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# **Educating Señorita: Teacher Training, Social Mobility, and the Birth of Costa Rican Feminism, 1885–1925**

Steven Palmer and  
Gladys Rojas Chaves

A photograph from turn-of-the-century San José shows a new Italianate palace rising two imposing stories above a fenced-off pasture and a row of humble adobe houses.<sup>1</sup> In 1903, during ceremonial gatherings in this great building, a chorus of young female voices could be heard intoning a novel hymn: “Let us sing of the triumphs of Art and Science that have dignified noble womankind, for humane consciousness has converted yesterday’s slave into the queen of the world.”<sup>2</sup> The choir was made up of students from all social classes, the majority of them training to become public school teachers at this temple of liberal civilization, the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, Costa Rica’s first modern normal school.

In June 1919 “yesterday’s slaves” were at the vanguard of the civic movement that broke the back of the Tinoco regime, Costa Rica’s one prolonged

The authors would like to thank María Enriqueta Castro Castro, director of the Archivo del Colegio Superior de Señoritas (hereafter ACCS), located at the Colegio in San José. Thanks are also due to Iván Molina, Ingrid Vargas, and Eugenia Rodríguez for their perceptive comments. The paper is related to a research project sponsored by the Vicerrectoría de Investigación and the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, both of the Universidad de Costa Rica.

1. The photograph is reproduced in Colegio Superior de Señoritas, *Album del cincuentenario* (San José: Impr. Lehmann, 1939), 21.

2. “Cantemos los triunfos del Arte y la Ciencia / Que dignificaron [a] la noble mujer; / Pues ya ha convertido la humana conciencia / En reina del mundo la esclava de ayer”; second stanza of the “Himno oficial del Colegio Superior de Señoritas,” written in 1903 by a teacher at the institution, Juan Dávila, and reproduced in María Enriqueta Castro Castro and María Lina Colombo Víquez, *Cantemos los triunfos: reseña histórica del Colegio Superior de Señoritas* (San José: Impr. Nacional, 1989), 9.

experience of military dictatorship in the twentieth century. Students and teachers from the Colegio Superior de Señoritas marched, denounced the country's tyrants, and confronted police and fire hoses in four days of urban protest that dealt a fatal blow to the regime. Four years later, in 1923, students from the Colegio joined former graduates, teachers, and the director of the institution in founding the Liga Feminista Costarricense, the country's first explicitly feminist organization, to pressure for women's suffrage and to fight attempts to legislate teachers' salaries that discriminated on the basis of sex. In part because of its continued militancy, the Colegio was finally stripped of its teacher training role in 1923, although it continued to provide a full secondary curriculum for young women, joining the male-only Liceo de Costa Rica as the only school that then offered its students the possibility of obtaining the title of *bachiller*. By the time the normal section closed its doors in 1923, however, Colegio graduates already accounted for a large portion of the certified teaching force in the country's primary schools, and they staffed the growing ranks of public health nurses, home visitors (early social workers), philanthropists, and school inspectors who were pioneering public roles and occupations for women.

Over the past two decades, women's education in Costa Rica and the rest of Latin America has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention. Nevertheless, most studies have concentrated on analyzing published polemics and official documents. There have been few social historical studies of the class origins of the unprecedented waves of female teachers trained and certified as part of the late-nineteenth-century liberal educational reforms, although these women have been assumed to be children of a vaguely defined, new middle sector. Nor have the links between the experience of a normal school education and the development of dissident politics and feminism been explored. Costa Rica's Colegio Superior de Señoritas offers a unique opportunity to broach these issues. On the one hand, over the first quarter of this century the Colegio's directors, teachers, and students had a profound influence on women's culture in Costa Rica, and they played a central role in crucial moments of the country's political life.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Colegio's archive provides an

3. Although very little work has been done on the education of women or the development of the women's suffrage movement in Costa Rica, scholars working on Costa Rica are part of the movement to put women's and gender history on the Central American historiographical agenda. Besides works cited below, interested readers may consult Eugenia Rodríguez Saenz, "'Tiyita bea lo que me han echo.' Estupro e incesto en Costa Rica (1800-1850)," in *El paso del cometa: estado, política social y culturas populares en Costa Rica (1800/1950)*, eds. Iván Molina Jiménez and Steven Palmer (San José: Ed. Porvenir;

excellent source to study the social composition of the student body; it preserves a wealth of material on the background of the students and staff who were at the Colegio during its tenure as a normal school.

In the following pages, we reconstruct the social and geographical backgrounds of the student body for the years in which the Colegio Superior de Señoritas served as the country's principal teacher training facility. Based on this profile, we suggest that the normal school, although primarily an institution for the professional education of middle-class girls from the capital city, was also a vehicle of social mobility for a significant number of young women from an artisan background and from rural areas throughout Costa Rica. Furthermore, the Colegio offered women students an enclosed, "private" space where they could rehearse the new public roles they were destined to perform. We argue that this gendered and cross-class space of sociability was a crucible in which Costa Rican girls from a wide variety of backgrounds were transformed into a corps of modern teachers imbued with a civilizing mission, a feminist identity, and a democratic ethic.

To a great extent the new roles assigned to these women were prescribed by the patriarchal script of the liberal project, and the women graduates became zealous standard-bearers of hygienics, eugenics, social inspection, bourgeois morality, and patriotism. In return for this service, however, the *maestra normal* expected recognition of her new status as "queen of the world." When such recognition was denied, she found herself in a novel position, one which allowed her to plot against the patriarchal liberal order in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup>

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Plumsock *Mesoamerican Studies*, 1994), 19–46; Marc Edelman, "Landlords and the Devil: Class, Ethnic and Gender Dimensions of Central American Peasant Narratives," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994): 58–93; Eugenia Rodríguez, ed., *Redefiniendo identidades: género e historia en América Central* (San José: Ed. Porvenir; Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia, 1998); Alfonso González, "Introducción al estudio histórico de las representaciones sociales de la mujer y la familia costarricenses, 1850–1900," *Actualidades en Psicología* (Costa Rica) 4:39 (1988): 1–75; Ruth Cubillo Paniagua, "Las imágenes de la mujer en el *Repertorio Americano*," (M.A. thesis, Univ. de Costa Rica, 1994); and Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega, "Clases subalternas y movimientos sociales en Centroamérica (1870–1930)," in *Las repúblicas agroexportadoras (1870–1945)*, 255–323, vol. 4 of *Historia general de Centroamérica*, ed. Edelberto Torres-Rivas (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario; Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 1993).

4. Here we adopt the perspective of Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989).

### Latin American Liberals and the Education of Women

Beginning in the waning years of the colonial era, and then continuing through the nineteenth century, political reformers throughout Latin America advocated the belief that girls needed an education to become civilized women.<sup>5</sup> The rationale for this position was nicely summed up by Clemen-tina C. de Alió (at least as her words were reported by Domingo Sarmiento), a delegate to the Argentine Pedagogical Congress of 1882: “Nature gave woman a teaching function the moment that it made her a mother; as a result, a mother must be educated so that, in turn, she can educate her children.” For Sarmiento, this self-evident truth also established—“axiomatically,” as he put it—that the education of women “is the first duty and should be the first concern of the State because it is, for all of society, the *initial* education.”<sup>6</sup>

Latin America’s liberals had learned many lessons from the civil wars of the postindependence period, and from the broad resistance that arose in response to their programs to accelerate capitalist production and secular modernity. They thought it evident that women tended to be staunch traditionalists, likely to support the conservative morality of existing communities and of that most antiliberal of institutions, the Catholic Church. Largely because of their loyalty to the Church, women were thought to support, directly and indirectly, the backwardness that was also ascribed to indigenous cultures, popular customs, and superstitious worldviews. Moreover, as mothers, and given their unmediated control over the formative years of their children’s lives, women had enormous ideological power. Mothers were thought capable of either decisively consolidating or thoroughly undermining the new republican project. As Gertrude Yeager has noted, liberals felt that women had to be reached first through education and then enlisted “as agents of secularization and modernization.”<sup>7</sup>

5. Carlos Newland, “La educación elemental en Hispanoamérica: desde la independencia hasta la centralización de los sistemas educativos nacionales,” *HAHR* 71 (1991): 337–38. On Brazil, see Susan K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914–1940* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 110–13.

6. Domingo F. Sarmiento, “Cuestiones incendiarias en el Congreso Pedagógico” [originally published in *El Nacional*, 1882–83], in *Obras de D. F. Sarmiento*, 52 vols., ed. Augusto Belin Sarmiento (Santiago and Buenos Aires: various publishing houses, 1885–1903), 48:130–31; emphasis in original.

7. Gertrude M. Yeager, “Women’s Roles in Nineteenth-Century Chile: Public Education Records, 1843–1883,” *Latin American Research Review* 18, no. 3 (1983): 152. See also Franco, *Plotting Women*, 79–101; and Sandra McGee Deutsch, “Gender and Sociopolitical Change in Twentieth-Century Latin America,” *HAHR* 71 (1991): 262.

By the latter third of the century, educational reformers were also convinced that women teachers trained in normal schools should be placed in charge of the primary school education of both girls *and* boys. The surrender of the primary school to women educators reflected a combination of utterly practical needs and profoundly romantic metaphors, a combination that again was succinctly captured by Sarmiento. In a letter of 1865 to the Argentine minister of education, Sarmiento reflected on the results of the pioneering normal school he had established in Chile in the 1840s. On a recent visit to that country he had found that most former male students had left the profession for more rewarding activities in politics, agriculture, and commerce. What was needed in Buenos Aires, he insisted, were “women *maestras*, who could be entrusted with rudimentary education given the greater aptitude of their sex and their more limited salary requirements.”<sup>8</sup>

Women were not only natural teachers, but they could be paid less than men. Given the limited budgets of late-nineteenth-century Latin American governments, this second point was decisive for the rapid and ambitious enlistment of women as primary school teachers by centralizing states during the latter third of the century. Sarmiento noted that almost all primary school teachers in the United States were women. This feminization of public teaching (though in fact more characteristic of New England than the South) had resulted from the actions of political reformers in the United States who held ideas similar to those of their Latin American counterparts. It was also thought that women would be more obedient in implementing uniform curricula decreed from above, and that they would be less likely than men to abandon teaching as school terms were regularized and lengthened, making it increasingly difficult to casually combine teaching with other remunerative activities such as farming and commerce.<sup>9</sup> Ten years later, after returning to Argentina and successfully laying the foundations for the feminization of normal schools, Sarmiento reiterated his view that women had superior innate abilities as pedagogues and that they would always work for less than men. He added a further practical point: as industrialization and free trade eliminated artisan occupations that had been held by women, massive state employment of teachers would offer the displaced women a viable substitute to compensate for their lost income.<sup>10</sup>

8. Domingo F. Sarmiento, “Las escuelas: base de la prosperidad de la república en los Estados Unidos” [1866], *Obras*, 30:8–9.

9. Myra H. Strober and Audri Gordon Lanford, “The Feminization of Public School Teaching: Cross-Sectional Analysis, 1850–1880,” *Signs* 11 (1986): 218–19.

10. Domingo F. Sarmiento, Congressional Speech of 8 Oct. 1875, on the jurisdiction of the *escuelas normales de mujeres*, in *Obras*, 23:18.

Beyond these practical reasons, the liberal reformers' certainty that a mother's aptitude for teaching her own children meant that women would become superior primary school teachers stemmed from a powerful romantic, republican metaphor. This was wonderfully expressed in 1849 by the legendary Venezuelan philosopher of education, Simón Rodríguez: "In the moral life of men, Society is the Uterus and Childhood the Fetus."<sup>11</sup> The gendered correspondences, however, suggest the ideological tension inherent in the role of the *maestra normal*. Nineteenth-century republicans considered the family to be part of the private sphere. Thus liberals perceived no contradiction in schooling girls to become virtuous mothers, whose intellect and character would make the domestic realm healthier and more productive, and who would transmit enlightened and patriotic values to their children while reinforcing them in their husbands.<sup>12</sup> If republican schools had been conceived of as the simple continuation of the love, care, and vigilance that was found naturally, first within the womb and then within the family, there would have been no contradiction. But for liberals, schools were supposed to be *public* schools, institutions that would initiate male children into public life and instruct them in republican principals and behavior. For this reason, over the course of the nineteenth century, Spanish American reformers had become increasingly concerned that the low status and wages associated with teaching had led to the feminization of municipal school teachers, while the absence of normal schools for women meant that the new teachers had received no special training or supervision. In the view of liberal education reformers, the municipal schools *were* extensions of the family—of the private sphere. And it was precisely this situation that critics like Sarmiento, Marcos Sastre, and Justo Sierra found intolerable because it did not ensure that progressive, republican values and practices (rather than the conservative and traditional beliefs associated with the family) would be inculcated among the general population, both male and female.<sup>13</sup>

11. Simón Rodríguez, "Extracto sucinto de mi obra sobre la educación republicana [1849]," in *Escritos de Simón Rodríguez*, 3 vols., comp. Pedro Grases (Caracas: Impr. Nacional, 1954), 2:325. The equating of reproductive biology with the social organism, a position typical of Rodríguez, is a modernist leap forward, in this case to the social medicine of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

12. Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 159. On Sarmiento's encouragement for more assertive female roles within the home, see Cynthia Jeffress Little, "Education, Philanthropy, and Feminism: Components of Argentine Womanhood, 1860–1926," in *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), 238.

13. Newland, "La educación elemental en Hispanoamérica," 346–47. On Sastre and other educational reformers, see Mark D. Szuchman, "Childhood Education and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Argentina: The Case of Buenos Aires," *HAHR* 70 (1990): 128–31.

The only practical solution involved a fundamental ideological and political contradiction. In was a contradiction already suggested in the prescient Simón Rodríguez's metaphor, cited above, for he departed from standard Enlightenment and Romantic motifs by representing society rather than nature as a female body. To formally train women teachers to become the principal agents of the ethical project of the new centralizing liberal states, and to do so in a fashion that ensured increasing professionalization, was to feminize the public sphere. It was to establish a vital and relatively autonomous public institutional network within which women would be authorized to debate and act. In a context in which women did not have full political or civil rights, this feminization was a potentially explosive initiative.

Over the past two decades, a good deal of scholarship has been devoted to the symbolic and discursive importance of the prostitute as a "public woman" in liberal Latin America. The focus is more than justified, given the obsession of the new bourgeois order with this transgressive figure and the special importance that discourse on prostitution played in the rise of social medicine, the fixing of family norms, and the tracing of prescriptive gender boundaries.<sup>14</sup> However, there is a tendency to overstate the case and to leave the impression that no *legitimate* public roles existed for women in Latin America during the liberal era.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the assigning of public roles to women was an integral part of the very construction of the centralist and moralizing liberal states of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, these were civilizing roles of great practical importance and symbolic grandeur. New spaces for women were opened not only in education, but also in schooled midwifery, nursing, home visiting, and modern philanthropic societies.<sup>16</sup> The first generations of

14. Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990); Martha Abreu de Esteves, *Meninas perdidas: os populares e o cotidiano do amor no Rio de Janeiro da Belle Époque* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1989); David McCreery, "This Life of Misery and Shame: Female Prostitution in Guatemala City, 1880–1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18 (1986): 333–53; and Juan José Marín Hernández, "Prostitución y pecado en la bella y próspera ciudad de San José (1850–1930)," in Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *El paso del cometa*, 47–80.

15. A case in point is the suggestive work of William E. French, "Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family in Porfirian Mexico," *HAHR* 72 (1992): 529–53.

16. Many of the strands of this process in the Southern Cone are pieced together in Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995). On Costa Rica, see Steven Palmer, "Confinement, Policing and the Emergence of Social Policy in Costa Rica, 1880–1935," in

women to assume these roles were often zealous promoters of moral purity and messages of order and progress. As a result, it would be easy to declare them mere extensions of the bourgeois and patriarchal liberal order or, as Susan Besse argues in her recent study of Brazil, agents in the service of the “modernization of patriarchy.”<sup>17</sup>

Four points underline the historical importance of these new female roles. First, as Angel Rama has pointed out, such civilizing zeal was true of both elements, male and female, of the intellectual caste that expanded notably under the late-nineteenth-century modernizing regimes. Rather than being participants in an autonomous public sphere of critical thought, these women belonged to a new generation of the *ciudad letrada*. Their limited autonomy derived from their status as “dueños de la letra,” but they could never afford to be overly independent of official disposition, since the sinecures and salaries of a lifetime ultimately depended on the state, as did their investiture with the status and functions of a “priestly class.”<sup>18</sup> Second, as Theda Skocpol has noted of women’s philanthropic societies in the United States during this period, the autonomous spaces granted these “new women,” however small, allowed them to begin domesticating national political and public life, and to establish motherhood and other feminine qualities as civic virtues.<sup>19</sup> Third, as Judith Walkowitz has noted for England in the 1880s, the expansion of teacher training and secondary schooling for women, no matter how conservative the curricula and ethos might have been, precipitated new expectations and social possibilities, “redefining both heterosocial and homosocial norms,” and “[heralding] the entrance of middle-class women into new forms of waged work.”<sup>20</sup> And finally, as we have already argued, the fact that women accounted for a majority of the professionals working in a vital public institution in and of itself contradicted and undermined the nineteenth-century construction of an exclusively male republican public sphere.

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*The Birth of the Penitentiary in Latin America: Essays on Criminology, Prison Reform, and Social Control, 1830–1940*, eds. Ricardo Salvatore and Carlos Aguirre (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1996), 224–53.

17. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy*, in particular the chapter on “Educating without Emancipating,” 110–28.

18. Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984), 23–30.

19. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 9–10.

20. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 64–65.

The state's ideological and financial investment in the training of women primary school teachers was, therefore, a Pandora's box. No doubt most liberal ideologues would have echoed Justo Sierra's hope that women would use their education to become the domestic collaborator and companion of men, "to form souls, to sustain the soul of [their] husband[s] . . . to continue the perpetual creation of the nation." Those women conscripted to do the actual educating, however, clearly began to think that they had some license to act otherwise. Sierra's plea—"Niña querida, do not turn feminist in our midst"—was surely a fatalistic recognition that such an outcome was inevitable.<sup>21</sup> As Francesca Miller notes, "there is a strong correlation between the advent of public female education, the appearance of *normalistas*, and the rise of feminism in certain Latin American nations."<sup>22</sup> Though it is not on her list, Costa Rica was one such country.

### The Setting

In 1821 Costa Rica became independent from Spain without violence and managed to escape the grotesque wars that tore through much of Central America in the postindependence period. Moreover, the struggle between four principal towns—Cartago (the colonial capital), Alajuela, San José, and Heredia—for political dominance was decided (in favor of San José) with a minimum of civil strife. Not coincidentally, San José was at the center of a burgeoning coffee export economy that, unusual for Central America, provided the foundation for national prosperity and social peace. Costa Rica was also spared many of the sociocultural divisions that pierced the core of other Latin American societies in the postindependence period. By the early nineteenth century, the small indigenous population had been culturally and geographically marginalized. By this time, the axis of society and politics in the principal zones of settlement had become a system of unequal exchange between merchants and direct agricultural producers who shared the same culture. In this context, many peasants were able to prosper as independent growers in the coffee economy, while merchants maintained a monopoly over credit, processing, and export.<sup>23</sup>

21. Sierra's discourse is from Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Crisis in Mexico, 1880–1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1982), 204; cited in Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1991), 47.

22. Miller, *Latin American Women*, 35.

23. Iván Molina Jiménez, *Costa Rica (1800–1850): el legado colonial y la génesis del capitalismo* (San José: Univ. de Costa Rica, 1991); Lowell Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before*

By the second half of the nineteenth century, coffee was grown in many parts of the central valley, a vast, centrally located intramontane basin that was home to a large majority of Costa Ricans. Peasant migration gradually extended the agricultural frontier of this region outward and led to the establishment of new towns throughout the central valley. Effectively, then, Costa Rica had two peripheries. The first was a frontier peasant society, based on subsistence and incipient commercial agriculture, located within the geographical confines of the central valley. The second extended into Costa Rican territory outside the valley: the ranching area of Guanacaste to the northwest; the mixed agricultural and ranching areas around the growing port of Puntarenas on the Pacific littoral; and, after the 1880s, the banana enclave of Limón on the Caribbean coast. Costa Rica's growth was also reflected in its demographic statistics. A population of 50,000 in 1800 had doubled by 1850; in 1900 it reached about 250,000, and then doubled again to a little over half a million by the census year of 1927.<sup>24</sup>

After 1870 a liberal state took shape and directed agricultural expansion, facilitating its growth by providing an infrastructure and services, as well as by exerting administrative as well as moral and ideological control over an increasingly complex, dispersed, and numerous people. San José was the political and administrative hub of Costa Rica. It also maintained a central position in public employment, the service sector, the coffee economy, and in a manufacturing sector characterized by a nascent import-substitution industry and artisan workshops of various sizes. By the turn of the century, according to one traveler from the United States, San José's prosperity and its population of 25,000 had made it a "metropolis in miniature."<sup>25</sup> The grandiose edifice of the Colegio de Señoritas, like the splendid National Theater and the ominous National Penitentiary, was a monument to civilization erected at the symbolic center of the liberal polity.<sup>26</sup>

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*Coffee: Society and Economy on the Eve of the Export Boom* (New Orleans: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987); and Robert G. Williams, *States and Social Evolution: Coffee and the Rise of National Governments in Central America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994), 44–52, 127–30, 156–63.

24. Mario Samper, *Generations of Settlers: Rural Households and Markets on the Costa Rican Frontier, 1850–1935* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); and Carolyn Hall, *El café y el desarrollo histórico-geográfico de Costa Rica* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1976).

25. Gray Casement, "A Central American Arcadia," introduction to Ricardo Fernández Guardia, *Cuentos Ticos: Short Stories of Costa Rica*, 3rd ed. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1925 [1905]), 5.

26. For a thorough architectural appreciation of the Colegio, one of the country's most pleasing buildings, see José Enrique Garnier, "Estudio de restauración," reproduced

In Costa Rica, as throughout Latin America, the reform of public education was central to the liberal project. From the eve of independence to the 1880s, the central government was often in the hands of political reformers who issued enlightened decrees on national education; but the concrete results of their efforts were limited. Perhaps most significant for the advance of education in Costa Rica was the absence of any crippling ideological conflicts between conservatives and liberals until very late in the century. Furthermore, the relative social peace and ethnic homogeneity that prevailed in the country's heartland, as well as the rise of a stratum of prosperous peasants, made it more likely in Costa Rica than in other Latin American countries that peasant and artisan children would receive some education.<sup>27</sup> As Ileana Muñoz has demonstrated, until the 1880s Costa Rican education took place almost exclusively under the auspices of municipalities and under strong Church (or at least religious) influence; concomitantly, there were few teachers professionally trained at state-sponsored schools. The central state's increasing desire to inspect these schools and to impose a uniform curriculum was not matched by its capacity to do so.<sup>28</sup>

Carmen Fallas and Margarita Silva have provided a basic sketch of the instruction of girls in the nineteenth century prior to the liberal reform of the 1880s. One key aspect of this period was a debate over the potentially positive or negative effects of education for women. A series of newspaper articles from 1844, that Fallas and Silva cite, reveals a typical division among elite men, who debated whether providing women with an education would be beneficial or detrimental to "civilizing" Costa Rica. But in 1847, President José Castro Madriz mandated that a "general *liceo* for the education and instruction of girls from all the State's departments" be opened in the capital. The school, the Liceo de Niñas, materialized two years later with 40 students, some enjoying state fellowships. It also functioned as a normal school, graduating a fair number of teachers between 1853 and 1856, when the minister responsible for the school, Nacario Toledo, deemed that it had "fulfilled its mission" and ordered it closed. The school, it was thought, had been successful in training women

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in Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 167–76. See also Steven Palmer, "Prolegómenos a toda futura historia de San José, Costa Rica," *Mesoamérica* 31 (1996): 181–213.

27. On the negative effects of the civil wars and ideological conflicts, see Newland, "La educación elemental en Hispanoamérica," 346.

28. Ileana Muñoz García, "Estado y poder municipal: un análisis del proceso de centralización escolar en Costa Rica, 1821–1882" (M.A. thesis, Univ. de Costa Rica, 1988).

from outside the capital who had returned home and were instructing other girls and teachers in the provincial capitals.<sup>29</sup>

In 1858 the Liceo de Niñas was re-established in San José, but only as a school for girls and not as a normal school. As late as 1862 the minister of education, Francisco María Iglesias, expressed the deeply equivocal attitude held by officials in the centralized institutions of public power toward universal public schooling for girls. In advocating "selective schooling," he posed the rhetorical question: "What good does it serve, what possible use would it be, for the daughter of a washerwoman or cook, or the daughter of an artisan, to learn the grand operations of arithmetic, geography, and history . . . creating in them needs and pretensions superior to the sphere to which their families belong?"<sup>30</sup> The general populace, however, apparently did not agree with the elite directors of the central government.

During the 1870s, popular demand for girls' instruction grew at a startling rate. Residents throughout the country petitioned Congress to have Liceos de Niñas established in their areas, and offered to pay the costs of building schools and paying teachers.<sup>31</sup> Most likely it was this demand from below that was responsible for a dramatic change in schooling patterns during the late 1870s. In 1872, in the Costa Rican public school system, there were 59 schools for boys (with 3,414 students) while only 19 for girls (with only 988 students); by 1883 there were 127 schools for boys (with 7,045 male students) and 107 for girls (with 5,592 female students).<sup>32</sup> While education for boys had doubled in a decade, that for girls had increased six-fold. In Santo Domingo, a prosperous coffee-growing area between San José and Heredia, 42 percent of girls born between 1868 and 1877 would receive some schooling.<sup>33</sup> In San José as many as 70 percent of girls were receiving some schooling by 1880.<sup>34</sup> This

29. Carmen Liddy Fallas Jiménez and Ana Margarita Silva Hernández, "Surgimiento y desarrollo de la educación de la mujer en Costa Rica, 1847-1886" (Lic. thesis, Univ. de Costa Rica, 1985), 157-59.

30. "Memoria de Instrucción Pública, 1862," Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica (hereafter ANCR), Congreso, 5800, fol. 21; cited in Muñoz, "Estado y poder municipal," 94-95.

31. ANCR, Congreso, 9166, fol. 27, 1875; cited in Fallas and Silva, "Surgimiento y desarrollo de la educación de la mujer," 160-61.

32. Muñoz, "Estado y poder municipal," 312.

33. Lowell Gudmundson, "Campesino, granjero, proletario: formación de clase en una economía cafetalera de pequeños propietarios, 1850-1950," *Revista de Historia* (Costa Rica) 21-22 (1990): 182.

34. According to the municipal census of 1904, 77 percent of women born between 1875 and 1879 could read, and 71 percent could write; Victor Hugo Acuña and Iván Molina, database for the 1904 census. We thank Iván Molina for providing us with this information.

dramatic rise in the numbers of girls within the school system suggests that the association of girls' education with social improvement was already part of artisan and peasant culture by the time the Colegio Superior de Señoritas opened its doors in 1888. This expansion of girls' education, promoted from below, made it possible for the normal school to attract and enroll girls of non-elite backgrounds.<sup>35</sup>

The military regime of Tomás Guardia (1870–82) laid the foundations of Costa Rica's liberal state, but it failed to impose uniformity on the public education system. Moreover, as Muñoz notes, "teacher training was the most erratic and contradictory part of its education policy." As late as 1878, Guardia's centralizing regime, despairing over the quality of schoolteachers, decreed that municipalities assume the costs of establishing summer academies for teacher training. The outcome of this effort is not known, but its decentralizing thrust suggests the indecisive nature of state educational policy at this time.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1881 and 1885, on the eve of the great liberal reform of public education, the central state's involvement in education came to a virtual end. In part this retreat was the result of a pronounced fiscal crisis brought on by a plunge in coffee prices, a huge debt contracted for railway construction, and the diversion of public funds to the armed forces in preparation for war with Guatemala. But state withdrawal from public education was also conditioned by the state's brewing showdown with the Catholic Church for control over the moral tutelage of the people. This conflict began heating up in 1882, and came to a head with the expulsion of the archbishop and the Jesuits in 1884.<sup>37</sup>

The effect of this clash over public education has still not been entirely understood. However, some details are clear. In 1883 the central government

35. No research has been done on the forces behind this remarkable increase in popular demand for girl's education. We suggest that it was driven by artisan and peasant women, as well as by women schoolteachers. Although from a later period (1913), in the fascinating autobiographical novel of Luisa González, it is her female primary school teacher who informs Luisa's father that his daughter is smart enough to attend the normal school; and it is Luisa's mother who insists that the desperately poor artisan family make the sacrifice, despite a lot of skepticism; see Luisa González, *A ras del suelo* (San José: Ediciones Revolución, 1970); translated as *At the Bottom: A Woman's Life in Central America* (Berkeley: New Earth Publications, 1994), 50.

36. Muñoz, "Estado y poder municipal," 228; see also the general discussion on pages 223 to 229.

37. Ricardo Blanco Segura, *1884: el Estado, la Iglesia y las reformas liberales* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1984), 145–91; and Claudio Vargas Arias, *El liberalismo, la Iglesia y el Estado en Costa Rica* (San José: Ed. Guayacán, 1991).

suspended all support for secondary education; in early 1885, when Guatemala did declare war on the rest of Central America, the Costa Rican government suspended its involvement in public education altogether. Astrid Fischel, Costa Rica's leading historian of education, has offered a Whig interpretation of the central state's education reform. She suggests that the state ceased to participate in education because the municipal-based public school system, long considered inadequate by centralist reformers, was outmoded and in a terrible state of decline; and she argues that the liberal reform of 1885–89 was a necessary, inevitable, and successful rejuvenation of a moribund education system.<sup>38</sup> The available evidence, however, suggests a rather different picture: popular demand, and municipal and Church administration, had greatly expanded and invigorated public instruction during a decade of conspicuously incoherent central state policy. The systematic reconstruction of a uniform, secular public primary education system after 1885—with control, curriculum, and funding emanating from the central state—was motivated more by the success than by the failure of the preceding system of public schooling. The education reform was a crucial part of the liberal struggle to wrest ideological and administrative power from the municipalities and the Church, and to more directly oversee the “civilizing” of the popular sectors and the forging of a homogenous national culture. The Colegio de Señoritas was a major cog in this new machine of liberal education.

### **Creating the Colegio Superior de Señoritas**

Between 1885 and 1889, a group of exceptional intellectuals—who came to be known as “el Olimpo” (the Olympians) due to the blithe arrogance they displayed in accelerating liberal reforms that they had circumspectly initiated under the military regimes of Guardia and Próspero Fernández (1882–85)—assumed leadership of Costa Rica's government. When Bernardo Soto, a member of the Olympians, became president in 1885, he filled his cabinet with like-minded individuals, brilliant young positivists in their twenties and thirties, most of them graduates of the law school of the Universidad de Santo Tomás. Among them was Mauro Fernández, who from 1885 to 1889 was minister of education and a protagonist in the radical reform of public instruction that led to the creation of the Colegio Superior de Señoritas.<sup>39</sup>

38. Astrid Fischel Volio, *Consenso y represión: una interpretación socio-política de la educación costarricense* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1987), 162–64.

39. On the Olympians, see Patricia Badilla Gómez, “Ideología y derecho: el espíritu mesiánico de la reforma jurídica costarricense (1882–1888),” *Revista de Historia* (Costa Rica)

The reform itself, its principles encapsulated in the 1886 *Ley general de educación común*, made primary schooling mandatory for both sexes, eliminated the Church and the municipalities from the development and implementation of public education, imposed a uniform school curriculum, and mandated a new system of age-group divisions rather than the mixed system that had prevailed up to that time. It was a classic positivist, centralist project, in many aspects adopted verbatim from the Argentine reforms of 1875–84, and then buoyed by model “*sarmientino* tours” of the United States in 1884 and 1886 by young Costa Rican liberal ideologues.<sup>40</sup> Beyond the primary level, the Universidad de Santo Tomás (which liberals saw as a vestige of scholastic influenced education) was eliminated; its financial base was supposed to be reassigned to a project that would expand and rationalize secondary schools in the four principal towns of the republic. The only postsecondary institution left in the country was the Colegio de Abogados, formed out of what had been the most active *facultad* of the Universidad de Santo Tomás.<sup>41</sup>

The reform was highly controversial, and in 1886 the Church successfully appealed for a boycott of the new liberal primary school system. Although recognizing the widespread nature of the boycott, Fischel has rather hastily dismissed popular reaction as basically a result of Church initiative, which she felt manipulated people who were “ignorant, incapable of appreciating the advantages of knowledge and without any intellectual aspiration, [and who] could not comprehend the utility, and even less the duty, of making sacrifices to educate their children.”<sup>42</sup> The Church was clearly the ideological leader of the resistance, but it was joined by other sectors of Costa Rican society. The municipalities, which had good reason to feel overwhelmed by an authoritarian imposition from the center, played an important role. So too did popular sector households, whose reticence toward the reform stemmed from their

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18 (1988): 187–202. On Fernández, see Constantino Láscaris, *Desarrollo de las ideas en Costa Rica*, 2d ed. (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1975), 140–45.

40. The *Ley general* embodied a positivist, centralist vision. The main sections of the law were adopted verbatim from the Argentine reform laws of 1875–84. The new system was also based in part on the findings of young liberal ideologues who had been sent by the state on tours of United States facilities. These two study missions, one in 1884 and a further one in 1886, were modeled on Sarmiento’s earlier visits to the United States.

41. On the reform, and the influence of Sarmiento’s thought and the Argentine model on Costa Rican reformers, see Fischel, *Consenso y represión*, 114–22; Luis Felipe González Flores, *Historia de la influencia extranjera en el desenvolvimiento educacional y científico de Costa Rica* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1976 [1921]), 98–99, 154–55.

42. Fischel, *Consenso y represión*, 195.

concern that mandatory school attendance would adversely affect their children's contribution to the family economy. Thus resistance to the educational reform might be better understood as the result of complex class and local responses to the liberal project, responses that at the national level coalesced around a reactionary campaign headed by the Catholic Church.<sup>43</sup>

From 1886 to the present, critics have maintained that the reform was simply another part of an essentially antidemocratic Olympian agenda. Although it did provide a minimal level of education for artisans, laborers, and peasants, by eliminating the university and reducing support for secondary education, the reform left little room for social mobility. The state, in effect, had abdicated its responsibility to underwrite quality higher education.<sup>44</sup> Though there is much to be said for this interpretation of the 1886 law and its results, a refusal to evaluate the reform on its own terms has led many scholars either to miss or to underestimate some of its most important effects, including its impact on the role later played by the Colegio de Señoritas.

The central government gradually reached compromises with the municipalities and in 1890, following a popular uprising that chased the Olympian clique from power, religious instruction was reintroduced into the public system. Once again the laboring classes began to send their children to school in large numbers, a development that reflected a renewed popular support for public education of boys and girls, such as that which had marked the 1870s.<sup>45</sup> This extended role of centralized and uniform primary education, however, required a large and better-trained teaching force, a need that created significant possibilities for new professional employment. While a normal school section was established in the male Liceo de Costa Rica in 1888, male secondary students were more likely to pursue opportunities in other professions (especially in law, medicine, and pharmacy) that held out the prospect of greater earnings and prestige than teaching. The personnel needs of this new public education system would have to be met

43. This is similar to the view of Juan Rafael Quesada Camacho, "La educación en Costa Rica: del apogeo del liberalismo al nacimiento del estado benefactor," in *Las instituciones costarricenses: de las sociedades indígenas a la crisis de la república liberal*, ed. Jaime Murillo (San José: Univ. de Costa Rica, 1989), 419–20.

44. The most recent exponent of this view is Quesada, "La educación en Costa Rica," 415–29.

45. In 1886 there were 14,478 students enrolled in 138 schools. In 1890, despite liberal reforms that increased the number of schools to 237, only 12,685 students were enrolled. By 1895 there were 21,289 students enrolled in 316 schools; and by 1900 there were 33,374 in 362 schools. See Quesada, "La educación en Costa Rica," 421.

by training young women.<sup>46</sup> Already in 1887 Mauro Fernández had taken steps to open a normal school for girls in San José. He contracted three German women who had first gone to Nicaragua to teach, but who had left that country when their expected teaching contract had failed to materialize. The school was a relative success, but within a year all three women had either returned to Germany or developed other projects. Fernández then turned to his sister-in-law, Marian Le Cappellain, and asked her to become the director of a new normal school, the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, that as minister of education he was able to create in time for the opening of the 1888 school year. The government appropriated a generous subsidy to finance a new building in the heart of San José, just southeast of the central plaza, that would house the Colegio.<sup>47</sup>

Le Cappellain was a native of the Channel Islands, though she and her sister had studied Classics at a secondary school in York. In 1872 circumstance had led them to visit Costa Rica, where Marian's sister fell in love with and wed the dashing young Fernández. "Miss Marian," as Fernández's sister-in-law came to be known, remained a spinster and began to tutor, later becoming director of a small private school for girls in San José. She then served as the first director of the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, holding that position for twenty years (1888–1908). As a Protestant, a graduate of an elite girls' boarding school in England, and a relative by marriage of one of Costa Rica's most elite and ideologically influential families, she was an appropriate figure to train a cadre of teachers in an educational system that had been strongly influenced by Sarmiento's anglophile adoption of the views of Herbert Spencer and Horace Mann.<sup>48</sup>

In his annual address to Congress in 1889, Fernández reiterated the standard liberal justifications for expanding the education of girls and stressed the need "to prepare women to better carry out their social duties; to make them real intellectual companions of men." He made no gender distinction in addressing the need for all teachers to improve their training, and suggested raising salaries to motivate them to do so. He also announced government sponsorship of forty fellowships for girl students, from the city and the provinces, who would attend the normal section of the Colegio Superior de

46. Fischel, *Consenso y represión*, 167.

47. Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 19–23.

48. The best portrait of Le Cappellain is in José Fidel Tristán, *Baratijas de antaño* [1925–29] (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1966), 11–14; see also Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 25–37; and Angela Acuña de Chacón, *La mujer costarricense a través de cuatro siglos*, 2 vols. (San José: Impr. Nacional, 1969–70), 1:441.

Señoritas. Twenty fellowships were to include housing and a stipend for provisions, and were created to attract girls of moderate to lower income to the city, where they were to be housed with “honorable families” and considered “under the protection of the Government.” The state would be responsible for the decency of their public destinies.<sup>49</sup> The other twenty fellowships were to include a stipend only, and were to go to needy girls from San José.

While the Colegio’s program changed over the time it functioned as a normal school, its basic structure remained the same: a five-year program for girls between 11 and 16 years of age. The curriculum for the first three years was to be shared by all students, but during the final two years the young women would select a course of study depending upon the specialty that they had chosen. The Colegio offered literary studies with a humanist orientation that did not include teacher training. In addition, after 1909 a *sección comercial* was created to offer special training in some trades, as well as in telegraphy, stenography, and other skills that would be needed for those who wished to enter the various service-sector jobs that were then opening up to women. The Colegio also had a primary school annex that facilitated training opportunities for *normalistas* while providing a context for innovative pedagogical experiments (including Costa Rica’s first kindergarten).

The school temporarily closed its pedagogical section in 1914, when a new coeducational normal school was opened in Heredia, a provincial capital near San José. This school was created by an ardent critic of the Colegio de Señoritas (and of women schoolteachers in general), Luis Felipe González Flores, while he was minister of education in the government of his brother, Alfredo (who would be deposed by Federico Tinoco in 1917). The Colegio de Señoritas did not reopen its doors as a teacher training facility until 1918, ironically benefiting from the Tinoco dictatorship’s efforts to weaken the normal school in Heredia, which it justly considered an opposition bastion of political radicalism and pro-González Flores sentiment. This favor from the Tinoco government did not stop the students and staff of the Colegio de Señoritas from later turning on the military regime. The willingness of the school’s student body to oppose the dictatorial regime might reflect the broad class composition of this group.

49. Secretaría de Instrucción Pública, *Memoria de la Secretaría de Instrucción Pública, 1888* (San José: Impr. Nacional, n.d.) 26, 28–30. “Disposición del Presidente de la República [1903],” in “Album de recortes de periódico, 1900–10,” ACSS. In 1900 the fellowships were augmented; see “Reglamento del Colegio Superior de Señoritas,” reproduced in Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 235–37.

### The Social Composition of the Student Body

Angel Rama has written that the “*maestra normal*” was one of the defining “social myths” in turn-of-the-century Latin American cities. “It oriented the dreams of the young women of the lower middle class” and provided them with the possibility of assuming places in the expanding ranks of intellectuals in the modernizing city who, “if not better paid, were certainly more respectable and admirable.”<sup>50</sup> From a very different perspective, Francesca Miller proposes that the woman schoolteacher “represented a new social group in Latin American society, the educated middle sector, which included skilled workers, clerks and government employees, as well as educators.”<sup>51</sup> The following profile, for the most part based on research in the registration books of the Colegio, reveals that the normal school was indeed largely attended by girls from urban backgrounds, and particularly by those from the capital city. Nevertheless, although a plurality of its student body was made up of the daughters of the new middle class of professionals and public employees, a significant proportion was of working-class and artisan extraction. Young women of rural backgrounds were also well represented, and a small minority of students came from the ranks of the very poor.

For the period that the Colegio functioned as a normal school (1888–1914 and 1918–23), registration records that provide details on the geographical and social background of the incoming student body are available only from 1900 onward. Some geographical data relevant to the first class of 1888 has been recuperated, and the 1900 figures include information on girls who were enrolled as early as 1897.<sup>52</sup> We have chosen to collect data up to 1919 (not including 1915–17) that provides information relevant to determining the social composition of the Colegio’s student body during the time it functioned as a normal school. The 1918–19 figures also allow us to suggest a social profile both of the *normalistas* who marched against the Tinoco dictatorship in June 1919, and of the senior class of 1923, the year in which the Colegio’s student body and staff played a significant role in founding the Costa Rican Feminist League.

Between 1897 and 1914, and again from 1918 to 1919, a total of 1,243 girls

50. Rama, *La ciudad letrada*, 74.

51. Miller, *Latin American Women*, 36.

52. The relevant information has been gathered from the Libros de Matrícula, 1900–14 and 1918–19, ACSS. The 1888 figures are from Colegio Superior de Señoritas, *Album del cincuentenario*, 27–35.

Table 1: Geographical Origins of Students from the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, 1888–1919 (number and percent)

	1888	1897–1906	1907–1914	1918–1919	1888–1919
San José (city)	119 (85)	390 (79)	340 (83)	291 (92)	1,140 (84)
San José (prov.)	4 (3)	38 (9)	15 (3.5)	21 (6.5)	76 (5.5)
Alajuela	5 (3.5)	15 (3)	14 (3.5)	3 (1)	37 (2.5)
Cartago	3 (2)	15 (3)	14 (3.5)	– (–)	33 (2.5)
Heredia	5 (3.5)	21 (4)	9 (2)	– (–)	36 (2.5)
Guanacaste	– (–)	8 (2)	13 (3)	– (–)	21 (1.5)
Puntarenas	4 (3)	7 (1.5)	5 (1)	– (–)	16 (1)
Limón	– (–)	– (–)	1 (–)	– (–)	1 (–)
Total	140 (100)	494 (100.5)	411 (99.5)	317 (99.5)	1,360 (99.5)

Sources: Libros de Matrícula, 1900–14, 1918–19, ACSS; CSS, *Album del cincuentenario*, 27–35.

enrolled in the Colegio; records with data on their geographical origins are available for almost all these students. The vast majority of the girls and young women (84 percent) were from the city of San José, and an additional 5.5 percent were from the province of San José. (The location of provincial boundaries meant that these latter students could either have been from semirural towns near the capital or from quite distant rural areas.) Only 7.5 percent of all students came from other principal towns and their provincial hinterlands (approximately the same proportion from Alajuela, Cartago, and Heredia), and 2.5 percent were originally from areas outside the central valley (two-thirds of these were from Guanacaste, and one-third from Puntarenas; during the entire period there was only one registered student from Limón, despite the fact that after 1900 two fellowships a year were earmarked for students from this area).<sup>53</sup>

Table 1, which includes figures for the Colegio's first year of operation in 1888, reveals that the percentages mentioned above remained fairly constant over time, with three notable trends. The first is that the proportion of girls coming from the province (as opposed to the city) of San José increased between 1897 and 1906, only to drop off afterward as the student body was again increasingly dominated by city girls. This renewed dominance, however, might simply reflect the statistical impact of an administrative change, the

53. This only meant that Spanish-speaking students in the region went without trained teachers; the majority anglophone, Afro-Caribbean populace of Limón had a high rate of literacy and their children were served by Protestant mission schools.

incorporation of previously independent municipalities within San José's expanding city limits. A second, more significant, trend is that up until 1914 there was a slight but constant increase in the proportion of Colegio students from the outer periphery of Costa Rica, particularly from Guanacaste (an area targeted in a 1907 scholarship program initiated by the González Víquez administration). Finally, in 1918 and 1919, when the Colegio reopened as a normal school, it was almost completely dominated by girls from the city and its environs as students from other areas began to attend the normal school in Heredia, which retained its status as a national institution despite the persecution it suffered during the Tinoco years.

Data are available on the occupations of the parents of 959 girls from incoming classes between 1897 and 1919.<sup>54</sup> The occupational categories are often ambiguous, an ambiguity that both warrants further discussion and provides a means to explore in greater detail the nature of social stratification in Costa Rica. *Comerciante*, for example, might have designated anyone from the operator of a corner store to the owner of an import-export firm. Likewise, *agricultor* could signal virtually any type of agriculturist, from humble peasant to wealthy *cafetalero*. Because of the nature of Costa Rica's urban manufacturing sector at this time, the listing of a trade like *zapatero* could mean that the girl's father might have been a shoe-mender working out of his own house; a cobbler deft in finely crafting women's shoes and earning a good wage at a large, protoindustrial workshop; or the owner of a respectably sized shop that employed a substantial number of individuals and produced shoes for the internal market.

The occupational listings that most faithfully represent a given social standing are those of the elites, such as *diputado*, *ministro*, *cónsul*, *hotelero*, *hacendado*, and *representante de casas extranjeras*. Almost as definitive are the categories given by the emergent middle sectors, particularly *empleado público*, but also *farmacéutico*, *oculista*, *maestro*, and *profesor*. *Abogado*, and even *médico*, on the other hand, could simply represent the preferred professional identity of a member of the elite whose wealth and social eminence derived from coffee or other family-based merchant interests. Among the trades, a listing of *costurera* (seamstress) or *purera* (woman cigar-maker) clearly signal a working-class background, although the woman might have been married to an artisan, and so have formed part of the "classic" San José working class of the era; or she

54. The actual total is 1,065 girls; however, those whose parents were listed under *oficios domésticos* have been discounted since this category is neutral, simply indicating that a woman who did not have a trade or professional identity registered the child.

Table 2: Social Background of Students from the Colegio Superior de Señoritas, 1897–1919 (number and percent)

	1897–1906	1907–1914	1918–1919	1897–1919
Elites	12 (3.5)	12 (4)	5 (2)	29 (3)
Professionals	7 (20.5)	66 (21)	64 (22.5)	203 (21)
Merchants	58 (16)	71 (22.5)	70 (24.5)	199 (20.5)
<i>Agricultores</i>	66 (18.5)	45 (14)	36 (12.5)	147 (15)
White-collar	66 (18.5)	57 (18)	42 (15)	165 (17)
Artisans	79 (22)	62 (19.5)	65 (23)	206 (21.5)
Unskilled	5 (1)	3 (1)	2 (.5)	10 (1)
Totals	359 (100)	316 (100)	284 (100)	959 (100)

Source: Libros de Matrícula, 1900–14, 1918–19, ACSS.

might have been extremely poor (a virtual certainty if indeed she had to rely exclusively on either of these occupations to make ends meet).<sup>55</sup>

Despite the fact that these ambiguities within the occupational categories listed in the Colegio's registration books impose unavoidable limitations on the data, a strongly suggestive picture of the social composition of the Colegio's student body, based on parents' occupations, emerges (see table 2). If professional and public sector occupations are grouped together as representing the urban middle class, then this group constitutes the largest social category (38 percent) to which the Colegio's student body belonged. The single largest occupational category (21 percent) was that of merchants, the majority of whom were probably middle class. Although we have no evidence to corroborate this, it is quite likely that a significant number of girls whose parents listed themselves as *agricultores* were from Costa Rica's prosperous peasant families engaged in coffee farming, who made up the bulk of the rural middle class in the central valley.

The most surprising statistic, however, is that daughters of artisans and other skilled laborers accounted for slightly over one-fifth (21.5 percent) of the student body over the period studied. Almost by definition, these young women were from urban areas. The fact that artisan categories potentially covered a wide range of economic conditions means that, in terms of family wealth, these girls probably came from very different circumstances. Nevertheless, a working-class identity was shared by most members of this group

55. An exhaustive analysis of occupational categories is found in Mario Samper, "Evolución de la estructura socio-ocupacional costarricense: labradores, artesanos y jornaleros, 1864–1935" (Lic. thesis, Univ. de Costa Rica, 1979), esp. appendix A, 245–95.

(even by those who were *maestros*, in other words small industrial capitalists) who shared skills and an early life trajectory with proletarianized skilled laborers. Prosperous artisans and the owners of small workshops were protagonists in creating a working-class network of mutual associations, newspapers, and sports and reading clubs. This cultural network—espousing self-improvement, the value of education, the dignity of skilled manual labor, and the possibilities of political reform—was the foundation of a strong working-class identity that emerged in San José between 1890 and 1920.<sup>56</sup>

Although their size is difficult to precisely determine, it is clear that the daughters of Costa Rica's most influential social sectors also attended the Colegio in significant numbers. Besides the 3 percent who were clearly members of the elite, we may assume that a certain proportion of parents who registered their occupation as merchant, lawyer, or *agricultor* were members of eminent families. Elite families had the option of sending their daughters to the private college run by the Hermanas de Sión; that many did not do so suggests that despite the mixed social composition of its student body, the Colegio de Señoritas was sufficiently “elite”—that is, distinguished—for their daughters. At the other extreme, there was a smattering of occupational categories—in particular *jornalero*—that definitely indicate a very poor background, and demonstrate that some marginal families made a concerted effort to educate their daughters, perhaps by taking advantage of state scholarships.

Unless there were significant shifts over time in the social background of families from those ambiguous categories that least precisely encode economic or status variables, the proportions of students from different social classes remained roughly unchanged over the 23 years under study, except in two instances. There was a gradual decline in the proportion of daughters of *agricultores* and a notable rise in the proportion of girls whose parents were merchants. These shifts probably reflect the impact of urbanization in and around San José, where the population increased from 19,000 in 1892, to about 40,000 in 1920.<sup>57</sup>

We suggest that the social composition of the Colegio de Señoritas' student body demonstrates that the widely shared myth surrounding the *maestra normal* represented a dream of success that attracted urban girls of working-

56. See Acuña, “Clases subalternas y movimientos sociales,” 263. Also Mario Oliva Medina, *Artisanos y obreros costarricenses, 1880–1914* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1985); Victor Hugo Acuña Ortega, *Los orígenes de la clase obrera en Costa Rica: las huelgas de 1920 por la jornada de ocho horas* (San José: Centro Nacional de Acción Pastoral; Centro de Estudios para la Acción Social, 1986); and Samper, “Estructura socio-ocupacional.”

57. Palmer, “Prolegómenos,” 196.

class and even extremely poor backgrounds, as well as girls from the rural middle class.<sup>58</sup> We would also question Miller's designation of skilled workers as members of an "emergent middle sector" made up of public employees, educators, commercial clerks, and small shop owners. Indeed, though the interests of the two urban groups (skilled workers and the "emergent middle sector") often overlapped, the forging of a distinct working-class identity, culture, and movement in Costa Rica between 1880 and 1930 arose from the particular solidarities and ways of life that skilled manual labor generated. From the perspective of white-collar workers, as David Parker has demonstrated in his work on Peruvian commercial employees, a Latin American middle-class identity was based on the fact that members of this class worked with their head, not with their hands.<sup>59</sup> In cultural and political terms, it is more accurate to say that a quarter of the Colegio's students were from families of the emergent working class, and over a third from the emergent urban middle class, than it is to say that over half the girls were from "middle sector" families.

This distinction is very apparent in the memoir of Luisa González, *A ras del suelo*.<sup>60</sup> González attended the normal school in Heredia from 1917 to 1922, and not the Colegio de Señoritas. Nevertheless, her experience of the magical opportunity of normal school education, written from the perspective of a woman acutely aware of her poor artisan class identity, underscores the fact that teacher training at a prestigious institution would have had a different meaning to a woman from a working-class, as opposed to a middle-class, family. For the former the overall risks of educating daughters were higher because of the greater sacrifice a poor family would have to make to keep its children in school. In addition, upward mobility would have meant a greater

58. Fragmentary evidence suggests that normal schools were accessible to working-class girls in other Latin American countries as well, though we know of no other study that presents hard evidence on this matter. Costa Rica's Colegio Superior de Señoritas may have been unique in that it was an elite national institution containing a normal school open to girls of low socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas in larger countries the elite preparatory institutions tended to be separate from the regular teacher training facilities, and were of course much more exclusive. On this institutional division, and on the lower socioeconomic backgrounds of normal school students, see Gertrude M. Yeager, "Elite Education in Nineteenth-Century Chile," *HAHR* 71 (1991): 79; on Mexico's elite Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, see Roderic A. Camp, *Intellectuals and the State in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1985), 89, 107.

59. David S. Parker, "White-Collar Lima, 1910–1929: Commercial Employees and the Rise of the Peruvian Middle Class," *HAHR* 72 (1992): 48–54.

60. This was recently translated as *At the Bottom*, although *Dirt Poor* perhaps better captures the sense of the original title

ascension for someone starting from the bottom of the social hierarchy, than for someone who had begun from the middle. Once González began working as a teacher, her income allowed her and her family to move from a shack with a dirt floor in San José's poorest barrio, to a house with a wooden floor in what she referred to as a "barrio de clase media," composed of respectable artisans, commercial employees, and small merchants. Finally, the sense of cultural transformation, and thus of the value of the training itself, was felt more acutely by girls from a poor background.<sup>61</sup>

A version of a rural girl's passage through the Colegio itself comes to us from the autobiographical notes of María Leal, the daughter of a school director in the peripheral canton of Santa Cruz, Guanacaste. In 1907 she was awarded a scholarship to study at the Colegio, and upon receipt of the title of *maestra normalista* in 1914, she returned to teach in her home district. After four years she married a local peasant farmer of average means, although she continued to work as a teacher for another thirty-nine years. Though somewhat atypical in that Leal came from the distant periphery of Guanacaste rather than the rural areas of the central valley, her story is an example of the middle-class aspirations and trajectories of Colegio students from rural areas.<sup>62</sup>

From 1897 to 1913, close to 25 percent (206 of the 871, or 23.5 percent, for whom records exist) of the Colegio's total student body enjoyed some form of state scholarship.<sup>63</sup> The scholarships ranged from tuition support, to stipends for purchasing school materials and clothes, to full room and board for girls from the provinces. Although this assistance was occasionally suspended during moments of fiscal crises, the numbers are not insignificant. The proportion of the student body needing and receiving state assistance is close to what we would expect, given the data on parental occupation. Nevertheless, we have no hard evidence that working-class or poor girls were targeted for scholarships, and, indeed, the case of María Leal shows that scholarships for rural girls did not necessarily go to the needy.

Overall, then, we can safely say that the Colegio de Señoritas was primarily used by urban middle-class families who wished to maintain a respectable social standing for their daughters. But in addition, it was used by a significant number of working-class families who saw it as a means for their daughters'

61. González, *At the Bottom*, 102–3.

62. María Leal de Noguera, "Notas autobiográficas," in *Estampas del camino* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1996), 147–50.

63. Atestados de Bequistas, 1888–1913, ACSS. Because only normal school students were eligible for fellowship support, the proportion of *normalistas* receiving state assistance was higher than that (23.5 %) for the total student population.

(and hence their own) social mobility and economic advancement. To a significant degree, the Colegio also provided a means through which middle-class families from the countryside could maintain, and possibly improve, their social status, and through which young women could earn an income that might considerably supplement their future husband's earnings from agricultural endeavors. Finally, at the extremes of the social hierarchy, the Colegio educated both a significant contingent of daughters of the elite—though undoubtedly most of these young women opted for an education in the humanities rather than in the normal school—as well as a considerable, if small, group of truly marginal girls, who almost certainly opted for teacher training. Nevertheless, we do not wish to reduce the interests and dreams of the young women students themselves, let alone the meaning of being a *maestra*, to such basic socioeconomic considerations.

### Sociability and Pedagogical Orientation

In her analysis of the Costa Rican liberal educational reform, Fischel concludes that the Colegio de Señoritas acted “more as a moralizing center where the girls perfected their restricted and rudimentary knowledge, . . . than as a real pedagogical establishment.” She also questions its effectiveness in producing normal school teachers, pointing out that it graduated only 100 certified teachers during its first 12 years of operation.<sup>64</sup> And despite differing sharply with her on most subjects, Juan Rafael Quesada agrees with Fischel in pronouncing the Colegio a disappointment in terms of production and training.<sup>65</sup> Both historians echo Luis Felipe González Flores's 1921 declaration that Le Cappellain's preparation of teachers with pedagogical culture “was always deficient.”<sup>66</sup>

Of these criticisms, the question of the Colegio's productivity is easiest to address. Over the course of its tenure as a normal school, the institution certified 572 teachers, 508 of them as full *maestras normalistas* and the rest at lesser

64. Fischel, *El uso ingenioso de la ideología en Costa Rica* (San José: Univ. Estatal a Distancia, 1992), 58; and idem, “Estado Liberal y discriminación sexista en Costa Rica,” *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (Costa Rica) 65 (1994): 27.

65. Quesada, “La educación en Costa Rica,” 425–29.

66. González Flores, *Historia de la influencia extranjera*, 246. A notable exception to this consensus is presented by Marcia Apuy Medrano, “Educación, mujer y sociedad en Costa Rica (San José, 1889–1949)” (Lic. thesis, Univ. Nacional Autónoma, 1995), who paints a favorable portrait of the Colegio in the context of a general discussion of women's education.

titles. This means that the school graduated an average of just over 19 teachers per year. As Fischel notes, the first years of operation were even less productive, with an average of only 12 teachers graduating each year between 1891 (the year of the first graduation) and 1903; from 1904 to 1914, the rate picked up to 19 per year; while from 1920 through 1923 there was a relative boom, with graduating classes ranging in size from 38 to 55 young women.<sup>67</sup>

These are relatively modest figures, considering that in 1904 Costa Rica's educational system employed 890 teachers (almost 500 of them women), and in 1920, a total of 1,346 (almost a thousand of them women).<sup>68</sup> However, since the above figures are national in scope, whereas most of the Colegio's students came from and returned to work in San José and its environs, the effect of Colegio graduates on renovating primary education in the city and its hinterland was more pronounced. Of course, the greater impact in San José itself bespeaks a failure of the liberal reform and the Colegio to adequately address the education needs of the country in its entirety—another example of the disproportionate benefits in services that have always gone to the capital.

Still, some graduates originally from San José did not find positions in the capital and wound up serving in rural or semirural districts. In effect, they became cosmopolitan emissaries with a high, if at the same time ambiguous and often resented, stature who could have a dramatic effect on shaking up local mentalities and power structures. And no doubt they served as unprecedented role models for many a young girl (and boy) from the hinterland. More common than rural teachers with an urban background, however, were local girls who returned home after their experience in the capital, and who most likely enjoyed a stature and effect in their native towns comparable to that of city girls.

As a fourth-grader in the rural town of Santa Cruz on Costa Rica's most outlying periphery, María Leal benefited in this way from the arrival of the canton's first "maestra normalista graduada." Leal does not say whether the teacher was originally from the area or not, but she refers to her as having been "very intelligent and aware of her mission" and influential in "orienting my life" (probably a reference to the teacher's sponsorship of Leal's application for a scholarship to attend the Colegio de Señoritas).<sup>69</sup> Of 22 Colegio graduates who were originally from outside the city of San José, and whom we have been able to trace working in a school after graduation, 14 were

67. Colegio Superior de Señoritas, *Album del cincuentenario*, 269–75.

68. Fischel, *Uso ingenioso*, 301; and Apuy, "Educación, mujer y sociedad," 225.

69. Leal, "Notas autobiográficas," 149.

employed in their native districts, and the percentage of women who returned to their home regions to teach rises the further one moves away from the core of the central valley.<sup>70</sup>

Evidence of women teachers' successful service as front-line soldiers in the liberal civilizing crusade is the ringing endorsement given by Rockefeller Foundation antihookworm teams to female schoolteachers in rural areas. For example, the Costa Rican director of the team that worked in Sardinal, Guanacaste, in 1917, noted that teachers at the boys school had given the campaign no support whatsoever, while the teacher at the girls school had shown extraordinary enthusiasm and given needed practical assistance. She was only one of the teachers who served as key allies in combating local political bosses and *curanderos*, and in winning over the populace to the Rockefeller Foundation's message of hygiene evangelism.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, we must differ with the consensus of Costa Rican scholars who present the Colegio as a retrograde institution. We are unable to provide a detailed picture of the school's curriculum and course content, which would be necessary for a complete understanding of the ideological message teachers were being trained to accept and to convey. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the curriculum confirm that the conception of studies was not backward-looking. This ecumenical plan of study, combined with a consideration of other aspects of the Colegio experience, draws a picture suggestive of an environment that was modernist and feminist, in the most basic sense of these terms.

The *normalistas* were products of a unique pedagogical and social experience that trained students to see themselves as privileged agents of social transformation and modernity. The academic disposition of the institution was that of a sober, scientific establishment devoted to the pursuit of women's excellence and the training of a modern corps of teachers. While pedagogical theory was not Le Cappellain's forte, her two decades of leadership marked the institution with that tone of conservative but independent femininity peculiar to the era, and in the words of Carlos Gagini, a leading pedagogue and literary

70. Determined by matching teacher appointments for 1901 to 1922 (extracted from the *Colección de leyes y decretos*, published yearly by the government of Costa Rica), with the *Libros de Matrícula*, ACSS.

71. Report of José León Quijano, Director de Campo, in Departamento de Ankilostomiasis, "Informe Anual, 1917," ANCR, Policía 6475. On the role of teachers in antihookworm efforts, see Steven Palmer, "Central American Encounters with Rockefeller Public Health: The Anti-hookworm Missions, 1914–1921", in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998).

figure who taught at the Colegio, with “that seriousness characteristic of English educators.”<sup>72</sup>

For its time, the edifice, equipment, and infrastructure of the Colegio were considered first-rate; they included a library, a natural history collection, chemistry and physics laboratories, and a gymnasium. The curriculum covered ancient and modern history as well as civics; geography and cosmography; chemistry, physics, natural history and hygiene; and calisthenics. All normal school students took specialized courses in pedagogy and constantly practiced teaching in the primary school annex.<sup>73</sup> They were also sent out to schools to give lessons on specialized themes to other, presumably uncertified, teachers. For example, in 1914 María Leal studied the works of various authors, including Anatole France, in order to prepare her workshop on “The importance of the short story in the mental development of children” for teachers at the school in Alajuelita, on the distant rural perimeter of San José.<sup>74</sup>

Almost all the Colegio’s male instructors also taught at the Liceo de Costa Rica (teaching requirements at both schools was often stipulated in the contracts offered to foreign recruits). Partly because of this, and because of the real overlap of family and friends in this small burgh, the two institutions developed a brother-sister relationship that generated the sense of a shared intellectual milieu whose tone was distinctly modernist. At some point, virtually every significant progressive intellectual of the time taught at the Colegio de Señoritas: Joaquín García Monge, the socialist pedagogue and the country’s first novelist; Solón Núñez, the great health reformer and anti-imperialist; José Fabio Garnier, architect and outspoken supporter of women’s emancipation; Roberto Brenes Mesén, avant-garde philosopher and *enfant terrible*; Clodomiro Picado, renowned scientist and alumnus of the Pasteur Institute; and economist Tomás Soley. Eminent foreigners included the chemist and astronomer Juan Rudín (who taught geography), the ethnographer Henri Pittier, and the Salvadoran social philosopher Alberto Masferrer. These erudite and eclectic intellectuals were invariably engaged in research, writing, and debate, and they brought their work into the classroom.<sup>75</sup>

72. Carlos Gagini, *Al través de mi vida* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1961), 137.

73. “Reglamento del Colegio,” in Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 222–31.

74. Leal, “Notas autobiográficas,” 150.

75. The list of teachers is from *El Colegio Superior de Señoritas* (San José: Impr. Nacional, 1925), 21–22. See also the photograph of Rudín giving lessons in cosmography to Colegio students in Tristán, *Baratijas de antaño*, 33; and Tristán’s memories of Pablo Billely bringing his experiments in natural science into the classroom, *ibid.*, 44. Gagini also recalls with satisfaction the pedagogical experiments in language learning that he carried out at the Colegio; *Al través de mi vida*, 138.

The education received by the young women also had a distinctly feminist component. Of the 157 teachers who taught at the Colegio between 1888 and 1925, 67 (43 percent) were women.<sup>76</sup> They included the country's first woman physician, Jadwisa de Picado, and legendary teachers such as Vitalia Madrigal. From 1922 to 1926, the institute's director was Esther de Mezzerville, a graduate of the Colegio, a heroine of the antidictatorial resistance, and an outspoken feminist.<sup>77</sup> A number of the male teachers themselves were interested promoters of the Colegio's feminist impulse, perhaps the result of having pursued advanced studies in Chile, where breakthroughs in the postsecondary and professional education of women occurred far earlier than in any other Latin American country.

Among the group of young pedagogues, García Monge and Brenes Mesén had received prestigious state fellowships to study at Chile's Instituto Pedagógico, as had the Colegio's second director, José Fidel Tristán (1909–21), and the author of the school's emancipatory anthem, Juan Dávila.<sup>78</sup> In fact, of the ten graduates of the Chilean scholarship program, eight would teach at the Colegio, as would two other foreigners who had likewise attended the Instituto Pedagógico.<sup>79</sup> In 1921, González Flores wrote of this group that "the pedagogical evolution experienced in the Liceo de Costa Rica, thanks to the presence there of these new teaching elements, is without any doubt the most transcendental from a technical point of view that this country has achieved."<sup>80</sup> Perhaps because González Flores was an inveterate misogynist, perhaps because he wished to deny any glory to precursors of his beloved normal school, he assumed that the Chilean generation had no such impact on the young women of the Colegio de Señoritas, where they also taught.<sup>81</sup> But the Chilean-educated pedagogues had an impact and were strong advocates of

76. *El Colegio Superior de Señoritas*, 21–22.

77. Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 47–55, 122.

78. On the intellectual prestige and social elitism of the Instituto Pedagógico de la Universidad de Chile, see Charles Hale, "Political and Social Ideas in Latin America, 1870–1930," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, 11 vols., ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984–), 4:384–85, 426–27. On Chilean scholarship students, see Fischel, *Uso ingenioso*, 65–67.

79. González Flores, *Historia de la influencia extranjera*, 125–26; *El Colegio Superior de Señoritas*, 21–23.

80. González Flores, *Historia de la influencia extranjera*, 126.

81. In 1915, because of his belief in the "mental inferiority of women" and their "weak, malleable character," González Flores ordered the dismissal of all married women school-teachers as a first step toward the removal of all female teachers; "Una entrevista con don Luis Felipe González Flores," *La Prensa Libre*, 16 June 1915; cited in Fischel, *Uso ingenioso*, 100.

women's rights, both in their capacity as teachers and, within the wider society, as intellectuals. Brenes Mesén and García Monge, for example, championed the cause of women's emancipation in the pages of *Vida y Verdad*, their 1904 publication that scandalized the traditional-minded public of Costa Rica.<sup>82</sup>

The Colegio was not enough of a juggernaut to demand the kinds of advances in the professional and university training of women that distinguished Chile as the Latin American leader in women's education.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, Costa Rica's first woman *bachiller* (and eventually its first woman lawyer), Angela Acuña, had graduated from the Colegio prior to finishing secondary studies at the Liceo, and many other normal school graduates also achieved recognition in their fields. They included social activist, creative writer, and avant-garde pedagogue María Isabel Carvajal (better known by her pseudonym, Carmen Lyra); Guanacastecan folklorist and writer María Leal; and Communist Party militant and folklorist Emilia Prieto. The majority of graduates, however, earned their reputation within the fold, as intellectuals concerned with national education—studying, experimenting, commenting and founding reviews, or becoming school principals. Notable in this regard were Lila Ramos, who became the country's leading educational psychologist, and, of course, Esther de Mezzerville, who would eventually preside over her alma mater. Colegio graduates were also among those most responsible for the increased activity in philanthropy and public health that characterized the 1910s and 1920s, when they helped promote a concern with both disciplines within the primary school system.<sup>84</sup>

The Colegio also had an egalitarian, leveling spirit. This position was formalized in 1907 when a school uniform was introduced and made mandatory, in part as a way to avoid the implication of social differentiation that was so easily communicated through clothes and fashion. The uniform also promoted an esprit de corps within the Colegio. Nevertheless, beyond its walls and within society at large the uniform functioned as a status marker; it marked the students as members of a scholastic elite that had managed to gain entrance into the selective institution.<sup>85</sup> Yet even though within the Colegio

82. Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:9–10. See also Ingrid Vargas, "Modernism, Feminism, and Maternalism in Costa Rica, 1900–1920," paper given at the conference Gender and History, London University, 1996.

83. Miller, *Latin American Women*, 49–51.

84. Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, passim; on Prieto, see Leonor Garnier, *Antología femenina del ensayo costarricense* (San José: Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes, 1976), 35.

85. Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:207. Castro and Colombo, *Cantemos los triunfos*, 39.

there was no mandated and formal marker of social differentiation among students, students were obviously aware of class differences. (Luisa González's recollections dwell on the shame she felt when the director of the normal school saw her humble home.) But official school policy aimed to join an institutional egalitarianism with a sense of grand cultural mission and ethical leadership.<sup>86</sup> To what degree the Colegio inculcated democratic sentiments among women educators is a question that cannot be answered through statistics; a thorough analysis of political behavior would be required.

In 1912 José Fabio Garnier's teaching experience at the Colegio was one source of inspiration for a new journal, called *Cordelia*, that soon became a forum for the ideas of Costa Rica's intellectual vanguard. But Garnier also used the journal to present the work of the Colegio's more exceptional senior students and graduates, such as Angela Acuña. The journal's title was more appropriate than Garnier might have imagined, for it was the students of the Colegio de Señoritas who, like Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, would demonstrate a principled, youthful sincerity by standing up to a liberal patriarchy gone awry, and restoring the country its soul during the heroic June days of 1919.

### **Democrats and Feminists**

In the context of a severe recession brought on by World War I, the government of Alfredo González Flores introduced progressive, though controversial, banking and taxation reforms. The president also attacked members of the political elite for corruption associated with oil exploration concessions that Congress had made to foreign capitalists. González Flores was overthrown by his defense minister, General Federico Tinoco, in a coup that was not unpopular. Most eminent Costa Ricans either enthusiastically supported the takeover or showed little reaction to the overthrow of democracy. Nevertheless, the Tinoco dictatorship gradually weakened; it was unable, for a variety of reasons, to secure the blessing of Washington, and it was incapable of overcoming the domestic economic problems provoked by the war in Europe. Eventually the Tinoco regime was confronted with an armed threat from a group of dissidents who had taken refuge in Nicaragua. The growing army managed to defeat the insurgents, but at the expense of a budget that was increasingly dominated by military expenditures. Opposition stalled, and the

86. González, *At the Bottom*, 77–80.

dictatorship seemed to be on the verge of achieving legitimacy. In early June of 1919 the situation abruptly changed.<sup>87</sup>

The Costa Rican crisis took place in an international context characterized by widespread popular rebellion. A university reform movement was sweeping through Latin America, sparked in 1918 by students in Córdoba, Argentina. The Russian Revolution and the generalized socialist rebellion and labor militancy of the postwar period was also making its mark on Latin America. It was fitting, then, that the catalyst for the popular rebellion against the Tinoco dictatorship came during a speech to schoolteachers given by the Argentine educator and labor leader Julio Barcos. A woman teacher stood up to denounce the political persecution she had suffered as a relative of several rebels.<sup>88</sup> The floodgates of criticism burst open, and that night plans were made to create a national association of educators to protect teachers' rights and to lobby for increased funding for education. The Tinoco regime responded by summoning the directors of all the country's secondary schools, and demanding that they circulate a form that educators could sign to voluntarily donate a portion of their salary to the war effort. The threat was clear.

Two forms went up on the walls of educational institutions throughout Costa Rica, one for those who wished to collaborate, one for those who wished to dissent. After some hesitation, school inspectors José Guerrero and Esther de Mezzerville, the first a former teacher of the Colegio and the second a distinguished graduate of the institution, became the first two to sign, choosing the second form in what amounted to an effective declaration against the military regime. The majority of the country's leading educators in San José and at the normal school in Heredia followed suit. The dictatorship retaliated by ordering schools and colleges closed in order to facilitate a "reorganization of personnel."

Students from the Liceo marched to the Colegio de Señoritas in support of the teachers, but the protest was dispersed by police. That night the regime sent military police to block the meeting where the national teachers association was to be formed. The following day it was announced that the school year was suspended, and that there were plans to eliminate school inspectors, to dismiss personnel, and to raise the salaries of those who remained in their jobs (in other words, to reward those who supported the regime). This time it

87. The best global account of the dictatorship is Hugo Murillo Jiménez, *Tinoco y los Estados Unidos: génesis y caída de un régimen* (San José: Univ. Estatal a Distancia, 1981).

88. Unless otherwise indicated, what follows is from Eduardo Oconitrillo García, *Los Tinoco (1917-1919)* (San José: Ed. Costa Rica, 1980), 160-70.

was the students of the Colegio de Señoritas who initiated the march, heading to San José's Morazán Park, where they were joined by teachers, students from other schools, and workers.

As our earlier statistical sample shows, the core of the marchers—the students of the Colegio—was fairly representative of San José society. Virtually all the participants were from the capital; a quarter were of working-class extraction, slightly fewer had parents who were professionals, and 15 percent were from “white-collar” families. The strong contingent of girls from artisan families sheds new light on the level of support that the city's popular classes gave to the march, which is often mistakenly represented as heroically led by the middle-class intelligentsia, backed by a faceless mob. The presence of a female working-class contingent among the protagonists also suggests that these anti-Tinoco street protests were part of the same wave of working-class militancy that peaked less than a year later in the coordinated series of successful strikes in favor of the eight-hour day.

Some of the more audacious students addressed the crowd from the kiosk in Morazán Park. When the police intervened to stop them from speaking, women teachers defended the girls, and the fight was on. Fire hoses were used to disperse the crowd, which regrouped and continued the protest by marching to the United States diplomatic mission, only to be broken up again, this time by machine-gun fire. The next day, Liceo students once again marched to their sister school, inspiring popular support that quickly coalesced into an angry crowd that finished its protest by burning the installations of the proregime newspaper, *La Información*. The police reaction was swift and violent, and numerous protesters were left wounded and dead in the streets.

Although the normal school in Heredia was the symbol and center of a male democratic radicalism, it was the women students, teachers, and graduates of the Colegio de Señoritas who led the organized resistance that finally broke the back of the Tinoco dictatorship, which collapsed in August 1919, less than two months after the first public demonstration against the regime. Indeed, heroic female leadership of the urban protest movement was so widely recognized that it almost won women the right to vote. Women's suffrage was part of former rebel leader Julio Acosta's platform during his successful 1920 campaign for the presidency. The role of educated and educating women as protagonists in the overthrow of the Tinoco regime was underscored by Colegio students in June 1923, when they presented a petition in favor of female suffrage to the national Congress, arguing that “through the instruction of many women a large number of significant projects have been realized in our country; it was the virile activity of these women that made it possible on one

occasion to overthrow a tyranny.”<sup>89</sup> The audacity and novelty of this act should be emphasized: these *normalistas* were declaring—on the most central political stage in Costa Rica—that it was legitimate, and even necessary for the democratic life of the republic, for women to assume a “manly” public stance.

In part out of resentment for the public demonstration of the impotence of the traditional male political class in 1919, this petition was only the first of many supporting female suffrage to be ignored by the male Congress, despite a great deal of lip service from leading political figures in favor of granting women the right to vote. Nevertheless, on October 12, 1923 (the anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the Americas), the Liga Feminista Costarricense was officially founded in a ceremony at the Colegio de Señoritas attended by President Acosta and the First Lady, Elenita Gallegos. The Liga’s first board was made up of the director of the Colegio, Esther de Mezzerville; the institution’s most academically distinguished graduate, Angela Acuña; and its physical education teacher, Ana Rosa de Chacón. Among its rank and file members was a contingent of schoolteachers, many of them graduates of the institution.<sup>90</sup>

The Costa Rican movement also had strong links to the network of suffrage movements in other European, North American, and Latin American countries. In 1922 both Angela Acuña (who had a long history of activism, and who had been inspired by English suffragettes during a stay in England)<sup>91</sup> and the conservative Catholic suffragist, Sara Casal de Quirós, attended the Conference of the League of Women Voters in Baltimore, prior to going on to the Panamerican Women’s Conference in New York City.<sup>92</sup> In both meetings they met with Latin American and United States feminists, including the Uruguayan Paulina Luisi, and the head of the League of Women Voters, Carrie Chapman Catt (who would later tour South America to help promote women’s

89. Macarena Barahona Riera, *Los sufragistas de Costa Rica* (San José: Univ. de Costa Rica, 1994), 74.

90. Barahona, *Las sufragistas*, 71–79; Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:353.

91. After graduating from the Colegio in 1907, Angela Acuña spent several years in France and England. Upon returning to Costa Rica in 1912, she became the first woman to enroll in the Liceo, with an eye to pursuing her education at the Colegio de Abogados, which she did in 1916. She then became the leading proponent of women’s emancipation, and her essays were published in the press (including in *Cordelia*). Although from an elite background, Acuña frequently spoke on the plight of the woman worker. See Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:343–45.

92. On Casal, see Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz, “¿Hábrase visto cosa igual? El trasfondo doméstico de la lucha por la aprobación del voto femenino,” *Actualidades del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central* (Univ. de Costa Rica): 1–4.

suffrage organizations). The immediate organizational link, however, was Ibero-american rather than Panamerican: the Liga Feminista Costarricense was founded simultaneously as a local chapter of the Liga Internacional de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispanoamericanas.<sup>93</sup>

The founding of the Liga Feminista at the Colegio Superior de Señoritas was a dramatic expression of the real and symbolic links between the institution and women's emancipation. The presence of the president of the republic at this event underscores the extraordinary degree of political legitimacy that Costa Rican women had achieved by the 1920s. Fabrice Lehoucq and Iván Molina argue persuasively that the battle for women's suffrage was not won at this time, despite such favorable circumstances, because the Liga Feminista organized its campaign by appealing to powerful allies in the political class, and consciously chose not to mobilize women from the popular sectors.<sup>94</sup> This strategy underscores the ambiguous position of women educators: they were transforming the nature of the public sphere and the contradictions of their position made them potential political radicals; yet they felt uncomfortable stepping outside the bounds of officially sanctioned reform unless the liberal system totally betrayed them (as it did in 1919). The point can be further illustrated with a brief look at two additional Liga campaigns from the 1920s.

Women had assumed leadership of the expanding Costa Rican network of philanthropic organizations. This new role was apparent by their actions in the aftermath of the 1924 earthquake, when the Liga Feminista immediately, indeed almost reflexively, decided that its greatest contribution to the relief effort would be to form an "Office of Inspection." With this goal in mind they requisitioned the president's car to carry out "an inspection . . . of the living conditions of the people who present petitions to the National Relief Committee, in order to provide positive confirmation that they really need what they are asking for."<sup>95</sup> Among the new legitimate public roles for women was inspection of the homes of laboring classes in order to better regulate the allocation of welfare resources. Despite their democratic vocation and the humble class origins of some of the militants, they were incapable of conceiving their action as directly supporting popular demands that the state apportion relief in a fairer and more expeditious manner.<sup>96</sup> Thus the Liga's activity after the

93. Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:354; Miller, *Latin American Women*, 84–92; Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change*, 334–35.

94. Fabrice Lehoucq and Iván Molina, "Fraud, Electoral Reform, and Democracy: Costa Rica in Comparative Perspective," ms.

95. Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 2:356–57; *Diario de Costa Rica*, 4 Apr. 1924, p. 7.

96. On such popular organizing, see "Comités de socorros del Cantón del Hospital," *Diario de Costa Rica*, 9 Mar. 1924, pp. 1, 16.

earthquake also reveals “*oficialista*” limits placed on the political participation of these new women.

The struggle of the Liga Feminista to combat job discrimination on the basis of sex reveals that, in some areas, women teachers could dissent effectively from the official line. As Fischel has documented, the education ministries of the late 1920s continued González Flores’s criticism of women as innately inferior teachers; liberal discourse had now come full circle. They also complained about the large numbers of primary school teachers, most of them women, who lacked specialized training. In the early 1920s, only two-thirds of the country’s schoolteachers were uncertified; most of these were women, who constituted approximately three-quarters of all primary school teachers. The Liga Feminista successfully fought efforts to reduce the salaries of the uncertified teachers, although they could not block a variety of informal tactics used to encourage men to join the teaching force.<sup>97</sup> This conflict in the domain of primary school education was perhaps the first labor dispute in the public sphere to be articulated in terms of gender, particularly as it affected equality in salary and in access to professional activity.

## Conclusion

It could be convincingly argued that Costa Rican women’s organizations have never been as politically and professionally coherent, nor as aggressive and demanding, as they were under the leadership of the staff and alumnae of the Colegio de Señoritas during the first three decades of this century. During this period the institution created a corps of specialized primary school teachers that served as the axis for the increasingly coherent and publicly militant women’s movement. A complex social makeup, and a generally progressive intellectual milieu, promoted an egalitarian and feminist spirit among the graduates, one that they did not hesitate to display in the streets of San José. Only further studies will reveal the extent to which this same spirit was displayed in the classrooms of Costa Rica, although the *normalistas* educated at the Colegio were undeniably agents of modernity in a wide variety of social settings.

A great deal more work needs to be done to fully understand the importance of the opportunity for social mobility that teacher training offered to a small but significant segment of working-class and rural women. More research on the details of everyday life in the Colegio, in the classrooms, and

97. Fischel, “Estado liberal y discriminación,” *passim*; and Acuña, *La mujer costarricense*, 1:357.

in the formal and informal associations of teachers would facilitate a clearer understanding of the connection between this first generation of women professionals, drawn from middle and laboring classes, and the development of Costa Rican feminism and political radicalism in the 1920s and beyond. The actions of 1919 and 1923 clearly demonstrate, however, that the Colegio Superior de Señoritas had provided a broad spectrum of women with the conviction that they had legitimate title to an important public domain, one that authorized them to take intellectual and political action in the interests of the polity, even to the degree of open dissent with the dominant order.

The formation of these female agents of liberal civilization was a contradictory process, both for the patriarchal state and for the women involved. The *niñas queridas* did turn feminist; the daughters of washerwomen and seamstresses did begin to expect to receive the same rights and benefits as their social superiors; the young women of San José learned how to overthrow a tyranny and act with greater republican “manliness” than the sanctimonious Olympians of the male political class. *Normalistas* succeeded in writing a stunning new chapter in the public life of women. In the short run, however, they were unable to sustain the momentum of this new plot. The Colegio Superior de Señoritas was both Pandora’s box and patriarchal labyrinth, the first unsolvable puzzle of modern gender politics in Costa Rica.