

Chapter Four: THE POWER OF POSITIVISM

On a rainy winter day in Rio de Janeiro the building disappears into the grayness of its surroundings. To get there one takes the subway to the Gloria Station, then walks three or four blocks up Benjamin Constant Street. From the mist of the morning emerges what appears to be a Greek temple, albeit one covered with faded green paint: the Temple of Humanity, home of the Positivist Church of Brazil.

On any given Sunday at 10:00 A.M. a half dozen casually dressed and mostly aged people slowly collect on the front steps of the temple. With a nod from a gray-haired gentleman (the congregation's leader, Mr. Danton Voltaire), the first notes of the "Marseillaise" play over an ancient loudspeaker while the French flag slowly climbs an impressive mast near the street. The music from the loudspeaker then turns into the Brazilian national anthem, and in front a man hoists the Brazilian flag up another mast. A handful of pedestrians stop to stare at the spectacle. Some, but not all of them, come to attention and sing when the Brazilian anthem is played.

A century ago the exact same ceremony played to a decidedly larger and more boisterous crowd. As described by João do Rio, a famous chronicler of the time, crowds of well-dressed ladies entered the temple accompanied by gentlemen clad in fine coats and top hats. Their carriages clogged the normally deserted street in front of the temple. Military men in uniform herded their children into the building. Without fail, Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon was among these parishioners when he was home in Rio de Janeiro.¹

To note that Rondon was a Positivist is to state something

as obvious as the fact that man is a biped. Positivism was everything to him. It shaped his outlook on life. It provided a blueprint for national development that he followed in the planning and construction of the telegraph line. It also shaped his ideas about Indian-white relations in Brazil. Positivism gave Rondon the spiritual strength to carry on his activities in the Amazon. It comforted him during the long months of separation from his family and encouraged him when the trials and tribulations of the telegraph campaigns eroded his confidence. Simply put, Rondon built the successes of his career on the foundation of Positivism. Yet Rondon's Positivism was also a principal source of the troubles he encountered during the course of his telegraph campaigns, leading him to engage in unnecessary disputes with public officials over issues of faith and to antagonize Catholic Church officials, which then caused their supporters to challenge Rondon and his project in northwest Brazil. Thus, the very thing that gave meaning to his life and strengthened his resolve and character also limited the impact of his work and his influence in Brazil.

Positivism: The Religion of Humanity

What was this philosophy/religion that was able to cast such a powerful and decisive spell over Rondon? Founded by Auguste Comte, best known today as the father of sociology, Positivism grew out of Comte's search for ways to ensure order and progress in the aftermath of the French Revolution.² Comte's goal was to prevent social unrest, rebellions, and revolutions by convincing the proletariat to accept the domination of the bourgeoisie in exchange for material benefits, guidance, and improvement. He believed that he had uncovered the natural laws of the universe and that this allowed him to develop an objective and neutral social theory. As Brazilian philosopher Lelita Benoit notes, for Comte the universe was "the perfect paradigm of order," which led to "the fundamental tenet of positivist sociology: the notion of a natural social order." Scientific thought and observation were the keys to uncovering this natural order, and thus Comte emphasized the importance of studying the sciences, mathematics, and engineering.³

Using these natural laws, Comte divided human experience into three stages through which he felt all of mankind passed in the course of

social evolution. In the theological stage humans could only explain natural phenomena through the mediation of spirits, because they were so reduced in their ability to observe natural phenomena. During this stage societies passed through three successive periods. In the fetishistic period man believed that supernatural spirits were responsible for all phenomena. Then came the polytheistic period, followed by the monotheistic, or final, period of the theological stage. In that stage society gradually came to believe that one supernatural being was responsible for all providential actions.

The monotheistic period prepared societies for the second stage of social evolution, the metaphysical stage. In this stage humans began to search for the causes of phenomena through observation and rational thought, which prepared them for the final stage of social evolution, the positivist stage, wherein the true causes of and relations between diverse phenomena would be discovered through the identification of natural laws. A few enlightened individuals would guide society in this period, leading to human progress and the unification of all mankind into Humanity. Because of the emphasis on the social, on what Comte termed "the Universal Order," Positivists were to work for the public good, for solidarity, with Positivism as a technical guide for moral behavior.

Late in his life, beginning in 1847, Comte developed the so-called Religion of Humanity to teach and spread the ideas of Positivism. To his faith in science Comte added the importance of emotions and affection. Humanity replaced the Christian god. The religion's primary mission, therefore, was to complete the pact between social classes so that one, unified Humanity could unite all people on earth. Here the architecture of the Positivist Church in Rio de Janeiro is instructive, for while the front looks like a Greek temple, the sides, in rough red brick, represent the architecture of the factory and express Comte's goal of uniting all peoples, from the learned elite to the proletariat, into one social unit.⁴

Comte's religion recognized as saints those historical figures that represented key phases in the social evolution of Humanity, including Moses, Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, and Dante. He developed his own calendar (which Rondon used in much of his personal correspondence, as well as in numerous official documents). Women were central to the new religion, for Comte believed that they possessed certain innate qualities, such as affection and goodness, that would help mankind reach the Posi-

tivist stage. Women were to be venerated as the chief representatives of Humanity, for they were responsible for transmitting Positivist beliefs to the family. Comte's maxim, which is inscribed above the doors of the Positivist Church in Rio de Janeiro, proclaims "Love as the Principle, Order as the Base, and Progress as the End."⁵

Positivism and the Religion of Humanity in Brazil

In the aftermath of the Paraguayan War (1865-1870), many Brazilians questioned the foundations of their society.⁶ Positivism's emphasis on industrialization, modernization, and reform found an appreciative audience among members of the middle class in Brazil, who, according to Robert Nachman, "tended to feel divorced from traditional, national institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church and the oligarchically-controlled government."⁷ Furthermore, the paternalistic Positivist plan to incorporate the proletariat by providing for their material and moral well-being (in order to create a unified Humanity) offered these members of the middle class a way to reform Brazil without unleashing social unrest and violence. Not only were the first Positivists in Brazil drawn from the middle class, but they were drawn from a particular segment of that class: those schooled in the sciences and engineering. Nearly 80 percent of the 400 Positivists studied by Nachman were employed as army officers, professors, engineers, and physicians.⁸

Beginning in the 1870s Benjamin Constant Botelho de Magalhães played the key role in the spread of Positivism in Brazil by teaching it to his students at the Military Academy in Rio de Janeiro. Constant, who established the Positivist Society in 1876, began to rally cadets to the cause of republicanism in Brazil, and he played a crucial role in the declaration of the republic in 1889. According to Brazilian scholar José Murilo de Carvalho, the peak of Positivist influence came during the first months of the Republic, when Positivist-inspired proposals such as the separation of church and state were adopted into law, and the Positivist motto "Order and Progress" was included on the new, Positivist-designed national flag.⁹

Benjamin Constant was what has come to be known as a heterodox Positivist. That is, he followed Comte's philosophy but did not subscribe to the rituals and teachings of the religion of Humanity. In 1881 Miguel

Lemos, who had encountered Positivism as a student in engineering school, established the Positivist Church of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro after a visit to Paris to study the religion. As opposed to the heterodox Positivists, members of the Positivist Church were much stricter in their interpretations of Comte's writings. They became known as orthodox Positivists.¹⁰

The leadership of the Positivist Church (first Lemos, then engineer Raimundo Teixeira Mendes) made heavy demands on its members. Given its especially narrow interpretation of Comte, leaders prohibited the practice of certain professions and discouraged their members from practicing others. They pressed a strict moral code through which they hoped that, as Robert Nachman notes, "mankind [would] develop an inward harmony that would establish an unending reign of both spiritual and material peace." The strictness of this code led many Positivist sympathizers, Nachman continues, to avoid the church. It is because of their zeal that José Murilo de Carvalho calls the Orthodox Positivists "the Bolsheviks of the middle class."¹¹

João Cruz Costa makes the interesting assertion that the enthusiasm for Positivism was already in decline by 1891. In part this was due to the fact that many Brazilians were attracted to it as an intellectual fad and thus were quickly alienated by the rigors of the religion and its moral code. Teixeira Mendes's Sunday "conferences" (sermons) lasted three to four hours. He could be, according to Ivan Lins, intolerant and unforgiving. He demanded of believers total subordination to his spiritual guidance, and he could be merciless in his attacks against those who disagreed with him.¹²

Indeed, as early as 1882, Benjamin Constant, in many ways the pivotal figure in Brazilian Positivism, broke with Miguel Lemos, Raimundo Teixeira Mendes, and the Positivist Church over their fanaticism. Perhaps Constant had a point. In 1883 Miguel Lemos clashed with Pierre Lafitte, Comte's successor in Paris and leader of the Positivist religion in France. In essence Lemos excommunicated the Positivist Church in Paris for what he saw as doctrinal sloppiness in preaching Comte's laws. Such intensity led many to abandon the church in Rio de Janeiro, and the number of dues paying members declined thereafter, so that to this day the church faces ongoing financial difficulties.¹³

In spite of this, some scholars argue that orthodox Positivists re-

mained an important political force in Brazil, at least through the first decade of the twentieth century. Their influence resulted from the considerable power of the intellectuals of Miguel Lemos and Raimundo Teixeira Mendes, and from the orthodox Positivists' dogged assertion of the correctness of their doctrine, as well as their influence as an organized pressure group. Lemos, and especially Teixeira Mendes, engaged in "interventions," which were aggressive Positivist pronouncements on matters of politics and governance. Such interventions usually began as opinion pieces written by Teixeira Mendes and published in the *Jornal do Comercio*. These pieces were then collected and reprinted as Positivist Church publications.¹⁴

Rondon the Orthodox Positivist

Rondon first encountered Positivism in 1885 as a student at the Military Academy in Rio de Janeiro. There he studied mathematics with Benjamin Constant, converted to Positivism, and became part of a growing Positivist group of officers and cadets.¹⁵ Rondon was a lifelong member of the Positivist Church and was very much orthodox. Indeed, it would be fair to say that although he became a Positivist when the movement was in vogue and growing, he nevertheless continued in the religion long after the church possessed any real influence in Rio de Janeiro and in Brazil.

As did the orthodox Positivists he so admired, Rondon adopted Positivism as a worldview. For him it was a blueprint for what should be done in Brazil and in the world. According to Arthenzia Rocha, Rondon followed the Positivist idea of liberty: that subordinating one's life to a moral order and that serving "Family," "Patria" (the nation), and Humanity meant true liberty, because doing so would help establish fraternity and universal peace. "It is really quite telling," the famous Brazilian historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda once noted, "to see the certainty with which these men [Positivists] believed in the ultimate triumph of their ideas." "The world would end up accepting them," Positivists believed, "because they were rational, and because their perfection was beyond debate."¹⁶

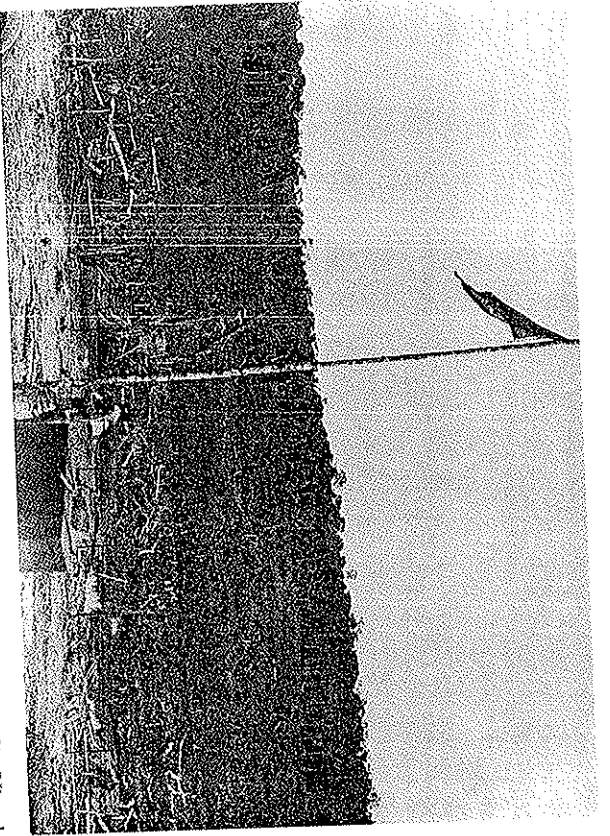
According to Ivan Lins, Rondon's entire professional career was shaped by and led according to Positivist principles. The Positivist call to serve mankind by bringing scientific progress to the world led to Ron-

don's manic dedication to integrating the Brazilian west through infrastructure development and to his commitment to biological and geological surveys of the region. As an orthodox Positivist, Rondon was called to study and use nature to serve Humanity. Positivism gave Rondon the discipline necessary to (in the words of Miguel Lemos) "reconcile the biological need to live for oneself with the social need to live for others."¹⁷ Positivism, it seems fair to argue, gave Rondon the strength to pursue telegraph construction under the most difficult of circumstances and in the most difficult places for more than twenty years. For him, it was both a religious compulsion and a guide to the creation of a modern Brazil.

The nation-building aspect of Rondon's Positivism is best observed in his actions and orations in the field, where he explained the commission's mission in Positivist terms to his troops. His lecture to gathered soldiers on 1 January 1912 is instructive in this regard. New Year's Day, the most important Positivist holiday, is known as the Day of Humanity. That day in 1912 found Rondon and his men deep in the forest of northwest Brazil, where they were building the telegraph line while Rondon surveyed the remaining right-of-way.

Rondon explained the Positivist inspiration of his telegraph project to his captive audience. "This date," he told his men, "reminds us of the possibility of one day realizing the political utopia envisioned by the most brilliant of the Philosophers, Augusto Comte: the utopia of Universal Peace." The soldiers' sacrifices, Rondon told them, would contribute to Family, Patria, and Humanity. Building the line would facilitate needed research, which would then aid in the evolution of Humanity, for the 1,100 kilometers of line now in service had "already allowed us to connect the thoughts of those who live in the desert with those more developed on this Earth." Thus, Rondon concluded, "I celebrate the universal Festival of Humanity, and I congratulate all . . . on their service to the Family, to the Patria, and to Humanity."¹⁸

Such speeches were the rule rather than the exception. Early in his telegraph career, at the inauguration of the telegraph station at Coxim, Mato Grosso, in 1902, Rondon spoke to those gathered on "the mission of women in society according to the teachings of Augusto Comte." Nor did Rondon limit his Positivist preaching to public events. He discusses in his diary the conversion of a telegraph worker to Positivism in 1905. Rondon met several times with the man in camp, at night, at which time



Raising the flag. Courtesy of Comissão Rondon, Serviço de Registro Audio-Visual, Museu do Índio.

he discussed Positivism and answered the worker's questions. After several such meetings, the man "spontaneously converted" to Positivism. Even much later in his life, Rondon was still writing to public officials in order to explain the Positivist position on key issues.¹⁹

The importance of these Positivist positions, combined with the nation-building messages, helps explain some of the more curious aspects of daily life in the construction zone. Rondon ordered a wooden mast to be fashioned and the national flag to be raised every night no matter what the weather, no matter how late at night the men built the camp. He went to great lengths to celebrate national holidays such as Brazilian Independence Day and the Day of the Republic. He played the Brazilian national anthem in camp on a gramophone and never tired of photographing indigenous peoples parading the Brazilian flag or wrapped in it. He never failed, that is, to bring "his" country and nation to the peoples and places of the hinterland.²⁰

Along these lines the best of the recent Brazilian literature explains such actions in terms of nation building and national integration. That

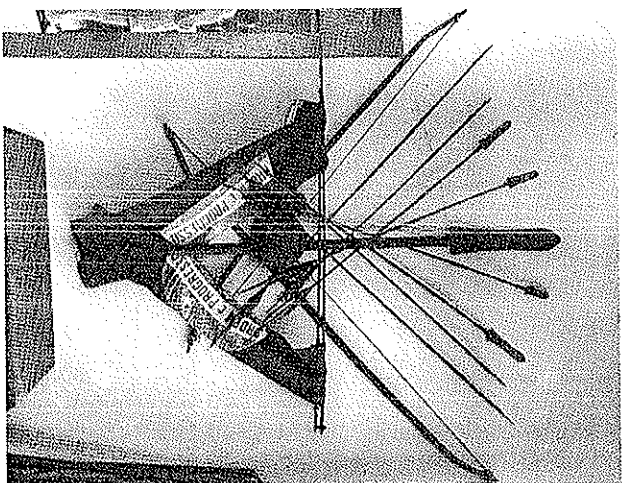
is, scholars argue that Rondon's primary goal was to define areas and peoples as "Brazilian." His goal was to incorporate peoples and regions in an elite-led project aimed at producing a single, republican Brazil. At the same time, this incorporation was to be carried out by the central state, so that both nation and state building informed Rondon's actions in the interior. "These rituals and their daily repetition," Laura Maciel concludes, "can be thought of explicitly as a national power under construction."²¹

A greater appreciation of the force of Positivism in Rondon's life and work, however, demonstrates that what was under construction in the interior was as much a Positivist message as a nationalist one. Indeed, the importance of civic ritual is a hallmark of Positivism, because for Comte such ritual socialized the proletariat, making them aware ultimately of the universal, or Humanity. Stated another way, Comte viewed civic rituals as the best mechanism for connecting individuals (Family) with society (Humanity), for in the middle was the nation (Patria).²²

So the nation, or in this case the Patria, could carry a Positivist as well as Brazilian connotation. The Brazilian flag flying above camp symbolized a certain kind of Brazil, but it was also a Positivist flag. It was designed by a Positivist, proposed by the Positivist leader Teixeira Mendes, and included the Positivist motto "Order and Progress." Furthermore, commission photographs housed in the Museum of the Indian in Rio de Janeiro show the particular care taken to insure that this Positivist motto appeared prominently in photographs.

According to Carvalho, another symbol carried this kind of dual meaning for Brazilian Positivists. The idealized female form represented both the republic and the Positivist concept of Humanity. Brazilian Positivist artists, he continues, promoted just such a double meaning in the paintings and statues they created in the 1890s. Flag and female figure, nation and Positivism again came together most dramatically in the photographs Rondon staged in the field. In one such photograph an indigenous woman stands in front of a national flag that is clearly draped to highlight the Positivist slogan.²³

Even seemingly more straightforward examples of nation building included a Positivist message for Rondon, demonstrating clearly that for him the two were the same. Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima asserts that the renaming of local, indigenous places demonstrated powerfully the



Positivist-Indian shrine, probably in the central office of the Rondon Commission. Courtesy of Comissão Rondon, Serviço de Registro Audio-Visual, Museu do Índio.

process of national incorporation, and indeed this appears to have been the case. However, what is one to make of the fact that Rondon often replaced indigenous place names with Positivist names, such as when he renamed a river north of Vilhena the Festival of the Flag River in honor of the Brazilian (Positivist) flag, or when he named another river after the Positivist (and republican) hero Benjamin Constant?

In honoring national heroes who lived long before Comte, Miguel Lemos, Teixeira Mendes, and Rondon created a Positivist palimpsest. Comte honored the great men of Humanity whom he judged to have contributed to the evolution of human society. In Brazil Positivists especially celebrated José Bonifácio, one of the architects of Brazilian independence in 1821–1822, in part as a founder of the Brazilian nation but also as a kind of proto-Positivist.²⁴ Furthermore, as noted earlier, Rondon placed the greatest importance on a day that was a holiday only for Positivists: New Year's Day, or, in Positivist parlance, the Day of Humanity.

Rondon's honoring of the quintessential national holiday, the Day of the Republic (15 November) drew on the twin themes of nation building and Positivism. On 15 November 1901, when Rondon renamed a river in

honor of Benjamin Constant, he presented a decidedly Positivist interpretation of the national holiday by explaining to his assembled troops that they were celebrating the day that "a select group of Humanity" declared the Republic. He further noted that for the Republic to prosper "all that needs to be done is to apply the political principle [Comte's principle] inscribed on our flag [Order and Progress]."²⁵

The next year Rondon was in Rio de Janeiro for this holiday and noted in his diary that he began the day by visiting Benjamin Constant's grave, at which time "Mr. Mendes [the Positivist leader in Rio] gave an oration worthy of such a Great Ancestor." Almost as an afterthought he added that "Rodrigues Alves was installed as the President of the Republic." Similarly Rondon celebrated Independence Day in 1909 by playing the national anthem and by raising the national flag to a salute of twenty-one sticks of dynamite. He then began his speech to soldiers by explaining that the idea of the "civic celebration is peculiar to modern civilizations, and is a system of commemoration founded by A. Comte . . . in order to reconstruct the West."²⁶ For Rondon the promotion of Positivism *was* nation building. In the same vein, Rondon clearly believed that the Positivists were the only true republicans and that the greatness of the Brazilian Republic depended on a solid, Positivist foundation, which is precisely the argument he made in a long letter to his friend and Positivist colleague Luis Bueno Horita Barbosa in 1927.

Rondon wrote this bitter letter, which he dated "17 Shakespeare, 139" according to the Positivist calendar, in part to discuss splits in the Positivist Church in Rio de Janeiro. His larger point, however, was that the decline of the Positivist Church had contributed to the degeneracy of the Brazilian republic. No longer were intellectual giants such as Benjamin Constant, Miguel Lemos, and Raimundo Teixeira Mendes around to educate Brazil's youth in the philosophy of Auguste Comte. The result was a country led by "so-called statesmen, many of who lacked the fundamentals of an elementary school education." Such politicians, Rondon lamented, attempted to "resolve social and political problems without knowing even arithmetic."²⁷

Such strident rhetoric could alienate politicians and army officials, and it reminds us that while Positivism was a source of Rondon's strength, it could also limit the impact and scope of his activities. In terms of army politics in particular, Rondon's Positivism generated opposition

from other officers and increased hostility toward his projects in north-west Brazil. It also led to fights with members of the Catholic clergy and their political supporters in Brazil.

The Positivist Dialectic

Most of the officers of the Rondon Commission graduated from the Military Academy in Rio de Janeiro during the era in which Benjamin Constant and other Positivist professors moved the curriculum away from traditional military instruction in favor of Positivist teachings in the natural sciences and mathematics. A principal reason for the shift was the Positivist opposition to militarism. Science and technology, Positivists believed, would bring progress to all mankind and eliminate the need for armies. Progress would, in the words of Benjamin Constant, "relegate the weapons of destruction to a museum of armaments."²⁸

This antimilitarism—or, from another perspective, this pacifism—was a hallmark of Brazilian Positivist thought. Teixeira Mendes, the leader of the Positivist Church after 1903, tirelessly pressed this point in regular letters to the editor, which were then reprinted in Positivist Church pamphlets. Following Comte's teachings, Teixeira Mendes explained that wars, be they defensive or wars of conquest, were relics of a previous stage of social evolution. He noted that given the "irreversible growth of universal friendship no one now planned, nor would they ever plan, to attack Brazil." To those who considered his pacifism to be utopian, he responded that at one time abolition had seemed a utopian dream, but that in his lifetime slavery had been abolished.²⁹

Positivists argued that militarism prevented countries like Brazil from developing the kinds of infrastructure that would most benefit the lives of its citizens. Thus, Teixeira Mendes, Constant, and Rondon believed that the armed forces eventually should be reorganized into a simple police force. In the future army engineers would be in charge of infrastructure development instead of warfare, and, indeed, Rondon's Commission was cited as a model of such a strategy. In the meantime, Teixeira Mendes argued, Positivist officers should continue to serve in the military as their presence would assure citizens that the army would not oppress them. Most importantly, Positivist officers would also "strive to

dissipate the passions, prejudices, and war-like habits of their [army] colleagues and the general public."³⁰

Following the teachings of Auguste Comte, Positivists predicted that pacifism would lead to the decline of nationalism and even of the nation. These outworn political loyalties and forms would be replaced by universal brotherhood and a unified Humanity. Comte argued that in the future the largest nations would be no larger than Portugal and would possess populations not in excess of three million inhabitants. Teixeira Mendes predicted that as a very large nation Brazil "would disappear in the near future."³¹

This incendiary position among countrymen proud of Brazil's colossal size was matched by Teixeira Mendes's and the Positivists' public condemnations of the Brazilian military victories that were so celebrated by officers and nationalists. According to José Murilo de Carvalho, Brazilian Positivists "denounced military heroics and considered the Paraguayan War a disaster." Teixeira Mendes referred to Brazil's conduct in this war as the "most monstrous attack against the Family, the Patria, and Humanity yet perpetrated in South America." He then ridiculed a 1906 proposal to build a monument in honor of the famous Brazilian victory at Riachuelo in the Paraguayan War because it would be nothing more than a monument to Brazilian backwardness. Likewise, Rondon Commission Lieutenant Severo dos Santos was quoted in 1916 in a Rio newspaper as saying that "this work [of the Rondon Commission] certainly honors the Brazilian Army more than all of the battles of the Paraguayan War, and in part makes up for the errors and crimes of the Canudos, Rio Grande, and Contestado [rebellions]."³²

In contrast to such Positivist partisanship, the historian Frank D. McCann asserts that increasingly the army could not "tolerate its officers being philosophers who knew Auguste Comte's Positivism but not how to shoot, ride, or function in the field." In 1908 one young officer denounced in public the Positivist Military Academy professors "who have dedicated themselves almost exclusively to science with prejudice to the military part of training." An officer who attended the Military Academy during the height of Positivist influence later noted that his lessons prepared him for nothing but the life of a dilettante.³³

Opponents labeled Positivists as religious fanatics. Within the army

special venom was reserved for the Positivists' critique of militarism and their call for the end of national militaries. Writing in 1914, General Tito Escobar denounced the tendency of the Positivist military professors to produce "entrenched bureaucrats, literary figures, philosophers, . . . [and] mathematicians" who were "friends of universal peace, of general disarmament, [and were] enemies of war, and permanent armies." Positivist military officers preferred to be called "Dr. General" or "Dr. Lieutenant," another officer sneered. Even General Tasso Fragoso, a Positivist sympathizer and friend of Rondon, noted the depth of anger toward and distrust of the Positivists' and, in particular, Constant's pacifism.³⁴

Critics often turned their general dislike of Positivism into an attack against Rondon and the Rondon Commission. Sometimes the tone was sarcastic, as when the editorialist "C.L." spoke of Rondon's "Positivist trumpet of proselytism," or when another newspaper reporter spoke of Rondon as "the illustrious Colonel and Positivist—that is to say, much more Positivist than Colonel." This latter remark was the crux of the matter, for some in the military argued that Rondon's work was not related directly to the army's mission. According to one newspaper, Minister of War Caetano Faria disliked the commission and had been heard to refer to Rondon and his men as mere "missionaries to the Indians." Rondon, it is worth remembering, was appointed commander of the telegraph commission by a civilian minister of transportation and public works, and that bureaucracy, and not the army, paid his salary.³⁵

The press regularly condemned Rondon's pacifism and the Positivists' stated goal of turning the army into a Brazilian civilian conservation corps. Rondon and his men were engaged in civil engineering, his critics claimed, instead of doing what they were trained to do, which was to defend the country. In one particularly strong attack in the *Jornal do Brasil*, longtime Rondon critic Antonio Pimentel began by presenting a pamphlet by Teixeira Mendes that he said ordered all Positivists in the military to avoid displays of militarism. This proved, Pimentel argued, that the Positivists within the army were working for its very destruction. Such Positivist harangues, he continued, were weakening the military and thus the country. Furthermore, Teixeira Mendes had called for soldiers to engage not in military activities but in "pacific-industrial" pursuits. This was exactly what Rondon and his men were doing in the in-

terior, Pimentel charged, and as such they should retire from the military.³⁶

"It is time," one commentator wrote in 1911 concerning the Rondon Commission, "to insist that the Army recall to the barracks the officers who have abandoned their duties, for they prefer to wander in the middle of the jungle fishing for the souls of savages and country bumpkins." This "fishing for souls" remark refers to the standard criticism that the Rondon Commission was little more than a Positivist missionary society. Almost without exception Rondon's officers were Positivists. Almost all of them belonged to the Positivist Church in Rio de Janeiro. Researching Positivist Church archives, Robert Nachman uncovered letters from Teixeira Mendes to Rondon requesting jobs for Positivists. From one prominent Positivist family alone, the Horta Barbosa family, Rondon hired four brothers as officers in the commission. His most trusted officer, Amílcar Botelho de Magalhães, was Benjamin Constant's nephew.³⁷

In a 1911 exposé the *Jornal do Comércio* presented the case of an unnamed lieutenant who it claimed was well known within the army but was not a Positivist. Assigned to the Rondon Commission, he was sent to a commission camp on the Madeira River. The officer returned to Rio de Janeiro "poisoned by malaria" and reported for duty in the commission's central office. The Positivists shunned him, the article claimed, and Rondon eventually placed the unnamed lieutenant on unpaid leave until his appointment with the commission expired. The reporter claimed to know of several other non-Positivist officers who had been similarly shunned.³⁸

Rondon and his officers were well aware of these opinions and attacks, and believed that they robbed the commission of the credit and praise it deserved for its hard work and accomplishments in the interior. Amílcar Botelho de Magalhães made this point most forcefully in a special article he wrote for *Correio do Povo* in 1925. His goal, he explained at the outset, was to attack ongoing official hostility toward the Rondon Commission. It pained him to say that government officials had shown little interest in publishing and publicizing commission reports. What reports did appear "robbed the Commission of its heroic vitality" by listing only construction numbers without explaining the dreadful conditions under which such construction had taken place.

"The moral and heroic side of the Commission, which would allow the public to understand the difficulties overcome and the sacrifices made," he continued, was ignored and even ridiculed by "pencil pushers [*homens de gabinete*] incapable of surviving even one month in the interior." Botelho de Magalhães singled out the ministry of war in particular for failing to report adequately the commission's accomplishments in the ministry's annual reports. The 1909 annual report, he noted specifically, included just two pages on the commission, as if that were enough to "capture the grandiose Amazon" and the commission's equally grandiose accomplishments. Some sort of official conspiracy against the commission, he claimed ominously, was underway.³⁹

More plainly hostile than some vague conspiracy was the army's policy on promotions for those serving in the Rondon Commission. Rondon himself was most concerned about the slow pace of promotion for his officers, which he interpreted as a sign of official hostility toward his "pacific-industrial" project. In a candid letter to his colleague Francisco Jaguaribe Gomes de Mattos, Rondon condemned the army's decision to "remove from consideration for merit promotion officials who serve in commissions." He then confided that an important general once told a Rondon Commission officer seeking a merit promotion that "the record of an officer in the Rondon Commission is a blank record!" Many weaker officers had been promoted, Rondon charged, while commission officers languished in their respective ranks. At best, his officers received promotions for time served, but such promotions, he concluded, "always represent an injustice and even a punishment for those who deserve a merit promotion." In 1919 Botelho de Magalhães confided in a private note that there were those in the military who wished to prevent Rondon's promotion to general "because his duties are not exercised with troops stationed in the cities." Earlier, Rondon had archly observed in an official government report that his 1908 promotion to lieutenant colonel "must have disappointed many of my colleagues."⁴⁰

Moreover, the government repeatedly refused Rondon's requests to grant hazardous duty (combat) pay to the soldiers and officers in the Rondon Commission. In 1911, and perhaps one other time, army leaders mounted opposition to the Rondon Commission because they did not consider it to be a military endeavor. In the 1911 case they pressed for the removal of all military personnel from the telegraph project, which

would have scuttled the mission. In reaction to this campaign Rondon and his officers voluntarily surrendered their military per diem payments.⁴¹

The Rondon Commission survived these attacks, but opponents continued to harp at Rondon, and the commission's budgets suffered throughout the years.⁴² Given these battles within the army over his Positivism and his "pacifist" project, it was probably unwise for Rondon also to have ruffled the feathers of Brazil's only other truly national institution, the Catholic Church. And yet, this is precisely what he did.

Positivists recognized Catholicism's historic contribution to mankind, but it was, Teixeira Mendes argued, a doctrine that was "fatally antagonistic to the spirit of modern civilization." In reaction to Positivist denunciations of Catholicism and to the early influence of Comte's religion in republican Brazil, Catholic officials worked to solidify their political support in Brazil. Positivist and Catholic leaders clashed in the media, such as in 1912 when Bishop Leme of Rio de Janeiro criticized Positivists for their lack of patriotism and morality, following which Teixeira Mendes responded with his own attacks.⁴³

For his part Rondon attacked, and often mocked, Catholic doctrine and Catholic officials in both his private and public correspondence. Such exchanges increased dramatically after Rondon pressed for the creation of a government agency to administer Indian affairs in Brazil and was named the first director of this agency, known as the Indian Protection Service (SPI), in 1910. He continued to challenge Catholic officials and the power of the Catholic Church in Brazil until his dying days.⁴⁴

Rondon regularly engaged in very public and very bitter disputes with Catholic officials and especially with the Salesian missionaries who operated a network of Indian missions in Mato Grosso. In letters, telegrams, newspaper articles, and speeches, Rondon and his officers denounced the federal government's subsidy of these Salesian missions and the Salesians' treatment of mission residents.⁴⁵ Rondon's and his officers' incendiary language is noteworthy. "The supreme aspiration of the pseudo-policy of Christianization of the jungle," Rondon was quoted as saying in a Rio newspaper, "is to exploit indigenous labor on the missions." He denounced what he termed the policy of holding the Bororo people "as prisoners on Salesian lands." Rondon asked a friend to "respond to those Senators allied with the Church [in order to unmask] the injustices that

these men practice in the service of Priests." Later he celebrated the defeat of what he termed an "attempt to transform [the SPI] into a false religious Mission, as was so desired by national and foreign clergymen."⁴⁶

Catholic supporters in the media and in government fought back. An article published in the *Journal do Comércio* condemned "the morbid orientation [of Rondon and the Positivists], which is the result of their philosophical and religious stereotypes." Catholic officials and supporters denounced what they saw as Positivist attempts to take over the Brazilian interior via the (Positivist) Rondon Commission. Rondon's congressional detractors defended the Salesian missions, and government subsidies to the Catholic missions were maintained even as Congress slashed the budget of the Rondon Commission.⁴⁷

During these unsettled times Rondon went out of his way to provoke Catholic officials and their supporters. One such provocation, which took place in 1917, began when Rondon enrolled an orphaned Nambikwara child in the Baptist School of Rio de Janeiro. His decision ignited a firestorm of protest and several months of debate in the press. An unnamed reporter discovered the boy's case and quickly denounced Rondon's brazen decision to enroll the child in a Protestant school. "Alert the Judge and Supervisor of Orphans," the reporter wrote, "for everyone knows that the Baptist School is an unabashed and tenacious institution of religious propaganda." He questioned why the child was not enrolled in a public school. "Mr. Rondon does not have the right," the article continued, "to kidnap our Indians and pervert their spirit by subjecting them to false doctrines." "It is necessary for Mr. Rondon to know," the reporter concluded, "that he will not be allowed to do anything he wants."⁴⁸

Reading between the lines, it is clear that Rondon's Positivist dislike of Catholicism outraged the writer, as did the deliberate act of doctrinal provocation. Certainly Rondon Commission Central Office Director Captain Botelho de Magalhães read the attack as such, for he quickly condemned the journalist's attempt "to transform into *religious propaganda* a Positivist's decision to enroll an Indian into a Protestant school." Certainly no protest would have occurred, the captain continued, if the boy had been enrolled in a Catholic school.⁴⁹

Subsequent barbs demonstrate that this affair emerged out of the larger issues of religion and religious affiliation in Brazil. For his part Botelho de Magalhães used the immediate events to hammer home Posi-

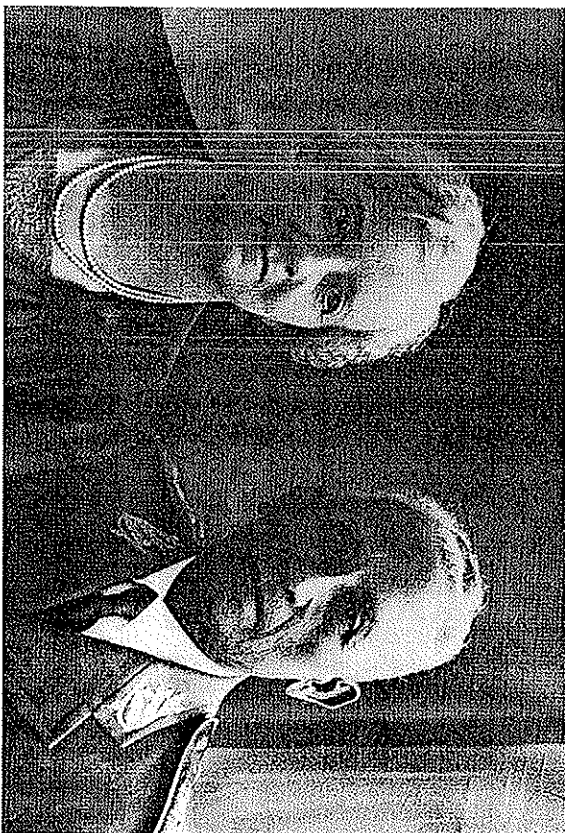
tivist criticisms of Catholic Indian missions and Catholic religious instruction of indigenous peoples. Joining the battle, the *Tribuna* repeatedly noted that Rondon, a firm supporter of the separation of church and state, had decided as a public official to favor one religion over another by enrolling the boy in a Baptist school.

Rondon refused to back down in the face of the controversy. Two months after the *Tribuna* broke the story he ordered the publication of a telegram he had sent recently to Botelho de Magalhães. In the telegram, which newspapers in Rio de Janeiro published, Rondon announced that he was sending a second Nambikwara child to Rio and that he too was to be enrolled in the Baptist School. Later Botelho de Magalhães explained to the media that Rondon was the legal guardian of this second child, a boy named Pariba, and that his tuition was to be paid by contributions raised by the Indian Protection Service.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon spent his entire adult life promoting the Positivist religion of Humanity. The religion shaped his daily life and activities, as well as his ideas about progress, Indian affairs, and, thus, the future of the nation. It led him to expend precious time and energy clashing with Catholic officials, their supporters in government, and army leaders precisely when he was most deeply involved with the demanding tasks of telegraph construction in the interior. Positivism inspired Rondon and strengthened his resolve, but it also led him into myriad disputes that distracted his focus and damaged the political fortunes of his telegraph project.⁵¹

Rondon's diary and other personal correspondence confirm the centrality of Positivism in his life. In his diary Rondon took pains to note his attendance at Positivist services, dinners, and celebrations while in Rio de Janeiro. Copies of telegrams to his wife and children, which Rondon included in the diary, are full of Positivist exhortations. Mostly these are stern but agreeable appeals, as when he honored his son Benjamin on his birthday by noting that "if you lead your life in accordance with your Faith you will one day become a dignified Son of Humanity." At times, however, they seem obsessive and out of place, such as in a tragic 1925 telegraph to his wife after Rondon was informed of the death of their



Rondon and his wife, Francisca Xavier da Silva Rondon. Courtesy of Comissão Rondon, Serviço de Registro Audio-Visual, Museu do Índio.

daughter. In it he expressed his love for the departed child and for his wife and other children, but also focused at some length on the overarching need for a Positivist, rather than Catholic, burial service.⁵²

There can be no doubt that scholars are correct to discuss Rondon's work and vision in terms of nation building and the expansion of central state power in Brazil. Especially later in life, Rondon emphasized more and more the need for the government to assert its authority over Catholic missionaries in Mato Grosso, and in true nationalist fashion he condemned the mostly foreign-born Salesian priests as a potential fifth column in Brazil. And yet, in far more cases Rondon stressed the appropriateness and infallibility of Comte's teachings when defending his work and attacking his opponents. Rondon's unshakable vision of a modern Brazil included the incorporation of distant lands and peoples into that nation, but this was primarily a Positivist vision, one shaped as much by the writings of a thinker in France as by the realities of Brazil.

Perhaps some scholars have ignored the obvious—Rondon's Positivism—because that religion quickly became anachronistic in early-

twentieth-century Brazil. By 1910 the Positivists' presence at the Military Academy was largely gone, having been replaced by the "Young Turks" who emphasized military science and the art of war rather than Comtean science and philosophy. By the 1920s and especially the 1930s Brazil's leading officers were openly hostile to Rondon, his Positivism, and his ongoing activities in the interior. In the meantime membership in the Positivist Church quickly plummeted to a mere handful of disciples.⁵³

Rondon, however, never abandoned the faith or its vision of the future for Brazil. He continued to devote his life to Positivism and to his other great passion: indigenous Brazilians.⁵⁴