

UNKEPT PROMISES

Liberal ideas and the need for national cohesion inspired early proposals for universal public education, but funding was always limited

Diego Viana | ILLUSTRATIONS Zé Vicente

In 1835, a series of government-commissioned reports on the state of the empire showed less-than-encouraging findings on the status of public education in the provinces.

The report on Alagoas lamented the “scant funding” being invested and the “meager wages” for teachers. In Santa Catarina, 15 schools were reported as being “underutilized.” In Mato Grosso, teaching methods were criticized.

The education system in newly independent Brazil was in stark contrast with its founders’ modernist ambitions. José da Silva Lisboa, Viscount of Cairu (1753–1835), serving as Crown Inspector of Education and Science Establishments, said that in regard to education, it is the withholding rather than the spending of funds that constitutes waste (see Pesquisa FAPESP issue no. 313). In 1821, José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva (1763–1838) championed the founding of a university in Brazil as “an absolute necessity” (see Pesquisa FAPESP issue

no. 319). His brother, Martim Francisco Ribeiro de Andrada (1775–1844), advocated for a system modeled after the education reform advanced by the Marquis of Condorcet (1743–1794) in post-Revolution France.

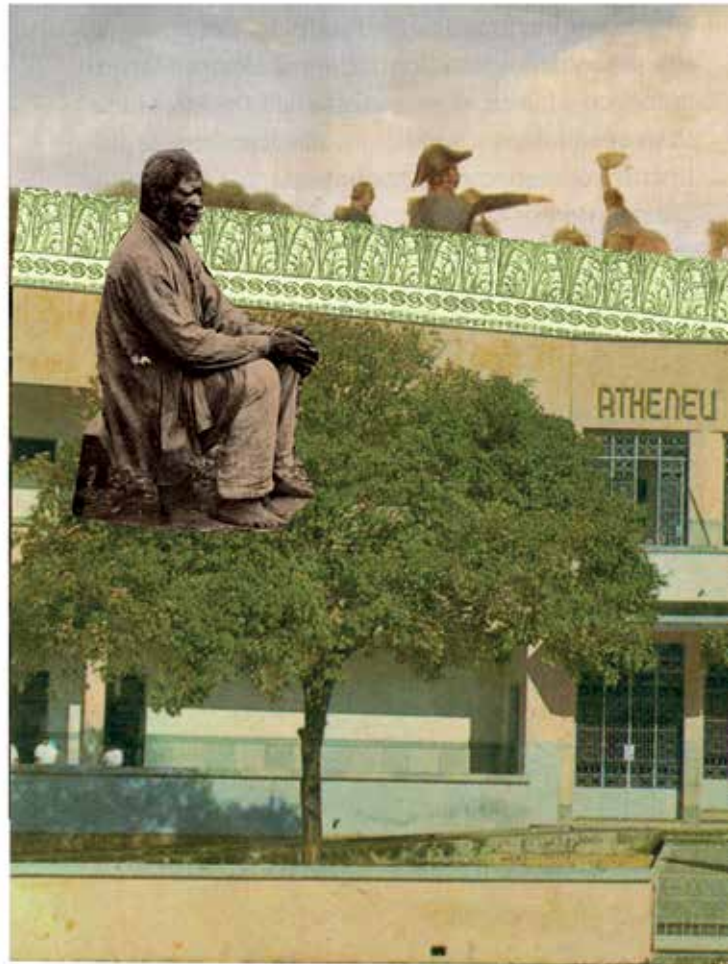
“Yet education spending remained limited and inconsistent with the grand rhetoric about the need for public education in the empire,” says historian Carlota Boto at the University of São Paulo (USP). Citing sociologist Celso Beisiegel (1935–2017), Boto notes that “Brazil’s education efforts have long been ambitious in rhetoric but feeble in practice.”

In his recently published book, *O ponto a que chegamos: Duzentos anos de atraso educacional e seu impacto nas políticas do presente* (What things have come to: 200 years of lagging education and the impact on current policies; Editora FGV), journalist Antônio Gois, a co-founder of the Brazilian Association of Education Journalists (JEDUCA), begins the opening chapter about the empire

with an epigraph written by Dom Pedro I (1798–1834), who in a manifesto dated August 1822 promised “a national code of public instruction that will cause talent to spring forth and flourish with vigor,” through “a liberal education that provides all Brazilians with the instruction necessary for their pursuit of happiness.”

This promise was an expression of the liberalism that influenced independence movements in the Americas, says Gois. “Countries such as Prussia and the United States were beginning to organize free public education systems for all, which was unprecedented at the time. Today, we take free education for granted, but back then people wondered why the elite should have to give part of their income, through taxes, to provide education to peasants,” he says.

According to Boto, the version of Enlightenment that Brazil inherited from Portugal differed from the one that prevailed in countries such as France and the United States. In Martim Francis-





co's proposal, which he modeled after Condorcet's, "many of the principles enshrined in the French reform, such as civic engagement and equality, were absent," says Gois. "Condorcet's education model was designed to educate free citizens in a Republic. In the First Empire of Brazil, the system was instead designed to educate subjects of the Crown."

This was a central goal of the education system in the Joanine period (1808–1821), notes José Gondra, a professor at Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ). "They had to build the entire government apparatus for the new seat of the empire. They needed to create an educated citizenry in a society with a predominantly oral culture and outlandish levels of illiteracy, likely as high as 90%," says Gondra.

In the early years after Brazil's Declaration of Independence, notes Gondra, the country was in turmoil, rife with unrest, with a population of 4.5 million, including indigenous people, slaves, and

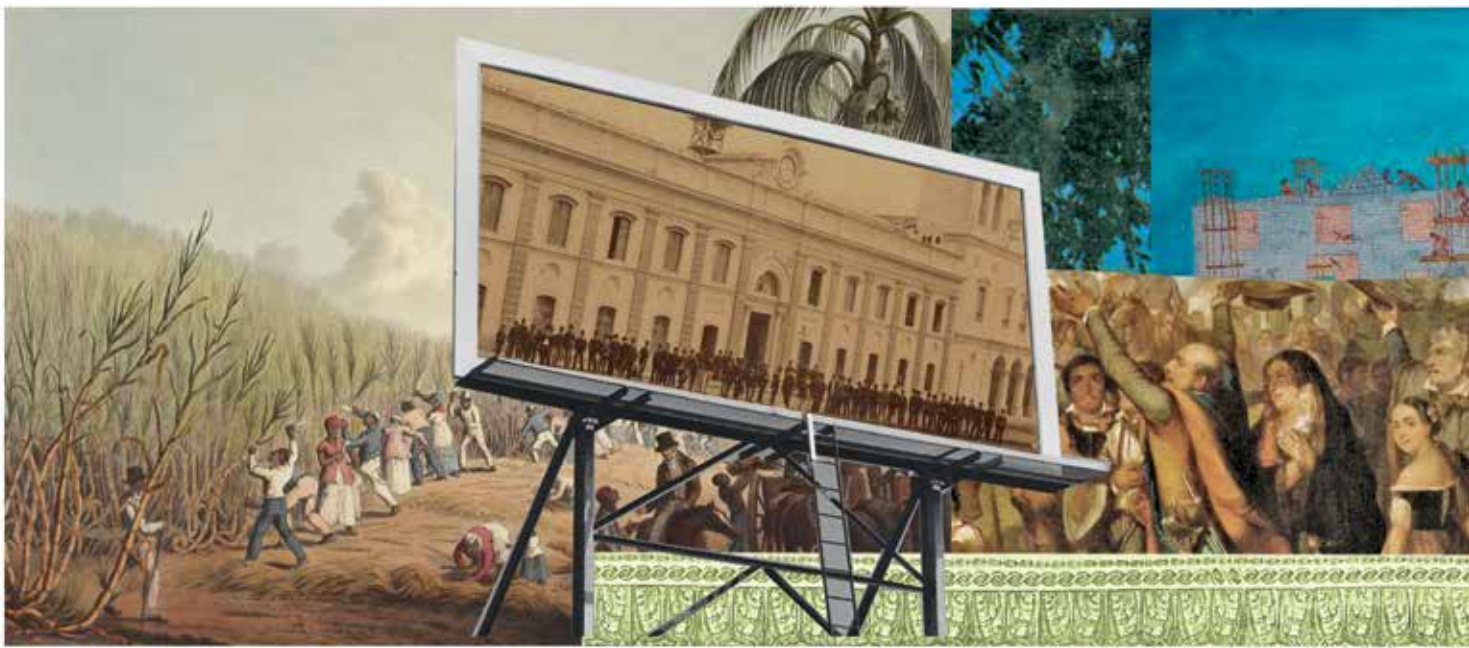
many immigrants. "They all spoke different languages and had different ways of life. Schools had become an important tool to help these people assimilate into Brazilian society," he explains.

The ideas brought from the Enlightenment and the desire to unify the populace set the tone for education policy proposals in the empire. "Following Brazil's Independence, efforts to create an education system that could support the emerging nation's ambitions for progress and a civilized citizenry were institutionalized," says Aline de Moraes Limeira, a professor of education at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). The history of the education system in imperial Brazil was one of institutionalization.

Article 179 of the 1824 Constitution dedicates two sections to education. Section XXXII establishes a set of civil rights that includes "Free primary education

for all citizens," while section XXXIII calls for the creation of "colleges and universities for the teaching of science, languages and literature, and arts." The Infant School Act of 1827 mandated the "creation of infant schools in all cities, villages, and other inhabited locations," stipulating wages of between 200,000 and 500,000 réis for teachers and masters.

However, policy proposals and laws failed to translate into investment. In 1830, the first year for which an imperial budget was drafted, the combined expenditure on education across the provinces was approximately 9% of the total budget of 321 million réis, according to a paper published in 2017 by Dalvit Greiner de Paula and Vera Lúcia Nogueira at the State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG). In contrast, Brazil's 1988 Constitution earmarked a minimum of 18% of federal tax revenue and 25% of state and municipal revenue for education. In many provinces, teachers received less than the legally required entry-level



wage of 150,000 réis per year. For context, people were required to have a minimum income of 100,000 réis to vote and 200,000 to run for local office.

One of the consequences of the limited budget was the proliferation of private institutions receiving funding from the government, as noted by Gondra. “The government argued that it lacked the funding to support a network of schools serving the entire population, justifying its policy of funding private and religious schools,” he says.

In 1834, a constitutional amendment partly decentralized the imperial government. The provinces were given a mandate to manage the public education system, with the exception of higher education institutions and schools in the capital. However, provincial governments were not entitled to the primary source of tax revenue at the time: customs duty. “Government spending on education fell short of demand. Many provinces had only one secondary school. Most schools were for boys only. Today, it is widely understood that decentralizing the public education system may have hampered its development due to provincial budget disparities and local political issues,” says Limeira.

For Gondra, understanding the education landscape during the empire requires an understanding of the legacy left by the colonial period. In the colony, the few existing educational institutes were schools founded by religious orders, especially the Society of Jesus. This changed when in 1759 the Portuguese government

enacted a law expelling the Jesuits from Portugal and its overseas possessions, replacing them with a system of “royal tutoring,” a public education system in which the state planned the curriculum, hired teachers, and issued diplomas.

The reform was part of an effort to modernize the empire and train citizens for government positions. The new system was funded by a “literacy tax” created in 1772 and levied on the sale of brandy, wine, and vinegar in Portugal, the Azores, and Madeira. In Portugal’s American and African colonies, the tax was levied on meat sold at butchers. During the Joanine period, revenue from the literacy tax amounted to approximately 12 million réis per year, far too little to fund the Colony’s entire school system, notes Carlos Roberto Jamil Cury, a professor of philosophy at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), in an article titled “Financiamento da educação brasileira: Do subsídio literário ao Fundeb” (Funding Brazil’s education system: From the literacy tax to FUNDEB).

According to Limeira, although data about the colonial period are scant, documents in the Overseas Historical Archive in Portugal that date back to the 1770s suggest that more than 350 vacancies were advertised for “royal teachers” (who taught subjects such as Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and philosophy) and more than 470 vacancies for “masters” (who taught reading, writing, and arith-

metic) in the Colony. There are also records of the arrival of 17 masters in Brazil between the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, says Gondra. When Dom João VI (1767–1826) disembarked in Rio de Janeiro, there were then 20 royal masters in the city’s employment.

The royal tutoring system continued into the First Kingdom. Teachers accredited by the state taught independently, and students enrolled in each course separately. Gradually, teachers were integrated into schools such as Atheneu Norte-Riograndense (1834), secondary schools in Paraíba and Bahia (1836), and Colégio Pedro II (1837) in Rio de Janeiro. The first institution dedicated to training teachers (normal school) in Latin America was founded in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, in 1835.

The 1759 reform expelled the Jesuits but not other orders of the Catholic Church. Despite their expulsion, however, there are records suggesting that Jesuits continued to work as private tutors, says Gondra. During the imperial period, the Church continued to play a key role in education—not only through its religious schools. “Catholicism was the official religion and the Catholic Church an arm of the State. It exerted an important influence on education in different ways throughout the nineteenth century, such as by incorporating Christian doctrine in the curricula, or by having representatives of the Church in educational roles, including teaching, supervision, recruiting, and public administration positions,” notes Limeira.



One piece of data that is often cited to demonstrate the failures of the education system in Imperial Brazil will be found in the country's first census, in 1872. The census showed that slightly over 80% of freemen were illiterate, or approximately 6.8 million out of a total population of 8.4 million. Limeira notes, however, that looking at these figures in isolation could lead to an anachronistic understanding of the state of affairs—at that time, a distinction was made between slaves and freemen and between illiteracy and schooling. Statistics for children were based on school attendance between the ages of 6 and 15 and not on literacy, although some provinces, including the capital, only required children to attend school from the age of 7.

As Brazil celebrates the 200th anniversary of its Independence, recent research has shown that many of the issues being dealt with 200 years ago are still current today, as Gondra says. Some economists are proposing a reintroduction of government-sponsored private education through voucher systems. The relationship between religion and education remains a subject of hot debate. Homeschooling, which was common among wealthy families in the 1800s, is making a comeback. “The issues underlying the education proposals of the past may have changed, but some things remain the same, and past ideas are now being repackaged as new ones,” he says. ■

The research projects and books consulted for this report are listed in the online version.

Higher-education mishaps

The beginnings of higher education and vocational education in the former colonies

Universities were nonexistent in Portuguese America throughout the entire colonial period. Conversely, in Spanish possessions, the first universities were founded in the 1550s in Mexico and Peru. Maria Ligia Prado, a historian at USP, says the absence of universities in Portuguese America was a direct reflection of the circumstances back in the colony's motherland. Seventeenth-century Spain, then a powerful European empire, had more than 20 universities. Portugal, in contrast, was a small, impoverished nation with a single university to call its own, the University of Coimbra. The Spanish had a large contingent of faculty, some of whom were willing to transfer to the New World. “The colonies were different because their colonizers were different,” she explains.

After Brazil's Independence, higher education was slow to develop despite advocacy for expansion. When the Portuguese court transferred to Brazil in 1808, a primary education system was created in which teachers taught individual subjects independently. Little by little, courses such as those administered at the School of Anatomy, Surgery, and Medicine in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador were integrated into medical schools in Rio de Janeiro State and Bahia (1832). Law schools were founded in São Paulo and Olinda (1827). Engineering schools, such as the Rio de Janeiro Polytechnic School (1874) and the Ouro Preto School of Mining (1876), were eventually founded. Brazil's first university—the University of Rio de Janeiro—would only be founded in 1920 and later renamed first the University of Brazil and now the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

During the colonial period, children born to wealthy families typically pursued advanced degrees at the University of Coimbra. In Spanish America, in contrast, independence movements had large numbers of alumni from local universities, notably Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala and Universidad de Chuquisaca in Bolivia.

“Universities in Spanish America were conservative and primarily designed to train civil servants for colonial government positions. But they, too, were influenced by the effervescence that marked the late eighteenth century. Mariano Moreno [1778–1811], who led the movement for independence of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata, had graduated from Chuquisaca,” notes USP historian Maria Ligia Prado.

Curiously, however, rather than expanding universities in Spanish America, the leaders of newly independent nations were determined to shut them down. “To liberals in [South] America, universities carried the stain of their colonial past,” explains Prado, who explored the events of this period in an essay titled “Universidade, estado e igreja na América Latina” (Universities, the State and the Church in Latin America), published in the book *América Latina no século XIX. Tramas, telas e textos* (Latin America in the nineteenth century: Stories, paintings, and texts; EDUSP, 2004).

Newly formed nations instead wanted to create a higher education system designed for more practical purposes.

“This was the model that Brazil would embrace in the nineteenth century: universities were intended primarily to develop professional skills,” says Prado. In this context, it was not the absence of universities in Imperial Brazil that caused the country to lag behind its neighboring nations, but the length of time it took to eventually develop higher education programs and schools.