks depicted their respective national history as an evolution from “barbarism” to greater “civilization,” a process that was driven by a few great men. Throughout the 20th century cultural understandings of national identity gained prevalence, the nation was imagined as grounded in cultural features, such as a shared language, religion, customs, or ethnic identity, while accounts of national history became centered on the agency of popular sectors.

The timing of these changes varied across cases. In Mexico, shifts in textbook content unfolded during the 1920s and 1930s—most prominently under the government of Lázaro
Cárdenas (1934-1940). In Argentina, cultural conceptions of nationhood gained prominence during the 1910s, whereas a greater emphasis on popular agency emerged during the 1940s and 1950s, under the government of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955). In Peru, comparable changes only took place during the 1960s and 1970s, most importantly under the military government of Juan Velasco (1968-1975).

Teacher reaction to those changes also differed. Schoolteachers in Mexico largely embraced the changed conceptions of nationhood found in textbooks and—if available—used the new teaching materials issued by the Cárdenas government. By contrast, the majority of teachers in Argentina opposed the ideas about national identity and history found in Peronist textbooks and employed a variety of strategies to circumvent using those texts. In Peru, teachers were divided in their own understandings of nationhood, yet they largely converged in their opposition against the newly issued texts and actively sought to elude using them in the classroom. Thus, during the 20th century textbooks in all three countries showed a similar shift from political and elitist to cultural and class-based understandings of nationhood, while the timing and teacher responses to these changes varied substantially across cases.

Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

Textbooks are written texts that are specifically crafted for use in teaching. Even when taking into consideration the potentially huge differences between text content and classroom lessons, textbooks are of critical importance in shaping what students learn. Especially in countries with developing public education systems, teachers frequently employ these texts as their main device to prepare for lessons. As a matter of fact, textbooks are often the first, and sometimes the only books students are exposed to. Moreover, as evident in the long history of
controversies over textbooks, the public usually treats textbooks as authoritative and accurate sources for what students should know.  

Textbooks do not reveal the “facts,” they convey particular visions of social reality by emphasizing and downplaying certain aspects of the world. As cultural artefacts, textbooks are planned, designed, and distributed by actors with real interests. In particular, states constitute the key actors in shaping textbooks. Textbooks are written by individual authors and often compete as economic commodities in the market, yet their content and structure is primarily determined by the “political hand” of state textbook-adoptions policies (Apple 1992: 6). A common strategy of state agencies is for instance to sponsor special approval commissions that either directly select specific texts or compile a list of approved titles from which schools make their choices.

At the same time, textbooks do not determine classroom activities. Not every statement in these texts is taught and followed literally. Schoolteachers regularly contextualize, rethink, and change textbook contents. Even though teachers frequently constitute the largest group of civil servants and the main contact point between state and local citizenry, they are not just transmitters of state-sponsored policies and ideological orientations. The role of teachers is more aptly described as translators that adapt and localize official curricula. Indeed, teachers often act as “local intellectuals, recognized as having the authority and responsibility to defend and promote their community” (Wilson 2001: 314). Teachers therefore play a critical role in the translation of state-sponsored conceptions of nationhood found in textbooks into everyday understandings of the world.

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This article analyzes textbooks from the implementation of obligatory public schooling in late 19th century Mexico, Argentina, and Peru until the educational reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, the main focus being periods of substantial change. In each country I reviewed between 50 and 70 textbooks, collecting at least five publications per decade. The selection criteria for my sample had three pillars: First, I focused on primary school textbooks because only a small segment of the population attended secondary schools during the time of interest. Second, I selected those textbooks that were published or approved by national educational authorities. Third, I preferred approved texts that were reprinted in several editions, indicating their actual use.

For exploring the negotiation of textbooks by teachers I use existing secondary literature on the subject (e.g., Angell 1982; Artieda 1993; Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993; Civera 2004; Gvirtz 1996; Portocarrero and Oliart 1989; Rockwell 2007; Vaughan 1997; Wilson 2001) in combination with different kinds of primary sources. In each of these sources I explored normative judgments of major historical epochs and ideas about the main agents driving national history. Analogously, I traced descriptions of national heroes and representations of major external enemies. Finally, I focused on hierarchies imagined within the nation and tracked characterizations of immigrants and indigenous people.

5 From this point onwards decentralization of public education makes textbooks a less reliable source for tracing state-sponsored conceptions of nationhood.

6 In Mexico I drew on teacher testimonies already active during the 1920s and 1930s found in the oral history archive Archivo de la Palabra. I reviewed 45 interviews and ultimately used evidence from 13 of them that contained information on the use of textbooks and personal outlooks on national identity and history. In Argentina I combined semi-structured interviews with teachers active during the Peronist era, and La Obra as a periodical written by teachers for teachers. Due to retirement and age I was only able to locate four retired school teachers. In Peru I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with teachers already active during the 1970s.
Textbooks and Nationhood during the Oligarchic Period

During the late 19th and early 20th century—a period often described in terms of “oligarchic domination”—central state power consolidated in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru. State elites saw the school as the key institution for modernizing and nationalizing society. School programs, curricula, and teacher training were brought under the direct control of the respective central government, and state authorities installed special textbook approval commissions (Bertoni 2001; Contreras 1996; Vaughan 1982).

Political Conceptions of Nationhood and the Creation of a “Civilized” Nation

From a comparative perspective, textbooks converged in their emphasis on the political-territorial underpinnings of national membership. Statements like “[t]he Peruvian nation is the political association of all Peruvians” (Wiesse 1913: 52) were common. Some textbooks even echoed Renan’s idea of the nation as a “daily plebiscite” and conceived of the national community as “the creation of our wills taken together” (Eizaguirre 1895: 20). Political institutions were depicted as defining features of nationhood. The constitution appeared as the central unifying force, guaranteeing that “all the inhabitants […] have the right and facility to do what they please” (Sierra 1894: 7).

Accounts of national history further reinforced such a political understanding of nationhood. Textbooks focused on the formation of a binding legal order, which constituted Argentina as a federal republic, while systematically downplaying the early 19th century struggles and civil wars between regional strongmen and political elites from Buenos Aires (Fregeiro 1896: 201; Pelliza 1905: 103-106). Analogously, Peruvian history tended to culminate in the “Republic” as a teleological ending point, while in Mexican textbooks the liberal
constitution from 1857 appeared as the historical destiny of the nation, securing material progress and internal peace (Fanning 1915: 18; Rosay 1913: 183; Sierra 1894: 7).

The political understanding of nationhood converged with the vision of a “civilized nation.” In all three countries textbooks advocated the spread of “civilization” — a category associated with whiteness, economic modernization, and an urban and cosmopolitan European culture — as the main vehicle for overcoming ethnoracial and political divisions. For instance, many of the main characters that appeared in school texts were children of an upper middle class background, often portrayed as being enthusiastically immersed in the study of ancient Greek and Roman cultures (e.g., Pizzurno 1901: 223-228).

Accordingly, textbooks drew a major distinction between those who were imagined as part of the “civilized nation,” and those who were not, portraying the indigenous population as the main manifestation of “barbarism.” In Argentina, textbooks celebrated the “Conquest of the Dessert” — outright extermination campaigns against indigenous people during the second half of the 19th century — as extending “civilization” into the interior of the country (e.g., Ferreyra 1895: 41, 78; Pelliza 1905: 112-113). Mexican and Peruvian textbooks stressed that indigenous people “maintained their superstitions and idolatries from before the conquest” (Sierra 1894: 63) and therefore lacked the capacities for full citizenship. The remedy to overcome the “profound dejection of the indigenous race” (Rodríguez 1900: 145) appeared to be the systematic “whitening” of the population with the help of education and European migration.

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7 For the distinction between civilized nation and homogeneous nation see Quijada (2000).
Benevolent Elites and Evolution towards “Civilization”

The idea of a “civilized nation” also shaped representations of the past. In all three countries textbooks identified the precolonial period with “barbarism.” Even the Aztecs and Incas—in Mexican and Peruvian textbooks credited for their achievements as architects and political centralizers (Oviedo 1894: 12; Rodríguez 1900: 4)—ultimately lacked “civilization.” This was epitomized by the practice of human sacrifices, which textbooks described as an “infamous holocaust that showed the fanaticism of these people and the cruelty of their unrefined and uncivilized religion” (Aguirre Cinta 1897: 37).

In all three countries, textbooks provided a positive assessment of Spanish colonialism. Ultimately, the beneficial effects of Spanish colonialism offset violence and exploitation because “[t]he Spanish gave their American colonies as much civilization as Spain had herself” (Sierra 1894 in Vázquez 2000: 128). Spanish colonialism instituted centralized rule, while the spread of Spanish as the dominant language and the arrival of Christianity fostered national unity and progress. As such, the result of Spanish colonialism was the formation of “a new society […], based on the principles of a superior culture” (Rodriguez 1900: 4).

Representations of colonial history also illustrate the elite-centeredness of late 19th century textbooks. Textbook narratives were primarily organized around political leaders. In Argentina, accounts of Spanish colonialism celebrated the foresight and virtues of Columbus, Juan Díaz de Solís, and Pedro Mendoza (Eizaguirre 1895: 76). In Mexico and Peru, accounts of the Spanish conquest predominantly concentrated on the character traits of Hernán Cortes and Francisco Pizarro (Aguirre Cinta 1897: 65-99). As a matter of fact, “[w]ithout the boldness of Hernán Cortés the country would have never been conquered and submitted to Spanish government” (Lainé 1890: 3).
Descriptions of national independence were equally constructed around elites. In Mexico, textbook narratives centered on Miguel Hidalgo who successfully initiated the insurgency because “[t]he Indians adored him and would have followed him to the end of the world” (Sierra 1894: 74). In Argentina and Peru accounts of national independence were centered on the capacities of General San Martín, who was “a man of right judgment, of refined sentiments, of pure patriotism, and of honest character” (Rodríguez 1900: 98). If textbooks mentioned subordinate sectors, they appeared as obedient subjects, content to follow the orders of their leaders.

Textbooks and Nationhood during the Populist Period

Over the course of the 20th century textbooks published in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru changed dramatically. State-approved texts advanced a cultural understanding of nationhood, envisioned the construction of a “homogenous nation,” and began to portray popular sectors as protagonists of national history. The timing of these changes varied substantially across the three countries.

Mexico

The decades after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) witnessed the consolidation of state power within the context of highly mobilized subordinate sectors. During the 1920s the newly formed Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) made the expansion of a rural school network their top priority (Vaughan 1982). Under Cárdenas, the SEP introduced a new curriculum grounded in the ideas of “socialist education,” a program that envisioned schools as the primary mechanism for controlled popular mobilization (Vaughan 1997).
State-approved textbooks advanced cultural definitions of nationhood. The underpinning of a homogeneous national culture appeared to be *mestizaje*, the process of biological and cultural mixing initiated under Spanish rule. “The three centuries of Spanish domination were enough for a new race to emerge within the territory of New Spain, [...] a result of the mixing between conquerors and the conquered. This race that inherited the language, religions, and customs from the Spanish and the sense of resistance and stoicism from indigenous people, is the one that constitutes the Mexican nation today” (Bonilla 1925: 83-84).

While the notion of *mestizaje* departed from explicit references to the spread of “civilization,” textbooks continued to reproduce cultural and racial hierarchies. Becoming mestizo meant speaking Spanish and adopting a “modern” urban life style. Being indigenous meant to not fully belong to the nation. Only with the assimilation of the indigenous population into a homogeneous mestizo identity Mexico would attain national unity (Teja Zabre 1935: 189). Thus, textbooks viewed *mestizaje* as both a historical process initiated during the colonial period and an idealized projection of mixture removed from contemporary lived experience.

The representation of Mexico as a mestizo nation converged with an emphasis on social class. Textbooks depicted mestizos as peasants, workers, and parts of the middle sectors. As shown in Illustration 1, the daily life of children from humble origins became a focal point of these texts.

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Illustration 1 about here
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This focus on popular classes also informed accounts of national history. “Against the orders of Moctezuma, the masses rose up and launched a massive attack against the Spanish” (de
Subordinate sectors also appeared as a crucial force in national independence and the Mexican Revolution. “The people, who felt their oppression […] that created the Dictatorship [of Diaz], began with reclaiming their rights in a peaceful manner, but exasperated by the dictatorship, they had to act in a violent form,” (Romero Flores 1939: 347). Thus, during the 1930s textbooks began to assign agency to popular sectors in shaping Mexican history.

Transcending particular historical epochs, the “oligarchy” constituted the main internal other. The Aztec Empire was ruled by a “nobility” composed of “priests and warriors,” a “closed caste the plebeians could not enter into” (Chávez Orozco 1938: 103, 113). For the colonial period textbooks identified “merchants, in their majority Spaniards,” as the worst exploiters (Castro Cancio 1935: 105), while after independence criollo merchants and large landowners appeared as major obstacles to national progress (de la Cerda 1943: 243).

These class-based depictions of national history were complemented by more celebratory descriptions of the precolonial period. Textbooks drew an intrinsic connection between modern Mexico and the Aztec Empire, often portraying ordinary Aztecs as “Mexicans,” and started to contextualize human sacrifices. The inquisition introduced by Spanish colonizers appeared to have “destroyed people with a more painful death when compared to Aztec sacrifices” (Bonilla 1930: 63). Textbooks also assessed Spanish colonialism in largely negative terms. Internal divisions were the main reason for the fall of the Aztec Empire, and with Spanish colonial rule a period of foreign domination began. Cortes “did not have much talent and abandoned his studies to pass his time on the street” (Castro Cancio 1935: 44). Thus, Cortes personified Spanish cruelty and greed, enhanced by the fact that the conqueror lacked a proper education.
Representations of Mexican independence followed the general emphasis on subordinate agency. The emergence of global capitalism weakened Spain’s authority, a process that enabled subordinate movements to gain more leverage vis-à-vis colonial authorities (Teja Zabre 1935: 120). Hidalgo was portrayed as responding to a “strong popular impulse” and providing “a politically, socially, and militarily oriented plan” when “enormous masses of people” began to “follow their instincts to fight for their freedom and economic improvement, tired of so much misery and tyranny” (Castro Cancio 1935: 145).

Yet, textbooks were highly critical of the final outcome. In the end, “the Revolution of Independence was crushed […] It were the great landowners and higher clergy who contributed to carry out Independence as a purely political project of separation from Spain.” (Teja Zabre: 1935: 139) Only the revolutionary struggles between 1910 and 1917 secured Mexico’s full political and economic independence. Textbooks embraced the image of the Mexican Revolution as “a revolution of the exploited poor against the opulent exploiters” (Castro Cancio 1935: 250).

Under Cardenas’ successors educational authorities followed the general move toward the right of the postrevolutionary regime. Yet, during 1940s and 1950s most of the official textbooks introduced under Cárdenas remained in use (Vázquez 2000: 246). During the early 1960s the SEP established the so-called Free-Text program, which distributed a single set of mandatory textbooks to students (Gilbert 1997: 274). This new generation of texts continued to envision Mexico as a mestizo nation and fully identified Mexico with the Aztec Empire. While the free texts softened their tone, accounts of national history remained organized around class conflict and subordinate agency (Vázquez 2000: 256-257, 281-283). It was only during the 1980s and 1990s that state-approved textbooks witnessed another round of major changes, when
the idea of a homogeneous mestizo nation gave way to the image of Mexico as a multiethnic nation (Gutiérrez 1999: 72-89).

Argentina

In Argentina state-approved textbooks went through two major transformative episodes. The first change developed against the backdrop of declining oligarchic power, and the almost complete demographic reorganization of the country due to mass migration from Europe and the Middle East. Around 1910 educational authorities instituted “patriotic education” as the overarching principle of public schooling, which remained the dominant orientation for educational policy until the 1940s (Escudé 1990).

Textbooks published during this period portrayed Argentinean identity as grounded in a Hispanic national culture. The nation appeared to be constituted by those “who share the same language, have the same traditions, [and] come from the same ancestors” (de Bedogni 1910: 15). The gaucho emerged as the personification of Argentine identity. Of Spanish descent, in “his veins moved the blood of warriors, artists, nomads, and singers” (Bunge 1910: 155). Endowed with the “strength of lions” (Fesquet and Tolosa 1935: 99), he “ran free and rebellious like his horse” (Levene 1912: 21). The gaucho was Argentinean already before national emancipation. He “serenaded the fatherland without even knowing it. He loved freedom and set the stage for national independence” (Bunge 1910: 155). The gaucho thus exemplified the existence of Argentina as a cultural community, and allowed the backward projection of the nation into the colonial period.

European migration appeared as a mixed blessing. Migrants were critical for economic progress, yet textbooks lamented their lack of national identification. Migrant assimilation into a
Hispanic national culture appeared as the only viable path towards unity and progress. “This fatherland, generous to the foreigner, demands the forgetting of all the other fatherlands in exchange for its provisions” (Blomberg 1940: 224).

This new emphasis on national culture combined with the continued celebration of elites as driving forces of national history. Accounts of the colonial period remained organized around the agency of Spanish conquerors. Analogously, the “military genius,” “courage,” and “intelligence” of San Martín, the “greatest of all Argentineans,” remained critical for transforming Argentina into a sovereign nation (de Bourguet 1932: 46; Macias 1933: 45).

The second major transformative episode unfolded in a context of major subordinate mobilization and changing political alliances. In 1946 Juán Domingo Perón, a former military officer, ascended to power and built a highly personalistic political movement grounded in a coalition with organized labor. The Peronist government radically redefined the school curriculum and modified the content of textbooks, all to be oriented towards the creation of the “true Argentinean man” (Cucuzza and Somoza 2001: 212-213).

A new generation of textbooks advanced a class-based understanding of the nation. Workers and peasants appeared in opposition to the “oligarchy” that had ruled the country for centuries. Textbooks were especially critical of Spanish colonial elites and their role in exploiting Argentina’s natural resources. This new emphasis on “the people” could also be detected on the visual level. As Illustration 2 shows, stonemasons, car mechanics, and carpenters populated Peronist textbooks, breaking with the exclusive focus on upper class life found in previous texts (de Garcia 1954: 17).

In the “New Argentina,” there was no need for class conflict anymore. Struggles between elites and the masses were a reality of the past. Instead, in a context where everybody,
“even the most humble Argentines [,] benefit from the riches of the country,” (de Garcia 1954: x), social peace would prevail. Textbooks portrayed Argentina as a “land where workers are happy” (Raggi 1953: 2), and where class conflict had given way to social harmony.

“The people” also emerged as protagonists of national history. The independence wars succeeded because of the “brave and heroic gauchos [who] strolled around the mountains and caused despair among the hostile troops with their surprising attacks” (de García 1954: 85). Peronist textbooks even envisioned San Martín as “a man of the people” (de Palacio 1952: 124). Historical accounts thus moved away from an exclusive focus on enlightened leadership and emphasized the critical role of subordinate classes.

This emphasis on popular agency stood in tension with the identification of a charismatic leader and his wife as the embodiment of the nation. Peronist textbooks engaged in a full-fledged personality cult centered on Perón and his wife Eva (Evita). Perón appeared as “the conductor” (de García 1954: 5), “the first worker of the Republic” (de Palacio 1952: 111) and “the authentic Argentine” (Raggi 1953: 33). Evita was represented as “Spiritual Mother” (de Palacio 1952: 38), and after her death in 1952 she ascended “towards immortality” (Raggi 1953: 99), having “burned her life to build the New Argentina” (de García 1954: 11). Textbooks ultimately suggested that only the conjuncture between the heroism of the masses and the guidance of benevolent leadership would enable national development.

Compared to the 1910s, the representation of European migration became more positive. During the 1940s and 1950s textbooks depicted Argentina as a *crisol de razas*, the local version
of the “melting pot.” Most descriptions focused on migrants of European decent. “Blond and brown kids, Italians with blue eyes and Spaniards with dark hair, men and women from all parts come to Argentina, in the hope of [finding] a world of peace and calm, where the dignity of work is respected” (de García 1954: 164). Peronist textbooks thus fused a class-based understanding of the national community with the idea of Argentina as a white and European nation. The destination of the crisol de razas continued to be the assimilation into a Hispanic culture (de García 1954: 115).

In 1955 a military coup ousted Perón from government. The new educational authorities were quick to remove Peronist textbooks from schools. The texts published during the subsequent decades avoided any mentioning of Perón and Evita. At the same time, representations of national identity and history largely resembled those found in Peronist textbooks. Texts emphasized the Hispanic roots of Argentina, and accounts of national history continued to stress the agency of “the people,” especially in struggles against Spanish colonial rule. Similar to Mexico, major changes in textbook content only unfolded again during the 1980s and 1990s. From this period onwards, state-approved textbooks began to problematize questions about the national “we” and celebrated the recognition of cultural differences within the nation (Romero et al. 2004: 43, 49-64, 94-95, 168-169).

**Peru**

Comparable changes in textbook content unfolded much later in Peru, yet again in a context of subordinate mobilization and the decline of oligarchic power. During the 1960s textbooks began to emphasize history, language and religion as basic identity markers. “All of the Peruvians from the Coast, the Highlands, and the Jungle form the Peruvian nation, we all
speak Spanish, profess to Catholicism [and] celebrate the same heroes” (Venciendo 1960: 531). Similar to Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s, textbooks envisioned *mestizaje* as the crucial underpinning of this shared culture (Pons Muzzo 1961: 23).

The formation of a *mestizo* nation remained incomplete. Textbooks complained about “an alarming cultural diversity,” caused by the “unfinished process of ‘transculturation’” (Pons Muzzo: 1961: 16). “Let’s assume that we could unite [all Peruvians] on a large square. There would be, noisy, ten million people of different races, speaking different languages, belonging to different religious beliefs” (Peruanito 1964: 320). Those to blame for this lack of cohesion were indigenous people, whose insistence on maintaining their own “autochthonous culture” impeded their assimilation into a homogeneous national identity (Pons Muzzo: 1961: 16).

Notions of “transculturation” thus remained wedded to occidental cultural forms. White children of a middle or upper class background appeared as the main characters in textbooks, and their association with indigenous culture remained confined to the celebration of folklore and ethnic consumption (e.g., Coquito 196x: 233). Analogously, enlightened and benevolent individuals—most of them military leaders—remained the driving forces of national history (e.g., Pons Muzzo 1962: 57-67; Venciendo 1960: 449).

More dramatic shifts in textbook content unfolded during the 1970s when the Velasco military government initiated a period of substantial political, social, and ideological change. More than any previous government in modern Peruvian history, Velasco enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from traditional elites, and its ambitious reform program, most importantly agrarian reform, permanently weakened oligarchic domination.

Educational authorities designed a new generation of primary school texts that portrayed “the people”—conceived of as “workers, peasants, and the middle sectors” (Fichas 1974b:
—as constituting the core of the national community. Similar to Mexico and Argentina, visual representations focused on children whose parents worked as carpenters, farmers, or small shopkeepers (e.g., Amigo 1976; Paseo 1976). This class-based understanding of national identity also transformed representations of Peru’s racial divisions. Textbooks understood indigenous people primarily as peasants and workers, while the “oligarchy” emerged as the most important internal other (Fichas 1974a: 3, 31.4; 1974b: 5.3).

During the 1970s textbooks also became less celebratory when assessing the potentials of mestizaje. Texts described “transculturation” between Spain and indigenous societies as a violent process that led to the distortion of the previously existing national identity (Fichas 1974b: 1.3). Art forms, cognitive scripts, and normative orientations found among indigenous peoples in the Andes appeared as manifestations of an “authentic” national culture. The origins of Peru were located in the Inca Empire. “A long time ago Peru was governed by kings called the Incas. Peru was then called the Inca Empire” (Peruanito 1974: 27).

Accounts of the colonial period reinforced Peru’s precolonial origins. Similar to Mexico, textbooks represented Spanish colonialism as a period of foreign domination and emphasized that Spanish authorities faced considerable resistance from below. “Peruvians always fought against the Spanish” (Fichas 1974a:31.3) and “rose up against the abuse colonial authorities committed against indigenous people” (Venciendo 1976: 111). Túpac Amaru emerged as the “Peruvian precursor” of national independence (Venciendo 1976: 112-115; Amigo 1976). “General San Martin declared the Independence of Peru, but the Peruvian people had already fought for many years to be free. The first great revolution that took place in America against Spain was orchestrated by José Gabriel Condorcanqui Túpac Amaru [italics in text]” (Peruanito 1974: 155). As shown in Illustration 3, Túpac Amaru’s prominence as a central national hero
also manifested itself in his increased visibility. He was credited for channeling the “state of consistent rebellion” against Spanish colonial rule found among popular classes into a major insurgency (Fichas 1974b: 15.2).

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In 1975 a dissident group of from within the military removed Velasco from power, and soon thereafter the educational reform initiated under his government stalled. Many of the textbooks published during the 1960s regained state approval and were used together with the texts published under Velasco, as schools did not witness textbook removal efforts comparable to Argentina in 1955 (Portocarrero and Oliart 1989: 89-93). Similar to Mexico and Argentina, another round of substantial textbook changes unfolded again during the 1990s, when a new generation of textbooks began to depict Peru as a multiethnic nation and emphasized the recognition of cultural differences as integral part of the national project (García 2005: 78-83).

**Teachers and the Negotiation of Nationhood**

From a comparative vantage point, state-approved textbooks published in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru during the mid-20th century exhibited strikingly similar patterns of change. Yet, the negotiation of those changes by teachers varied substantially across the three countries.

*Mexico*

During the 1920s and 1930s the new postrevolutionary state elites saw schooling as the key to integrating a conflict-stricken society. Teachers represented the vanguard in transforming
and nationalizing Mexico’s highly mobilized subordinate classes. And the majority of teachers indeed embraced their officially ascribed role as “messengers” of the revolution (Rockwell 2007: 181, 211, 222; Vaughan 1997: 6-7, 47, 103, 190-191).

Yet, the actual role played by teachers in local communities varied. Especially in the central and western Highlands, teachers acted as mediators that actively promoted the official agenda of national development, while simultaneously softening official policies, especially the anti-religious zeal of “socialist education.” In other regions, especially in indigenous communities of Northern Mexico and Chiapas, teachers tended to emphasize their cultural superiority and understood themselves as direct agents of the state, often provoking substantial community resistance (Vaughan 1997: 103-104, 117-118, 152-153, 178-181; Lewis 2001: 58-83). Moreover, official image and teacher self understandings contrasted with their socioeconomic situation. In postrevolutionary Mexico teaching remained a profession with low salaries and social prestige. Federal teachers were somewhat better paid than state teachers employed by provincial governments, yet both usually came from a modest middle class background (Vaughan 1997: 12; Rockwell 2007: 178, 186).

Despite these social and regional differences, teachers across Mexico were largely sympathetic to the textbook changes enacted during the 1920s and 1930s. Studies show that teachers in Puebla (Vaughan 1997: 92-93, 125), Sonora (Vaughan 1997: 182-184), Tlaxcala (Rockwell 2007: 210-217), and Chiapas (Lewis 2001: 66-71) embraced the idea of Mexico as a mestizo nation and class-based interpretations of national history. The teacher testimonies from Tabasco and Mexico City reviewed here further support these findings. Interviewees depicted subordinate sectors as the main forces in shaping Mexico’s fate, portrayed class conflict as decisive for Mexico’s historical trajectory, and projected the nation back into the precolonial
period. Before Spanish colonialism “the Mexicans were the owners of the land,” while subsequently “large Spanish landowners, together with the clergy, took away the lands of the people.” Colonial exploitation and oppression was met by popular resistance. “The great majority of the Mexican people, from their initial movements onwards, were against Spanish colonialism.”

There was a congruence between conceptions of nationhood found among teachers and their classroom practices. Most teachers tended to use the new educational materials. For instance, under Cárdenas the SEP published Simiente, a new series of introductory texts to reading and writing. These texts contained a rich popular iconography and “always talked about agrarianism and the redistribution of land.” Most of the interviewees reported their frequent use of Simiente, a pattern also found by Mary Kay Vaughan (1997: 97, 182). If teachers voiced concerns, they usually complained about the lack of educational materials. As one teacher remembers, textbooks often “were not available, the problem was that they were very scarce.”

Thus, teachers tended to embrace the new textbook contents and incorporate them into their teaching practices, yet at times they faced difficulties in accessing these materials.

The public education system worked somewhat better with respect to the training of schoolteachers. During the 1930s state authorities made teacher training one of their highest priorities, and inculcating popular conceptions of nationhood constituted a persistent goal (Civera 2004: 7-8). Participants remembered training institutes as advancing “an ideology in

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8 Public secondary school teacher (history), Mexico City, March 6, 1979
9 Public secondary school teacher (history), Mexico City, March 6, 1979
10 Public primary school teacher, Emiliano Zapata (Tabasco), November 30, 1979
11 Public primary school teacher, Villahermosa, May 2, 1979
favor of the workers, the peasants, in defense of the proletariat.”

Their own role as teachers was to improve “the lot of the popular masses...so that they were liberated.”

Another major objective of these trainings was the professionalization of a largely inexperienced and young teaching body. Frequent attendance and good grades would improve salary and career perspectives. Again, teacher reaction was predominantly positive. Especially rural teachers, often feeling not fully prepared for their task, tended to embrace the new training programs and their ideological contents.

Argentina

Perón (1946-1955) perceived schoolteachers as crucial contributors to the transformation of Argentina into an industrialized and cohesive society with a skilled labour force (Gvirtz 1991; Plotkin 2002: 96; Escude 1990: 169-171). In their self understandings teachers active during the 1940s and 1950s tended to exhibited a strong patriotic orientation and conceive of themselves as “apostles of knowledge.” They also converged in their anti-Peronism.

In comparison to Mexico under Cárdenas, Argentinean teachers received quite generous salaries that placed them squarely into the middle class. Similar to Mexico, federal teachers were significantly better paid than state teachers, leading to recurrent tensions between these two factions (Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993: 208-209, 225-227). Moreover, the local role of teachers varied. In rural areas, from Patagonia to Salta to the Chaco, public schools constituted the state institution par excellence and teachers played a central role in local life. They were mediators of

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12 Public primary school teacher, Villahermosa, May 1, 1979
13 Public primary school teacher, Villahermosa, May 2, 1979
14 Public primary school teacher, Villahermosa, May 3, 1979
official educational policies, and, often the only ones with a formal education, negotiated with the outside world on behalf of the community. In rural communities composed predominantly of indigenous peoples or European migrants, teachers usually remained more distant from local life, and their patriotic orientation was often met with hostility. Analogously, in the more urbanized Litoral teachers usually played a less central role in local communities and were less involved in the organization of extra-curricular activities (Artieda 1993: 307-308, 326-329, 333).

Yet, regardless of social differences and regional location, most of the major studies on the subject reveal widespread teacher opposition against Peronist educational policies (e.g., Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993: 226-228; Escudé 1990: 175-179). As a matter of fact, teachers largely opposed the new textbooks and training programs, and their ideological contents (Cucuzza and Somoza 2001: 214; Gvirtz 1996: 155-157). The primary sources consulted for this article provide a similar picture. Interviewees were alarmed about the introduction of new textbooks and complained that the new texts were “full of demagogy up to the last page.”15 Especially their persistent celebration of the Peronist government made them suspect. “These textbooks were simply an eulogy of everything Perón and Evita did.”16

The majority of teachers also rejected the celebration of the masses found in the new textbooks, noting that “mass politics and the theory of the dominant majority” would bear the danger of fostering “intolerance and coercion.”17 In their own understandings of national identity and history teachers viewed assimilation into a Hispanic national culture as key for achieving national progress (Artieda 1993: 321-323). “[Immigration] can to a certain degree

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15 Public primary school teacher, Buenos Aires, August 28, 2004
16 Public primary school teacher, Buenos Aires, August 11, 2004
17 La Obra, No. 486, October 15, 1949, p. 58x
divert the true sentiments of the Argentine nation,” which therefore made it important to “consolidate the ties of national cohesion by diffusing a culture [that is] authentically ours.”

Enlightened elites appeared as the driving force behind the nation’s fate and anchored most teachers’ accounts of Argentine history. For instance, San Martin appeared as “the brilliant securer of Argentina’s freedom and independence” and constituted “the greatest hero of our national history.”

Teacher opposition had real consequences for classroom activities. For instance, teachers only used a small amount of classroom time to discuss the new textbooks with students. Another strategy was to keep the old textbooks as part of a small library in the back of the classroom. As one teacher remembers, when asked by inspectors about these texts she responded by saying that “these are books from the students, books with stories that the students read over the weekend.” Finally, teachers often employed the new textbooks solely for grammar or orthographic exercises and did not further engage with their content (Gvirtz 1996: 157-162).

Teachers justified their opposition by pointing to the supposed authoritarianism of Perón. In their perspective Peronism undercut citizen’s democratic rights, a view reinforced by the fact that the Peronist government largely ignored the input of teachers and formed alternative associations to established teacher unions (Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993: 207-208, 227-228; Plotkin 2002: 101). Representing a common Argentinean middle class perspective during this period, teachers were also concerned about the increased public presence of popular sectors, the

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18 La Obra, No. 525, October 1, 1954, p. 392
19 La Obra, No. 440, July 25, 1946, p. 307
20 Public primary school teacher, Buenos Aires, August 11, 2004
21 Public primary school teacher, Buenos Aires, August 28, 2004
main supporters of Perón. Especially non-white immigrants from the interior of the country posed a threat to the idea of Argentina as a white and largely European nation. “Perón brought people from the interior, and they installed themselves in the shantytowns (villas) around the city. These *cabecitas negras*\(^{22}\) even took baths in the fountain of the Plaza de Mayo!”\(^{23}\)

Another major factor in teacher opposition was their already well-developed identity as members of a circumscribed status group (Artieda 1993: 319-321). In contrast to Mexico under Cárdenas, teachers in Argentina exhibited a strong sense of professional autonomy. They viewed the new educational policies under Perón as an interference in their work and an attack on their liberties to select their teaching materials according to their professional knowledge.\(^{24}\)

**Peru**

In Peru under Velasco teacher reception of the new texts was equally hostile, yet for other reasons than in Argentina. During the 1960s and 1970s both civilian and military governments hoped to achieve the modernization of Peru through the expansion of education. These efforts cumulated in the attempt of an encompassing educational reform by Velasco. Schoolteachers were seen as crucial in transforming established ideas about nationalism and development. At the same time, teachers nationwide were exposed to declining salaries and worsening working conditions. Moreover, as a profession teaching lost in prestige because it increasingly provided members of Peru’s subordinate race-class groups with a path for social ascendance (Angell 1982: 4, 7-9; Wilson 2007: 728).

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\(^{22}\) Literally translated as “little blackheads.” Racialized term for supporters of Perón, often non-white internal migrants from rural areas.

\(^{23}\) Public primary school teacher, Buenos Aires, August 28, 2004

\(^{24}\) Secondary school teacher (history), Buenos Aires, August 25, 2004
The literature indicates that the majority of Peruvian teachers embraced a class-based understanding of national history and fully identified Peru with the Inca Empire (Portocarrero and Oliart 1989: 113-114; Vargas 2005: 7-8; Wilson 2007: 727, 734). My own findings resonate with this assessment. Especially schoolteachers from a lower middleclass background with affinities to SUTEP (Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores de la Educación del Perú)—the major independent teacher union under the control of the Maoist party Patria Roja—were sympathetic to popular understandings of nationhood. As a representative of this faction suggests, the aim of his classes was “to approach the phenomenon of history from the perspective of the great social mobilizations from below.”

Túpac Amaru was considered the most important hero and “representative of Peruvian identity.”

Interviewees from an urban middleclass background articulated a different understanding of nationhood. This faction emphasized the political foundations of the national community. “The spine of a nation is a very good constitution.” Moreover, they viewed national history as driven by elites. As one of these teachers pointed out, Pizarro “conquered Peru. He took all our gold and took advantage of the fact that Huascar y Atahualpa [two rivaling Inca rulers at that time] fought each other.”

These distinct understandings of nationhood are related to important regional differences among teachers in Peru. Teachers working in urban areas tended to be more concerned with proper middle class appearance and maintained a distance to students and their parents. Rural teachers usually became more involved in the communities they worked in. Similar to

25 Public school teacher, Lima, March 27, 2004
26 Public school teacher, Lima, March 24, 2004
27 Private school teacher, Lima, March 29, 2004
28 Private school teacher, Lima, April 17, 2004
postrevolutionary Mexico, the majority of teachers in the countryside acted as local intellectuals and mediators between local communities and larger society, while a minority maintained a more paternalistic attitude and acted as *mistis*—mestizos convinced of their own racial and cultural superiority (Contreras 1996; Montero 1990).

Yet again, these social and regional differences among teachers went along with crucial similarities in their classroom practices. Across Peru, teachers from different backgrounds opposed the new educational materials put forward by the military government (Wilson 2001: 328-330; see also Portocarrero and Oliart 1989: 117-118). Both rural and urban teachers portrayed the top-down character of the Velasco educational reforms as an offense against their professional autonomy and resisted the implementation of new educational materials, even when the new textbooks were in sync with their own conceptions of nationhood. As a matter of fact, teachers often sought to circumvent textbook contents, for instance by dedicating only minimal classroom time to the official texts, or by supplementing textbook content with opposing views from other sources, such as newspapers or their own texts.

One prominent example of teacher resistance against new textbooks was *Amigo*. The educational reform obliged primary school teachers to work with this new introduction to reading and writing. In the words of an interviewee from Lima, “all the pages [of *Amigo*]...were images of the profound Peru, of the rural Peru, and had nothing to do with groups of people that were administrators [or] bankers.”

Yet, even teachers actively involved with SUTEP did not like to work with *Amigo* because of its new approach to teaching literacy and preferred the traditional *Coquito* instead. In many cases, teachers made students buy *Coquito*, while the ministry of education distributed *Amigo* for free. Only when supervisors came, they used *Amigo*.

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29 Private school teacher, Lima, April 7, 2004
“Every time supervisors came around, all the children had ‘[Amigo]’ on their desks. But when the supervisors were gone, the teacher took out Coquito again and worked with Coquito.”  

One major factor in teacher opposition against the new educational materials was the authoritarianism of the military government (Angel 1982: 4; Wilson 2001: 328). “The fundamental reason why Velasco’s project did not pan out was that he did not trust the people, and did not make them the protagonists of his reforms…with the educational reform it was the same. The teachers were told: ‘Here you have the reform, and now you have to apply it!'”  

Moreover, beyond their political rights as citizens, it was especially their professional identity as teachers that required their inclusion in the reform process. Thus, similar to Argentina, teachers in Peru perceived the new policies and educational materials as an insult on their professional autonomy.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the role of schooling in the construction of nationhood in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru. An analysis of school textbooks has provided a window at state-sponsored ideas about national identity and history. An analysis of the ideological outlooks and teaching practices of schoolteachers has revealed insights into the negotiation of those official national discourses in the classroom.

The main findings point to the importance of political and institutional factors in shaping nationalization efforts at schools. The striking similarities in how textbooks in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru changed in their representation of the nation—over the course of the 20th century state-approved texts shifted from political and elitist to cultural and class-based

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30 Public school teacher, Lima, March 29, 2004

31 Public school teacher, Lima, April 2, 2004
understandings of nationhood—support arguments about a general trend of convergence in curriculum development over the last hundred years (Frank et al. 2000). Comparable changes in textbook content were not limited to these three countries, but could be observed across Latin America (e.g., Harwich Vallenilla 1991; Luna Tamayo 2001), and even on a global scale (Schissler and Soysal 2005).

Yet, country-specific patterns, especially with respect to when textbooks adopted different understandings of national identity and history, and how schoolteachers reacted to them, also indicate the importance of domestic factors behind curriculum development (Dierkes 2005; vom Hau 2008). In Mexico, Argentina, and Peru, changing political configurations—whether brought about by subordinate mobilization, regime change, or revolution—raised new questions about national inclusion and historical agency, and made previously established framings of nationhood more difficult to sustain.

Teacher reactions to the new educational materials point to the critical role of state institutional development. In all three countries, teachers varied in their political orientation, community involvement, and socioeconomic background. Yet, by themselves these variations cannot account for how Mexican, Argentinean, and Peruvian schoolteachers reacted to the textbook changes. In Argentina, teacher resistance against Peronist textbooks was to an important extent motivated by their opposition against Peronism and a well-developed sense of professional autonomy. These two factors were closely related to their prior socialization within an established educational system. In contrast to Mexico’s newly recruited teachers in a public school system under construction, Argentinean teachers had an already well-established career path with clear guidelines for promotion. They were also paid a decent salary, which positioned them within the ranks of the middle class. Likewise, the majority of Peruvian teachers had
already entered the profession before the military government came to power in 1968, and their sense of professional autonomy and level of organization provided them with the capacity to challenge the Velasco reforms (vom Hau 2008).

An exclusive focus on textbooks and teachers also has its limitations. First, the modern classroom includes a variety of other artifacts—most prominently maps, wall charts, and photographs—that are equally involved in the national framing of lived experience. Expressions of nationhood may also be negotiated outside the classroom, at school-wide events and ceremonies, such flag pledges and patriotic festivals, or at visual displays found in school spaces, such as memorials and name plaques. As Grosvenor (1999) suggests, the cumulative effects and relative importance of the value messages and cognitive orientations negotiated at schools have received relatively little scholarly attention and therefore warrant future research.

Moreover, what is taught in the classroom is distinct from the messages students take home. Their learning experience is obviously influenced by textbooks and how teachers select, package, and present these texts, yet it is also shaped by the outlooks students already bring to school. National socialization at home may reinforce or counteract the particular visions of national identity and history advanced in schools. Recent research on the relationship between parents and teachers (e.g., Levinson 2001; Vaughan 1997) provides a promising starting point to further unpack the interaction between different agents of national socialization.

Second, treating textbook content as a window at state-sponsored ideas about national identity and history is only one of many possible approaches to the study of textbooks. While the ‘political hand’ of the state certainly plays a central role, textbook production ultimately is a multifaceted process that—among others—involves authors, editing houses, educational authorities and teacher associations. In turn, these actors draw on a variety of broader
pedagogical, philosophical, ideological discourses (Ossenbach and Somoza 2001). For example, during the late 19th century most textbooks resembled religious catechisms, written in the style of a supposed dialogue between an all-knowing author and a fictive student. During the first half of the 20th century school texts became structured around a narrative with plot and characters, and sought to be of greater visual appeal. The driving forces behind those shifts in textbook form were global changes in pedagogical styles and the increasing professionalization of textbook authorship.

Finally, a growing literature emphasizes the significance of gender in the construction of Latin American nationalisms (e.g., Gutiérrez Chong 2007; see also Yuval-Davis 1997). Even a cursory review reveals that the conceptions of nationhood conveyed in Mexican, Argentinean, and Peruvian textbooks were inherently gendered. In many texts the nation appeared as embodied by a female figure, *La Patria*, that had to be protected by male agents, whether enlightened elites or popular movements. Analogously, the shift towards cultural and class-based ideas about national identity did not change the established gender hierarchy displayed in textbooks. Female figures remained largely absent from descriptions of national history. Another extension of this research would thus be to focus on gender as an analytical category.

Beyond these limitations, however, what this article does provide is an analytical grid for the comparative study of nationalism and schooling in Latin America. For example, textbook representations of Spanish colonialism found in Ecuador and Venezuela (Harwich Vallenilla 1991; Luna Tamayo 2001) were similarly structured around the activities and outlooks of Spanish conquerors and indigenous rulers. Analogously, studies on textbooks in Bolivia after 1952 and Brazil under Vargas indicate that during these periods “the people” emerged as protagonists of national history (Nava 2006; Luykx 1998). Thus, the framework developed here
for examining the nexus between schooling in the construction of nationhood in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru opens up a starting point for synthesizing this literature and systematically comparing national socialization in Latin America.
Appendix: School Textbooks Cited


Lainé, Ramón. 1890. *Catecismo de historia general de Méjico*. Mexico City: Tipografía "La Providencia".


Sierra, Justo. 1922 [1894]. *Historia patria*. Mexico City: Secretaria de Educación Pública.


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