

VALENTIN LETELIER: THE INFLUENCE OF POSITIVISM ON CHILEAN EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

*Valentín Letelier: La influencia del Positivismo en Chile
a través de la educación*

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of Positivism on Latin American educational thought. It argues that while this influence is significant for the number of institutions that it inspired, little attention has been paid to perhaps the most elaborate presentation of positivist educational ideas: Valentín Letelier's *Filosofía de la Educación* (1892). Building on national experience concerning the development of education, Letelier used Positivism to reform the curriculum of secondary education and was a primary force behind the foundation of the Instituto Pedagógico (1889). His view of the school can be summarized as a philosophy based on a rational and systematic hierarchy of the sciences, which he applied to the educational field. As a result, the curriculum reflected a progression from the study of the most general to the most specific sciences. The training of professors at the Instituto was geared precisely to steer students to achieve a systematic and comprehensive view of society based on scientific criteria. Letelier's work created a new sensitivity, and provided a significant link to subsequent efforts to reform national education.

Keywords: Valentín Letelier, Instituto Pedagógico, Philosophy of Education, positivism, German influence

Resumen

El artículo examina la influencia del positivismo en el pensamiento educacional latinoamericano. Si bien dicha influencia es significativa dado el número de instituciones que inspiró, no se ha prestado suficiente atención a lo que constituye tal vez la presentación más elaborada de las ideas educacionales positivistas: La Filosofía de la Educación (1892) de Valentín Letelier. Basándose en la experiencia nacional relacionada con el desarrollo de la educación, Letelier utilizó el Positivismo para reformar el currículo de la enseñanza secundaria pasando a ser una fuerza esencial en la fundación del Instituto Pedagógico (1889). Su visión de escuela puede resumirse como una filosofía basada en la jerarquía racional y sistemática de las ciencias la que aplicó al campo educacional. Como resultado de esto, el currículo reflejó una progresión en el estudio de las ciencias más generales a las más específicas. La formación de profesores en el Instituto estaba orientada precisamente a dirigir a los estudiantes para que lograran una visión sistemática y comprehensiva de la sociedad basada en criterios científicos. La obra de Letelier creó una nueva sensibilidad y proporcionó un nexo significativo para los posteriores esfuerzos de reformar la educación nacional.

Palabras clave: Valentín Letelier, Instituto Pedagógico, Filosofía de la Educación, influencia germana

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The great philosophical elaboration of positivism is destined to establish the foundation for the final system of positivist education that will necessarily bring to the citizenry... a unity of beliefs and a common identity of purpose.

—Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*

Positivism is best known in Latin America for its influence on politics. The prime example of this is Mexico, where a group of positivists known as the *Científicos* became close advisors to Porfirio Díaz's regime by the end of nineteenth century. Positivism in Mexico became, in fact, the official ideology of the regime until its collapse in 1911. In Brazil, it is also well known that positivism became instrumental in the overthrow of Dom Pedro II and proceeded to create a republic along positivistic lines in 1889. The motto of positivism, "order and progress," became also the motto of the Brazilian republic, and it can be seen in the country's flag to the present day. Elsewhere in Latin America, positivists were usually outspoken social critics, and often political leaders as well in their nations¹.

The impact of Positivism in politics is indisputably important, but one must not neglect its influence on education. Indeed, it was on Latin American education that the movement left its most enduring mark. Even in countries where Positivism was influential in politics, such influence would have been impossible without a previous success in the area of education. In Mexico, for instance, the educational reforms implemented by positivist Gabino Barreda furnished the grounds for the wider acceptance of positivistic ideas. As an official in charge of education under the administration of Benito Juárez, Barreda was instrumental in the creation of many secular primary and secondary schools. His foundation of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (ENP) can be considered the best

¹ Harold E. Davis suggests that "the mainstream of social thought in Latin America" followed the course of Positivism in *Latin American Thought: A Historical Introduction* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 97. Similar points about Positivism are made by Miguel Jorrín and John D. Martz, *Latin American Political Thought and Ideology* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970). A thorough sampling of positivistic thought in the region is *Pensamiento positivista latinoamericano*, 2 vols. edited by Leopoldo Zea (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980). Other useful sources on Positivism are by Leopoldo Zea, *Dos etapas del pensamiento en Hispanoamérica: Del romanticismo al positivismo* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1949); Germán Arciniegas, *Latin America: A Cultural History*, trans. By Joan MacLean (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), especially chapter XVI "From Utilitarianism to Positivism," pp. 378-403. Ralph Lee Woodward, ed., *Positivism in Latin America, 1850-1900: Are Order and Progress Reconcilable?* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1971); William J. Kilgore, "The Development of Positivism in Latin America," *Inter-American Review of Bibliography* 19 (1969), 23-42; and Charles A. Hale, *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

example of the embodiment of his educational ideas. At the ENP, Barrera eliminated all non-scientific subjects of study, and placed an unprecedented emphasis on professional training. A generation of students educated under this system became the notorious *científicos* who are today closely associated with Díaz's regime. The ENP provided the grounds for the formation of a professionally-oriented and anticlerical elite of Mexican political leaders. Positivism flourished in educational grounds first, then moved into the open political arena through the zeal and enthusiasm of its followers².

The same can be said of Brazil, where Positivism first took hold in such schools as the Río de Janeiro Military School and the Central Technical School. At the Military School, in particular, Benjamin Constant Botelho de Magalhães became the Minister of Education of the newly founded republic, and immediately proceeded to implement positivist reforms in the curriculum of teacher-training and secondary schools. Although his program was not nearly as comprehensive as that of Barreda, he managed to introduce a study of science following the positivistic concept of the hierarchy of the sciences³.

Many other Latin American countries produced positivists of note who by inclination and conviction became involved in the educational development of their nations. Such was the case of Cuba's Enrique José Varona, who served as Secretary of Education after independence from Spain, and who implemented educational reforms of a positivistic bent. Alfredo Vázquez Acevedo in Uruguay, and Ramón Rosa in Honduras, also infused their respective educational systems with ideas they had absorbed from Positivism⁴.

Perhaps because most Latin American positivists were involved in practical educational reforms, few left a systematic account of positivist educational thought in Latin America. If one were to base a definition of Positivism solely on their reform activities one would indeed have little to say about the extent to which such reforms were unequivocally positivistic. One would notice the anticlerical nature of their actions as well as a marked preference for science rather than metaphysics or theology in forming new curricula of study. Nor would it escape one's attention that they viewed the State as the protector and financier of a public and secular system of education. But beyond that, there is little of the intellectual sophistication Latin American positivists showed in other areas of knowledge such as philosophy and sociology⁵. One need

² Leopoldo Zea, *El positivismo en México* (Mexico: Ediciones Studium, 1953), especially pp. 142-155 and 187-196.

³ Joao Cruz Costa, *A History of Ideas in Brazil: The Development of Philosophy in Brazil and the Evolution of National History*, translated by Suzzette Macedo (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966). This source contains a lengthy discussion of Brazilian Positivism; also Jorrín and Martz, pp. 138-144.

⁴ Jorrín and Martz, pp. 150-152, Davis, pp. 128-129, Hale, 140-146.

⁵ Jorge J.E. Gracia, "Antropología positivista en América Latina: Enrique José Varona y José Ingenieros," *Cuadernos Americanos* 33 (March-April 1974), 93-106.

only mention Enrique José Varona and José Ingenieros, whose philosophical views on man and knowledge are among the most elaborate of their kind in the history of Latin American philosophy. Eugenio María de Hostos' legal and sociological writings also stand as sophisticated examples of positivistic thought. But insofar as the theory of education is concerned, Latin American intellectuals seem remarkably muted. Apparently, positivists interested in educational issues perceived their role to be in the public realm rather than at the writer's desk.

Had it not been for Valentín Letelier's *Filosofía de la educación*, published in 1892, the contemporary student of Latin American educational history would have no systematic account of how Positivism had a direct impact on educational ideas in the region. The book and its author are, therefore, of a crucial, if not always acknowledged, importance in the history of educational thought. Born in Chile in 1852, Valentín Letelier was educated at the Instituto Nacional, where he was inspired by the noted historian and educator Diego Barros Arana. As a student of law at the University of Chile (1872-1875), Letelier witnessed the removal of his mentor from the rectorship of the Instituto, who was forced to resign his post by Minister of Education Abdón Cifuentes. Barros Arana's outspoken opposition to the 1872 "Freedom of education" decree, which allowed private schools to grant degrees without the supervision of the State, caused his demise from an administration that included both conservative and liberal elements in the cabinet. This affair had a profound influence on the way that Letelier viewed the role of the State in education⁶.

While a law student, Letelier came under the influence of Positivism. In the wake of the "Freedom of education" decree, an Academia de Bellas Artes was founded by José Victorino Lastarria to respond to what he viewed as the growing influence of the Church on Chilean education. The Academia was founded in Santiago in 1873, with the specific purpose of disseminating positivist ideas, which were then formally introduced in Chile⁷.

⁶ By far the best biography of Letelier is by Chilean historian Luis Galdames, *Valentín Letelier y su obra, 1852-1919* (Santiago: Imprenta Universitaria, 1937). Other important sources are by Peter Sehlinger, "The Educational Thought and Influence of Valentín Letelier" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1969) and Julio César Jobet, *Doctrina y praxis de los educadores representativos chilenos* (Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1970), especially chapter V, "Don Valentín Letelier y su filosofía democrática de la educación nacional," pp. 281-347. See also Sehlinger's "Cien años de influencia de la obra de Letelier," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía* 139 (1971), 72-85; William Rex Crawford, *A Century of Latin American Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 74-78, and Solomon Lipp, *Three Chilean Thinkers* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1975), who devotes considerable attention to Letelier's career and biography in pp. 53-100.

⁷ Positivism was introduced in Chile in part as a reaction to the perceived growth of clerical militancy. See Allan L. Woll, *A Functional Past: The Uses of History in Nineteenth-Century Chile*

Lastarria, who is generally regarded as one of the founding members of the so-called “Generation of 1842,” established a reputation as a champion of liberal ideas and educational reforms in the 1840s. During that decade, he contributed articles to several newspapers, such as *El Crepúsculo*, and became involved in a riveting controversy with his mentor Andrés Bello on the role of history in Chilean national development. Lastarria was also a member of Congress, and a leader of the fledgling liberal movement that rose in opposition to the government of Manuel Bulnes. He was in addition a founding member of the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the University of Chile, a body that was responsible for the supervision of Chilean education. Lastarria, a staunch anticlerical, was a prolific writer, editor, and polemicist. By the 1870s, liberalism no longer provided him with the ammunition to attack the Church and the conservative establishment. He turned to Positivism, which guided from then on his views on politics and education⁸.

Lastarria’s positivism was more the instrument than the inspirer of his views, and in this he was not alone. Latin American Positivism was never a monolithic doctrine. There were as many interpreters of Positivism as there were intellectuals who held positivistic views. Auguste Comte, the French founder of the movement, would have probably been unable to recognize the Latin American versions of his thought, which in some cases was mixed with Spencerian evolutionism. There were also orthodox positivists who followed even his religious beliefs, as was the case in Brazil and Chile. By and large, Latin American positivists followed a heterodox variety that took some ideas from Comte, but neglected many others⁹. Such was the case of Lastarria, who followed Comte’s ideas on science, but completely ignored his “Religion of humanity”. Because the creation of the Academia de Bellas Artes was a reaction to the perceived growth of clerical influence, it would have indeed been somewhat contradictory to attack on religion with another, when the whole point was to provide a “scientific” answer to society’s problems. What

(Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 176. On the larger political environment, see Sol Serrano, *¿Qué hacer con Dios en la República? Política y secularización en Chile, 1845-1885* (Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008).

⁸ Lastarria described these developments in his autobiography, *Recuerdos literarios*, first published in 1878, when he was fully under positivistic influence. Useful sources on Lastarria’s activities are Woll’s *A Functional Past*; Norman P. Sacks, “José Victorino Lastarria: Un intelectual comprometido en la América Latina,” *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía* 140 (1971), 153-193, and Alamiro de Ávila Martel *et alia*, *Estudios sobre José Victorino Lastarria* (Santiago: Ediciones de la Universidad de Chile, 1988).

⁹ Leopoldo Zea has discussed the many varieties of Positivism in Latin America in his *Dos etapas del pensamiento*. See also Arturo Ardao, “Assimilation and Transformation of Positivism in Latin America,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963), 515-522.

attracted Lastarria to Positivism was its rhetoric of objectivity, which seemed to destroy theological claims by the sheer force of scientific truth¹⁰.

This was the version of Positivism that Letelier absorbed during his student years in Santiago. An orthodox form of this school was developed by the Lagarrigue brothers (Jorge, Juan Enrique, and Luis). They were the founders of one of the few “Temples of Humanity” where positivistic religious services were held in Latin America, aside from Brazil. These two varieties of Positivism followed two different French mentors: Emile Littré, who followed Comte’s scientism, and Pierre Lafitte, who was a loyal follower of Comte’s Religion of Humanity. The Lagarrigues and Letelier joined the Chilean Sociedad de la Ilustración (similar to the Academia, but for younger members), where these two views collided and eventually developed their different ways. As a weary Jorge Lagarrigue reported in 1882, after trying to persuade Letelier to join his ranks, “We discussed Positivism from eight to eleven o’clock at night. The revolutionary hydra, in addition to pride and vanity, has given Letelier a shield of personal infallibility which prevents his conversion”¹¹.

Letelier’s conversion to orthodox positivism was also prevented by his Masonic convictions and his membership in the Radical Party. He had little tolerance for religion, and remained an agnostic for the rest of his life. He also remained a heterodox positivist who read and discussed Comte without following in his footsteps. By the time he returned to Santiago in 1878, after a stint of four years as an instructor of philosophy at the *Liceo* of Copiapó, Letelier’s interpretation of Positivism was fully developed. A lawyer and a congressman until 1882, the foreign service recruited him as a staff member in the Chilean legation in Germany, where he was stationed until 1885. He returned to Chile to pursue an active career as a professor, lawyer, educational leader and public official. In addition to being elected congressman for Talca, he was an elected member of the Consejo de Instrucción Pública between 1888 and 1893, and then again from 1903 to 1911. All along, Positivism informed his thought and writings, although he derived many of his ideas from a rich variety of doctrines and thinkers, including Herbert Spencer¹².

Letelier’s Positivism was clearly articulated in his educational writings, particularly in his *Filosofía de la educación*. This book, by the time of its second edition in 1912, included eight hundred erudite pages containing his thoughts on the subject, which began as far back as his student years at the Instituto Nacional. His very first published writing,

¹⁰ Lastarria’s encounter with Positivism is amply described in *Recuerdos Literarios: Datos para la historia literaria de la América española i del progreso intelectual de Chile*, 2nd ed. (Santiago: Librería de M. Servat, 1885).

¹¹ Quoted by Leopoldo Zea, *Dos etapas*, p. 207.

¹² Davis, p. 125.

in fact, concerned an educational issue¹³. His interest was fueled by the public debates on education at the time, and by the active efforts of liberal administrations and parties to promote a free, secular, State-run educational system. Young Letelier was quickly taken by these debates, which attracted many of the best minds at the time, including Diego Barros Arana, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, and Miguel Luis Amunátegui¹⁴. Education was also a major concern for some of the parties and associations to which Letelier belonged, such as the Radical Party, the Sociedad de Instrucción Pública in Copiapó, and the Sociedad del Progreso in Santiago. The combination of his interests in education, and his adoption of positivistic ideas, eventually produced one of the most cogent expressions of Latin American positivist educational thought. Positivism seemed to him to provide not only the best approach for understanding education in general, but also the best remedy for the specific ills of Chilean education.

The development of Chilean education was closely tied to the process of nation-building in Chile. In the wake of independence from Spain, many educational leaders successfully argued in favor of the establishment of a national system of education. The proposals of such men as Juan Egaña, Camilo Henríquez, and Manuel de Salas were welcome, but the growth of the system was as difficult as the consolidation of the republic. Continuous disagreements and political tensions from 1818 to 1830 prevented education from becoming a national priority. It was only in 1833 that the Constitution made education a primary responsibility of the State, and laid out the foundations for a superintendancy of education that concentrated all matters related to education under the aegis of the State. Still, the number of public schools remained small in spite of active encouragement and modest, but consistent, financial support from the State. By 1830, of a total of twenty schools only four were public and only ten percent of the school-age population received instruction. Twenty years later, there were more than one hundred and eighty public schools, but the percentage of students receiving an education remained the same¹⁵.

Educational leaders estimated that for as long as Chile continued to be a largely illiterate nation, the prospects for modernizing the country were nil. The creation of the University of Chile in 1842, which assumed the constitutional role as supervisor of national education was a response to the challenges facing the country in this area. Engineered by Andrés Bello, the University of Chile was designed to meet the nation's needs in the

¹³ Letelier, "Enseñanza libre," *El Alba*, July 9, 1871, pp. 76-78.

¹⁴ Peter Sehlinger has discussed the background of Letelier's educational ideas in his "Educational Thought," pp. 1-28.

¹⁵ Fernando Campos Harriet, *Desarrollo educacional, 1810-1960* (Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1960), pp. 16 and 24.

areas of science, economic development, and education¹⁶. The Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, in particular, received the mandate to supervise primary education and contribute to its growth. By 1860, however, its authority over elementary education was transferred to the State's Consejo de Instrucción Pública. The university retained authority over secondary and higher education, but its role as a supervisory body ruling over all aspects of national education was significantly diminished. Still, the problems continued. In 1860, elementary schooling was made tuition-free, but the same problems of absenteeism and poor facilities plagued the system through the end of the century¹⁷.

During the 1860s and 1870s it was obvious to a number of otherwise sympathetic reformers that Bello's ideas for a thriving educational system serving national needs, however commendable, had not been realized. Many believed that the failures of the educational system were due to staunch clerical and conservative opposition, and viewed with alarm the growth of private education in the country. The drastic measures of Minister Abdón Cifuentes in 1872 did nothing to mollify the worst liberal fears. Only the State, and a liberal one, could ensure a free, democratic and lay education serving the larger country rather than the interests of the Church and other conservative groups.

It was in this context, and also in the context of a period of social tensions emerging from Chile's increasing urbanization, population growth, and the uncertainties of a vulnerable economy, that Valentín Letelier developed his ideas on education. His contact with the philosophy of Comte, which he absorbed at the Academia, the Sociedad de la Ilustración, and subsequently in his discussions with other positivists in Copiapó, provided him with the key to interpret the problems of education in the country. This became apparent in 1879, when still a young man of twenty-seven, he delivered a speech at the Sociedad del Progreso¹⁸. There he stated his concern about the educational plans of

¹⁶ Andrés Bello's ideas on the role of the university in a national context are included in his *Obras completas*, 26 vols. (Caracas: Fundación La Casa de Bello, 1981-1984), especially in vols. 21 and 22. For discussions on Bello's views on higher education see the special issue of *Atenea: Revista de Ciencia, Arte y Literatura* 443-444 (1981), and in *Bello y Chile*, 2 vols (Caracas: Fundación La Casa de Bello, 1981). See also Raúl Hernán Silva, "El pensamiento de Bello en el discurso de instalación," *Boletín de la Universidad de Chile* 35 (November 1962), 28-32; Rafael Fernández Heres, *El proyecto universitario de Andrés Bello* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1982); Sol Serrano and Iván Jaksic, "In the Service of the Nation: The Establishment and Consolidation of the University of Chile, 1842-1879," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 70, Nº 1 (February 1990), 139-171, and Sol Serrano, *Universidad y Nación: Chile en el siglo XIX* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1993).

¹⁷ See Campos Harriet on the different periods and landmarks in Chile's educational history; Clark Gill, *Education and Social Change in Chile* (Washington, D.C.: U.S: Government Printing Office, 1966), pp. 109-124.

¹⁸ Letelier, "Un Nuevo plan de estudios secundarios i la filosofia positiva," in *La lucha por la cultura* (Santiago: Imprenta i Encuadernación Barcelona, 1895), pp. 297-307.

the Consejo de Instrucción Pública, which he claimed had no systematic organization, and expressed particular alarm at the plans to reintroduce the teaching of Latin in the secondary school curriculum¹⁹. Moreover, it bothered him that proposals to introduce science into the plan of studies were met with opposition and derogatory comments against Positivism. Positivism, he suggested, was a philosophy based on a rational and systematic hierarchy of the sciences. Such philosophy was in the best position, in his judgment, to inform the educational system. The reason for his confidence rested on Positivism's arrangement of the sciences from abstract to concrete, which Comte had proposed, and that organized knowledge in sensible stages that were absent in other proposals. He strongly believed that Positivism was the only philosophy with a systematic character that could not only inform education, but also help society by lending it much needed scientific support to confront its problems. Only Positivism, he thought, prepared students for society.

Underlying Letelier's confidence in the power of science to bring about rationality and order in areas beyond the natural sciences was not only the perceived effectiveness of scientific methodology, but also the supposedly uncontested nature of scientific truths. He and other positivists, like Gabino Barreda in Mexico, were convinced that the orderly and rational values of science could also be applied to society through education. Their interest in "order" is almost self-explanatory, as they were members of a movement that sought radical transformations in society and yet was fearful of mass uprisings and violence. Education, for these intellectuals, was an instrument with the power to raise the population to the standards of order and progress, and to instill the scientific values necessary for the modernization of society. Positivism guided them up to this point, but the specific pedagogical techniques had to be sought elsewhere. Letelier was aware of this and took the lead.

Shortly after his address to the Sociedad del Progreso, Valentín Letelier sailed to Europe to assume the responsibilities of secretary of the Chilean legation in Germany. His by now fully developed Positivism showed in his early comments on the country: Germany had overcome a significant conflict between Church and State, and had built a strong system of secular public education²⁰. The country was widely recognized as a leader in the area of pedagogy. The clearly impressed Letelier was not alone in this regard, for many educational leaders around the world studied and in some cases ad-

¹⁹ Augusto Orrego Luco also expressed his opposition to the reintroduction of Latin in the secondary school curriculum in an article published in 1880. See his "La resurrección del latín," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía* 101 (July-December 1942), 157-174. See also Walter Hanisch Espíndola, *El latín en Chile* (Santiago: Fondo Andrés Bello, Biblioteca Nacional, 1991).

²⁰ Galdames, p. 80.

opted many of the reforms implemented in Germany²¹. He returned to Chile in 1885, determined to introduce some aspects of the German educational system. The most important of these, and also the most enduring, were his recommendations and his leadership in implementing the “concentric” plan for secondary studies in 1889, and the creation of the Instituto Pedagógico the same year²². The first lasted more than fifty years, while the second lasted nearly a century, when it was dismantled by the regime of Augusto Pinochet. Critics and biographers coincide in viewing these contributions as the most important made by Letelier, and certainly among the most important in Latin America²³.

Caught in the crossfire of the 1891 Civil War in Chile, Letelier saw his political and educational activities suddenly interrupted. As an opponent of José Manuel Balmaceda, Letelier spent most of 1891 in prison for having endorsed the congressional act of deposition of the President, and for attacking him in the press. Letelier used his time in prison to write the monumental *Filosofía de la educación*, a summary of his positivistic views and the pedagogical knowledge that he had acquired in Germany and Chile²⁴.

Perhaps the most doctrinaire aspect of Letelier’s *Filosofía* concerns his application of Comte’s three-stage paradigm for understanding the historical evolution of society to education. Letelier structured his work on the basis of a discussion of the theological, metaphysical, and scientific models of education, just as Comte had done in relation to society at large. Comte had understood the progress of humanity as successively going through a theological stage, a metaphysical stage, and finally a scientific stage that was the culmination of the process which Comte urged his contemporaries to help bring about. The French thinker viewed this progress as inevitable, and believed that each stage superseded the previous in an increasing degree of universality and rationality. This model for the understanding of society and history could not but appeal to Letelier, who was quite aware of the civil confrontations that had torn the country apart in 1830, 1851, 1859, and again in 1891. The scientific stage, as defined by Comte, provided the

²¹ The impact of German educational ideas on other areas of the world has been examined by Jurgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1972) and Roger L. Geiger, “Reform and Restraint in Higher Education: The French Experience, 1865-1914,” *Yale Higher Education Program Working Paper*, N° 2, 1975.

²² For an account of German influences on Chilean education, see William Walter Sywak, “Values in Nineteenth-Century Latin America: The Germanic Reform of Chilean Public Education, 1885-1910” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1977).

²³ Details on the creation of the Instituto Pedagógico can be found in Letelier’s *La lucha por la cultura*, pp. 355-443. See also Guillermo Feliú Cruz, “El Instituto Pedagógico bajo la dirección de Domingo Amunátegui Solar, 1892-1922,” *Mapocho* 3 (1965), 11-43.

²⁴ Letelier described the circumstances under which he wrote the book, in the prologue of *Filosofía de la educación*, revised and expanded edition (Buenos Aires: Cabaut y Cia., 1927).

foundations for the orderly progress of society. To Letelier, the achievement of such a scientific stage became an utmost priority, as it promised to render obsolete the previous—and deficient—stages in the evolution of humanity. In Letelier's understanding, the theological stage had already been superseded, but his urgency to advance to the scientific suggests that he believed Chile to be still under the grip of some theological and metaphysical influences. He saw them in the conservative attempts to control the Chilean educational system. Since clerical and conservative forces had already been opposed by liberals with little success, Letelier thought that the adoption of a scientific stage would do by reasonable means what had not been accomplished by means of political and even armed confrontations.

Liberals did not fare much better in Letelier's analysis. In an effort to make Chilean reality fit into his positivistic views, he characterized Chilean liberalism as an expression of the metaphysical stage described by Comte, mainly characterized by anarchy, and guided by abstract and ineffective concepts of liberty. Much of Chilean history since independence seemed to him to confirm this, particularly in light of the disarray he viewed in education and politics.

Because of these lingering theological and metaphysical currents still seeking to prevail in politics and education, Letelier concentrated on a positivist-inspired reorganization of the educational system. His view of education, as it may be now be apparent, was essentially social in nature: it reflected the norms and values of society. The times, which were in his judgment badly in need of order and progress, demanded an educational program guided by a comprehensive philosophy. Thus informed by a systematic scientific philosophy, Letelier expected the educational system to teach students how to contribute to the development of society²⁵.

If scientific principles could guide the educational system society would follow a constructive path characterized by the order and progress missing in the Chile of Letelier's time. Following standard positivistic views, he stated that theological views were not up to the task, for they had not accomplished what was most needed at this time: unity. Moreover, theological truths had failed to appeal to all persons, and, more often than not, they had plunged humanity into conflicts of an unsolvable nature. Metaphysics did not fare much better in Letelier's assessment. He suggested that the type of metaphysical concerns that characterized the liberalism of his time produced a form of eclecticism in educational matters that confused the minds of the young, and introduced rebelliousness and anarchy into the larger political life of the nation²⁶.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Only science, he suggested, could bring about much needed unity to society and provide the basis for the orderly progress of humanity. He insisted that scientific truths were of such nature that they did not leave much room for the type of debates and controversies on the basis of which anarchy flourished. A scientific approach to society could bring about order due to its ability to resolve problems beyond political and religious discussions²⁷.

Understandably, not only the contemporary student of science, but also any informed person today would consider Letelier's faith in scientific truth naïve. Even during his lifetime, science was undergoing profound transformations and questioning. Science was in addition moving into the type of specialization that defied any attempt at coordination, thus undermining the unity that Letelier assumed.

Still, science for Letelier represented the best basis for the development of a sound educational system, and for the orderly progress of society. It provided him with a platform to attack the educational models that he thought were inspired by ineffective beliefs. To demonstrate that science could develop knowledge better than any other system, he closely followed Comte's classification of the sciences and suggested that any system of education should follow a process of learning ranging from the most general to the most complex sciences²⁸. Comte had classified the sciences in an order from general to specific beginning with mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and culminating with sociology. He believed that this arrangement should be applied to the Chilean educational system, and it did in fact inform his proposal for the implementation of the "concentric" plan of studies that was approved in 1889 and implemented in 1893²⁹.

Letelier's model for the teaching of the sciences was only a part of his general conception of the educational system. Following Comte, Letelier divided education into two major areas, arts and sciences. While the different sciences should be taught according to their natural hierarchy, Letelier suggested that the arts should complement the entire process of learning, for they helped the development of other faculties in the student. They also prepared the young for specific careers much needed in society. This approach to the combined beneficial effects of the arts and sciences provided him with the grounds to claim that neither theology nor metaphysics could guide the educational system as thoroughly as science could³⁰.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-278 and 286.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 343-344.

²⁹ Sehlinger, "Educational Thought," pp. 158-159.

³⁰ Letelier, *Filosofía*, pp. 295-297.

Letelier's notion of science, as may already be obvious, was far too general. The reason for this lies in the form of the scientific stage of humanity as defined by Comte. Science for this thinker, indeed, was more a philosophy than a collection of disparate fields, and Letelier was quite clear about this when he advanced his own proposals for a scientific system of education. The coordination of the sciences, from simple to complex, developed into a general system capable of comprehending "everything that is humanly possible to know"³¹. This view of science was not very different from Andrés Bello's. In fact, the founder and first Rector of the University of Chile understood science as a general system including all branches of human knowledge. To this extent, Letelier's views were not exclusively Comtean; they also developed from Chilean sources that relied on science as a guiding philosophy for the development of education and society. Still, the unity of the sciences was more an assumption than a reality.

In his *Filosofía de la educación* Letelier attempted to coordinate the three major divisions of education, namely, elementary, secondary, and higher. These three levels of the educational process were in his view only more developed stages of a larger process of knowledge that started earlier at birth. Letelier was confident that his scientific philosophy of education could inform every stage of this process by proceeding according to a concentric approach, that is, by moving gradually from simple skills to more developed notions. He believed that knowledge developed by building on what was already acquired, adding both depth and generality in gradual stages³².

At the top of the educational process was the university, an institution he knew well both as a member of the faculty and as Rector of the University of Chile between 1906 and 1911. Letelier viewed the university as the best place to develop the science that was needed to nurture the rest of the system. In this sense, he actively tried to return to the original role of the university as a superintendancy of education. When this venue was finally created after almost a century since its original conception, the university played only a limited role in it. Following German experience more than Comtean positivism, Letelier viewed the university as the center for the development of science and believed that this institution should have complete freedom to cultivate it. Because he viewed pedagogy as a "science," he favored it as a central field of study at the university. To this extent, he was quite successful, for he did manage to create the German-inspired *Instituto Pedagógico* in 1889, secure university status for it in 1890, and encourage its impressive growth until it was standing on its own feet, with a solid reputation throughout the continent.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 363.

His other ideas about the university were not as successful, such as his proposed division of the institution into six faculties that would embody the six sciences that Comte regarded as fundamental. When he left it in 1911, the university was still far from being the center of the growth and development of science in the country. Nor was it the “spiritual power” that he expected so that it could lead the larger society³³. Instead, the university was plagued by the same financial problems that characterized its entire history, and the institution continued to turn out the usual high number of graduates from the traditional areas of law and humanities.

However, Letelier managed to think through the educational history of Chile and come up with specific proposals for its organization and rationalization. Many of these proposals, such as the concentric system and the Pedagogical Institute were actually implemented. Letelier was also quite successful in providing a systematic view of Chilean education and its challenges. His *Filosofía de la educación* provides the most comprehensive treatment of educational issues in Chile from a positivistic perspective. Letelier found in Positivism an opportunity to approach one of the most urgent national problems with a seemingly scientific and objective spirit. Still, political convictions resonate quite strongly in this otherwise remarkably restrained treatise. The most important of these convictions concerns the role Letelier believed the State should play in national life, with education being only a facet, albeit an important one, in a larger process of nation-building. He knew that conflicts between individual freedoms and the State had characterized much of the political history of the country during the nineteenth century. Defining the role that the State should play in order to promote democracy, and yet implement needed reforms that might be perceived as authoritarian, was a concern of great urgency for most liberals at the time. Political organizations like the Radical Party, created in 1863, and individuals of different liberal persuasions, strongly believed that the State should play a leading role in the direction of society, while at the same time safekeeping fundamental democratic freedoms³⁴.

Achieving this must have seemed virtually impossible by the time of the 1891 Civil War, when even a liberal-minded president of positivistic leanings, José Manuel Balmaceda, was seen as authoritarian by his own supporters. Letelier, for one, actively opposed Balmaceda, and yet he was convinced of the need of a strong State to lead the nation. Especially in the field of education, Letelier thought that only the State was in a position to ensure that all citizens receive an adequate education. The destiny of democracy rested on this, for only an informed citizenry could in turn define the limits of executive power and speak out for their rights. This, of course, was not just Letelier’s view, but

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

³⁴ Letelier devoted considerable attention to this subject in *Filosofía*, chapter XVI, pp. 619-703.

also that of the Radical Party, which made State control of education one of its central political platforms³⁵. But it was Valentín Letelier who most clearly articulated this view when he stated that “education cannot unite the minds if it is not universal, nor can it be universal if it is not public, nor can it be public unless the democratic inclinations of a people demand it from the State”³⁶. The perceived power of education to strengthen democratic institutions was perhaps the major reason for Letelier’s dedication to this aspect of national development. Surely, as some scholars have suggested, his eloquent defense of State control over education played a significant role in making education obligatory in 1920. It was under the administration of Arturo Alessandri Palma, a former student of Letelier, that this law came into effect. Still another student, Pedro Aguirre Cerda, made Letelier’s motto *Gobernar es educar* (to govern is to educate) his own during the successful 1938 presidential campaign³⁷. Letelier’s arguments in favor of this issue did manage to prevail, though by themselves did not, and could not, solve the problems of Chilean education.

Letelier, as other educational leaders before him, relied perhaps too heavily on the power of ideas to solve problems of a more political and economic nature, such as those that characterized Chilean education. Ideas were perhaps the only means available to them to contribute to the solution of those problems. In the process, they introduced educational models such as the British Lancasterian system in 1821, some features of Scottish and French higher education in the 1840s, and the Germanic pedagogical reforms of the 1880s³⁸. These systems proved to be too ambitious in that none solved the problems they intended to solve. Making the educational system more rational or modern, it became clear, was not the root of the problem. Educational leaders rallied for the introduction in Chile of new pedagogical methods that had proven effective elsewhere, particularly in more developed countries. As critics of the hiring of German professors put it in the 1880s, if Chile was to hire foreign professors because of their innovative methods, the country would have to hire new personnel every time there was an innovation³⁹. A country like Chile could not easily afford this, but it proved to be quite generous to its educators’ requests. But despite reforms, the country continued to be plagued by low attendance in school, high dropout rates, inadequate facilities to accommodate students, and a critical shortage of trained teachers and resources to educate the young.

³⁵ Sehlinger, “Educational Thought,” p. 32.

³⁶ Letelier, *Filosofía*, pp. 623-624.

³⁷ Sehlinger, “Educational Thought,” pp. 59-60.

³⁸ Sywak, p. 59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Positivistic ideas proved to be influential enough to lead Valentín Letelier into a life-long struggle for the improvement of Chilean educational institutions. Positivism's emphasis on science was translated by Letelier into a modest, yet significant change in secondary school studies. Also, through Positivism Letelier addressed the long-neglected question on the education of students with disabilities, suggesting that science was equipped to deal with all types of pedagogical challenges. This approach created a new sensitivity, which also led reformers to put more emphasis on an integral education for the young. Students found that, under the influence of Positivism, education included handicrafts, gymnastics, and singing. Positivism also encouraged educational leaders to think in national terms about the problems of education. It encouraged them to also think of education as a process that did not end with primary schooling or the labor market, but that it stretched from the early days of childhood to the most advanced and sophisticated studies at the university.

In sum, Positivism did not solve all the problems it discussed, but Letelier's systematic treatment of them left not only a substantial record of positivistic influence on Latin American educational thought, but it also pointed the way for implementation of needed reforms.

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