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ASSIMILATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF POSITIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA *

BY ARTURO ARDAO

In Latin America, positivism was not only *adopted* but *adapted*. It was adopted, but it had to adapt itself to our historico-cultural characteristics. Its assimilation, therefore, evolved through its transformation. This adaptation did not take place under identical circumstances all over the continent. Latin-American positivism not only is different from the European, but it varies from one country to another. These two factors are equally important. For instance, Argentinian positivism and Mexican positivism are very different from the European types of positivism, but they also differ from each other.

In order to realize fully the rôle of those two changes—from Europe to Latin America, and from one country to another within Latin America itself—it is necessary to understand fully the two previously mentioned observations. First, there is no single Latin American positivism, but there is no single European positivism either. Second, while the main ramifications of European positivism intermingle, ours are estranged from one another. Positivism is as diversified in Europe as in Latin America because it lacks a common doctrinal basis. This fact is sometimes overlooked. But it is very important because, up to a point, the diversity of Latin American positivism is a reflection of the diversity of European positivism.

Positivism differs a great deal in the four countries of Western Europe where it was most important, and are in Europe the philosophical leaders of today: France, England, Germany, and Italy. It varies less in the remaining European countries, where it assumes national characteristics. If we take into consideration only the two countries which have had the greatest influence on Latin American positivism, France and England, we shall find out that positivism in each is not the same, but that within each country positivism is open to many different interpretations. In France there have been many interpretations of positivism, from that of its creator, Comte, to that of Taine, and many others, such as Littré, Laffitte, Renan, *et al.* In England, positivism varied from John Stuart Mill to Spencer, and, we might add Darwin, Bain, Huxley. It would be fairly easy to enumerate many others listed in most histories of philosophy. Also we could add to the list of the different schools of positivism from the classical with its epigonal manifestations, to neopositivism. We could also start with positivism as a general philosophy and go on to more specialized applications in specific branches of culture.

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To have an idea of how Latin American positivism was a reflection of European positivism, we should look towards two neighboring countries, Brazil and Uruguay, where at a certain period positivism expressed the national mind. Positivism in these two countries was very different because of its origins. Brazilians were predominantly influenced by the Frenchman, Comte; the Uruguayans, by the Englishman, Spencer. It must be understood that many differential characteristics of Latin American positivism were not due to the differences among European schools of positivism, but to their own national characteristics and history.

The different manifestations of European positivism in the main countries evolved through a maze of reciprocal influences; in Latin America just the opposite took place; the different manifestations of positivism evolved without any interchange, or practically no interchange, among the Latin American countries. In each one of these countries, the starting point was a certain European school of positivism, which sometimes coexisted with other European schools or was influenced by them. Also there was a lack of communication in the Latin American community.

In the XIXth century, whatever link there was among the different Latin American manifestations of positivism was provided by their common European origins, as well as common national characteristics—cultural, social and political needs and pressures—in their formative period. There was no intellectual interchange among our universities and cultural centers. In Europe, starting with the correspondence between the creators of positivism, Comte and Mill, to the manifest influence of English positivism on Taine, there was a constant relationship between the positivism of France and that of England. During the decades in which positivism had its largest following in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, there was no communication among positivists in those three countries.

The historical influence of positivism in Latin America was stronger in the fields of education, politics, and religion. It manifested itself through educational and governmental institutions. It was due to positivism that new methods were adopted and that many structural changes took place in those fields. On the spiritual and cultural levels there were deep changes reflected in the crisis of scientism in metaphysics and the naturalistic movement in literary and artistic romanticism.

There was an interaction of forces which resulted in fragmentation. Positivism changed ways of thinking. It introduced new methods in education, politics, religion, and even in general philosophy. In the schools positivist doctrines were debated and displaced the spiritual ones, from eclecticism to 'krausism.' But, it was in relation to the applied sciences that Latin-American positivism showed itself stronger and contributed most.

The main difference between Latin American positivism as a whole and European positivism, also as a whole, was that Latin American positivism anticipated and precipitated scientific culture, instead of resulting from scientific thought as in Europe. In Latin America, this was the greatest contribution of positivism in *the field of education*.

In Europe positivism evolved as a philosophy of scienticism. It developed as a reaction against philosophy, as a consequence of the historical victory of the natural positive sciences. This scientific reaction which developed later on into the so-called "scientism" represented a philosophical glorification of science. On the abstract side the scientific method was the only one leading to the gathering of exact data; on the practical side, it offered unlimited possibilities for the practical utilization of natural reality.

It is easy to understand that this scientific movement in philosophy could not have developed before the organization and establishment of scientific-natural knowledge, based on physical-mathematical concepts. It was in the late XVIIth century, with the establishment of the first scientific Academies, that science became organized, in the full meaning of the word organization. This scientific organization developed fully in the XVIIIth century and greatly influenced philosophy. Positivism, from Saint-Simon to Comte, became an established doctrine in the first half of the XIXth century when scientific theory developed a high historical perspective and when the practical application of scientific processes multiplied during the Industrial Revolution. Positivism was a spontaneous philosophical fruit of science, which had reached the peak of its flowering stage but not its full ripeness yet.

In Latin America the process was just the reverse. Scientific positivism did not originate from science; it was science that evolved from scientific experience, thus furnishing us a model from which we could draw when attempting to establish science in Latin America with the help of positivism as an ideological tool.

When positivist doctrines started to reach Latin America, early in the second half of the XIXth century, there was almost a complete lack of scientific culture in our countries, in the sense of experimental physical-mathematical knowledge. Therefore, positivist doctrines went beyond mere acquisition of new knowledge; they involved the adoption of a new methodology, that of the natural sciences. The sponsors of positivism started by preaching the introduction of those sciences and their teaching in our cultural centers, which were then under the influence of romantic rhetoric superimposed on neoclassicism without any great contradiction in the traditional metaphysical mentality.

This phenomenon did not develop in the same degree all over the

continent, but, if we make allowances for this difference in degree, it was quite general. In the Plata River Basin, at the last quarter of the colonial period, scientific teaching had retrogressed. Until then it had developed to the point of being able to absorb the scientific spirit of the end of the XVIIIth century. Thus the emergence of a natural scientist of the stature of Damaso Antonio Larrañaga (1771–1848), who was respected by both Cuvier and Saint-Hilaire, became more plausible. This spirit was lost in the teachings of the Revolution and in the first years of Independence¹ until the appearance of positivism, which established scientific teaching on a permanent basis. In 1900, the systematic organization of science throughout the continent, through teaching, became the most coherent and uniform product of positive thinking.

The influence of positivism in the field of education was one of its aspects which varies least from one Latin American country to another. It constituted a basic and general directive of educational policy, in which all different aspects of positivism coincide. Scientific knowledge, positive and practical, became the main objective of educational changes, and new methods of teaching were adopted from Grammar School to University in the last quarter of the XIXth century under the influence of the positivism of Comte or Spencer. Thus, it satisfied a crying need of our countries, still unformed economically, socially, and politically. It was against the exaggerations of this pragmatical positivism that the idealists of 1900 rebelled, through the message proclaimed in Rodo's *Ariel*.

However, it is in the field of education that the domestic variants of Latin American positivism start to appear, when we shift from the overall educational policy to the more specific field of pedagogic theory in its application in teaching. In the last quarter of the XIXth century, there was a time in Europe, when, under the influence of the scientific spirit of positivism, and through Saxon evolutionism, pedagogy became a *science of education* after the model of the natural sciences. This kind of pedagogic positivism took roots in the Plata River Basin under the educational guidance of the Argentinian-Uruguayan Francisco A. Berra's speculative doctrine, which then caused great repercussion in Europe in relation to empirical positivism in the field

¹ Alberdi said, "In writing the name of the College (of Moral Sciences) which I attended, I realized for the first time the reason why my classmates and I were so ignorant in natural and physical sciences. It is very simple, we were taught only 'moral sciences.' This proves two things: one in favor of Rivadavia, another against him. In encouraging the moral sciences, he thought that he was encouraging his country to be free. Tyrants are afraid of moral sciences. But, on the other hand, Rivadavia by neglecting the natural sciences revealed his ignorance of the real needs of our countries, which cannot ignore technology and must prepare themselves by learning practical subjects, with utilitarian application." (*Escritos Póstumos*, XV, 907.)

of applied philosophy.

We find in the field of politics a distinction analogous to that made in the field of education. First, there is a general Latin-American positivism which derives from its application to political problems and events the specific method of positivist philosophy in its general characteristics, such as, statements with a positive and realistic core, and solutions involving a utilitarian and pragmatistical approach. Second, in a more restricted sense, there are several specific aspects of Latin-American positivism which differ greatly among themselves. All these manifestations have a common origin, but they differ according to the ideological content of the different European schools and institutions through which they manifest themselves.

If we take into consideration the classical positivism of Comte and Spencer, it will be interesting to see how they express themselves on this side of the Atlantic by comparing their manifestations in the three largest Latin American countries: Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. In the first, the political positivism of Comte's school flourished; in the second, Spencer's school predominated; in the third, historically there was a mixture of both, with a preponderance of the first. To the different origins of European positivism, we should add the different ways that it took shape in the course of political action.

In Brazil, Comte's positivism, as a political philosophy, derived from The Positivist Society of Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1876 by Benjamin Constant Botelho de Magalhaes and his followers. Its historical influence is closely connected with the proclamation of the Republic in November 1899. Although not the only one, it was the most powerful Republican movement which planned and accomplished the downfall of the Empire. Benjamin Constant's leadership was then decisive, and, after him, that of Demetrio Ribeiro, another member of the positivist movement, and his successor in the provisional government. It is due to the contribution of the positivists in the first days of the Republic that, among other things, the national flag carries even today Comte's motto, "Order and Progress."

In spite of being a Republican, in politics Comte was against democratic liberalism. Between aristocracy and democracy, he visualized "sociocracy" based on what he called "Republican dictatorship." It was for this Republican dictatorship that the Brazilian positivists fought in the middle of the Constituency. They failed, but one of its delegates, Julio de Castilhos, implanted it in his state, Rio Grande do Sul. This was the only time in the history of the world that the constitutional ideas of Comte triumphed. Without going that far, Comte's positivism as a political doctrine was widespread in the whole country before and after the fall of the Empire. The influence of Spencer's evolutionism was secondary.

In Argentina, political positivism was powerful for a time, but it did not become a distinctive movement as it had in Brazil, or a political party as it had in Mexico. Contrary to the Brazilians and Mexicans, Argentinian positivists did not use positivism as a cohesive factor or for political proselytism. Its philosophical doctrine did not inspire them to band together under its motto, or to organize themselves into a movement or political entity. However, in its heyday there were implicit or explicit individual statements by positivists.

On the other hand, whatever political positivism there was in Argentina was of Anglo-Saxon origin which followed the tradition of natural evolutionism. Comte's school was somewhat influential in certain educational circles, such as the Teacher's College of Parana. However, politically its influence was insignificant. It could not stop the overflowing liberalism that the positivist generation had inherited from the previous romantic generation. From Mill to Spencer, English positivism supported a democratic and liberal political philosophy, more in harmony with French idealistic spiritualism from de Tocqueville to Laboulaye. Imbued with this liberalism, the positivists of the '80's became the protagonists of a national conscience, which projected itself in the direction of all political parties. Spencer's type of positivism provided the Argentinian mind with the ideology to perform the extensive task of organizing a nationality.

In Mexico, at first the most influential school was that of Comte; later on, the development of positivism followed two stages. At first, although the influence of positivism was stronger in the educational field rather than in the political, Comte's ideology predominated through its application by Gabino Barreda, its greatest exponent in the political history of Mexico. In the second stage, Comte's positivism was supplemented by Anglo-Saxon positivism, and the two types combined inspired the organization of a political party called "The Scientists," officially founded early in the nineties.

In Mexico, more than in any other country in Latin America, positivism was closely identified with national policy because of this party. In Brazil official positivism, although important, was accidental; in Argentina positivism was official only to the extent that it influenced the political leaders of the time; on the other hand, in Mexico it became the official line during the long dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. The party of the Scientists, from the very beginning stronger than the Conservative and Liberal parties, and inspired by the great intellectual Justo Sierra, adopted the positivist ideology as its political creed. Thus, resorting to Comte, they found a justification for the dictatorship as a means of maintaining order, based on scientific principles. They also invoked the ideal of liberty, borrowed from Mill and Spencer, but applied it only in economic matters. Porfirism and positivism became one. Political positivism was defeated by the

Revolution of 1910, and at the same time the intellectual positivism of the "Ateneo de la Juventud" also came to an end.

Political positivism did not follow exactly the same course in the other Latin American countries, but what happened in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico is a typical illustration of its diversity and its adaptation to the historical process of each nationality.

In the field of religion the influence of positivism in Latin America manifested itself also on two levels: theoretically, in matters of faith; practically, in the struggle against the Church and the clergy.

In matters of faith, positivism brought to the fore in Latin America a crisis dealing with the conception of God and religious belief. This challenge to the established faith had really begun with the previous generation, through Deism, which was part of the spiritualist metaphysics of the romantics. The positivists, in the name of positive science, rebelled against the spiritualist metaphysics shared by deists and Catholics alike. This rebellion turned them into agnostics and sometimes even into atheists. After the '80's, this new conception of God, which contributed greatly to the disintegration of metaphysics itself, was viewed with great favor by the Latin-American academic intellectuals. However, before the advent of positivism, this new conception of God was already part of the religious rationalism which directed the struggle against the Church in the name of natural religion.

Still in terms of religious belief, in the case of Brazil, positivism went beyond mere criticism to constructive action by propagating, as in no other country in the world, the "Religion of Humanity," founded by Comte. Comte's positivism in Latin America followed Littré's philosophical line rather than Lafitte's religious one. Brazil was the great exception, with the creation of the "Apostolado" or Positivist Church of Miguel Lemos and Raimundo Teixeira Mendes, which led to the solemn inauguration in Rio de Janeiro, in 1897, of The Temple of Humanity. In Chile, the movement was sponsored by the Lagarrigue brothers, but it never went that far. In Argentina, the religious aspects of Comte's positivism of J. Alfredo Ferreira and his followers, remained part of the intellectual sphere. On the other hand, in Brazil, religious positivism as such became a popular movement. Today it is very much reduced, but not completely extinct. This religious aspect was, perhaps, the most original manifestation of European positivism transplanted to Latin America.

On the practical level, in the struggle against the Church and the clergy, positivism was the third step of a reaction against the clergy which took place in Latin America in the XIXth century. The first step was taken by the generation at the time of Independence, under the influence of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, as a reaction against Spanish ultramontaniam. However, it did not result in a complete break with Catholicism. The reaction was primarily against the realist

and absolutist Peninsular clergy and their successors, the creoles. The second step was taken by the romanticists under the influence of rationalist deism. It resulted in a break with the Church and with established religion. The struggle was mainly against the clergy in general, but there was special emphasis on disagreements in philosophical doctrine. The third step was taken by the positivists who opposed the clergy as a social institution, but who also raised questions of dogma and faith in their discussions. Educational secularism, which had started with the spiritualist deists, consolidated itself in the struggle waged by the liberal positivists against the clergy. This struggle led to the gradual secularization of schools and to the separation between Church and State, which has not been fully realized as yet.

In our exposition of the development of positivism in the fields of education, politics, and religion, we have stated nothing new. The values which lent an historical character to Latin-American positivism, as an ideology rather than as a philosophy, were all interconnected in the way of thinking of that time, producing an overlapping of various fields. As an intellectual form, we have never had such an organic phase of development since colonial scholasticism. However, it was also a period of utmost isolation among the Latin-American countries themselves. The practical consequences of this ideological crisis which started in 1900 were going to be felt much later by an institutional crisis which is perhaps going on in our days, because not even during the heyday of positivism was there such a chasm between theory and practice.

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