

Research article / Научная статья

Positivism in Brazil in the 19th Century: Philosophy, Politics, Culture

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Abstract. The paper is devoted to the cultural and historical prerequisites for the origin and main stages of the history of positivist philosophy in 19th century Brazil. Based on a review of both the philosophical and literary prehistory of the early 19th century and the positivist tradition in Brazilian thought of the century before last, it is shown by what factors Brazil turned out to be the country in Latin America, on whose cultural, political and religious life the philosophy of positivism had the greatest influence in this historical period.

Keywords: Latin America; Brazil; philosophy; positivism; literature; science; politics; culture; religion

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Introduction

It is difficult to find another philosophical movement that had such a strong influence on the political, cultural, and even religious life of Brazil during the first century of its independence (1822–1922) as the ideas of Auguste Comte’s “early positivism”. While in neighboring Spanish American countries, and above all in Argentina, they did not become widespread until the last quarter of the 19th century, undergoing significant transformation and ultimately having very little in common with the original, the situation with their reception in the Brazilian philosophical and political culture of the early Empire (1822–1860) was completely different, and a number of historical and cultural factors influenced this development.

Two historical circumstances that significantly distinguished Brazil from its neighboring Spanish American states largely determined the characteristics of the development of its philosophical and political thought in the early 19th century: its relatively late attainment of independence compared to its neighbors, in particular Argentina (1822), and its monarchical state structure (until 1889), coupled with the widespread use of slave labor in the country’s economy (until 1888). That is why one can fully agree with the opinion of the contemporary Brazilian historian of philosophy L.A. Cerqueira that in Brazil, unlike Spanish America, institutionally formalized philosophical discourse, as well as the very concept of “Brazilian philosophy” as an independent part of the world and Latin American historical and philosophical process, only appeared in the first quarter of the 19th century [1]. During the reign of Emperor Pedro I (1822–1831), here, as in neighboring Argentina, the influence of French Enlightenment ideas on the cultural and political life of the young monarchy became clearly noticeable. This was most clearly manifested in the text of the first constitution of independent Brazil, drafted in 1824 under the strong influence of the ideas of the Franco-Swiss publicist, classic of French Romanticism, and public figure Henri-Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). During this period, socio-philosophical issues were usually addressed primarily

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in the works of major theorists of Brazilian political thought, such as José da Silva Lisboa (1756–1835), Paulino José Soares de Souza (1807–1866), José Antônio Pimenta Bueno (1803–1878), Zacarias de Góis (1815–1877), and Bernardo Pereira de Vasconcelos (1795–1850). The revolutionary motifs of the socio-political teachings of the Enlightenment are also evident in the journalism of some radical critics of Portuguese colonial rule, such as Freire Caneca (real name Joaquim da Silva Rabelo, 1779–1825), one of the leaders of the so-called “Pernambuco Revolution” of 1817, one of the first attempts to create a Brazilian government completely independent of the Portuguese administration. At the same time, there was a continuation of a trend that had become clearly apparent in the middle of the previous century, namely the significant influence of the Masonic movement on the political and social life of the country, which was particularly evident in the events surrounding the army’s suppression of the so-called “Equatorial Confederation” (Confederação do Equador), an unrecognized state based on a separatist movement of wealthy landowners in the northeast of the country, in June–November 1824.

Materials and Methods

In the early years after Brazil’s independence, the geography of philosophy teaching as an academic discipline expanded significantly, both in existing and newly established educational institutions throughout the country. A number of new educational institutions emerged, including, in particular, the Provincial Lyceum of Pernambuco in Recife (1825), the Ateneu Norte-Rio-Grandense College in Natal (1834), the Provincial Lyceum of Bahia in Salvador (1836), and the Pedro II College in Rio de Janeiro (1837). In all of these institutions, philosophy has been included in the curriculum as a compulsory subject since their inception. During this period, philosophical issues (primarily ethical and socio-philosophical) were mainly addressed in the works of writers, as well as in the works of prominent lawyers and legal scholars. In 1845, during the reign of Emperor Pedro II (1831–1889), a group of writers and poets strongly influenced by Romanticism — Alvares de Azevedo (1831–1852), Aureliano Lessa (1828–1861), and Bernardo Guimarães (1825–1884)—formed a secret union of writers called the Epicurean Society (“Sociedade Epicureia”), which, among other things, organized discussions on moral and ethical topics that were not particularly approved of by society and the church, such as the problem of death and euthanasia, the sexual aspects of marriage, Satanist movements, etc. At the same time, the influence of modern philosophical ideas, notably Descartes’ rationalism and Locke’s empiricism, became noticeable in the works of major Brazilian medical theorists such as Domingos José Gonçalves de Magalhães (1811–1882) and Eduardo Ferreira França (1809–1857). In general, however, it should be noted that the processes of institutionalization of philosophy, and, as a consequence, the development of philosophical thought as a whole, in Brazil in the first half of the 19th century lagged significantly behind neighboring countries in southern Spanish America — Chile and Argentina. In addition to the socio-political factors mentioned above, this was also due to the lack of a developed system of university higher education in the country (while the first universities in Brazil appeared only with the attainment of independence, i.e., in the first half of the 19th century, in Argentina they appeared in the first quarter of the 17th century, and in Mexico and Peru as early as the 16th century [2]).

Results and Discussion

In essence, by the time Emperor Pedro I abdicated the throne (1831), elements of philosophical discourse existed in the young Brazilian monarchy only as part of

journalism, literature, and political and legal thought. However, in the mid-19th century, during the reign of Emperor Pedro II (1831–1889), the situation changed dramatically. These changes were primarily associated with the penetration into the country of the ideas of “early positivism” by Auguste Comte, which, due to a number of factors, proved to be extremely popular with the political elites, first in Brazil and then in a number of Spanish American states. Comte’s teachings, which vividly expressed the interaction between philosophy and concrete scientific knowledge, were in many ways a continuation of the ideas of New European empiricism, which had already found a large number of supporters on the South American continent. The idea of the practical orientation of philosophical knowledge, whose method is now identical to that of natural scientific research, as well as healthy evolutionism, which sharply contrasted with the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment and Marxist philosophy, were seen by many Latin American thinkers and politicians as a means of overcoming the social anarchy in which their societies found themselves, as well as a way to eradicate poverty and backwardness and move their peoples toward cultural and political progress.

It was precisely the evolutionism of Comte’s philosophical and political views that became the main feature of positivist philosophy, ensuring its incredible popularity in Brazilian intellectual circles in the second half of the 19th century. Unlike neighboring Spanish American states, which were forced to fight for their independence from the Spanish crown with weapons and revolutionary methods, Brazil gained independence in 1822 in a much more peaceful way, separating from the former metropolis with virtually no bloodshed and preserving not only the monarchical form of government, but also the former royal dynasty in the person of its new emperor, Pedro I — a case unique in the history of Latin America. Naturally, many representatives of the political and intellectual elite of the young monarchy preferred the evolutionary development of social and political institutions in the future, seeking to avoid anarchy and unnecessary upheavals. The “law of three stages” in the development of human knowledge (theological, metaphysical, and positive), formulated by Auguste Comte and underlying the doctrine of “first positivism”, seemed to many of them to be an extremely convenient principle for describing and classifying political, social, and cultural phenomena in their natural and sequential evolution. In the Brazilian intellectual milieu of the second half of the 19th century, it was equally sought after by the political elite of the empire (supporters of the monarchy) and by supporters of political reform — Republicans and abolitionists (supporters of the abolition of slavery). Another important social factor that determined the widespread popularity of positivist ideas in Brazilian society during the late Empire was the significantly higher percentage of Freemasons among the political and intellectual elite compared to Spanish America. Unlike the much more conservative adherents of Catholicism, immediately became active propagandists of positivist socio-political philosophy. As João Camilo de Oliveira Torres (1915–1973), a classic Brazilian historian and philosopher of the mid-20th century, rightly notes in his seminal monograph *Positivism in Brazil* (“O positivismo no Brasil”, 1957), “positivism appeared in Brazil to fill the gap that had opened up in our culture due to the absence of a philosophy developed rationally and in accordance with sound criteria. It was a concept of the universe and values, constructed systematically and rigorously, which over time became irrefutable” [3, p. 37].

The active penetration of Comte’s ideas into Brazilian intellectual circles began as early as the 1850s. One of the first steps in this direction was the publication in 1856 of a book by Benjamin Constant Botelho de Magalhães (1836–1891), a professor at the Higher Military School in Rio de Janeiro, military engineer, and staunch

abolitionist, entitled *Slavery in Brazil (A Escravatura no Brasil)*. In it, he drew on the evolutionary principles of Comte's epistemology and political philosophy to argue for the inevitability of the gradual disappearance of slavery in Brazil through peaceful and consistent reforms. However, the first truly positivist work of Brazilian philosophical thought in the second half of the 19th century should be considered the two-volume work by the prominent medical theorist Luis Pereira Barreto (1840–1923), who worked in São Paulo titled *The Three Philosophies ("As Três Filosofias", 1874–76)*. By "three philosophies", Barreto means the three stages of development of human knowledge in Comte's teachings, attempting to interpret the main events of world history in their light. According to Barreto, Brazil had now practically overcome the metaphysical stage in its intellectual and social development and stood on the threshold of the third and final stage of development – the positive stage, when both the political and cultural content of social life is entirely determined by the progress of science and, above all, the development of natural science.

In the imperial capital, Rio de Janeiro, the most prominent adherents of positivism (primarily its socio-philosophical and religious doctrine) were Miguel Lemos (1854–1917) and Raimundo Teixeira Mendes (1855–1927), founders in 1876 of the religious Brazilian Society of Positivists, which was reorganized in 1881 into the Positivist Church of Brazil (*Igreja Positivista do Brasil*) in 1876. In their interpretation, the epistemological component of Comte's teachings recedes into the background, giving way to the theory of creating a "universal religion of humanity" developed by him in the last years of his life, the practical implementation of whose principles was the main goal of the newly created organization. Lemos and Mendes' religious-dogmatic interpretation of the principles of positivism was fully embodied in two of their joint works: "Annual Circulars of the Positivist Apostolate of Brazil" (*Circulares anuais do Apostolado Positivista do Brasil*, 1881) and "Our Initiation into Positivism" (*A nossa iniciação no Positivismo*, 1889).

Another major center of the positivist movement in the period from 1860 to 1880 was the northeast of the country, where the famous "Recife School" emerged, centered at the Faculty of Law of the University of Pernambuco in the provincial capital of Recife, founded in 1827 by decree of Emperor Pedro I. The core of this group of philosophers and legal scholars consisted of Tobias Barreto (1839–1889), Sílvio Romero (1851–1914), who later also taught philosophy at the Pedro II College in Rio de Janeiro, and Clóvis Beviláqua (1859–1944). The views of the thinkers of the Recife School differed from those of the Positivist Society of M. Lemos and R.T. Mendes primarily in that they practically ignored the religious component of Comte's teachings, focusing instead on its epistemological and political aspects. In addition to Comte's philosophy of "early positivism", T. Barreto was also significantly influenced by the ideas of Romanticism, as well as by the German biologist and evolutionist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) and the founder of European "philosophy of life" Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), which later reinforced the evolutionary and natural philosophical features of his worldview, embodied in such works as "Essays and Studies in Philosophy and Criticism" (*Ensaio e estudos de filosofia e crítica*, 1875) and *Brazil as it is (Brasilien, wie es ist*, in German, 1876).

In the late period of the Empire (1860–1889), the ideas of positivism were widely used by Brazilian intellectuals and public figures to explain and resolve a wide variety of socio-political issues, not limited to the problems of slavery and reforming the existing political system. In the extreme south of the country, in Rio Grande do Sul, the principles of "positive philosophy" and "positive politics"

were actively used by Nisia Floresta (real name Dionisia Gonçalves Pinto, 1810–1885), a women’s rights activist, one of the first theorists of feminism in South America, and a prominent intellectual of her time. After becoming acquainted with Comte’s teachings by attending his public lectures in Paris in 1849–50, she returned to Brazil in 1852, where she began to actively publish articles in various socio-political periodicals, combining feminist ideas with the principles of Comte’s “positive philosophy”. She later expounded her teachings in a number of fundamental works, such as “Woman” (“A Mulher”, 1859), Brazil (Le Brésil, in French, 1871), and Fragments of an Unpublished Work: Biographical Notes (Fragments d’un ouvrage inédit: notes biographiques, in French, 1878).

Conclusions

The influence of the ideas of “early positivism” in Brazilian society in the second half of the 19th century was so great that in 1889, when the Republic was established following the abolition of slavery by the so-called “Golden Law” in 1888 and the voluntary abdication of Emperor Pedro II, it was decided that the new national flag of the Brazilian Republic would bear the main motto of Auguste Comte’s political philosophy: “Order and Progress” (“Ordem e progresso”). This influence continued throughout the 20th century, leading to a much stronger tradition of philosophy of science, philosophical epistemology, and logic in Brazilian thought during this period compared to the Spanish American countries of Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Mexico.

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Позитивизм в Бразилии XIX в.: философия, политика, культура

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Аннотация. В статье анализируются культурно-исторические предпосылки зарождения и основные этапы истории философии позитивизма в Бразилии XIX в. На основании обзора как философско-литературной предыстории начала XIX в., так и непосредственно позитивистской традиции в бразильской мысли позапрошлого века показано, в силу каких факторов Бразилия оказалась тем государством Латинской Америки, на культурную, политическую и религиозную жизнь которой философия позитивизма оказала наибольшее влияние в этот исторический период.
Ключевые слова: Латинская Америка, Бразилия, философия, позитивизм, литература, наука, политика, культура, религия

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