

Twentieth–Twenty-First Centuries

El Estado editor en América Latina: Libros, política y cultura. Edited by CARLOS AGUIRRE, MARTÍN BERGEL, and SEBASTIÁN RIVERA MIR. Sentidos de Libro. Temperley, Argentina: Tren en Movimiento, 2025. Photographs. Maps. Figures. Notes. 458 pp. Paper, ARS 35.000,00.

When the former guerrilla and future president of Uruguay José Mujica was in prison during his country's dictatorship, his guards refused to let him read. In 2023, he told me that he spent eight years without a book. When conditions relaxed slightly, he was allowed textbooks in scientific subjects—chemistry, agronomy—but still nothing in history or sociology. Freedom, when it came, meant the ability to read. The anecdote speaks to the power attributed to books, and to reading, as potential sources of liberation (or of subversion) in Latin America.

This edited volume brings together many leading scholars working on the intellectual history of Latin America to examine the role of the state in the creation of books in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The three editors, who also author contributions—Carlos Aguirre, Martín Bergel, and Sebastián Rivera Mir—begin the volume with three episodes that indicate the book's importance for the construction of state policy. First: the creation of the Secretaría de Educación Pública in Mexico under José Vasconcelos in 1921, soon after the end of the violent phase of the Mexican Revolution. Second: the creation of the Imprenta Nacional de Cuba in March 1959, soon after the end of the Cuban Revolution's violent phase. And third: the burning of books in Córdoba, Argentina, in April 1976, a bit more than a month after the military regime seized power in a coup.

The point of these episodes is that all three governments involved expected that books had the potential to shape publics. In Mexico and Cuba, increasing access to books coincided with efforts to increase literacy throughout the population, connected to a vision of revolutionary change that would offer not just a new political order but also cultural access and uplift. Under Argentina's military government, by contrast, books were a threat that the regime thought could harm the nation. Put differently, the shaping of the availability of books was part of each regime's development plan, as it sought to shape the capacities and orientations of its people.

In their introductory essay, the three editors identify six roles for the state in the production of books: the “printing state,” the “teaching state,” the “activist state,” the “censoring state,” the “promoting state,” and the “regulating state.” Each captures aspects of the tasks that various Latin American states undertook beginning in the nineteenth century, and extending throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first, as they sought to support the printing of books that they thought would benefit national projects. The fact that the categories (though organizationally and conceptually helpful) are not mutually exclusive is reflected in the fact that the book's subsequent contributions are not totally organized to match them.

The book spans a wide geography and a wide chronological range. Early chapters give panoramic looks at state-led publishing efforts in Colombia and Costa Rica. But the remaining chapters focus on specific episodes and editorial projects in Mexico, Chile,

Cuba, Peru, Argentina, and Brazil. One recurring theme across the chapters is the struggle to find an arrangement between state officials and editorial workers that both meets government needs and allows sufficient autonomy for the book projects to retain quality and utility. Another is the struggle between “bourgeois publishing” and “socialist publishing”—whether the purpose of a state publishing house is to meet the needs of experts and specialists or to bring literature to the masses.

Not surprisingly, some of the biggest disjunctures in institutional design came under socialist governments. The postrevolutionary Cuban government oversaw a massive expansion of state capacity for printing and the gradual disappearance of private presses. In Chile, workers at the venerable (but bankrupt) Editorial Zig-Zag staged a strike until the Salvador Allende government nationalized it, creating Editorial Quimantú. Two chapters consider Peru under the nationalist military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, who also sought a state-led expansion of access to books. In each of these cases, there was change in both the quantity and the kind of books published, as cheap editions were created for people with little income as part of broader projects of social reform.

Some of the tensions in these projects do, at times, poke out from between the covers. At Quimantú, editors from the Communist Party and the Socialist Party clashed over whether they should publish Leon Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. The chapters on Cuba, understandably enthusiastic about how much more was offered in the years after the revolution, only briefly address questions of what could not be said when the state became the sole publisher. The state, in other words, could be both promoter and censor. Ediciones de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, created in 1958 with financial support from the University of Buenos Aires but led by an autonomous editorial team, navigated those challenges admirably. But even there—and in spite of a spate of Third World-oriented publications on Asia and Africa—Peronist students were suspicious of its pedigree and put up little protest when a military government intervened in the university in 1966.

Because of their links to national states, these projects were primarily national in scope. But there were transnational dimensions as well. Many states backed translations of works considered essential for students. Other writers and editors were forced into exile themselves, which became an opportunity to spread expertise. Both the chapters on Mexico emphasize that government’s international ambitions for its projects. The state-backed Fondo de Cultura Económica had branches throughout Latin America and Spain. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s Centro Regional de Educación Fundamental para América Latina, based in Pátzcuaro, developed pedagogical materials for literacy that represented an internationalization of Cardenista ideas about education.

Country specialists should find individual chapters valuable, and the introduction provides a useful set of concepts for a broad range of scholars of Latin American intellectual history.

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