

“And That’s When the Main Blow Came”

FELIPE CORTÉS MARTÍNEZ, who in the 1950s studied and later taught at the rural normal of El Mexe, located in the central state of Hidalgo, considers the first attacks on these schools to have come in 1940: “It’s not the same to have [Ávila] Camacho as president as it was to have Cárdenas. And that’s when the main blow came, when they took away socialist education.”¹ Indeed, the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho, who took office in December 1940, signaled a rightward shift in the course of Mexico’s revolutionary project. Social reforms had already slowed significantly after 1938, the year President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized Mexico’s oil industry, an act considered the culmination of his progressive policies. Still, President Ávila Camacho’s conservative direction had important repercussions for Mexico’s educational system as his administration implemented a series of changes that privileged urban over rural schools, transformed the character of the countryside’s teachers, ended coeducation in boarding schools, and overturned socialist education.

The international context precipitated by World War II facilitated a change in the Mexican government’s rhetoric from emphasizing social justice to privileging national unity. This shift had important policy implications as subsequent regimes replaced wealth redistribution with urban infrastructural

development. The battles between church and state of the 1920s and 1930s drew to a close as President Ávila Camacho publicly declared himself a “believer,” marking a stark departure from earlier regimes that held strictly secular positions. In this way, the president initiated a *modus vivendi* with the Catholic Church, which soon found common cause with a state whose discourse became increasingly anticommunist. In addition to openly proclaiming his Catholic faith, Ávila Camacho declared shortly before taking office that he was a democrat, not a socialist. In his government there would be no communists.² His successor, President Miguel Alemán (1946–52), went even further. His administration actively persecuted communists, a label that, under the Cold War framework, was broadly applied to popular leaders, dissidents, or critics. Soon after taking office, Alemán created the Federal Security Directorate, an agency modeled after the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and ostensibly charged with protecting national security. Instead, it infiltrated, spied on, and repressed campesinos, workers, students, and even official organizations.³ The country’s major newspapers, such as *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, whose owners had held a fierce anticommunist line since the 1920s, likewise drew few distinctions among Mexico’s diverse leftist groups, labeling most forms of popular organizing communist. These newspapers operated with close ties to the ruling inner circle, and their editorial lines, paid advertisements, and numerous articles—some written in the United States—uncritically reproduced the Cold War’s bellicose language and magnified the supposed communist threat.⁴

The education system, too, began to undergo a series of changes. Under a framework of modernization and professionalization, the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) implemented curricular reforms to make rural normales more like their urban counterparts. This meant emphasizing academic instruction over community development, farming expertise, and the basic set of trade skills the institutions had previously prioritized. Funding for rural normales was itself jeopardized. No longer the regime’s priority, the number of schools decreased. Those that remained increasingly needed student mobilization to preserve what was already a precarious existence. Whereas rural teachers had previously held a special place in the educational system, the SEP reformulated the pay and benefits structure to reward professional training over years of service.⁵ This new system relegated rural teachers—who either had little formal training or took their jobs before attaining their degree, or whose remote location hampered their ability to enroll in professional development courses—to the bottom rung of the pay scale. Accompanying these changes was a deliberate transformation in rural teachers’

prescribed role. Their social leadership, so touted by the early educational architects, became civic duty: rather than advocating for the working class or rural communities, teachers were to limit their role to the classroom and emphasize self-realization over political militancy.⁶

But the fervor of the previous two decades, especially in the countryside during the Cárdenas years, had created an imprint that was difficult to erase. While discourse and policy at the top changed, the state could not easily transform the ideals and dynamics of educators working on the ground. Despite a changing context in which national unity replaced social justice as the official operative discourse, the rural normales preserved the more radical ideals of the revolution, making them bulwarks of Cardenismo, socialism, and justice for the poor. This process took place, this chapter argues, for three interrelated reasons. First, socialist education had grown deep roots in these institutions as it provided an explanation for the existence of poverty, emphasized its unjust nature, and charged its graduates with changing the conditions that produced it. Moreover, socialism offered a language to challenge the state's narrow definition of modernity, which assumed that support for industry would produce social equity. Second, student participation as a mainstay of institutional reproduction at rural normales reinforced a collectivist logic that normalistas soon internalized as a strategy of struggle. Appeals for students to identify with their school's integrity worked, though not necessarily as the SEP intended. Directives that students be mindful of the institutional reputation and thus adhere to the discipline the authorities demanded clashed with the need to preserve the normales' very existence. The schools' woeful underfunding led students to mobilize for basic improvements with tactics such as strikes that inherently challenged authority and drew attention to the normalistas as unruly subjects. Third, and finally, in the course of such struggles, the Mexican Federation of Socialist Campesino Students (FECSM), the rural normales' student federation, increasingly consolidated its power, holding steadfastly to a socialist framework even as the SEP purged communists from the administrative ranks. The FECSM gradually translated the say students had in quotidian school norms into political power and increasingly prioritized ideological formation. As the political context became more hostile to the poor's vindications—first because national unity to confront the fascists demanded restraint and then because the Cold War rendered the poor's demands subversive—rural normalistas blazed a path that increasingly diverged from that set by the SEP. In so doing, the rural normales developed a unique political culture in which

student action, socialist discourse, and justice for the countryside became inextricably linked.

“THE GREAT CALAMITY”

The retreat from the progressive policies of the 1930s took various forms. Toward the end of his term, Cárdenas’s reforms had already slowed as capital flexed its muscle, making evident the limits of state autonomy.⁷ Cárdenas’s conciliatory policies included the choice of Ávila Camacho as his successor. Upon taking office, the new president emphasized that national unity would structure policy and would be the path to “honor and bolster the high moral values of the Mexican family.”⁸ Class struggle as an analytical framework and popular vindication as a collective goal were no longer officially sanctioned ideas. Whereas Cardenista reforms had challenged the sacred right to private property and asserted Mexico’s economic nationalism, Ávila Camacho sought a closer relationship to the business sector and to the United States, appealing to a continental unity that would create a “nobler and more just Christian international order.”⁹ *Modernization* became the new buzzword and signaled a systematic abandonment of the countryside.

These changes affected the SEP almost immediately. This agency had come to house numerous socialists, who saw in the doctrine an opportunity to address the countryside’s historical inequality. Luis Sánchez Pontón, for example, who came from the Cardenista tradition and headed the SEP as President Ávila Camacho began his term in office, defended socialist education and attempted to clarify, if tone down, its meaning. He upheld an educational philosophy committed to collective over individual rights, one that strengthened the “ideals of justice, fraternity, and equitable distribution of wealth” and based itself on the progressive notions of science.¹⁰ Sánchez Pontón reiterated the ideals of the revolutionary school as linked to work and democracy and counterposed it to the “school of indifference,” which, he declared, produced “erudite, pompous individuals who fancied themselves geniuses.”¹¹ Despite a language that framed allusions to socialism within the Mexican context and denied it was a foreign-inspired doctrine, right-wing protestations, emboldened by the new president’s moderate stance, saw a new light. That an incident at a rural normal led Minister Sánchez Pontón to resign exemplifies the central place of these institutions in the battle against radical education.

In 1941 students from the rural normal of Ayotzinapa in the coastal state of Guerrero initiated a strike demanding the resignation of the school’s

principal, Carlos Pérez Guerrero, whom they characterized as authoritarian and accused of violating numerous regulations set forth in the normales' governing statutes. According to the students, Pérez Guerrero lived in the neighboring town of Tixtla rather than at the school as required, did not offer the obligatory number of classes, and made decisions with utter disregard for the normal's governing council.¹² In response to the strike, the director circulated rumors—which the national press eagerly published—that students at Ayotzinapa had acted in a blatantly unpatriotic manner against the national insignia. In the version published by newspapers, the normalistas had taken the Mexican flag, stomped on it, burned it, and in its place flown the anarcho-syndicalist red-and-black flag. Protest letters poured into the president's office denouncing the school's adherence to a "Muscovite doctrine" and its invasion by communist cells.¹³

There was never any proof that these events transpired in this way. The story's origins lay in a ceremony held the previous school year in Mexico City, where President Cárdenas gifted students the nation's flag to fly on the school grounds. Awaiting the local ceremony to deliver that flag to Ayotzinapa's principal—which owing to the school's vacation and later its strike, never took place—the student who received the flag folded it up and kept it with his personal belongings. Under Mexican law, this represented an offense to the national symbol, but it in no way approached the gravity of the charges levied in the press. Still, seven teachers and two staff members were fired, and six students were expelled. All were jailed.¹⁴ When their peers protested their detention by mounting a strike, the state governor sent the local army battalion to dislodge the students from the school. Thorough in his job, the commanding coronel ordered additional detentions, including, according to a former school director, seizing the portrait of Karl Marx that hung on the cafeteria's wall. "The Russian communist leader" would be dealt with in Iguala's military headquarters.¹⁵

Various organizations as well as student associations from other rural normales wrote to the president declaring solidarity with the jailed students, staff, and teachers. Student statements emphasized their loyalty to the government, and a few stated that they had even campaigned in favor of President Ávila Camacho.¹⁶ It was the school director, declared the "Ricardo Flores Magón" student association of Ayotzinapa, who was a traitor to the nation, for he had often spoken against Mexico's oil expropriation.¹⁷ Moreover, they continued, Pérez Guerrero had expressed nothing but contempt for their normal, maligning it as a center of prostitution, a characterization

consistent with the right's propaganda that rural normales were immoral, communist hubs replete with sordid sexual practices.¹⁸

The National Parents Union, an organization of private-school parents that had long fought socialist and secular education, in concert with Mexico's major newspapers (whose owners opposed the leftist tenets of the revolution), blamed Ayotzinapa's conflict on the minister of education himself. The attacks reached a crescendo when Minister Sánchez Pontón was called to answer before congress. Soon after, he resigned. The brigadier general Octavio Véjar Vázquez, who had no experience in education, replaced him. Supported by the right-wing National Action Party, the National Parents Union, and other right-wing groups such as the Freedom and Private Initiative Defense League, Véjar Vázquez immediately made explicit his goals: the elimination of socialist education and the mending of relations with the Catholic Church.¹⁹ The press welcomed him as a "young and dynamic professional." Reports in the national newspaper *Excelsior* expressed that just a few days after taking office, the new minister had established unity among the left, the right, and the private sector and highlighted his declaration to oversee "a school of love, not hate, one that will unify rather than divide us and promote a school that will affirm our nationality."²⁰

To normalistas, the removal of Sánchez Pontón was one in a series of public attacks against the rural normales. Writing on the subject two decades later, Hipólito Cárdenas Deloya, Ayotzinapa's former director, termed the incident "the great calamity." Not mincing words, he charged the "mercenary, whorish, and venal press" with representing the interests of those seeking to "outlaw the Communist Party! Elicit the confidence of Yanqui imperialism! . . . Use Ayotzinapa to punish teachers nationally! . . . And veer the Mexican Revolution off course."²¹ In his memoir—like in many others written by normalistas—Cárdenas Deloya, incensed by the claim that students had acted in an unpatriotic manner, details the virtues of the rural normales, defends their mission, and situates socialist education as the secret to their ability to serve the poor.

Even during its heyday, socialist education had been controversial. Liberals had attacked it based on the principle of academic freedom, while the right relied on a campaign of moral panic to incite opposition. The National Action Party, the National Parents Union, and Véjar Vázquez himself promoted an association between Marxists—long supporters of coeducation—and immorality. What, other than engage in improprieties, would the two sexes do in such close proximity? Under the communist watch, these groups argued, rural normales constituted centers of loose sexual mores where

students cavorted with one another, pregnancies abounded, teachers raped their pupils, and spurned lovers committed suicide or had abortions. Based on rumors of the most extreme kind—for example, that the grounds surrounding the rural normal of Tenería in Mexico State were littered with aborted fetuses—the right propagated the idea that young women, whether as temptresses or victims, did not belong in the same institutions as men.²²

While instances of unauthorized relationships, sexual harassment, and rape no doubt took place at rural normales, there is no evidence that these were more frequent than in the society at large. In fact, given the strict policing and students' ability to collectively mount a case against offending staff or teachers, such abuses were likely less common than at other institutions or workplaces. To the extent that it did occur, gender-based violence was a product not of rural normal culture but of the general subordination of women, which the socialists were, however imperfectly, committed to addressing. In fact, this was their whole argument for coeducation: equal instruction might help mitigate and eventually do away with "the inequality that has persisted across time and made women the slaves of men."²³ Significantly, some advocates of socialist education went even further. Not only should female students be trained in tasks traditionally considered men's realm—farming and small industry—but male students should take home economics courses.²⁴

Still, as is evident from Ayotzinapa director Cárdenas Deloya's characterization of the press as whorish, misogynist proclivities were not the exclusive domain of the right. Socialists responded to critiques of moral transgression with requests for more funding to better police student behavior (little was said about controlling abusive teachers, though engaging in a relationship with a student constituted grounds for faculty expulsion).²⁵ As it was, interactions between male and female students were strictly guarded, relationships were prohibited, and school medics were charged with monitoring female students' periods.²⁶ Significantly, when the right won the battle against coeducation, its allegations of immorality did not cease. Instead, they reappeared as campaigns against homosexuality, which supposedly abounded at rural normales. Students and teachers, for their part, rebuked such allegations based on heteronormative values and again demanded resources to prevent or police such relationships. For example, one director's request for more beds stated that the shortage meant students slept two to a bed, a practice that "elicited sexual vices."²⁷

The division of normales by gender in 1943 eased some parents' anxieties about sending their daughters to coeducational boarding schools, but

it ultimately undermined women's structural equality: once the schools were separated, female students were sent to smaller schools, and the better-equipped, larger institutions were reserved for male normalistas.²⁸ Tellingly, in their justification for ending coeducation, some school authorities proposed what amounted to female students subsidizing the reduced system-wide spending. Women's schools would not need cooks, washerwomen, or cleaning staff as the young girls were themselves equipped for such tasks, reasoned one report.²⁹

The campaign against coeducation and socialist pedagogy went hand in hand with the right's attempt to roll back Cardenismo. More broadly, the right fought the activist teacher, a figure, detractors maintained, who sowed a divisive dogma and substituted political agitation for learning. Such attacks set the stage for critiques of rural education itself. It was in the countryside that the most radical teachers taught and had been given the explicit charge to mobilize the poor. Because of socialist education, stated a 1942 *Novedades* article, "the Mexican government now had to contend with the sinister figure of a teacher saturated with doctrines of hate, engendered by the fetid Marx-Lenin-Stalin trilogy and transmitted to them by the virulent commies of the rural normales." The generation of teachers who graduated between 1937 and 1942, continued the piece, "carried within them the seeds of communism, poisoned consciences, and went on to destroy our valuable Mexican ideals."³⁰ The critique extended to the very conception of teachers as community leaders, a mainstay of the rural educational system. Since rural schools were political projects, reported another piece, "anyone with the desire to engage in demagogical practices could become a teacher." Or, rather, declared an official sardonically, they "could disguise themselves as a teacher" since their mandates "were not to teach but to do social work."³¹

It would take Ávila Camacho's entire *sexenio* (six-year term) to eliminate socialist education from national policy altogether. During his first state-of-the-union address, the president declared that Article 3's socialist provision needed a clearer definition. To this end, his education minister, Véjar Vázquez, announced a consultation with various sectors of the population, including state governments, university rectors, school principals, and parent associations. The minister of education said nothing about input from teachers, whose increasingly powerful unions distrusted a minister whose designs also sought to undermine their collective bargaining. Notably, rural educators were the most radical among a generally militant membership. In the 1930s one out of every eight teachers belonged to the Communist Party. And, as scholar David Raby reminds us, for every member of the Communist Party,

there were three or four sympathizers.³² In places like Guerrero, 90 percent of rural teachers were members of the Communist Party as well as four out of every six federal inspectors.³³

At a time when the official party sought to unite Mexico's educators under one union as a means of consolidating its control over them, Véjar Vázquez's battle against communists exacerbated preexisting differences among the various teachers' unions. The minister's intransigence—his hostility was directed not only against communists but against the unions themselves—ultimately led to his replacement in 1943. Before he stepped down, however, a December 1941 congressional reform of Article 3—undertaken without the consultation of the promised groups—replaced previous allusions to scientific socialism with *Mexican revolutionary socialism*, a term defined as a commitment to reduce social and economic inequality.³⁴

The right, unabashed in its disdain for materialist-based social critiques, celebrated an official SEP announcement that ordered the burning of a million textbooks, an act that would relegate this “demagogic educational material” to the past.³⁵ Such praise came from the very sector promoting national unity to fight the fascists, themselves also engaged in book burning. The church, for its part, offered Catholicism as the cultural element capable of bonding the country's classes in a common history and purpose. As would become more explicit once President Alemán took office in 1946, the government recognized Catholicism as a central component of the national identity whose focus on the family and social order coincided with the anticommunist rhetoric of the Cold War. Pope Pius XI's 1937 *Divini Redemptoris*, which expressed specific concern for Russia and Mexico “where Communism has been able to assert its power” and “striven by every possible means . . . to destroy Christian civilization,” would see renewed circulation.³⁶

In the meantime, the new education minister, Jaime Torres Bodet (1943–46), continued to roll back socialist education but in a subtler manner, with the political finesse his predecessor lacked. Unlike Véjar Vázquez, the new secretary had a background in education. A writer and diplomat, Torres Bodet had also worked closely with Vasconcelos during the latter's time as rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and had been in charge of the Library Department at the SEP. His relationship with Vasconcelos notwithstanding, Torres Bodet deemphasized teachers' community action and appealed instead to civic duty.³⁷ Ending socialist education also meant abandoning the community empowerment approach that had previously characterized the SEP's policy toward the countryside. Teachers' social responsibility would be to care about and support the needy, not to mobilize

the masses. But, above all, the teaching corps required professionalization. As the SEP sought to temper teachers' broad social role, it moved to reform their training programs, attempting to make rural normales more like urban ones. Not all references to socialism were immediately eliminated from Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution, but this shift paved the way for the final removal of any such language in 1946.³⁸

"A THOROUGH HOUSECLEANING"

While the SEP's leadership reflected the regime's rightward shift, consolidating the doctrine of national unity in an agency that housed so many communists would take time. A considerable number of teachers, especially rural ones, opposed the abandonment of socialist education. Their own humble background, the large proportion who belonged to or sympathized with the Communist Party, and the extent to which socialism provided a lens to understand educational shortcomings not as technical problems but as social ones motivated many in its defense.³⁹ Thus, even as the SEP handed down directives such as the 1945 reform that unified the curriculum at rural and urban normales, at national conferences, rural teacher delegates reaffirmed their training institutions as socialist, coeducational, regional, and agrarian.⁴⁰ The contradiction of declaring rural normales to be coeducational two years after their students had been separated by gender, and of affirming socialist education when such pedagogy had been all but eliminated, reveals the lack of consensus about Ávila Camacho's educational project.

Indeed, the president's own administration proceeded in a contradictory fashion. Education Minister Torres Bodet emphasized the need to professionalize the teaching body, yet he and other officials increasingly called on educators' sense of duty to compensate for the system's lack of resources. The hardship entailed by long hours, large classrooms, remote communities, and little pay should be counterbalanced by teachers' satisfaction at serving their fellow citizens. Through a labor of love, teachers were thus to subsidize a system it was the state's responsibility to maintain.

At rural normales, where, "against the basic principle of labor rights," pointed out one director, "we have always been asked to give all our time to the school," the 1945 urban-rural curricular unification spread teachers increasing thin by expanding the years of study from four to six and bringing a greater number of students to each institution.⁴¹ More and more educators found themselves teaching subjects for which they had no training or acting as dorm monitors or night and weekend guards even as they were paid

only for their classroom hours.⁴² Torres Bodet did worry about the conditions under which rural normales languished. “The dorms have no supplies. The shelves have no books. And what can we say about the laboratories and workshops that we are so often unable to equip with agricultural tools or farm animals?” he lamented. Such conditions would not only fail to produce the professional teachers the minister longed for but, more ominously in his mind, “intensify the resentment that invades the soul of the dispossessed.”⁴³ Subsequent SEP reports echoed this sentiment, noting that if youth were by nature rebellious, poor normalistas were especially so since “the immediate situation of misery in which they live makes them more sensitive . . . accentuating a great social resentment and increasing the general impulse to rebel.”⁴⁴ And yet the increased funding that Torres Bodet procured as education minister went predominantly to urban normales, even though the rural ones educated two-thirds of the country’s teachers.⁴⁵

As the years wore on, students demanded that SEP authorities increase the funding, their sense of indignation fueled by administrations that, despite presiding over unprecedented levels of economic growth, demanded austerity of rural normalistas. If President Ávila Camacho had slowed the precious revolutionary gains, his successor, Miguel Alemán, attacked them outright. His administration oversaw a policy that purged labor unions of their leftist leadership, surveilled and repressed activists, and applied the law of social dissolution—implemented during World War II to target Axis activity in Mexico—to criminalize leftist protest. Notoriously corrupt—amassing a personal fortune that led him to figure among the world’s richest men—Alemán reduced educational expenditures to 7.1 percent of the budget, the lowest since 1925.⁴⁶ If he expressed concern for education, it was only to better satisfy the country’s industrial needs.⁴⁷ Manuel Gual Vidal, Alemán’s education minister, whom a US consular report characterized as “the most conservative of recent incumbents in the position,” placed the very existence of rural normales in question.⁴⁸ The number of schools was already depleted—of the twenty-six that existed in 1940, only nineteen survived in 1948—and Gual Vidal also reduced the number of scholarships by 10 percent in 1950 (map 3.1).⁴⁹ When students responded with a strike, rather than negotiating with them, the minister closed the rural normales “in order to study and rehabilitate” them. Little interested in the FECSM’s proposals for ways to raise educational funds—taxing alcoholic beverages or instituting lottery sales—in a private meeting Gual Vidal declared that “a student on strike ceases to be a student and as a consequence is not in possession of his rights thereby.” He further threatened the movement leadership



MAP 3.1 Rural Normal Schools, 1948–1949

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|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 Ayotzinapa, Guerrero | 11 Salinas, Chihuahua |
| 2 Cañada Honda, Aguascalientes | 12 San Diego Tekax, Yucatán |
| 3 Colonia Matías Ramos, Zacatecas | 13 Tamatán, Tamaulipas |
| 4 Comitancillo, Oaxaca | 14 Tamazulapan, Oaxaca |
| 5 Galeana, Nuevo León | 15 Téneria, Mexico State |
| 6 Hecelchakán, Campeche | 16 Tiripetío, Michoacán |
| 7 Huamantla, Tlaxcala | 17 Tuxcueca, Jalisco |
| 8 El Mexe, Hidalgo | 18 Xalisco, Nayarit |
| 9 Palmira, Morelos | 19 Xochiapulco, Puebla |
| 10 Ricardo Flores Magón, Chihuahua | |

Source: Meneses Morales, *Tendencias educativas oficiales*, 3:377; and Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Memoria, 1949–1950*, 160–63.

Note: This map should be taken with a degree of caution since most documentation contains errors or inconsistencies.

with permanently shutting down the striking schools.⁵⁰ While at the national level the FECSM received hundreds of declarations of support from a variety of schools, teacher organizations, and agrarian communities, Gual Vidal's threats effectively deterred the National Polytechnic Institute and the National Teachers School from launching strikes in solidarity with the rural normales.⁵¹

Federal education inspectors proceeded to dislodge striking students whose takeover of the schools undermined Gual Vidal's closure mandate. But the SEP inspectors' task was hampered by the local support for normalistas. At the rural normal of Hecelchakán in Campeche, the education authorities noted that the parents association frustrated efforts to close the school since families maintained the cafeteria through their own food contributions. In Atequiza, Jalisco, the municipal president staunchly advocated on behalf of the striking students and, in an impassioned speech, declared that he would "take up arms to defend" them.⁵² While in places like Palmira, Morelos, official threats succeeded in having the majority of the student body oppose the strike, in Tamazulapan, Oaxaca, students would not "listen to reason," and the teaching staff exhibited a "remarkable indifference" to controlling them. Reporting such "insubordinate behavior" to parents proved equally futile since, even if they did not support their children's actions, families held little moral sway over them. In this context, lamented one school director, "one person could do little against the strike actions of all the students."⁵³

Such support for the normalista strike was not surprising; the schools' precarious conditions were obvious to anyone who looked. The SEP's general director of normal education, various school principals, and "neutral student circles" (presumably those not supporting the strike) agreed that the normalista demands—an increase in daily rations, building repairs, and better school equipment—were just.⁵⁴ However, on systemic issues—the reinstatement of coeducation, equalization of the pay structure between graduates of rural normales and those of the National Teachers School, and reinstatement of the scholarships Gual Vidal had cut, SEP authorities were unyielding.⁵⁵ After thirty-three days, the FECSM was ultimately forced to call off its strike. Despite the minister of education's refusal to negotiate, the SEP did respond to student pressure by implementing a slight increase in food rations and authorizing new funds for building repairs.⁵⁶

But true to his conservative reputation, Gual Vidal moved to identify and oust teachers and staff who had supported the normalista mobilization.⁵⁷ With national newspapers calling for "a thorough housecleaning," the president's office followed up with a broader campaign to counteract

socialist influence by creating the Institute of Youth, an organization that would “instill patriotism and democratic tradition in young people.”⁵⁸ The new organization was meant to undermine the Confederation of Mexican Youth, a national student coordinating body of which the FECSM was a part and which was affiliated with the International Union of Students and the World Federation of Democratic Youth.⁵⁹ The press greeted the initiative with great enthusiasm. An *Excelsior* editorial, for example, celebrated President Alemán’s directives as liberal measures that contrasted with “the totalitarian efforts that just a few years ago in Mexico sought to tie youth to the heavy shackles of Marxist dogma.”⁶⁰

The purging of leftists from the SEP continued under President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952–58) and his education minister, José Ángel Cenicerros, who, wrote the US ambassador to Mexico, “without any fuss or fanfare is weeding out and separating the Communist from the teaching force of the schools. He is not putting it on the grounds of Communism but merely as an administrative matter.”⁶¹ These measures affected high-ranking members such as the undersecretary of the SEP, José Gómez Robleda, who had reportedly been appointed to the position on the recommendation of former president Cárdenas. Robleda was condemned by reactionaries for his “communist plan” to adopt “intense propaganda among rural teachers” and disseminate “pedagogical principles that would predispose children to Marxist doctrine,” and Cenicerros scored a victory with his ouster.⁶²

José Santos Valdés, who in the 1940s and 1950s served as director at five different rural normales and in the 1960s was the SEP’s inspector and later supervisor of these institutions, wrote of socialist education, “We knew it was an insurmountable contradiction to carry out socialist education in a country with a system based on private property. But it offered a magnificent opportunity for the necessary creation of a consciousness that, among children and youth, would facilitate the change that Mexico’s revolutionaries longed for. The bourgeoisie understood this, and that’s why it mounted such fierce opposition.”⁶³ Indeed, despite the 1946 elimination of socialist education from Article 3 of the constitution, the right’s hostility to an education system emanating from the revolution continued. Significantly, this hostility now came from within the state itself as the SEP leadership sought to align policy with Cold War tenets that deemed most forms of leftist popular organizing communist. Given the education system’s centrality as a tool of social reproduction, the battle to define its parameters continued. So did the language of socialism. And here the rural normalistas experienced what elites called Marxist dogma in profoundly liberating ways.

A SPACE TO PERSIST

The common tropes in normalista narratives show how, before socialism functioned as an explanatory ideology for their own class position or the country's pervasive poverty, it served as a felt experience that helped make sense of their families' generations-long exploitation, the persistent obstacles in their quest for an education, and the possibility of collective action among a peer group whose common denominator was poverty. Here the FECSM served as a structuring and mobilizing body. Made up of representatives from the student association at each rural normal, the FECSM constituted the principal venue by which to channel normalista voices into a formal national organization recognized by the SEP. The student federation continued to uphold the Cardenista notion that rural schools were on the side of the poor and that as such the teacher had to be politicized.

Like other popular unions formed during the 1930s, the FECSM had officialist affiliations. As part of the Confederation of Mexican Youth, the counterpart to the Confederation of Mexican Workers and the National Campesino Confederation, organizations operating under the official party umbrella to harness and channel popular support for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the FECSM counted on state financial assistance for its annual conferences, which were frequently inaugurated by state governors, SEP officials, or municipal presidents. The FECSM leadership, moreover, had the right to miss class, schedule makeup exams, or spend a substantial amount of time at normales other than their own for the purposes of running the federation. Despite such measures, unlike the Confederation of Mexican Workers or the National Campesino Confederation, the FECSM did not develop into a clientelistic network delivering wholesale support for the PRI. While some of its leadership did go on to become state officials, the dynamics, ideology, and organizing strategies of the FECSM were so combative that in 1969 the government ceased to recognize it.

As discussed in chapter 2, the FECSM began as an organization advocating for the rights of campesino students. During Cárdenas's presidency this meant securing the newfound gains that enabled poor youth to access a teaching career. It also meant spreading the revolution's ideals of social justice, whose collectivist principles were frequently framed or understood as socialist. As the more conservative regimes of the 1940s and 1950s changed course, the FECSM sought to defend previous gains, combat attacks on Cardenismo, and maintain the rural normales' viability amid an increasingly hostile political climate. Because securing an education required con-

tinuous student action, the process produced a dialectic in which students both cherished the invaluable opportunity to study and refused to accept its unsettlingly precarious nature.

On the one hand, rural normales offered them conditions that, however modest, were for most an improvement on their home life.⁶⁴ This condition awakened in the youngsters a sense of possibility as they accessed spaces from which their families had historically been barred. Receiving a modest stipend and uniforms and being assured a meal three times a day gave them a glimpse of what it might mean to organize society along the logic of shared wealth. On the other hand, given the bare-bones character of rural normales, there was always a pressing need to improve their tenuous situation. This created a long-standing dynamic in which the FECSM mobilized to assure the schools' basic function and maintenance. Upon arrival, normalistas quickly learned—sometimes intuitively, sometimes as the deliberate result of FECSM organizing—that the chance to escape poverty lay in collective action. The FECSM's lessons in class struggle and revolutionary justice were hardly abstract; the students had but to examine their own family history. That history helps explain socialism's staying power at rural normales.

The memory troves of rural normalistas who studied from the 1930s through the 1960s include their families' experience in the late Porfiriato, the revolution, or the effervescence of Cardenismo. "I still experienced the cattle hacienda regime," recalled Mariano Orozco Álvarez, who was born in 1921 and spent his childhood on the Hacienda de Ojo de Agua in Michoacán's *tierra caliente* (hot, low-lying region), which, as he tells it, was replete with estates whose land grants dated to the colonial period. In 1938 Orozco attended the rural normal (then known as a regional campesino school) of Huetamo, which, he remembered, "the federal government [had] established on an expropriated parish. . . . Lázaro Cárdenas founded it for both men and women."⁶⁵ The location was replete with symbolism given the church's long history of siding with the landed oligarchy. That the government set up many other rural normales on expropriated haciendas further reinforced a sense of poetic justice. In the spaces that had previously exploited their ancestors, campesino youth would now receive an education.

Even for those who did not personally witness the hacienda system, their families' history provided a vivid foundation for their own experience. For example, José Ángel Aguirre Romero, who attended the rural normal of Salaces in the 1950s, related his story starting with his family's arrival in Nuevas Delicias, land they and other hacienda workers received after the revolution. To hear the detail with which Aguirre recounts the 1923 settling

of a community founded fourteen years before his birth, one would think he had witnessed it himself. Those who came to Nuevas Delicias previously “didn’t own the land, they had to share everything they farmed with the boss, and generally they didn’t have enough to survive, not even to eat. They lived in crowded rooms, shacks, on top of one another.” To get to their new land, “men, women, and children walked; they walked and walked, for three days, until they got to a prairie, an inhospitable place. . . . The people were all poor; some managed to bring a cow or two, spurring them along. Others not even that. Some came with those metal carts that have two wheels and are pulled by a burro, a mule, or a horse, not carrying people but where they put the few things they had: a sack of corn, a sack of beans, a bench.”⁶⁶ To such epic stories, others add their families’ legacies of struggle. José Luis Aguayo Álvarez, who studied at Salaces a few years after Aguirre, shared his family’s legacy of exploitation and battles for justice: “My grandparents were agraristas at the end of the nineteenth century. They were also slaves in the southern haciendas. I learned of the subhuman conditions in which they lived and worked. That was the environment in which I grew up. My uncles had long waged agrarian battles. When I was young, they taught me about that struggle. And I listened: I had breakfast, lunch, and dinner with the agrarian code.”⁶⁷ That the normalistas convey their life stories in a way that so clearly corresponds to episodes in the country’s revolutionary history—colonialism, Porfirian exploitation, and revolutionary upheaval—also reflects the type of education they received at rural normales, one the FECSM reinforced in its meetings and study groups.

The obstacles campesinos continued to face in gaining an education after the revolution enhanced socialism’s appeal. Not only was there a dearth of schools in the countryside, but family labor needs made it difficult for children to attend elementary schools even when these did exist in their communities. An elementary school education was required to enter the normal, but many attended grade school irregularly, began when they were quite advanced in age, or took excessively long to complete a basic education.⁶⁸ Othón Salazar, an indigenous normalista from the coastal state of Guerrero, for example, attended elementary school sporadically. “I’d register for two months and then out I went to work my land parcel or any other thing that could help sustain my family,” he related.⁶⁹ Manuel Arias Delgado, who came from a mining family in the northern state of Chihuahua, vividly recalled the harsh conditions under which his father and grandfather labored in an American-owned mine. Black lung disease, mining accidents, and wages that hardly supported a family of nine children marked Arias’s early life. As a

young boy, he did “anything my mom could think up”: he shined shoes and sold bread, tamales, and popcorn on the street. His other duties bordered on the macabre. Arias’s mother, a seamstress, “made everything from the wedding dress for the neighborhood bride, to the tunic for the young child who died.” When Arias was nine, he related, “My mother would send me, tape measure in hand, to record the *angelito*’s—the dead child’s—dimensions. I was really scared, but I had to do it: to measure from head to foot, and then from shoulder to shoulder. It was the first time I touched dead flesh. It made quite an impression on me. And since I was from one of the poorest neighborhoods, there were many dead children. There was no running water, no drainage system, and very little food. So child mortality was high.” Arias, whose mother birthed fourteen children but had only nine survive, was no stranger to infant deaths.⁷⁰

The stories of Salazar, Aguayo, Aguirre, and Arias—experiences shared by many others—made normalistas keenly aware of the extent to which injustice still structured their lives. Though few understood it as such until they participated in the FECSM’s mandatory assemblies, for many, the difficult road to that institution already provided telling political signposts. Priests, for example, continued to appear as foes in normalista narratives, even as church-state relations improved. Felipe Cortés Martínez, whose words opened this chapter, described how, having lost his father at a young age, he faced special hardship when he wanted to attend the rural normal of El Mexe. He was twelve and did not even have enough money for the transportation to take the school’s entrance exam. So he went to his godfather, a priest who lived about a day’s walk from his town. “What I didn’t know is that priests will not share a cent with anyone. They will receive money from everyone, will bless you, give you advice and affection.” But when Cortés explained why he needed the money, the priest replied, “El Mexe is where our enemies reside, so I cannot help you. Here is a scapular, and this rosary, and God will help you.” Cortés thanked the priest for his help but did not take the tokens. “I returned to my house in tears. It was another day’s walk home.”⁷¹

Such experiences gave normalistas clarity on where the church’s allegiance lay. Their dire material needs, moreover, often rendered priestly warnings of eternal damnation ineffective. For example, Reynaldo Jiménez, who attended the rural normal of La Huerta, Michoacán, in 1956, related how the town priest tried to dissuade his father from sending him there. “He said I’d become a Bolshevik, a communist. . . . [But] my parents, who were very poor fishermen and farmers, didn’t want me to inherit their misery.”⁷² Normalista narratives reflect a context that placed their schools on the dark side

in the Cold War's battle between good and evil. But as they and their families navigated the realm between need and fear, the former often won out. Their misery, the hand-to-mouth existence that marked the home life of so many normalistas, intensified their experience at the normales, where food and shelter were secure.

Tellingly, most remember in far greater detail the type of food they ate than the subjects they studied. For their main meal, stated Cortés, “We had three tortillas, a bit of watered-down soup with a few kernels of rice or pasta morsels floating in it, a tiny piece of meat and beans. That was it. And yet if you only knew how happy those of us who came from the countryside were, because at least we ate—half-ate—three times a day. What did many eat in the outskirts? One or two tortillas. Those who ate beans were the rich ones.”⁷³ In a similar vein, Aguirre stated, “When I studied at Salaces, we had to do without a lot. The food was meager. I was placed in a dorm where there was no bed, nothing. I had only the pair of sheets we were asked to bring, and we all slept on the floor. Of the four dormitories in the school, two had no beds, and those were for the newly arrived. So we slept on the floor, on a bit of cardboard, and it was very cold.” But, continues Aguirre, “would you believe it? I was in heaven! Because even if the food was meager, it was at least assured, and where I was from, sometimes we had nothing to eat.”⁷⁴

As 1940s and 1950s regimes rolled back the more progressive aspects of the revolution, including support for rural normales, the FECSM stepped up its demands to address school needs. And those were many. Directors' own reports emphasized the dire conditions. “Our poor school buildings . . . are so deteriorated they are close to collapsing,” and food allocations were “insufficient by any definable measure,” reported the principal of San Marcos, Zacatecas.⁷⁵ Rosalva Pantoja Guerrero, who attended the rural normal in Tamazulapan, Oaxaca, in the 1950s, remembers that it took them three years of organizing to finally have their school's central building constructed. “It was like that in all the normales,” she related. But thanks to a prolonged strike, “it was built, and our [food] rations were increased. Since then the political struggle has continued strong because all the normales came together under the [FECSM's] organization.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Graciela Cásares, from the rural normal of Atequiza, Jalisco, recalled that after a strike in 1953, “We finally got some relief and ate a little better. We began drinking milk. Before that, there was no milk; everything was made in water.”⁷⁷

That the FECSM acted as the organizing structure most capable of attaining basic needs codified it as the most important venue for normalista politicization, a role it deliberately reproduced with each incoming class.

It organized mandatory student assemblies, implemented initiation rituals for first-year students, and instituted the Political and Ideological Orientation Committee, an organization dedicated to reading Marxist texts, inviting speakers, and training students in oratory skills.⁷⁸ While during the 1960s the FECSM would become an increasingly important venue to discuss international events such as the Cuban Revolution and the possibilities of bringing about a socialist revolution in Mexico, during the 1940s and 1950s, the federation more often conflated socialism with Cardenismo. The words of Vicente Estrada, who studied in Ayotzinapa in the 1950s, are a good example of this tendency: Cárdenas “was of the mind that Mexico could be a socialist country. . . . In fact, it was during his government that the normales and their youth saw their biggest boom in the sense that they even had to learn ‘The Internationale.’ That is part of history. And he had the idea that the rural normales would forge the teachers who’d carry the political catechism throughout the country.”⁷⁹ The FECSM, moreover, constituted the primary vehicle by which the idea of socialism—however vague—persisted at rural normales long after it was eliminated from Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution. Felipe Cortés Martínez, for example, stated that while socialism was not part of the formal curriculum when he studied at El Mexe, Hidalgo, in the 1950s, “in practice it was, because a socialist mentality is not the same as a capitalist one. In a capitalist mentality, the individual comes first, second, and third, *time is money*. In a socialist one, the idea is to help one another mutually. To say ‘*Compañero* [comrade/brother], what’s wrong? How can I assist you?’ Not to say, ‘Oh, you’re dying, well die.’ We graduated with that mentality, to help the needy.”⁸⁰

As Cortés’s words reveal, many normalistas conflated the socialist tenets of collectivism with the spirit of service that the SEP also sought to inculcate in them. While, for the most politicized student sector, the notion of justice inherent in the revolutionary process clashed with the spirit of national service demanded by an increasingly conservative state, for others the notions complemented one another. As Luciano Vela Gálvez, also a 1950s student from El Mexe, asserted, “Since the FECSM sustained the philosophical principles of the Mexican Revolution, it helped imbue students’ spirit with that humanist sense of service to society. . . . What’s more, we learned that the principles of the collective come before those of the individual.”⁸¹ The officially designed pedagogical doctrine linking socialism to education that existed in the 1930s had created a remarkable legacy that rural normalistas used to express their feelings about the experience of being part of a collective, the discipline that regimented their study, and the consciousness it awakened.

Socialism became the central mediating concept, and it had liberating effects on normalistas, marking their education not as social reproduction but as consciousness. This political awakening was fueled by students' experience of poverty, nurtured through collective institutional norms, deepened by a sense of indignation as the government neglected their schools, and channeled into action by the FECSM.

That normalista youth lived, studied, and worked together further led many to conflate social solidarity with interpersonal concerns. As Aguirre put it, "We reached the conclusion that socialism was better because it is an altruistic system, the opposite of selfishness, and capitalism meant the exploitation of man by man. That's what we carried within us and understood in our treatment of one another, the respect we owed to each other, to the teachers, other students, the leaders and the led. It was a fraternal relationship that I would call socialist but a somewhat utopian socialism."⁸² To characterize even interpersonal relationships as socialist demonstrates the extent to which students internalized their ideological position. To acknowledge it as utopian shows an awareness of the context, the structural limitations—no doubt brought into relief by hindsight—of socialist experiments in capitalist Mexico.

Rural normales opened up a world of possibilities for youngsters who lived and studied with their peers from different parts of Mexico and, aside from their regular course load, engaged in sports tournaments, music and dance recitals, and field trips that took them throughout the country. Many saw the nation's capital or the ocean for the first time. In school deliberations, students had their voices heard and noticed that their opinion mattered. Just as significantly, by living far from their parents, they escaped domestic patriarchal constraints, a dynamic that, as discussed in chapter 6, was especially significant for female students. In this process, the day-to-day experience had as much effect as the political dimension offered by the FECSM.

"SCHOOLS THAT EDUCATE FOR DEMOCRACY"

Spending day and night together while conducting myriad different group activities no doubt primed student receptivity to collectivist political principles. The institution's very design reinforced this logic. To a remarkable extent, students participated in the maintenance, reproduction, and enforcement of school norms in institutions that by the 1950s had evolved from small, family-style boardinghouses with a couple dozen students to bustling centers of activity where two hundred to three hundred youth lived, studied,

and worked. The SEP's rationale for incorporating students into all aspects of the institutional fabric was threefold: to train them in the skills they would need as rural teachers, to connect classroom learning to daily practices, and to reduce administrative corruption. While the SEP's intent with such involvement differed from the FECSM's logic of student power, in practice, it reinforced many of the federation's own collectivist principles. Concerned with student discipline, institutional integrity, and the need for graduates to teach in remote areas, the SEP continuously emphasized that normalistas be invested in the well-being of their school and the fulfillment of their mission. To that end, students had a say in creating and enforcing regulatory norms of comportment "so they could understand how to govern themselves and participate in the leadership of the community they will eventually be a part of."⁸³ School officials sought to inculcate "a collective ideal that satisfies the mind, that moves the spirit, and that captures student interests and fantasies."⁸⁴ Faculty members were to help normalistas "understand and feel that human beings owed not to themselves but to the social group to which they belonged. Rural teachers should commit themselves to the people and their race, whose interests they are to serve."⁸⁵ While such directives could have positivist implications, and the state's language of service conflicted with normalistas' notions of justice, the message that they were to do right by the country's poor majority was emphasized by student and institutional leadership alike.

Depending on the type of school in their home communities, youngsters could be anywhere from eleven to sixteen years old when they began studying at a rural normal. Worried about adolescents' restless nature, the education authorities designed days tightly packed with activities.⁸⁶ "Seen from above," reflected a former student, rural normales "must have looked like beehives with teachers and students all engaged in multiple activities."⁸⁷ The rigorous schedule began at 5:30 a.m., when a military-style band sounded the wakeup call. Five minutes later, students were in the school's courtyard for roll call. Once that was completed, they had twenty minutes to wash up and make their beds. Their first class began at 6 a.m. An hour later, students were to clean their assigned areas: yards, gardens, or classrooms. Breakfast was at 8 a.m., and classes resumed an hour later and lasted until 1 p.m. Normalistas then had their main meal and could rest until 3 p.m., when a diverse set of activities began anew. These included tending to the school's farm animals and crops or participating in workshops such as carpentry or metalwork. This was also the time for students to rehearse dance, music, and poetry for their Friday social gatherings, for sports teams to practice, and for commissions,

clubs, and committees to undertake their duties. At 7 p.m. students had a light meal and at 8 p.m. a mandatory hour of studying. A no-noise call was issued at 10 p.m., when roll was again taken to ensure that each student was in bed. Students had lighter days on Saturdays, with morning classes and either physical education or agricultural practices in the early afternoon. Sundays they had off and could take care of personal matters or visit nearby towns.⁸⁸ Given the distance from their home communities, most students stayed in the normales throughout the school year and many through the summer. Some went years without seeing their families.

In 1945 the SEP increased the years of study from four to six, the first three *secundaria* (junior high school), the latter three professional teacher training. Rural normales also had two complementary years of study corresponding to fifth and sixth grade since most elementary schools in the countryside went only through fourth grade. Except for the farming activities, the curriculum of the complementary and *secundaria* years corresponded to that of other schools. Students studied math, science, geography, and literature. As their foreign language, they could opt—in theory—for either English or an indigenous language. In practice, the latter was rarely, if ever, offered. Students also enrolled in a series of workshops in agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, woodworking, and metalworking, as well as home economics. Their extracurricular activities included expressive media (art and painting), education aesthetics (song, music, and dance), pedagogy and its psychology, physical education, and civics. Students also had elective clubs and directed studies.⁸⁹

The last three years of the normal were specifically devoted to pedagogical training. Each semester students took courses on teaching methods and pedagogical theory where they produced didactic material. For example, with the assistance of their physics teacher, they constructed laboratories with basic equipment for experimentation with general laws of motion. The first year, they made tools to teach pupils how to measure; the second, they constructed audiovisual material; and in the third year, they focused on building simple devices for experimentation and proof.⁹⁰ Their workshops operated under the assumption that they would be pioneers of sorts. For example, in their woodworking class, they learned everything from the types of trees native to particular regions to the construction of doors, windows, and simple furniture for both schools and homes. They also took courses in metalwork, beginning with sheet metal the first year, blacksmithing skills the second, and the application of these techniques to mechanical classes during their third.⁹¹ Students also made periodic visits to surrounding communities, the

same places where they undertook their teaching practices. Such activities linked the normal to the local population, a design dating back to the 1920s and meant to connect the school and home environments and to coordinate health, sanitation, or infrastructural policy from government and, at times, private agencies.

The SEP sought to link academic lessons to practical knowledge through various school committees composed of students, faculty, and staff. The Nutrition and Rations Committee, for example, worked with the cafeteria staff to improve students' food and figure out the best use for school crops. In this committee they learned how to construct budgets for weekly student menus, check the market prices for meal ingredients, and find ways to secure discounts, whether through planning in advance or buying in bulk. The Agricultural and Industrial Promotion Committee was to make farming practices and workshops compatible with the surrounding region's local production, while the Social Action Committee organized literacy and hygiene campaigns as well as civic activities in neighboring communities.⁹² Moreover, teachers were expected to develop class lessons around committee duties. They could, for example, use math class to close out the monthly budget, track warehouse expenses, and develop a cost-of-living index. In biology, students might determine the number of calories needed for different types of labor and assess the nutritional values of their own food and the vitamins contained in each ingredient.⁹³

Most significantly, these student committees had the capacity to enforce norms. The Committee of Honor and Justice upheld disciplinary rules, handled conflicts, and meted out sanctions or commendations. The Hygiene and Material Improvement Committee, which promoted student health, made sure the school grounds remained clean, assessed infrastructural needs, and reported individuals neglecting their duties. The Library Committee, which worked to improve access to research material, ensured that students properly used the study hours, and the Nutrition and Rations Committee had access to spending ledgers to reduce the tendency of "teachers and administrative staff to siphon off food or other supplies."⁹⁴ In future years, under this same logic, normalistas would fight for membership in their school's admissions committee and a presence in grading entrance exams to ensure that students were accepted based on need and merit rather than political favors.

A disciplinary code made up of a point system existed at most normales. The Office of Normal Education handed down guidelines, but each school developed its own disciplinary code, which applied to students, faculty, and staff. Each member of the school community began with a hundred points,

and points were deducted based on the severity of the infraction. At some schools, reaching fifty points constituted a basis for expulsion; at others, it was not until students reached zero (though in the latter case the same type of violation would result in a larger deduction). Leaving the school without permission, going to bars, or selling equipment that belonged to the institution constituted the largest deduction of points, eight to fifteen; fights, smoking, or disrespect to staff or visitors would lead to a deduction of four to five points; less serious infractions, corresponding to deductions of one to three points, included littering, lack of proper hygiene, disrespect for the flag, damaging of school property, failure to participate in an assigned commission, or use of profanity. For staff and faculty, the larger infractions stemmed from sustaining a relationship with a student (a hundred points), “agitating” the student body (fifty points), or defaming colleagues (a hundred points). Disobeying the director or being intoxicated on school grounds or in adjacent communities led to a twenty-five-point deduction; lying, fighting, smoking in class, or dancing more than one song in a row with a student would lead to the loss of between ten and fifteen points; improper language, tardiness, failure to hand in reports, or neglect of the assigned work or commission would lead to a deduction of between one and four points.⁹⁵

Students cite this point system, which applied to all members of the school community and in whose elaboration and enforcement they participated, as creating a truly democratic environment.⁹⁶ José Santos Valdés, who in the 1940s and 1950s served as director at five different rural normales and was one of the main proponents of active student involvement in all aspects of school governance, asserted that their say in disciplinary matters constituted “the fundamental difference between the school that educates for enslavement and servitude and that which educates for democracy.”⁹⁷ Not all agreed. High-level SEP officials constantly tried to rein in student power and reminded school directors that they constituted the maximum authority.⁹⁸ While the goal was to form students who were “neither submissive nor timid,” normalistas also needed to be well mannered, attentive, respectful, and mindful of the proper ways of interacting with authority figures.⁹⁹ Some officials were outright hostile and characterized student participation in rule making as communist, equivalent to a soldier who debated a sergeant’s order.¹⁰⁰

Proper student comportment could of course conflict with normalista political actions, and as the years wore on, the authorities increasingly conflated their mobilizations with bad behavior, insubordination, unchecked student power, and damage to the school’s reputation. The principal and vice principal

of the rural normal of Comitancillo, Oaxaca, painted one such picture. So bellicose was the students' nature in this account that it is hard to discern where legitimate concern for the school's integrity ends and contempt for normalista empowerment begins. By the director's account, the school had been in a state of chaos since 1948, after the SEP made a series of concessions to students that resulted in the constant departure of school directors (seven in eleven years) since students would either oust those too strict or take advantage of those too lenient. Other student abuses included disregarding the academic calendar, leaving campus as they pleased, ignoring their work commissions, rebelling against dictates they did not like, and destroying or selling school property "in some cases to satisfy their recreational desires and in others to gratify vices they had acquired." Their "instinct to gain power" had transformed their school "into an institution at their exclusive service," while their disobedience and "indecorous attitudes to employees of both sexes undermined any principle of authority." Such unbridled student power all took place under the direction of "communist shock brigades" sponsored by the FECSM and the Confederation of Mexican Youth. To "guarantee a greater stability in the educational order," the director proposed turning Comitancillo into a women's normal.¹⁰¹ Such proposals ignored female students' active participation in rural normal strikes; while far less visible in the leadership, they constituted a vital piece of overall normalista resistance.

While it is likely that, on occasion, students unjustifiably sought the ouster of teachers, directors, or staff, not to mention demanded the transfer of individual students opposed to strikes, far more pervasive were blanket portrayals by the SEP, the press, and the government that described rural normales as institutions that housed immoral behavior, gave cover to those unwilling to study, bred subversion, and were of low academic quality, all characterizations harnessed against legitimate student grievances. As with the allegation that Ayotzinapa students had burned the Mexican flag, the press ran with, and the authorities acted on, demonstrably false information.¹⁰² Indeed, as subsequent chapters show, the black legend that to this day characterizes rural normales has long been cultivated through such rumors, falsehoods, and misinformation.

But the demonization of rural normales also reflected larger social anxieties about the poor's potential to challenge their place in the class hierarchy. As already discussed, SEP authorities saw in the dispossessed an inherent social resentment that produced restless behavior. As education minister Torres Bodet put it, given their social condition, normalistas could "accumulate a dark rancor that, once transmitted to the population, will end up

representing tragically fermented discord.”¹⁰³ Empowerment of the sort that poor, indigenous, or female youth experienced at rural normales—for example, the ability to collectively remove authority figures—stoked larger fears of popular defiance. The institutional culture, social relations, and pervasive nature of socialism as an operative framework denaturalized poverty by showing its historically material basis and undermined hierarchy through collectivist principles, and patriarchy by promoting women’s participation in heretofore exclusionary spaces. For the authorities, wrote Santos Valdés, a staunch advocate of student participation in school governance, “it is a form of communism that students, with their inferior status, demand to review the budget and expenditures of the administrators—their superiors.”¹⁰⁴ In the decades to come, the SEP would increasingly wield educational reform measures to combat this student power.

“A CRISIS IN EDUCATION”

By the 1950s it had become increasingly common to speak of a crisis in education, especially rural education. The crisis resulted, declared SEP officials, from “a lack of centralized planning, direction, and programs that are adapted to the country’s changing conditions,” and its manifestations were many: the countryside’s disproportionately high level of school-age children—about half—who had not set foot in a classroom; teachers’ propensity to migrate to the cities; the high attrition rates at the country’s normales, especially rural ones; ineffective or antiquated pedagogical methods at teacher-training schools; and the low quality of their graduates.¹⁰⁵ To address this situation, the SEP convened a conference on rural education in 1953, followed, a year later, by one on the teacher-training system. The deliberations from the heads of various SEP departments, technical bodies, zone inspectors, and normal directors provide a glimpse into how the state would frame teacher training over the next two decades.

Notably, the SEP’s approach was contradictory. On the one hand, there was a general consensus about the need to professionalize the teaching ranks since too many instructors taught with either no, incomplete, or woefully deficient training. Partly reflecting the need for more teacher-training institutions, this condition also dated back to the 1920s and 1930s when, urgently in need of instructors, the authorities showed a great deal of flexibility about their qualifications. In 1950 the majority of elementary schoolteachers—forty-three thousand out of sixty-five thousand—did not possess a diploma from a normal.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, conference delegates consistently

lamented the loss of an “educational mystique,” that quality inherent in the early generation of teachers who, deficient in training but generous in spirit, gave themselves to community instruction while asking for little compensation.¹⁰⁷ Current teachers, bemoaned education officials, too easily turned their back on their fellow citizens by migrating to the cities in search of individual prosperity.

Ironically, the SEP’s approach to teacher professionalization had contributed to their migration. Based on the framework of national unity, urban modernity, and the logic that since urban teachers were of better quality, rural ones should be trained in their image, in 1945 the SEP had adopted a uniform teacher-training curriculum that facilitated rural normalistas’ ability to transfer to urban normales, especially Mexico City’s National Teachers School. In the 1954 conference on normal education, SEP officials recognized the mistake of this measure and soon prohibited such transfers. Furthermore, rural normalistas were to pledge that, upon graduation, they would teach wherever the ministry sent them.¹⁰⁸ Parents, too, had to sign letters indicating that their sons and daughters would continue at the rural normal past their *secundaria* years.¹⁰⁹ At national conferences, delegates increasingly proposed using the entrance exam as a metric to assess who possessed a true teaching vocation.¹¹⁰ While in the coming years attrition rates did slow and more rural normales were established, the long-term movement to the cities continued.¹¹¹ With few secondary schools in the countryside, students turned to rural normales not only to become teachers but to access other professions. For those who remained in education, a move to the cities still made sense since teaching in urban schools entitled them to higher wages, not to mention better living conditions.

Such migration was part of a larger pattern of urbanization, which the SEP assigned the schoolhouse the impossible task of containing. “We must reestablish the rural school’s role in linking people to the land and preventing *campesino* migration to the cities and abroad,” declared Education Minister Ceniceros in his closing remarks at the 1953 conference on rural education.¹¹² To that end, the agrarian component of teacher training received renewed attention. It revealed a grim reality. Rural normales did not have agriculturalists with proper pedagogical training; even when they did, they lacked a clear vision about their role. In the absence of well-articulated goals about the relationship between agricultural skills and education, this component could not fully take root. “Was the aim to produce qualified agricultural technicians, candidates for higher-learning agricultural schools, aspiring state bureaucrats, or educators truly qualified to teach in the countryside?”

asked one evaluation. Each path, it concluded, demanded a different level, depth, and scope of preparation. Additionally, agricultural cooperatives at the rural normales needed more attention and resources in order to better equip teachers in rural community development.¹¹³

Santos Valdés, then director of the rural normal of San Marcos, Zacatecas, argued that if the SEP wanted to reduce attrition rates at rural normales, it needed to improve the basic conditions, making them at least on par with Mexico City's National Teachers School. The SEP, he urged, should fortify their physical infrastructure, double the allocation for food rations, provide a basic set of clothing twice a year, and have full teaching personnel so students could actually take the courses they needed to graduate. If the goal was to keep teachers in the countryside, given the challenges that working in impoverished rural areas imposed, they should be paid more, not less, than their urban counterparts.¹¹⁴ Progressive officials within the SEP also pointed out how teachers' meager pay contributed to low teaching morale. "The living conditions of rural teachers," declared the ministry's general inspector, Luis Álvarez Barret, "are unquestionably inferior to those they had twenty years ago. Their nominal salaries are, of course, much higher, but money's lower purchasing power and the high living cost reduce it to such an extent that their salaries are now half what they were twenty and likely thirty years ago."¹¹⁵ This situation caused absenteeism since low pay led teachers to seek supplemental income, thus limiting the time and attention they devoted to communities.¹¹⁶

And yet, despite teachers' material reality, education officials continued to bemoan their loss of a service ethic, educational mystique, and genuine teaching vocation. Proposed solutions reflected this logic. The following is a good example:

The teachers who created a rural Mexican school with an international profile did so because of the atmosphere created by the Mexican Revolution: as long as the state that orients and directs the educational policy does not create a new fervor, a new educational mystique, a new humanistic current in which man can be the friend of man, in which collective interests are placed above those of the individual, the plans and programs will serve to prepare teachers technically and professionally but in and of themselves will not achieve the model of an individual identified with the needs of the people.¹¹⁷

Recognizing the extent to which the revolution had spurred a laudable education project, officials invoked a return to those principles. But they

reduced the state's role to creating a new fervor, a mystique or humanistic current by which teachers' dedication made up for the state's commitment to industry. Absent was the national wealth redistribution that marked the earlier revolutionary project. Despite the enormous economic windfall brought about by the Mexican miracle, the proportion of federal spending devoted to education went from 12.6 percent in 1935 to 8.2 percent twenty years later.¹¹⁸ The regime would no longer put the interests of the majorities above those of elites nor satisfy popular material needs if it meant sacrificing business or industry profits. The much-celebrated levels of economic growth that from 1940 to 1970 hovered at 6.5 percent did little to address unemployment, rural poverty, and wealth inequality. On the contrary, the inequality increased. Between 1950 and 1963, 10 percent of the population controlled half the national income.¹¹⁹ Mexico's Gini coefficient, a measure of national inequality and wealth distribution, was the highest in the hemisphere, trailing only Honduras and Brazil. Globally, it was comparable to countries in sub-Saharan Africa.¹²⁰

The crisis in rural education reflected the larger crisis of campesino livelihood in the wake of diminishing state support. During the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican agriculture saw a fiscal policy that taxed more than it invested, a banking system that garnered more in profits than it extended in credit, and a price structure unfavorable to farm products, all of which ensured substantial transfer of wealth from the countryside to the cities.¹²¹ The public and private resources that flowed to the countryside increasingly went to export-oriented agricultural products. As the government declared large-scale agribusiness producing winter fruit and vegetables and the cattle industry immune from redistribution, provided subsidies, sponsored irrigation projects, and focused the Green Revolution's technical innovations on large farming ventures, the ejido and small-scale campesino production floundered.¹²²

Within the confines of this model, SEP efforts to build more schools, train more teachers, and reform the curriculum could only fall short. Even if the SEP addressed systemic issues—teachers' low pay, deficiencies in the agricultural training, a general dearth of schoolhouses and instructors—the wider state policy that privileged cities, agribusiness, and industry pushed people to migrate. Even reports from the official teachers' union, which generally acted in alliance with the PRI, pointed out that “the roads, the expensive and ostentatious buildings, the large dams do not in themselves have the magic power to modify the standards and ways of life of the people.”¹²³ While some officials acknowledged that the dismal education rates in the

countryside reflected rural poverty, most ignored the extent to which the state's project of modernity displaced the rural population and was itself antithetical to the small-scale community development that the schoolhouse was supposed to spearhead.

THE END OF Cárdenas's presidency saw a halt of the most radical revolutionary principles and a rise in urban and industrial development. The process led to large-scale rural-to-urban migration that by the 1960s had tipped the population scales in the cities' favor. Increasingly, that is where the state concentrated its social infrastructure and where the middle class grew from about 16 percent of the population in 1940 to about 22 percent in 1960.¹²⁴ Against this backdrop, the country's poor majorities—urban and rural—fought for their share of the national wealth. These decades saw some of the century's strongest labor movements, with teachers and rail, oil, and telephone workers rebelling against the PRI's domination of their unions, a control that demanded labor discipline and kept industry profits high. Rural inhabitants, too, fought for a decent way of life in the countryside, with rural unrest taking shape through electoral challenges to the PRI, sporadic armed struggle, land takeovers, and battles against *caciquismo* (local bossism).¹²⁵

These struggles seeped into rural normalista consciousness, and students increasingly framed their educational demands in light of this broad social injustice. The FECSM would soon prioritize solidarity with campesino mobilizations, and rural teachers stood as visible figures in the countryside's unrest. At the same time, rural normalistas were caught in the forces of urban migration, and their radical tendencies did not cease when they arrived in the cities. That two of the most militant confrontations the SEP faced in Mexico City—one by elementary schoolteachers and the other by students at the National Teachers School—were led by former Ayotzinapa students is hardly coincidental. Such challenges caused the SEP to reevaluate its approach to rural education and to again modify the teacher-training curriculum. Just as significantly, Jaime Torres Bodet, who returned to head the SEP in 1958, reconsidered the boarding-school structure because its very design facilitated student power.