When Appearances are Not Deceptive: A Comparative History of School Uniforms in Argentina and the United States (Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries)

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Appearances are deceptive, the saying goes. However, we devote much time to the presentation of ourselves, and ties and necklaces can take up more energy than other ‘substantial’ matters. This article analyzes the history of the presentation of selves in schools through the study of school uniforms. It will be claimed that modernity configured a ‘regime of appearances’ that had powerful effects on the ways that people relate to themselves and to others, and that schooling played a significant role in shaping it. The article will deal particularly with school uniforms as part of this regime of appearances, focusing on the development of vestimentary codes in Argentina and the United States of America. In Argentina, white smocks, which were adopted as the mandatory dress code around 1910 on the basis of an egalitarian rhetoric, were part of a politics of the body closely tied to Hygienism and linked to ideals of moral and racial purity. White smocks established a homogeneous and austere, monochromatic aesthetics of the school space that quickly identified transgression and indiscipline. In the US, uniforms were used for the schooling of minorities (Native Americans, women) as a way of rigorously training unruly bodies and of learning other aesthetic and bodily dispositions. Recently, urban public schools have adopted uniforms to counter-balance gangs’ and rappers’ dress codes. I believe that both cases show the fertility of analyzing school appearances for the history of school daily life and for understanding the effects that schooling produces in our societies.

Introduction

‘Appearances are deceptive’, the saying goes. However, few things as trivial as necklaces or socks are so difficult to decide upon and consume so much of our time. Common sense identifies the concern with appearance with frivolousness and the will to hide or deceive, and has been generally associated with the feminine condition: weak, superficial, irrational. Despite its negative connotation, human beings have
spent a good amount of energy in producing seductive appearances that will produce particular effects on the viewer.

This concern has been linked to postmodernity, which in the eyes of some cultural critics has established the reign of ephemeral sensations and the primacy of surfaces and simulacra over thought and meaning.\(^1\) But other studies show that the preoccupation with appearances stems from long ago, maybe even from the beginnings of humanity. A line can be drawn that connects bodily paintings to the development of textiles, architecture and social aesthetics, all based on the importance of the image of the self and others to communicate human experiences.\(^2\) Even the emergence of an austere regime of appearances in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as Philippe Perrot\(^3\) has called it, a regime that underscored simplicity and opaqueness and that was articulated to the rise of an urban bourgeoisie opposed to the ostentation of the noble court, can be read as a manifestation of a will to regulate appearances, to intervene on the presentation of selves and collective practices that had political, social, economic and cultural overtones. Modern schools had their own ‘regime of appearances’ as well. The construction of school buildings and classrooms, the production of instructional materials with specific formats and languages, the design of special uniforms and dress codes, the spatial ordering of persons and objects, were all part of the organization of a particular aesthetics that contributed to define the inside/outside limits of the schools.

In this article, I will deal with the emergence of school uniforms as part of this ‘regime of appearances’, focusing on Argentina and the United States of America. In Argentina, white smocks, which were adopted as the mandatory dress code around 1910 on the basis of an egalitarian rhetorics, were part of a politics of the body closely tied to Hygienism and linked to ideals of moral and racial purity. White smocks established a homogeneous and austere, monochromatic aesthetics of the school space that quickly identified transgression and indiscipline. In the US, uniforms were used for the schooling of minorities (Native Americans, women) as a way of rigorously training unruly bodies and of learning other aesthetic and bodily dispositions. Recently, urban public schools have adopted uniforms to counter-balance gangs’ and rappers’ dress codes. I believe that both cases show the fertility of analyzing school appearances for the history of school daily life and for understanding the effects that schooling produces in our societies.

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White Smocks in Argentinean Schools

The ‘Invention’ of White Smocks: a Choral Production

[A] cause is always the consequence of a long work of composition and a long struggle to attribute responsibility to some actors.  

White smocks started to be donned in Argentinean schools at the beginnings of the twentieth century. Several people (school inspectors, principals and teachers) claim to have invented them in search of the same goal: to provide the students with economic, hygienic and democratic attire in tune with the expansion of mass schooling. This plurality of ‘inventors’ deserves our attention. It speaks of a generalized consensus on a particular form of regulation of bodies in schools, which thought that homogeneous attire was the best way to ensure democracy and health; and also of a singular moment in the history of the Argentinean school system, in which different people were experimenting with new techniques, copying and producing ideas about what and how to teach, how to conduct the work in a classroom, and how to organize the life of schools, in a sort of reform movement from below.

One of the people who claim to be their inventors is the educationist Pablo Pizzurno. Pizzurno was General Inspector of Schools for the capital city when he complained about the luxurious garments that girls wore in schools in 1904. Reproducing a central topic of Victorian morality, Pizzurno thought that ostentation and luxury were highly suspicious because the ‘love of finery’ potentially led to nonsaintly activities (e.g. prostitution) in order to pay for expensive habits. Women, seen as weak and superficial by nature, were more prone to be tempted by these evil inclinations than men; and that is why their appearance had to be regulated with more zeal, in order to guarantee their decency and decorum. As is obvious, gender issues were always present when thinking about a vestimentary code for schools. The complaint about the dangers of finery and ostentation led him to recommend the use of an ‘equalizing apron, [which will bring] all the advantages of order: moral, economic, hygienic, and even aesthetic’, apparently taking it from the dress codes of

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5 Which, on the other hand, he had been doing since 1886, when he wrote articles with a feminine pseudonym in the Teachers’ Association journal condemning luxury and ostentation. At that time, he was opposed to any sort of dress code: “The female teacher cannot tell the mother: ‘Dress your daughter with ‘this’ dress, of this material, and with these shoes, and this hat’. Yet the female teacher can and must require cleanliness of their bodies and clothes; she must not tolerate ripped or filthy clothes, because personal cleanliness, considered as a virtue, does not only exercise a moral influence upon mores, reflecting always the purity of the soul, but it is also compatible with poverty, because nobody lacks a needle or some water and soap” (Pizzurno, Pablo. *El educador Pablo Pizzurno. Recopilación de trabajos. Más de medio siglo de acción cultural en la enseñanza secundaria, normal y primaria*. Buenos Aires: Congreso Nacional, 1938: 268).


manual skills classes. Soon, the practice was generalized to the public schools in the capital city.

At least four other people have taken credit for the use of aprons in public schools, all of them graduates or professors at normal schools. Julia Caballero Ortega, a professor of manual skills, is said to have suggested it to her students in 1905 in a suburban school. Antonio Banchero, a 6th grade teacher in 1906, reported that he promoted the use of white aprons for the teacher and for the students in a central school in Buenos Aires, in order to avoid the contrast between wealthy children and poor children. Professor Pedro Avelino Torres is said to have conducted a similar experience at an experimental school in Buenos Aires, also during the first years of the century. Finally, there is the story of Matilde Figueira de Díaz, who has been included in the *Dictionary of Argentinean Women* because of the invention of the apron. The dictionary entry is a good example of the type of rhetorics that has been used to support the use of white smocks:

[The teacher Matilde Figueira de Díaz] in 1915 was at the school “Cornelia Pizarro” in the capital city, and she realized that her class was divided into two groups: those who were well dressed and those of humble origins. She tried to solve this distinction and it occurred to her that everybody should dress in aprons during school hours. In a meeting with her colleagues and parents she presented her idea, and the color white was chosen; in order to act as an example, she went to a big department store in a central street where she bought aprons and white textiles with her own money, and gave them to the mothers along with instructions on how to sew them. Shortly after, aprons were used in her school, erasing the economic differences among children and making hygiene problems disappear. There were some people who were alarmed because they thought that the aprons were uniforms, which were prohibited by law [and denounced their use with the Local Board]. But a Board member who followed up the anonymous denunciation was soon convinced of the efficacy of the initiative.

The law to which this testimony and others refer appears to be an undated decree but enacted prior to 1915 according to some other information, which established that: ‘It is prohibited for principals, vice-principals and teachers ... to oblige students to come to school in uniform attire, whatever the school activity may it be, and even to suggest any recommendation in this respect, which ought to be prevented’. Another decree argued that uniforms could not be compulsory because they implied an expense that could become an obstacle for people to attend schooling: ‘Art. 12– The school principals will take care that students attend school with simple clothes and without adornments that could promote emulations or luxurious ostentations, and

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9 Sosa de Newton, Lily. *Diccionario biográfico de mujeres argentinas*. Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1966: 237; also, Morgade, Graciela. “La docencia para las mujeres: una alternativa contradictoria en el camino hacia los saberes legítimos.” In *Mujeres en la educación. Género y docencia en la Argentina, 1870–1930*, edited by Graciela Morgade. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila Editores, 1997: 98. This narrative is also a good example of the hagiography of Normal School teachers that is common in educational historiography, even the feminist one, which pens a heroic tale, with altruistic teachers who are driven only by their “good feelings.”
this does not imply any authorization of a particular uniform whose acquisition results in extra spending for the family.'

Two years later, however, as referred to in Matilde Figueira’s story, there is another decree that not only authorizes but recommends the use of white aprons for the schools of the capital city. It was then considered ‘good practice’, because ‘besides teaching the students to dress simply, it will also suppress the competition about who is better dressed among school personnel’. It is remarkable that the first objects of regulation were teachers and not students, for whom only it was authorized. Teachers were to set the example of the ethical and aesthetic regime that had to be adopted by young boys and girls.

In 1919, only four years later, another measure was passed which established that parents’ associations would provide uniforms to the families that lacked the resources to buy them. After recommending the use of aprons during school hours and in school activities, it declares that:

> Aprons should be considered as uniforms characteristic of school attire, and in analogous conditions to textbook and school materials, in relation to their provision to children who do not pay school fees. It is asked that parents’ associations collaborate in the task of ensuring the possibility of giving this element of school life to all homes, without any violence of an economic order.

Uniforms work within, but also help create, a network of support for mass schooling that involves the central state, Normal School teachers and parents’ associations. The spread of uniforms would become much more important in the next decade, with the consolidation of a populist regime and a welfare state that periodically distributed goods and food to people. In a 1939 booklet, aprons figure among the first items to be given to children of the poorest provinces. The photos that illustrate the official educational journal, *El Monitor de la Educación Común*, begin to be populated by children with smocks between 1910 and 1930, and by the end of the 1930s it is quite uncommon not to find schoolchildren without their uniforms, even in rural schools in isolated locations.

To briefly summarize what I have argued so far, I would underline that the invention of white smocks does not recognize a single ‘author’ but a ‘work of composition’, as Bruno Latour put it at the beginning of this section, which was undertaken by several actors who claim to have found unjust differences in the way their students dress and who propose instead hygienic and egalitarian attire. The dress code is the basis upon which a legal and economic network started to develop, via parents’ associations or the action of the central state, to ensure its massive adoption. In the following section, I will try to explain why it was possible for several actors to think coincidentally that smocks were the best attire, the most democratic and hygienic,

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11 Ibid.: 181 (April 16 1913, Circular 67).
13 Ibid.: 724 (November 1, 1919).
and not other dress codes. I will claim that this coincidence was built upon several
discursive series that constituted, although not always coherently or harmoniously, a
single scaffolding\textsuperscript{15} that articulated an equivalence between smocks, democracy,
hygiene and morality. Of these discursive series, in the next section I shall focus on
three: egalitarianism, school hygiene and a new conceptualization of the body.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The Scaffolding of Discourses at the Emergence of White Smocks: Egalitarianism,
Hygienism, and the Production of Healthy Bodies}

Egalitarian discourse has been enormously influential in Argentina. According to
Guillermo O’Donnell, a renowned political scientist, it is one of the cornerstones of
Argentina’s political culture and of the construction of the state, although he claims
that it also has to be read along with the history of violence and authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{17}
Concerning our focus, egalitarianism is probably among the most important causes
for the persistence of white aprons throughout the twentieth century. For many immi-
grants and children from low-income families, the possibility of an abstract equality
and of ‘concealing’ their backgrounds was appealing, for it implied a temporal release
of the markers of difference in a society that valued homogeneity highly. While it can
be argued that these markers remained in their language and habitus notwithstanding
the uniform code, their narratives spoke of inclusion and equity.\textsuperscript{18}

In this context, white aprons became important as markers of inclusion within
particular groups of the social field. The uniform was a symbol of distinction, of social
inclusion in a different class of people, and in that respect it was more fiercely
defended by those who have to rely on this acquired cultural capital for success than
for those who took this success for granted.\textsuperscript{19} Republican citizenship implied a style,
and working on the presentation of the self. Francine Masiello puts it this way: ‘How
to act as a modern person in the nation was set out through prescribed behaviors and
through standards of dress and speech. They all conferred a limited range of identities

\textsuperscript{15} Popkewitz, Thomas S. \textit{Struggling for the Soul. The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of the
\textsuperscript{16} It should be noted that these series juxtapose themselves: the egalitarian discourse involves
practices upon the body, and the education of the body involves hygienic and egalitarian ideals. This
distinction is analytic and not ontologic, but is helpful to clarify discourse formation that has a
certain stability and common rules over time. Other series that could be traced would be the ideas
regarding childhood and adult authority, nationalist discourses in themselves, sumptuary laws and
the regulation of dress and aesthetic regimes, among others. I have dealt with them extensively in
my PhD dissertation: \textit{School Uniforms and the Disciplining of Appearances: Towards a Comparative
History of the Regulation of Bodies in early Modern France, Argentina, and the United States.}
\textsuperscript{17} O’Donnell, Guillermo. \textit{Contrapuntos. Ensayos escogidos sobre autoritarismo y democratización.}
\textsuperscript{18} Sarlo, Beatriz. “Cabezas rapadas y cintas argentinas.” \textit{Prismas. Revista de Historia Intelectual} 1
\textsuperscript{19} Bourdieu, Pierre. \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste}. Cambridge, MA:
upon individuals as a part of a fledgling democracy…. In this way, they regulated the style of being a citizen.’ Good taste becomes, following Masiello, ‘a social regulator, a way to control abuse and excess’.20 Style was important to regulate the distance to others and one’s location within the social order.

Let us take the example of a textbook that set standards for young girls, written by Inspector Pablo Pizzurno, of whom I have already spoken. In a lesson entitled ‘Adelita and the dress’, he narrated the story of Adelita, always the most thoughtful and independent of girls. She comes to school with a new dress that apparently is not fashionable and that surprises her classmates because she usually dresses ‘in good taste’. Adelita answers back that ‘in order not to have bad taste, I decided to distance myself from fashion’. ‘Good taste’ can contradict ‘fashion’—and one can see how the idea of self-monitoring gains weight. Adelita goes on to explain that she does not want to be a slave to tailors and seamstresses when their clothes are not nice or contradict the rules of hygiene. ‘Sensible people do not follow fashion when it goes against good taste or when it inconveniences health…. Would you rather use high-heeled boots than comfortable yet elegant simple shoes? Would you rather use a narrow skirt that does not allow you to walk comfortably than a medium one that frees your movements? Would you use your grandmother’s long skirts that swept around filthy elements from the soil and carried along germs and microbes everywhere?’21 Adelita then gave some rules to her friends: ‘Sensible, enlightened and tasteful people dress themselves simply, trying not to call attention to themselves, and take into account, above all, the hygiene rules to which clothes have to be submitted’ (idem). The rules then established which kinds of colors and textiles to use according to the season and the social situation, and which shapes were more convenient (always looser ones so as to allow freedom of movement). She ended up with an exhortation to those ‘little poor creatures’ that could not afford to buy fashionable clothes: fashion is not important if ‘you are clean and comfortable, and if you’re a good girl. One does not judge people by the clothes they wear.’22

One does not judge people by the clothes they wear: it is paradoxical that Pizzurno states this after a lesson heavily preoccupied with setting aesthetic and ethical rules about clothes that provide a ‘judgment’ for young girls. Clothes do inform others about the moral condition of a person, her sensibility and education, and that is why appearances have to be so closely monitored. But these aesthetics and ethics appear as ‘neutral’, ‘natural’ and ‘sensible’ common sense, and not as the result of work on the self.

Like ‘standard’ Spanish, style was also regulated and prescribed by schools, and also appeared as the only possible option. A woman who attended the Normal School

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22 Ibid.: 185.
of Paraná (Province of Entre Ríos), one of the first and most prestigious institutions of this kind, recollects these memories about the use of aprons:

In those distant years of our first grade, uniforms were not used, and most of the children went to school exquisitely dressed. One day, our mother, who was very practical and did not care about dandiness, sent me to school with a humble apron of an unbleached canvas with broad pleats, which ended up being my daily attire. I also wore a new handbag, made of leather, bigger than I was at that time. When I got close to my teacher in order to line up before the class started, very proud myself with my humble attire, she said to me in a loud voice: ‘How dandy you look!’, an expression that filled me with pride at my five years.\textsuperscript{23}

This combination of ‘dandiness’ with simplicity was a strong basis for uniforms, and picks up themes and topics already articulated by the aesthetic and political proposals advanced by the French revolution and by other nineteenth-century revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{24} The idea that appearances had to be austere, against the ostentation and luxury of court life, was fundamental when the new republics designed civil and military uniforms. The change in appearances had to be as profound as other changes; for example, the North American Benjamin Franklin stunned everybody when he discarded the use of the periwig of the ‘superior orders’ and decided instead to don his natural hair as a symbol of his renunciation of display and ostentation and his trust in ‘inherent virtues’.\textsuperscript{25} In the early twentieth-century republics, this austere appearance combined with Victorian discourses on morals and virtues, and with a renewed idea of personality as the basis of citizenship, as the result of active work on the self.

The second discursive series that will be analysed is Hygienism, which was a powerful movement in Europe during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{26} While earlier health issues were dealt with in terms of the conservation of a state of health, the emergence of ‘hygiene’ as a social concern implied ‘the collection of practices and knowledge which helped to preserve [health]…. [Hygiene] was a specific discipline within medicine. It was a body of knowledge and no longer a physical qualification.’\textsuperscript{27} This body of knowledge, allied with the medical profession and the microbiologists who, after Pasteur, declared ‘war on microbes’, became a central discourse by the end of the nineteenth century, combining issues related to urbanism, consumer protection, ecology and moralization.\textsuperscript{28} They provided a way of problematizing the social life,


\textsuperscript{26} Vigarello, Georges. “Modèles anciens et modernes d’entretien de la santé.” \textit{Communications}, 56 (1993); Latour, \textit{The Pasteurization of France}.


\textsuperscript{28} Latour, \textit{The Pasteurization of France}: 23.
defining what was at stake, distributing praise or blame, laying down priorities and raising energies and money to fight for these ideals.\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, social hygiene not only changed the practices of cleanliness but above all it implied a new conception of society. The health of an individual was not only his or her concern. In a society characterized by the possibility of flux and contagion of invisible organisms, someone’s illness could become an epidemic, and that is why individual health had to be closely supervised and scrutinized by the social body. It was in one’s best interests to fight against disease collectively. Hygienic precepts were not optional but mandatory rules. An Argentinean hygienist eloquently said that violence against individual resistance to hygienic measures was absolutely justified ‘when [the individual] confronts the supreme right of collective health’.\textsuperscript{30}

The majority of teachers, graduating from Normal Schools, took the hygienic discourse as their own, understanding that the struggle against ignorance, sickness and poverty was one and the same. It is not surprising, then, that the adoption of white smocks supposedly had prophylactic bases, such as to prevent germs and bacteria from spreading throughout schools. In his ‘Instructions to school principals and teachers in relation to school hygiene’, the health inspector Genaro Sisto mandated daily inspections of students, furniture and the school setting.\textsuperscript{31} The white smock appeared as the problem and as the solution, as it prevented the spread of microbes but also acted as a connection with the home that, for him, was under suspicion. White smocks should be seen as a protection against the outer world, a defense set by the school to sanitize and cleanse its students.

Hygiene not only provided a moral-political code through which society was organized but also constituted the basis of an aesthetics—what I have already called ‘an aesthetics of washability’, following Francisco Liernur.\textsuperscript{32} In a popular magazine, one can read the following poem for girls by Pedro Monlau, author of several textbooks on hygiene:

Cleared atmosphere,
A decent and clean dress,
without any cream or powder
shining on cheeks or front,
moderate eating,
discrete drinking,
and fulfilling the obligation,

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.: 25.
even if one plays for a while, 
docility, great decorum, 
and continuous occupation. 33

Austerity thus becomes equated with moral cleanliness and appropriateness, in an aesthetics that turns poverty and moderation into a positive value. ‘Hygiene is the luxury of the working classes’, says another hygienist in 1898.34 There can be an aristocratic ‘flavor’ in poverty, and that is simplicity, charged with moral weight. In a different article published on the official journal of the National Board of Education, another poem appeared:

Never dress carelessly, 
because in society it is as dishonorable, 
[to have] a stain [tarnish] on your honor 
as a stain in your dress. 35

The hygienic support for uniforms can also be traced in the fact that school uniforms and doctors’ smocks are identical in Argentina. This ‘speaks’ in sartorial language36 about proximity or similarity. On the one hand, as has been said, at the turn of the century physicians were very prominent in the Argentine intellectual field, and occupied powerful positions in the national educational system.37 This proximity surely led to an identification of the medical profession and its symbols with prestige and honor. On the other hand, both pedagogy and medicine share gnoseological and ethical assumptions about the world and their role in it (salvation and redemption of others, among them). To fashion teachers and students in a similar way to doctors was a consequence of this rationale.

The third discursive series that supported the use of smocks was the one linked to new ways of conceptualizing and talking about the body. One important source of this new education of the body was the rituals and national festivals, which included drills and marching, combining religious and military tactics.38 Another source was the health inspections performed by inspectors and schoolteachers. Although hygiene was certainly among the contents of the inspection, principals and teachers included other concerns. In 1915, it was established that a daily inspection of children was to be performed, looking at hands, nails, teeth, ears, neck and head. Clothes, shoes and tools brought by the student should also be scrutinized. Each student should carry a handkerchief. Also, there would be a morbidity record for each student, indicating

name, infectious diseases, other diseases, vaccination.\textsuperscript{39} Recording and individualizing: one can see how the tactics of disciplinary power described by Foucault were still at work in schools at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Physical education became a distinct school discipline by the end of the nineteenth century. Initially, it was taught by military personnel. In 1898 there was a curricular reform that reorganized its teaching, and included a ‘scientifically oriented’ program that stressed methodical exercises and non-violent games and was supposedly founded on notions of the anatomy and physiology of the body.\textsuperscript{40} This education was supposed to maximize the capacities of the body, no longer understood as a quasi-mechanical object but as a compound of muscles and organs that had to be developed through methodical exercise.\textsuperscript{41} Sports were explicitly excluded because of their competitiveness—with negative consequences for the students’ morals.

It is quite difficult to separate gymnastics from hygiene. In a school hygiene textbook, for example, gymnastics figures among the contents. Gymnastics, it was said, promotes ‘the normal development of the body, perfecting the functions of the “life of relation” [social life] directly’.\textsuperscript{42} It was supposed to have a beneficial impact on nutrition and on the motor-nervous system, but it was believed that it depressed the sensitive-psycho nervous system. ‘Acrobats are brutalized’ by perpetual exercise,\textsuperscript{43} it was said in a litany that had gender implications. Yet as intellectual education was thought to arouse nervous tension, it was important to moderate it with gymnastics. This was specially recommended for women, who were considered to be generally more nervous and irritable than men, and even more so if she was a hysteric or descended from neurpaths. Gymnastics, it was stated, teaches one how to master one’s own violence, and to control one’s forces in order to perform strong actions without wasting too much force; and the will learns the habit of mastering one’s instincts.

As has been said, in Argentinean schools sports never became an important part of the curriculum, and that is an important difference from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Physical education was reduced to the teaching of drills and exercises, and the gym was poorly equipped or inexistent in most schools.\textsuperscript{44} The body was regulated through repetitious training, and that continued to be the case despite the modernization of other areas of study. The conceptualization of the body was based more on this repetitive exercise than on more original and challenging production. This education of the body is also at the basis of the persistence of white smocks as the vestimentary code for schools.

\textsuperscript{39} Sisto, Genaro. “Higiene escolar:” 563–565.
\textsuperscript{40} Aisenstein, Angela. “Historia de la educación física escolar en Argentina.” \textit{Revista del Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias de la Educación}, V/11 (1997): X–XVII.
\textsuperscript{43} Tello and Ramirez, \textit{Elementos de Higiene Escolar}: 52.
\textsuperscript{44} Aisenstein, Angela, “Historia de la educación física escolar en Argentina”. 
School Uniforms in the United States: the Domestication of ‘Unruly Bodies’

In the United States, the uniformity of children’s clothes in schools emerges from a different setting than in Argentina. The history of education in the US is not one in which there is increasing centralization but rather the configuration of a decentralized system, with local boards and direct control by communities. Despite that, centralizing trends were also at work, with nationally produced textbooks, teacher training at the universities, and curricular movements that unified debates, languages and the educational imagination.\textsuperscript{45}

The nation as an imagined community in the United States had quite different traits from in the Argentinean case. Tocqueville and other nineteenth-century thinkers posited the nation as a tree with a central trunk of common mores rooted in white Christianity and with many branches or racial minorities that grew out of the trunk.\textsuperscript{46} The very notion of minorities, which on the one hand has been so productive socially and politically for the Civil Rights movement, has none the less tended to perpetuate the affirmation of a center-majority that was White, male and Anglo-Saxon, and also to essentialize racial affiliation as a ‘natural’ line and not as the product of history.\textsuperscript{47} These narratives of the nation were formed in successive periods in which the ‘others’ against which a supposedly homogeneous society compared and opposed itself changed greatly: That position was occupied alternatively by indigenous tribes, Irish, Italians, Africans, Asians, and more recently by Mexican immigrants.\textsuperscript{48} Throughout these national narratives, one can see how the nation was built with an idea of unity and harmony as opposed to a threatening alterity, whose content varied without losing its ‘dangerous’ quality.

Another peculiar trait of the US national imaginary is the explicit racialization of politics, present since the eighteenth century. The racialization of difference has had great implications in the political system, the social structure and education.\textsuperscript{49} There was, until the 1960s, at least in the southern states, a segregated school system for Afro-Americans and white Americans. This experience of segregation was central to define a school culture that promoted diversity: not an egalitarian or tolerant diversity but none the less a diversity that despised uniformity. Individualism, with the self-made man and meritocratic myths, was the axis around which differences were articulated.


People tend to think that, given this diversity and individualism, school uniforms never existed in American schools. But, despite this widespread opinion, there have been several experiences of uniform code policies both in public and private schools. From early onwards, such policies were tied to the disciplining of ‘unruly’, ‘savage’, ‘untamed’ bodies, that is, the bodies of those who were not able to perform self-regulation or self-government: women, Black, Indian, poor classes, immigrants, toddlers or infants. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, Indians and Blacks were the privileged targets of close surveillance in terms of what to wear and when to wear it. In particular, the introduction of uniforms in Federal Indian Boarding schools meant that tribal attire and moccasins were forbidden and strict measures were enforced to ensure that children wore ‘civilized’, Western clothes, including underwear. Tsiamina Lomawaima has written a fascinating study that analyses the struggle around feminine underwear in these schools. Also, women were subjected to strict regulation, in which first-wave feminists joined doctors and social reformers to produce a hygienic, virtuous body; even the story of trousers can be read as a result of this alliance. The only exception to this was the sports uniforms, which have been tied to the production of a pious and energetic body and that were related to the organization of mass society (the ‘invention of the social’, as Jacques Donzelot calls it).

Another source for the donning of uniforms in contemporary America is the experience of the regulation of the bodies of more advantaged social groups, such as the white students in elitist private schools, which adopt a vestimentary code that is called the ‘preppy look’: khaki or gray trousers, worn with Oxford shirts with button-down collars in white or light blue. The ‘preppy look’ has been brought to the fore as the aesthetic norm for current uniforms in public schools. It is also important to note that, even though no universal uniform was donned, this does not mean that dress codes, formal and informal, have not been in effect since the spread of mass schooling. That

students show up clean and ‘properly dressed’ was always part of what the school was supposed to accomplish. More recently, mini-skirts, makeup, earrings, bareness of limbs or abdomen, and bright or ‘flashy’ colors are among the many pieces of clothing and vestimentary practices that have been subjected to regulation and debate in American schools.  

This brief sketch aims to provide some clues about the context in which the proposal to implement school uniforms in public, urban schools emerged. First implemented in Baltimore, Cleveland and Long Beach (CA), uniforms that imitated the practice of Catholic schools and English schools began to be a practice of American public schools. They went almost unnoticed in the national press until January 1996, when President Clinton endorsed their use while he was campaigning for reelection. 1996 was a turning point in the diffusion of uniform policies. Clinton stressed that they would help promote security in schools and would be safe attire for children. It has to be remarked that the issue of safety was important and carried a dramatic burden, because some days earlier one teenager had been killed in New Jersey while somebody was trying to rob him of his Nike shoes. Clinton’s speech put together the extended condemnation of the crime with a feasible solution: had he not been wearing his Nike shoes, this kid would be alive. The school uniform could protect children from exterior violence. As simplistic as it may seem, the argument was effective in propagandizing uniforms in public schools. The Secretary of Education, under express orders from the President, published a booklet with recommendations for schools, and started a national campaign for their use. The recommendations, which emphasize the need for consensus and the participation of the community in adopting uniforms, do not have the status of law but have nonetheless been followed in several school districts. According to some estimates, more than 25% of the school population of public schools in the United States wear uniforms in schools.  

Clinton issued his proposal in a Long Beach, California, school, and the scenario could not be more apt. In the Congressional Bulletin that published the recommendations, uniforms in the Long Beach school district were given credit for an astonishing 36% drop in school crime and a 51% decrease in school violence. A survey of 5500 Principals carried out by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 1996 showed that 70% were in favor of school uniforms. Also, according to the Gallup Poll of Public’s Attitudes toward the public schools in the same year, more than 50% of the parents supported the initiative. School uniforms instill pride and self-esteem, help establish discipline, reduce violence and crime and help restore our public schools as places where our children can learn in safety.  

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uniforms has been that it promotes equality among students, as is claimed in Argentina: to don a homogeneous uniform prevents social differences from becoming explicit.

In the first section of this article, it was underlined that clothes are invested with specific meanings. Uniforms, according to the state regulation, provide reassurance that all bodies are manageable and can be controlled. It is also perceived as a sign that bodies have become docile—as can be seen in the behavior of students who resist uniforms. In many ways, uniforms are called upon to act as Alison Lurie\(^{61}\) said they work: as a way of diluting individuality, positioning the individuals on a disciplinary grid that tames their nature.

The adoption of uniforms is inscribed in a series of measures that also speak about the ways in which the law is written on the back of its subjects, as De Certeau\(^{62}\) stated. The disciplining of bodies has become a central issue in schools, given the primacy of ‘security concerns’ in school spaces. Uniforms appear as part of the measures that schools have to take in order to create a more protected, disciplined and safer environment for children. It is not by chance that the Manual on School Uniforms has been issued by the program for Safe and Drug Free Schools of the Department of Education. Some advocates of school uniforms have argued that they are useful for identifying gangs’ members, as they resist wearing a uniform. To control students’ bodies (especially, to control young, masculine bodies) seems to be the main goal of this policy. Confirming this argument, Education Secretary Richard Riley said at the time that schools should be concerned with the ‘three Rs’: Reading, Rating (putting ‘violence chips’ into TVs) and Regime (school uniforms and discipline), in a striking redefinition of the traditional ‘Rs’ of literacy (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic).

There is, however, a striking issue to note in this panorama of increasing surveillance and monitoring. School uniforms are being defended by minority leaders in the African-American and Latino communities, as a way to construct collective identities and generate a new consensus on the need for better schooling. As with the charter schools’ movement, minority leaders have been deeply engaged in sustaining these policies. It is interesting to relate these positions to Paul Gilroy’s discussion on the politics of Black intellectuals, who try to police the boundaries of racial identities and have assumed a neo-nationalism with taints of essentialism.\(^{63}\) Uniforms could be read as measures that tend to discipline the collective identities following certain patterns and values that reproduce the power of the leaders. Using other scholars’ views of minority leaders’ strategies, they could be read as part of a democratic movement to shape schooling as more respondent and sensitive to demands for recognition and social mobility.\(^{64}\)

\(^{61}\) Lurie, The Language of Clothes.
Finally, I would like to stress that this strategy of uniformity does not apply evenly to all bodies; as has been said before, ‘public urban schools’ mean schools for Latino and African-American children. Uniforms, then, both make uniform and distinguish: those who wear it can be easily identified as students of poor schools. Uniforms thus configure an identity with multiple levels, homogenizing and differentiating at the same time.

Concluding Remarks

An invention only opens a door; it never forces anyone to pass through it. The revision of the history of white smocks and school uniforms is inscribed in a history of the forms of the regulation of power and disciplining of bodies. This history has to be read locally and nationally, that is, it is interwoven with the formation of national imaginaries that have articulated identity and difference with specific traits. The notion of uniform bodies in schools, present since the organization of modern schooling and its structuring as a pastoral power, has adopted particular characteristics in each national school system. It can be said that the ways in which the appearance and disposition of the bodies in schools was and is regulated are indicative of the methods of cultural and political intervention in a given social formation.

In the case of US schools, there are clear links between the disciplining of bodies and the racial dynamics that are central to its political imaginary. The scaffolding of discourses that is supporting the spread of uniforms in contemporary America is dominated by a disciplinary function that emphasizes the surveillance and control of dangerous populations over the production of autonomous subjects with the capacity to self-regulate and self-monitor. However, as has been emphasized, like any other device, uniforms are employed as well in other tactics, by movements and politics that carry other aspirations for social justice, and which cause dislocations and accommodations that are not easily predictable.

In the case of white smocks, throughout the history of Argentinean school system in the twentieth century, they have become to represent desires and aspirations for social justice—like those just mentioned for the US. White smocks are defended as a symbol of public schooling and as a benchmark of an egalitarian legacy. However, in this article, I have been interested in showing other meanings and strategies embodied in them that have tended to be overlooked. The discourses that were conflated in the spread of smocks as the vestimentary code for schools were heterogeneous and diverse, and shaped the smock as an artifact with multiple and contradictory meanings. Smocks were incorporated into the construction of a nationalism that rendered democracy and homogeneity equivalent, and which posited that modern equality could only be reached if everybody behaved, dressed and thought identically. These

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65 Popkewitz, *Struggling for the Soul.*


67 Sarlo, “Cabezas rapadas y cintas argentinas”.
equivalences were entrenched during the European and American bourgeois revolutions.\textsuperscript{68} For many generations of Argentineans, white smocks were synonymous with democracy, health and decency, to the point that it became unthinkable to dress differently in schools without feeling that important achievements were being threatened. I feel that it is necessary to interrogate these equivalences, as their effects in terms of an authoritarian political culture were profound and lasting. Also, they speak about the kinds of social relations and conceptualizations of the body that were and still are authorized in/by schools, as well as about what has been silenced and excluded.

Coming back to the saying that ‘appearances are deceptive’, I would like to emphasize, once again, that appearances mark and configure us much more than we generally perceive. Children and adults learn a lot of things through the smock or the uniform—for example, about who should wear them and who should not, who has several of them and who has only a few, who is alike and who is different, who is tidy and clean and why, and who is filthy and untidy, what the boundary of decency and decorum is, what should be considered ‘proper appearance’. All these factors refer to a whole set of knowledge about identity and difference that are central to the ways in which we perceive and imagine ourselves as social beings. The history of the vestimentary codes, thus, has a lot to tell us about the ways in which schools have helped produce our experiences and ideas about the societies in which we live.