

Julio Larrea (1904–1987)

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In 1904, Julio Larrea was born in Ecuador: at the center of the world where all roads meet, in the land of eternal green and blazing sun, tempered by the mesa of the high Andes and the stunning pure snow on the chain of extinct volcanoes, in that land where sharp contrasts create landscapes of breathtaking beauty. There he lived and fought for freedom, justice, and democracy, as a quixotic and learned educational leader supporting the peoples in the immense and rich Americas, and inspiring them to build a genuine New World.

Guided by the teachings of his father, the illustrious Ecuadorian educator Alejandro Larrea Fonseca, whose name graces a famous school in San José de Minas, Pichincha province, he learned in his own home the redeeming message of Simón Bolívar. He also absorbed Juan Montalvo's strong sense of opposition to tyranny, expressed in the most beautiful Spanish prose of the nineteenth century, and came to admire both the civilizing efforts of Vicente Rocafuerte and the heroic work of General Eloy Alfaro, who established the secular state in Ecuador. In his home he learned actively to cultivate ideas, ethics, and solidarity; his mother, Griselda Estrella, also forged his unbending will to defend what he judged to be just, beautiful, and good.

His imagination was prodigious; even as a small child, he dazzled older children with his fantastic recreations of children's stories. This imagination inspired all his original work as a writer, teacher, and educator and led him to found and direct his own journal of education and culture called *Nueva Era* [New Era], “an epic publication without rival”,¹ according to the Spanish educator Santiago Hernández Ruiz, who wrote that “only one who works in publishing knows what it means to sustain the best pedagogical journal in the world through pure will and hard work, in a desperate fight with the fleeting dollar”. This unique creative work led Hernández Ruiz to describe him as a “titan of education”.

Julio always lived in contact with books, starting in the rich library that educated his father, full of works notable as much for their general academic and cultural richness as for their educational value; daily, father and son discussed ways to relate lived experience to

¹ Most of the appreciative statements in this article can be found, in their original Spanish, on the blog devoted to his work (Larrea 2010).

cutting-edge theories. He also started his own library at a very early age and developed it throughout his lifetime, both in and out of Ecuador. Eventually it became one of the richest and most selective private educational libraries in Latin America; many authors sent him their publications with eloquent inscriptions recognizing his vast and original contributions, through both his journal and his roughly 30 books.

As a child, he absorbed the rich events of *Don Quixote*, his father's favourite book. Alejandro would read it to Julio every night, adding illuminating comments, helping to shape Julio's speech and his early vocation as a writer and defender of ideals. Julio remained faithful to these ideals until his death. He sustained them through the practice of what he called "heroic discipline": living them fully as part of oneself, until he himself became an example, as one of the most integrated and unique men in the history of Latin American education.

No other American educator so dedicated his life to survey, inch by inch, the paths of an injured America; to generously embrace and spread in *Nueva Era* the thoughts of so many educators and thinkers from both sides of the Atlantic; and to sharing so widely their lessons of faith, confidence, and optimism in the highest destinies of human beings. With his confident, eloquent, lively, and thoughtful writing, he shed light on the most complicated problems in education, culture, sociology, and political science, and he expressed, without anger, his strong and nonnegotiable opposition to oppression, inequality, and dictatorship.

Sustained by an iron will, he devoted all of his talent to fight and struggle for an America "free of ignorance, mercantilism, humiliation, routine, the tendency to *seem* and not to *be*, following molds or models, undervaluing what is American, and all types of tyranny", as he wrote in the dedication of his most polemic work, the 1961 *Didáctica de Lengua y Literatura Españolas*. Atahualpa, Eugenio Espejo, Antonio José de Sucre, Juan Montalvo, and Eloy Alfaro, from Ecuador; Cuáthemoc, Miguel Hidalgo, Benito Juárez, and Emiliano Zapata, from Mexico; José Martí, from Cuba; Mariano Moreno and Juan Bautista Alberdi, from Argentina; José Enrique Rodó, from Uruguay, were the archetypes of American and universal nationality who shaped his life and work as a born educator. He was part of this pantheon of rebels and was especially inspired and driven by Simón Bolívar's ideas.

Each morning he would say, "To labor is to pray and to love God", as he enjoyed the arrival of a new day with all its potential. And that was his religion throughout his life. Every day, throughout his long life, he wrote, or more frequently dictated, his thoughts, which he expressed with the signature style of a writer of disciplined prose: confident, direct, and elegant, alternating between extended descriptive passages and briefer synthesizing ones. His writing was always clear, original, and balanced, with every word used to good purpose. He never revised his dictations because he meditated on them thoroughly before he began. He used to read other authors slowly, because for him *to read* meant *to retain* and to enter into live dialogue with ideas. His enormous memory allowed him to retain what he read for months and years, and to reproduce it with surprising accuracy. In contrast, his own ideas flowed quickly, without rough drafts; a page at a time, they became voluminous books.

Beginning in his student years at the Juan Montalvo Teacher Training School, Larrea began to write for newspapers in Quito. When he was 16, *El Comercio* published his first article. By age 25 he had already become a significant intellectual.

Sometimes he wrote under his own name; he also used a variety of pseudonyms, including Jean Maurois, John Taylor, Gonzalo González, Altamira, Licenciado Vidriera, and, in his final decade, Juan Fernández. In his memorable essays about the continent's

political, socioeconomic, and educational problems, that appeared in the Mexican *Cuadernos Americanos*, he lashed out at oppressive dictatorships, instead elevating the inhabitants to the position of citizens; he corrected errors sanctioned as truths by false leaders of thought, and denounced those who betrayed the most noble interests of the human race, with his unmistakable *macho pen*, as his compatriot Justino Cornejo called it.

No other Ecuadorian was so often relieved of his duties, with honour, so that he could pursue the authentic republican life. He was persecuted by the government of Velasco Ibarra, even though he was outside of the country. However, the Ecuadorian House of Representatives raised its powerful voice on October 14, 1952, and recognized the unique philosophical, scientific, and technical value of his educational work in Ecuador and internationally. A similar pronouncement was made in 1982.

He taught and gave talks in many countries, at the invitation of national governments and prestigious universities, and also worked as an advisor, mainly in educational fields, but also in the social and political sciences, which he saw as an indispensable base for studying educational problems and developing solutions to them. Meanwhile, he remained in journalism, writing for the most important daily papers throughout Latin America. Journalism gave him his forceful style and his direct way of expressing ideas: agile, always alert, and vitally connected with the nature of things and with human drama all over the globe. For many years he was a permanent correspondent for Latin America for the *World Yearbook of Education*, which was published in conjunction with the University of London and Columbia University; he wrote essays for it, and for the Mexico City-based *Cuadernos Americanos*; he also wrote frequently for *Education and Society* and *Comparative Education Review*.

His outstanding gifts as a writer and thinker about the national situation became obvious in his very first book, the 1932 *Cuestiones Educativas*. Víctor Mercante, the founder of scientific pedagogy in Argentina, wrote, “I salute you as one of our strengths. You have before you fifty years of action, and I don’t doubt for a moment that your constructive thoughts will prove fertile for your country and the rest of the Americans”. In 1933, as Director of Education in the Province of León—today called Cotopaxi—he founded *Nueva Era*, so that “the teacher could explain his worries, give wings to his desires and unify his life and his work. *Nueva Era* is but one of the numbers in the formula for reform, outlined in the schools and for the schools”. The reform plan that he conceived focuses on the child as a living element who can bring his parents into the school’s efforts at reform, a process driven by “the teacher who socializes thought and method in active teaching”.

Nueva Era became *Revista Interamericana*, starting with volume 10 in 1941. In 1944, volume 13 was published under the auspices of Mexico’s Secretary of Public Education. In 1945, volume 14 was published by the University of Chile, and volume 15 in a bilingual edition by Brazil’s Ministries of Education and Foreign Relations. In addition to prominent national specialists in each country, the collaboration always included renowned intellectuals from other countries in the Americas and Europe. In 1957, volume 24 appeared in Argentina, under the auspices of the National University of Tucumán. Each edition ran to 320 pages. In the 1940s, various volumes also appeared in bilingual Spanish–English editions, because the journal was received so well in the United States, whose government and universities invited Larrea to teach at the highest level there in 1941, 1943, 1948, and 1965. In 1945, *Nueva Era* became an international journal, thanks to the many excellent contributions by outstanding educators, thinkers, sociologists, and representatives of the American and European cultures.

Nueva Era reached such a high level of excellence, and Larrea’s selfless work was so astonishing—he prepared each edition alone, and handled both circulation and distribution,

making it free outside of Ecuador—that he was praised by many renowned scholars and representatives of international organizations. Among them, H. M. Chambers, president of the American Council on Education, wrote that “*Nueva Era* is the most admirable pedagogical publication in the world”, and Pedro Roselló, then assistant director of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education, wrote that “*Nueva Era* figures prominently, as it deserves, among the three hundred pedagogical journals that we receive from in the entire world”. Luis B. Prieto, Venezuela’s Minister of Education, wrote that “The generous work of *Nueva Era* in America is welcome. It connects us to a greater degree than half a century of Hispanic American conferences”. Ronald Hilton, professor of Romance Languages at Stanford University, wrote: “I don’t know what would become of Hispanic America if there were only politics, if we were missing those individuals who, like Julio Larrea, don’t let the sacred fire of culture go out. I congratulate him with all my heart for the individual, heroic work that he is carrying out. It is unfortunately typical with cultural things that they are the product of one creative man without whom they wouldn’t be able to continue and in fact wouldn’t continue”.

Furthermore, *Lectura Para Maestros*, the official publication of the Pan American Union, which is now the Organization of American States (OAS, or, as it is known in the three other official languages, OEA), described *Nueva Era* as the “tribune of the leaders of contemporary education... [an] unequalled publication”. And the Spanish educator Lorenzo Luzuriaga described it as “The only readable, pedagogical journal in the Spanish language”. M.A. Teixeira de Freitas, a Brazilian lawyer, sociologist and educator, expressed his “admiration and immense gratitude” for “the noblest life of Julio Larrea, as a sociologist, publicist and educator, as much for his enlightened idealism as for his human figure and American citizenship. And more still for the transcendent meaning of the immense [...] work brought to fruition by the tireless director of *Nueva Era*, in support of education, social justice and the brotherhood of our continent”. For Elsa Bergamaschi, president of the Italian League for New Education, *Nueva Era* was “the best pedagogical journal in the world”, one that “constitutes the most complete body of the pedagogical union of educators and countries”.

In 1942, in Cuba, *Nueva Era* received the First Prize out of 1711 publications from all over the world. For his herculean efforts to publish the journal, philosopher Juan Roura Parella described Larrea as “the man of nostalgia for American union”. Larrea’s moral, intellectual, and pedagogical authority came to be so highly valued and regarded, that in 1948 Julian Huxley, UNESCO’s first Director General, personally invited him to become General Counsel to the World Seminar on the Education and Training of Teachers, held that summer in Ashridge, England. Moreover, in 1948, for his widely known and selfless work in support of the cultural integration of America, he was named an honorary member of the UN Human Rights Council.

Fervently defending the principle of active education that he successfully introduced in the Simon Bolivar School in Quito, Larrea led a nationwide effort at educational reform, and discovered and encouraged talent, especially Oswaldo Guayasamín (1919–1999), who became a world-renowned painter. After 1939, when he published his *Problemas de la Educación Ecuatoriana*, he shared his wide knowledge and rich experience with educators in the United States, as a special invited guest from Latin America at the American Progressive Education Conference in 1941, and at the Conference on New Education, held in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1943, the US State Department invited him to observe how educational problems changed during the war, and the Mexican Secretary of Public Education invited him to rethink its processes and techniques; this work led to his 1951 *La Educación Nueva*. This book established him as a worldwide authority on pedagogy; it was

the only book in Spanish to cover so many issues and offer a critical perspective on trends in schools, based on what both Americans and Europeans hailed as complete, balanced, and detailed analysis. It was adopted as a reference book by many high schools and universities throughout the Americas, and was translated into English, French, Portuguese, and Japanese.

In 1957, while working as a Distinguished Professor at the National University of Tucumán in Argentina, he published his culminating work *Didáctica General* in Mexico. Writing in *El Comercio* on 13 April 1959, the Spanish critic Julián Caparrós Morata said it marked “an era in the history of the pedagogy of the Spanish language”; to him it was “A work without rival, unsurpassed and difficult to surpass, not only for the ideas that nourish its dense, weighty pages, not only for the method and rigor of the focus and treatment, but also for the human spirit that brings to life the ideas and techniques, roots and treetops, from beginning to end”. Not only did it solidly establish various teaching methods; it also addressed many new themes including the interdependence and autonomy of logic and psychology in education, the importance of memory and attention in learning, experimental pedagogy, the scientific and aesthetic foundation of reading, self-criticism in the classroom, and ways to keep teaching interesting and vital.

In this book, Larrea also announced the heroic school, one where effort is based on authentic interest, one that prepares students to forge a new world. In all his work he aimed to show how interdependent the educational disciplines are, and how necessary tight relationships are among the mind, the heart, and the hands, between theory and practice, and between what is and what should be. His work established, for the first time, a reflexive connection between the education of the nineteenth century and that of the twentieth. Further, he said, the educational process is inconceivable without an atmosphere of freedom, which he saw as a right and an obligation. Freedom for students and the people “implies the necessity of teachers free of all subjugation and slavery” (Larrea 1957, p. 18).

In 1961 he published *Didáctica de Lengua y Literatura Españolas* in collaboration with Elba A. Martínez. Today it remains one of the most comprehensive works in the field, widely consulted in Spanish-speaking countries and in universities in the United States.

In Ecuador, Larrea moved quickly through his schooling, achieving each educational milestone at an early age, and becoming Dean of the Pedagogical Institute at Ecuador’s Central University. He also held many teaching positions abroad. In addition to teaching at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, in 1944 and 1961, he taught at many other universities throughout the world (for instance, in Chile in 1944 and 1966; San Pablo and Río de Janeiro, Brazil in 1945; Buenos Aires and La Plata, Argentina in 1945 and 1967; Panamá in 1954; London and Paris in 1954–55; and Tucumán in 1957–59). After 1961 he was again a Visiting Professor at universities in the United States and Puerto Rico, and in 1965 taught at the Central University of Venezuela. He died in Tucumán, on August 18, 1987. The president of Ecuador ensured that his remains now rest in perpetuity in the crypt of the San Gabriel Church, in Quito, Ecuador.

Selected publications by Julio Larrea

In addition to nearly 5,000 articles published in newspapers and academic journals, his books address a wide range of topics; the titles in the list below provide only a sample.

Problemas de administración y organización escolar [Problems of administration and school organization], 1944.

Tendencias de la educación latinoamericana [Trends in Latin American education], 1949.
La investigación objetiva del trabajo escolar [Objective research in schools], 1954, 1967.
La clase en acción [The class in action], 1954.
La educación en los Estados Unidos [Education in the United States], 1960.
Educating and training teachers in Latin America, 1963.
La pedagogía de la igualdad y la pedagogía de la desigualdad [The pedagogy of equality and the pedagogy of inequality], 1964.
Las pruebas, la promoción y la evaluación escolares [Tests, promotion, and evaluation in school], 1968.

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Author Biography

Elba Aurora Martínez de Larrea (Argentina) earned her PhD from the National University of Tucumán in Argentina and pursued postgraduate studies at the universities of Texas, Dayton, Illinois and California (Berkeley). As a Fulbright scholar, she worked with the Federation for Women in Illinois and the International Institute of Education. She was also a researcher at the Fondo Nacional de la Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina. In Argentina she taught at the Teaching Institute and in Tucumán, at the Juan B. Alberdi School and the University of Tucumán. She also taught in the United States at the University of Illinois, and at the University of California in Berkeley and Los Angeles, where she worked with gifted students. She authored *El Ecuador en la Conformación de la Identidad Cultural Americana* (1997) and *Horizontes Literarios* (2007). She co-authored *Didáctica de Lengua y Literatura Españolas* with her husband, Julio Larrea. Her articles have been published in over a dozen Spanish-language journals, including *Nueva Era*, *Cuadernos*, *Revista Hispanica Moderna* and *Cuadernos Americanos*. She was an Honorary Consul of Ecuador in Tucumán, Argentina.