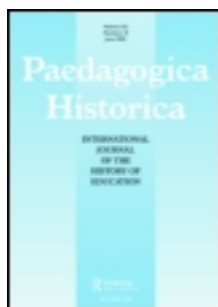


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### Formación de nación y educación

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Formación de nación y educación**, by Alejandro Álvarez Gallego, Bogotá-Colombia, Grupo Historia de la Práctica Pedagógica, 2010, 160 pp., €23.73 (paperback), ISBN: 978-958-665-155-4

The author of this book, Alejandro Álvarez, is a professor at the National Pedagogical University of Bogotá, and his works are directly related to the *Grupo Historia de la Práctica Pedagógica*, a long-standing inter-university group of renowned influence in Colombian educational circles. *Formación de nación y educación* is part of Álvarez's doctoral thesis, which he wishes to bring to public attention in this and further publications.<sup>1</sup> The book makes up only a small part of his thesis, incidentally, and is circumscribed to one issue in a specific period: the construction of the Colombian national identity in the first half of the twentieth century, considering nationalism as a strategy of power, in the interests of which education constituted a central element in the necessary task of nationalisation of people's consciences. Álvarez's thesis as a whole, however, contains more aspects and analyses that could well aid the reader in better understanding what is unfolded in this short book.

The fact that "education was at the centre of the nationalistic project" (p. 15) is well-known, so that the statement that follows, "In the history of education and pedagogy this approach is also a novelty", seems to be taking things a bit far. On the contrary, the nationalising function of schooling has attracted the attention of a good number of scholars in different parts of Europe and America. In the introduction to Álvarez's book itself, Professor Ossenbach points out the central importance of the relation between nationalisation and education in the emerging Latin-American production of history of education, a phenomenon also recognised in the bibliography managed by Álvarez. Without resorting to bibliographic references, I would add that there are several Spanish, French and North-American authors who have dealt with the construction of national identity through education. Therefore, the first thing I would say about Álvarez's book is that it contributes towards enriching a wide range of works dealing with the introduction of social sciences into teaching projects with the evident political and cultural intention of shaping the national conscience of the children and youths going through the education system. Nevertheless, in *Formación de nación y educación*, we find much more of the former than of the latter (education). The book is, above all, concerned with the economic, social and political avatars that framed the creation of nationalistic

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<sup>1</sup>The aforementioned thesis, entitled "Ciencias Sociales, escuela y nación: Colombia 1930–1960", was directed by Gabriela Ossenbach and was read in 2008 at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Madrid). Some information about the thesis has come to my attention from other sources. To be precise, this book comprises the introduction and the first chapter of the thesis.

discourses in Colombia. In its pages appear speeches of leaders and scholars of different leanings, but not the (promised) analysis of the construction of social sciences, nor the reflection in the classrooms of those sciences which, as the author says, sprang up from nationalistic debate (history, geography, anthropology, archaeology, etc.).

Nationalism, for the Colombian professor, has its expression in a relatively short time, between the two main wars of the twentieth century (p. 17),<sup>2</sup> during which a pedagogic process of nationalisation of the past, the territory and the people was produced. This hypothesis is reinforced with the idea that in formation of the nation-state during the nineteenth century, the illustrated project acquired a more universal form of emancipation, and so, strictly speaking, it cannot be characterised as nationalistic. On the other hand, from the 1960s onwards, the *raison d'être* of nationalisms would vanish in a globalised world. Consequently, this division of the contemporary societies, which, according to the author, is partially in debt to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,<sup>3</sup> would have its reflection in a political-pedagogical network developed in three phases: school of the Enlightenment, creator of citizenship (nineteenth century), school at the service of nationalistic doctrines (1930–1960) and a “globalised” school prepared to face other challenges in which nationalism no longer has a significant presence. In my view, Álvarez’s periodisation presents serious difficulties in the face of historical and educational facts as well as with theses put forward by other authors. To put it simply, I do not believe that nationalistic ideals were absent throughout the construction of the nation-state and in the emerging school systems accompanying the process, nor that those ideals have been disappearing from the dominant culture and education since the Second World War. I disagree with the idea of periodisation, especially if the three phases proposed by Álvarez are made for world-wide application. Certainly, the Colombian case, like others in Latin America, has its peculiarities, and Álvarez gathers and emphasises this. It should not be forgotten that Colombia developed at the beginning of the twentieth century from the position of a very weak nation-state, from a past of violent civil and partisan confrontations, which did not serve the nation as a unifying force. Neither is it strange that during the period studied, the question of Colombian nationalism was addressed in the most radical and diverse forms; European debate was similarly affected by the appearance of revolutionary forces of the Left.

So much for the first three chapters of the book. After an approximation made in chapter IV about the nationalistic tendencies in Latin America (cases of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico), Álvarez proceeds to describe the Colombian social movements in relation to nationalism (chapter V), to the analysis of different versions of nationalism (chapter VI) and to a brief argumentative reinforcement of the decadence of nationalism after the Second World War (chapter VII). Álvarez concludes that different nationalistic doctrines contributed to the creation of a national conscience relative to the past (history), the people and the territory. This triple

<sup>2</sup>Although, by the author’s own declaration, adjusting to the conventional boundary mark between concrete dates, the period studied would go from 1930 to 1960.

<sup>3</sup>I have not reached these conclusions after reading Hardt and Negri. Nevertheless, I do find interesting methodological suggestions of Foucaultian root in their book (*Empire*) as well as concepts such as *subaltern nationalism*, which would have been very useful in Álvarez’s work.

action resulted in the emergence of social sciences and a strategic function of pedagogy. Álvarez contributes a series of testimonies from politicians, intellectuals and social leaders which, accompanied by suitable contextual analysis, account for a process by which an X-ray of alliances appears among liberals, the *Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria* (UNIR) of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and peasant movements to configure a modernising project opposed to *yankee* imperialism and defender of national interests. In this respect, the author follows Daniel Pécaut closely (in Latin America, the French author has become an indispensable reference) and, in chapter VI, classification and characterisation of various nationalistic doctrines in Colombia is offered: modernist, *centenaristas*, *nuevos*, liberal, conservative, catholic and *indigenista* (defender of the indigenous culture in Latin America). This is the richest and most interesting chapter because it shows the ideological tensions between forces and interests expressed through ideas about the Colombian nation and its unity.

As also occurs in the ideology about the homeland made by other elites in other parts of the world, education inevitably appears as a way of forging different ideals. So a considerable number of educational references appear in the pages of the book but as theoretical elements of the political or academic sphere, which make pronouncements on the functions of the school system and the knowledge it should impart. However, as is well-known, political and bureaucratic truth and logic is at odds with the scientific and practical aspects of schooling. The three spheres maintain a constitutive autonomy. This book shows that Álvarez knows the currents of the social history of curricula and a cultural history of education that deny any possible harmonious relationship between ideological constructions, scientific knowledge and the school knowledge. I have even found that many quotations from the most renowned authors of such currents appear in alluvium in Álvarez's original investigation (B. Bernstein, M. Apple, S. Popkewitz, Y. Chevallard, A. Chervel, I. Goodson and several more).

However, after reading this book, I have the impression that there is a mechanical driving belt, without transformations or recontextualisations, among nationalist rhetoric, social sciences and school knowledge. In the end, I have not seen that those currents of history of school knowledge have had an application or a refined methodological deployment of its potential in the work reviewed. Perhaps this is due to Álvarez breaking up his (certainly very meritorious) PhD thesis into successive publications in an attempt to make it public.<sup>4</sup> A clear, well-balanced summary of the whole of his thesis, possibly a later rewriting, would have been a more valuable contribution to the history of education that is emerging in the international arena.

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<sup>4</sup>After writing this review, it has come to my attention that on the Internet, Álvarez has published his thesis in *Editorial Académica Española*, and it is available online at <http://www.morebooks.es/>. I am obliged to report this fact without the need to adjust the contents of this review.