

Positivism & the Cientificos

Positivism is a philosophical system based on the view that sensory experiences, and their logical and mathematical treatment, are the exclusive source of all worthwhile information. Positivism rejects speculative philosophy, that is, all questions of traditional philosophy dealing with being and causes, that can not be verified through empirical observation. Positivism declared that empirical science is the sole source of true knowledge.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857), one of the earliest proponents of this new school of thought, introduced the term *positivism* in the 1820s. He argued that knowledge should be understood as a historical process. Comte firmly believed that intellectual development was the primary cause of social change. It is precisely this social and political dimension of Comte's positivism that attracted such widespread interest during the nineteenth century.

Comte viewed society as having progressed through three distinct phases: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific or positive.

Here is a breakdown of the three stages.

1. **Theological:** In this stage human beings rely on supernatural agencies to explain what they can't explain otherwise.
2. **Metaphysical:** In this stage human beings attribute effects to abstract but poorly understood causes (such as human rights, national interest, etc.)
3. **Positive:** Human beings now understand the scientific laws that control the world.

One Positivist was Gabino Barreda (1818 –1881). After participating in the U.S.-Mexican War, Gabino Barreda studied medicine in Paris until 1851. There he became acquainted with Auguste Comte's doctrine of positivism. Upon returning to Mexico City, he introduced the positivistic school into Mexico, and taught in the state of Guanajuato until 1867. Then, he headed the educational commission of President Benito Juárez, which established the National Preparatory School, where he served director for a decade. Barreda expounded Mexican history in positivist terms. Mexico's colonial period had been the country's theological stage. Post-independence liberalism had raised it to the metaphysical level. Now that liberalism had triumphed (with the defeat of conservatism, and the emperor Maximilian in 1867), Mexico was ready for its next upward step.

One of his statements was: "Scientific emancipation, religious emancipation, political emancipation: here is the triple veneration of that powerful torrent that has been running day by day and increasing its strength..."

Positivism in Brazil

While positivism affected every Latin American country in the nineteenth century, its influence was nowhere as profound or widespread as in Brazil, where it gained support by criticizing the institutions of slavery, monarchy and the Church as constraining the natural progress of the nation.

Order and Progress

The motto “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress) on the flag of Brazil is inspired by Auguste Comte’s motto of positivism, “Love as the beginning, and order as the base; progress as the end.” It was inserted due to the fact that several of the people involved in the military coup d’état that deposed the monarchy and proclaimed Brazil a republic (in 1889) were followers of the ideas of Comte.

Abolition of slavery

In the pamphlet *Positivism and Modern Slavery*, Miguel Lemos writes in memory of Toussaint Louverture (1746–1803), “the dictator of Haiti and martyr for the liberty of his race.” The tract contains “precious extracts” from Comte, who universally condemned the “monstrous crime that continues to smear the Brazilian nation.” In 1888, Brazil (which had imported 40% of the slaves that came to the Americas) finally abolished slavery. Comte severely criticized what he called “decadent Catholicism” for not only sanctioning but even encouraging the institution of slavery. He considered slavery to be a “monstrous social aberration,” an embarrassment to European philosophy and civilization.

Brazil's indigenous population

The Positivist Church developed a great concern for the welfare of Brazil’s indigenous peoples. The pamphlet “In Defense of Brazilian Savages (1910)” argues for “the need to substitute, with respect to the savages, as well as regarding all peoples, the fraternal attitude, inherent to all Humanity, for the conquering attitude.” These pamphlets all call for urgent action on the part of the government to reach out to and protect indigenous peoples, specifically by reorganizing land in such places as the territory of Acre and setting aside reservations.

Brazilian positivist leaders, especially Raimundo Teixeira Mendes, and Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, turned to their doctrine when developing a plan to govern relations with indigenous people. In a series of letters to the editors of newspapers, which were then reprinted in a series of pamphlets and annual reports, Teixeira Mendes presented an Indian policy based on protection and acculturation. Teixeira Mendes wrote, “No human being can deny that it is the savages who are the rightful owners of the lands they occupy, with titles every bit as valid as those that any western nation could invoke.” Indeed, he wrote elsewhere that indigenous groups should be recognized as sovereign nations. Usurped lands should be returned, or, where this was impossible, new lands should be given to the inhabitants of these indigenous nations. He further argued that Indians had every right to resist incursions onto their lands. And he noted wryly that the armed defense of these lands could hardly be considered a crime, for “no one considers the Spanish and Portuguese as being criminals for having expelled the Arabs from the Iberian peninsula.”