

IRIS Area and International Studies Awards for Incoming Graduate Students activity report

I spent the summer of 2024 in Mexico City researching the Archive of the Ministry of Education.

While doing this archival work, I was in the process of writing my preliminary examinations. It was a challenge to go to the archives regularly and at the same time write about my research project and what is linked to the theoretical framework. However, doing this will help me create a more detailed and concrete methodological approach within my preliminary exam and identify some of the sections I will explore next year as I collect sources for my dissertation.

This last semester, I started redefining my research proposal, given the literature review I did as part of my preliminary research. In this process, I recognized how the issue of religion and secularization had not previously been analyzed by the history of education in Mexico or by broader theoretical perspectives in education and curriculum development. This redefinition was helpful for the preliminary archival work I did this summer. I devised two different ways in which I will incorporate the Ministry of Education Archive into my research.

First, I spent a couple of weeks analyzing the documentaries at the Cultural Mission department, which coordinated several itinerant educational programs in some of the more remote areas of the Mexican countryside in the 1920s and 1930s. These so-called “missions” produced detailed reports about the academic conditions, challenges, and responses to the introduction of secular schooling in the countryside. Using these reports, I will analyze why peasant and indigenous religiosity became framed by the educational authorities as a challenge to the modernization of the countryside. What was the assumption regarding the race of peasants and the environmental conditions of the countryside that concerned educational reformers with the religious “fanaticism” of peasants?

Secondly, I became interested in the cultural and aesthetic project the Ministry of Education launched after the Revolution that ended in the 1920s by exploring the section of the Ministry's archive devoted to the Department of Fine Arts. A central feature of this artistic project was the rescuing and promotion of peasant culture as a constitutive part of national identity. Through funding and promoting artistic movements like muralism or musical nationalism led by composer Carlos Chavez, the Ministry sought to introduce peasant aesthetic expressions to the image and the sounds of the revolution. However, given the secularizing mission of the post-revolutionary education project, how did these aesthetic projects deal with the constitutive part religion played in peasant art and expression? How did these artists appropriate catholic symbols and reflect on the religious dimension of the peasant's life?

These two methodological decisions were fundamental to my dissertation project and would not have been possible without the support of the Institute for Regional and International Studies. Without the opportunity to be in Mexico during this last summer, it would have been impossible for me to identify the most relevant sources, documents, and sections of the Archive that will guide the next steps of my project.