

# Intellectual Origins of Environmental Philosophy in Brazil: A Brief History

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*Brazil's intellectual heritage is sufficiently rich to deal with its present environmental challenges. But environmental philosophy in Brazil is still in its infancy. If it were encouraged to grow, it could contribute much to discussions and solutions. Intended as such a stimulus, this review summarizes colonial philosophic traditions, European Enlightenment influence, and Twentieth Century and present trends. An integration of this historical philosophic base and new concepts is desirable. Today the Internet makes possible synergy between the country's intellectual heritage and international ideas. Brazil has much to contribute to international philosophy and vice versa.*

## Introduction

Environmental issues – both problems and opportunities – loom large on Brazil's social and natural horizon. How people relate to the natural environment in Brazil is rapidly undergoing very complex and globalized changes. Increased awareness of these changes is stimulating national debate.

While Brazilians are understandably proud of the country's continental dimension, its size has also created large environmental dilemmas.<sup>2</sup> The potential exists to use its vast natural endowment in a positive manner. Yet oftentimes its exploitation has been accompanied by undesirable results. These include adverse physical impacts, deterioration in quality of life for the present population and potential harm for future generations.

The philosophic constructs that intellectually sustain this dynamic of development and impact need to be examined. Many Brazilians are already engaged in considerable self-reflection. They want to know what is behind the present evolution – oftentimes damaging to the environment – of the human/nature relationship.

This paper is based on the belief that the underlying causes of present dilemmas have intellectual roots just as much as practical explanations. Analyses done at the practical, operational level of environmental management tend to be incomplete. Basic concepts also need to be examined. This systematic search for answers is the task of environmental philosophy, a new area of thinking worldwide and especially in Brazil.

The present paper seeks to contribute to this national reflection by investigating the historic foundations of Brazilian environmental thought. Its objective is to show that various rich strands of thought already

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<sup>2</sup> For a sample of Brazil's current environmental situations, see *Almanaque Brasil socioambiental*, São Paulo, SP: Instituto Socioambiental, 2008.

exist. This intellectual heritage is evaluated as being fully capable of sustaining in Brazil the fledgling discipline of environmental philosophy.

### **Frustrations of Present-Day Philosophers**

A review of Internet material immediately gives the impression that philosophy as an intellectual activity is certainly happening all over Brazil. As one essay points out, there is much to reflect on in Brazil – the environmental and cultural contexts are unique. How could there not be philosophy in a land so rich in life experience and interface between people and nature?

But many Brazilian philosophers express frustration that their ideas “aren’t getting out” from isolated regional and national contexts. They particularly lament their discipline’s institutional underdevelopment. And they suffer from the accusation that philosophizing for most Brazilians means verbally defending one’s favorite foreign philosopher, not discussing ideas<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>.

While some of this self-criticism may be warranted, the country’s intellectual background even if mostly unknown should not be underestimated. A deeper examination reveals that Brazil has a rich and diverse philosophic tradition.

### **Colonial Origins**

According to the country’s official history, the Portuguese expedition of Pedro Álvares Cabral made the first European contact with Brazil on April 22, 1500. It was one of the most important events of Portugal’s vast maritime and commercial expansion during the 15th and 16th Centuries. Brazil is believed to have gotten its name from brazilwood (*Caesalpinia echinata*), once abundant in the Atlantic coastal forest. It was an ominous environmental beginning that this namesake was logged almost to extinction for red and purple dyewood.

As to be expected from their colonial origins, Brazil’s 17th and 18th Century philosophers<sup>7</sup> were obeisant to Portuguese thinking of the 16th Century. However, the philosophy taught in ecclesiastical centers was actually more Spanish than Portuguese because of Spanish Jesuit influence. The doctrine of *Ratio Studiorum* that regulated Jesuits in Portugal had also effectively monopolized thought in Portuguese secondary schools. These teachings are best described as harsh doctrines intended for strict control and salvation, not for promoting individual thought.

Fleeing Napoleon’s campaigns, the Portuguese royal court moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1808. Among the 15,000 (the exact number is unknown) persons they brought with them were learned men such as

<sup>3</sup> A. J Severino, "A experiência filosófica brasileira da atualidade: uma proposta de sistematização," (São Paulo: Congresso Brasileiro de Filosofia. <http://www.hottopos.com/convenit3/severin.htm>, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> R. J Ribeiro, "Erros e desafios da filosofia no Brasil, hoje. Palestra na reunião da Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia, São Paulo, 2002," (São Paulo: <http://www.renatojanine.pro.br/Ciencia/erros.html>, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> A. A Favero, "O ensino de filosofia no Brasil: um mapa das condições atuais," *Cadernos CEDES* 24 (2004): 257-84.

<sup>6</sup> J Cabrera, "Filosofia no Brasil (Filosofia sem filósofos?)." <<http://www.unb.br/ih/fil/cabrera/portugues/fbrasil.htm>> (29 August 2006)

<sup>7</sup> The summary given here of 17th, 18th and 19th Century Brazilian philosophy is based primarily on R. V. Rodríguez’s 1985 and 1993 essays describing what he calls “the panorama of Brazilian philosophy” (Rodríguez, 2007). Another good source is Luiz A. Cerqueira’s book, *Filosofia Brasileira*, published by Vozes (Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro) in 2002.

the Portuguese thinker Silvestre Pinheiro Ferreira (1769-1846). These thinkers introduced a fresh intellectual breeze called “mitigated empiricism.” Ferreira, for example, not only knew Aristotelian logic but was also familiar with the more recent philosophies of Leibniz and Locke. As government Minister in this temporary seat of the Portuguese empire, he had ample chance to promulgate these ideas. He also expounded on his own theories of language, knowledge and world systems.

### **Nineteenth Century European Enlightenment**

Brazil’s transition to independence in 1822 was mostly evolutionary. But even in the absence of a general revolt, national thinking in Brazil during most of the 19th Century was inspired by the ideals of European Enlightenment and focused on questions of liberty, sense of nation, and organization of the State. The Brazilian philosophers of the time, best represented by Eduardo Ferreira França (1809-1857) and Domingos Gonçalves de Magalhães (1811-1882), got their inspiration from spiritualistic French eclecticism.

In fact, from this time on, French philosophers have *mostly* dominated the history of philosophy in Brazil, even to present day. That is a qualified “mostly” because as we will see, the ideas of Kant and Marx also left a German imprint on at least one important Brazilian school.<sup>8</sup>

The philosophy of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) has been the most important French influence. He revered social engineering and promoted science as a new “religion of humanity.” Newtonian physics was considered the ideal scientific model, and Comte argued that positivistic reasoning should encompass everything including art and religion. During the latter part of the 19th Century, many Latin American elites, especially in Brazil, took Comte’s teachings to heart. These are manifest in Brazil even today in several quite distinct threads of positivism.

According to A. J. Severino, the first strand – theological Comtism – took root during the country’s transition from Empire to Republic after Monarch Pedro II was ousted in 1889.

Methodological positivism came much later. It appeared in the 20th Century, accompanying industrialization, urbanization and the founding of Brazil’s first public universities.<sup>9</sup> (In contrast with most Latin American universities, public higher education in Brazil is quite recent). Despite these different historical strands, modern-day positivists in Brazil tend to be united in their support for authoritarian reforms. Their rallying cry is for modernization via the State, and they consider scientific technology and strategic planning as the preferred instruments for achieving modern ways.

As to be expected, there were reactions against positivism’s late 19th Century hegemony, and these criticisms extended into the 20th Century. The most significant objections were raised by the so-called “School of Recife” philosophers led by Tobias Barreto (1839-1889). These Teutonic inspired men were against not only against positivism but also criticized spiritualistic eclecticism, the already mentioned 19th Century French influence in Brazil. As an alternative, the School of Recife philosophers defended ideas from neo-Kantism. They furthermore concentrated on culture as a specifically human dimension that protects man from the world of nature. This led them to argue that law and morals are cultural inventions. Aware that Brazil is especially rich in cultures, these objectors to positivism and spiritualism establish the foundations for culturalism (the idea that each culture should be studied in its particularity) in Brazilian philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Amós S. Nascimento, e-mail message to author, November 26, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Antônio Joaquim Severino, e-mail message to author, April 11, 2007.

Meanwhile there remained a steady undercurrent of Iberian traditionalism based on the already described Jesuit legacy. These colonial influences continued throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries. This was largely an ecclesiastical reaction against economic liberalism, and these traditionalists, such as Romualdo Seixas (1787-1860), the Archbishop of Salvador, Bahia, and José Soriano de Souza (1833-1895), also belittled rationalism.

## Twentieth Century and Current Trends

Analyzing today's Brazilian philosophies, one finds diverse remnants of the 17th, 18th, and 19th Century threads. In an attempt to classify the present situation, Antônio Joaquim Severino (1997; 1999) of the University of São Paulo has proposed a taxonomy of contemporary Brazilian philosophy and lists philosophers associated with each category. Many of them have indeed followed international trends. But, in most cases the Brazilian thinkers have produced rich, if isolated, national adaptations. Severino's taxonomy is summarized as follows:

- I. *Classic metaphysics tradition* – an essentialist perspective manifest as neo-Thomism.
- II. *Positivistic tradition.*
  - A. Neopositivism.
    1. Logicist – the logical-formal basis of scientific knowledge.
    2. Analytic – concerned with precise and rigorous use of language.
    3. Epistemological – discusses not just formal aspects of scientific knowledge but also its objective conditions.
  - B. Transpositivism – recognizes the autonomy and relevance of science, but does not isolate science from other forms of human activity.
- III. *Subjectivist tradition.*
  - A. Neo-humanism – doing anthropology in real historic context is considered the fundamental task of philosophy (includes existentialism, personalism, Marxism and Teilhardism).
  - B. Culturalism.
  - C. Dialecticism.
    1. Hegelian/Marxist tradition – describes history's transforming power by human praxis.
    2. Arqueogeneology – amplifies philosophic reflection beyond pure reason, including basic human drives in human subjectivity.

The following list developed by the study team led by Fávero et al. (2004)<sup>10</sup>, when asked by a UNESCO survey which philosophers are most commonly taught in Brazil, is another indication of the national situation:

*Socrates* (the most frequent), *Plato*, *Aristotle*, *Descartes*, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, *Kant* and *Marx*.

Monica Rector (2007)<sup>11</sup>, a Brazilian linguist at The University of North Carolina, has described development of semiotics in Brazil. The main impetus began in 1969, when *Cours de Linguistique Générale* by Swiss-born Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was published in Portuguese. The

<sup>10</sup> A. A Favero, "O ensino de filosofia no Brasil: um mapa das condições atuais," *Cadernos CEDES* 24 (2004): 257-84.

<sup>11</sup> M Rector, "Semiotics in Brazil: trends from the last century to the present." <http://www.semioticon.com/semiotix/semiotix7/index.html> (2007).

previous year the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) had been communicated for the first time in Portuguese to Brazilians. This was done by Décio Pignatari who explained in his book, *Informação, Linguagem e Comunicação* (1968)<sup>12</sup>, key concepts of this pioneer U. S. semiotician.

Rector's account reveals that specialists in linguistics, more than departments of philosophy, have been responsible for disseminating semiotics in Brazil; courses on semiotics have been included traditionally in literature and communication studies. She describes several contemporary national semiotics associations, events held, and proceedings published. One of the most productive resulting alliances was with Thomas A. Sebeok (1920-2001), renowned Hungarian semiotician, who played a major role in encouraging Brazilian scholars and their writing at Indiana University.

Practical aspects of semiotics have been appropriated in Brazil by multimedia and technology research, a trend which Rector predicts will increase in the 21st century. She also cites possible environmental connections explored by Irene Machado in her concept of "semiodiversity" created in the context of biodiversity. Another link is Eduardo Neiva's effort to use Darwinian evolutionary biology for reorganizing the conceptual frame of semiotics (Rector, 2007)<sup>13</sup>.

### **Present-Day Environmental Philosophy**

According to philosopher Amós S. Nascimento, today's Brazilian political actors are divided by two contrasting environmental views: romantic ecocentric utopia ("ecotopia") *versus* anthropocentric realism (especially economic rationality). Nascimento summarized Brazilian environmental philosophy in a paper given at the 2004 International Association for Environmental Philosophy conference. He says that the country's philosophers as a profession have trailed behind other professions practiced in Brazil. Lawyers, economists and educators, for example, have already assimilated environmentalism, but not philosophers. He blames the current lack of focus on philosophers' losing their intellectual *cause célèbre* against the military government once democracy was reinstated after 1985. He laments that only a few responded, belatedly, to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.

Nascimento says that Brazilian philosophers need to do much more serious thinking and writing about the environment. He argues that present-day environmental actions in Brazil still have little philosophical base; they are often intellectually inconsistent. His closing suggestion is that Brazilian philosophers should especially clarify the ontological status of nature. As a fundamental first step, this would help differentiate natural identities in Brazil (how people understand and define "the environment") (Nascimento, 2004)<sup>14</sup>.

Environmental education is a popular topic in Brazil. Three writers, Isabel Cristina de Moura Carvalho, Mauro Grün and Rachel Trajber have collaborated to describe its philosophic fundamentals in a book

<sup>12</sup> D Pignatari, "Informação, linguagem, comunicação," (São Paulo, SP: Perspectiva, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> M Rector, "Semiotics in Brazil: trends from the last century to the present."

<http://www.semioticon.com/semiotix/semiotix7/index.html> (2007).

<sup>14</sup> A. S Nascimento, "A new role for philosophy in Brazil? The case for philosophical action and reflection on environmental issues. In: JOINT CONFERENCE OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY, 2004, Boulder, Colorado," In: [http://www.environmentalphilosophy.org/environmentalphilosophy/upcoming/philosophy\\_in\\_brazil%20.pdf](http://www.environmentalphilosophy.org/environmentalphilosophy/upcoming/philosophy_in_brazil%20.pdf) ed (2007)

commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Education (2008). Carvalho (2002)<sup>15</sup> has argued that teachers should emulate archeologists, digging up cultural meanings of nature and of nature's use embedded in the real world. Grün (2007)<sup>16</sup>, a specialist in ethics and hermeneutics, has similarly explored new ways of understanding the concept of language in environmental education. Trajber is a specialist on audiovisuals. In an earlier book, she and Larissa Barbosa da Costa<sup>17</sup> organized a collection of philosophic evaluations of Brazilian-produced environmental audio-visual materials.

While environmental education is a more frequent topic, discussions of environmental ethics seem to stir more passion. Perhaps this is because many persons consider "environmental ethics" to be synonymous with consciousness-raising and protest. This passion is evident in several well-researched books that are currently available in Brazilian bookstores and whose titles all feature the key words, *Ética Ambiental* (Environmental Ethics). Mauro Grün's (2007)<sup>18</sup> book linking environmental education and ethics has already been mentioned. Two others are also by philosophy professors: The first is Marcelo Luiz Pelizzoli (2004)<sup>19</sup>, specialist on continental phenomenologists Husserl, Heidegger and Lévinas. The second is authored by philosopher José Roque Junges (2004) who has done considerable research on how transformations in socio-economic ambience affect collective health. A fourth book on ethics is by José Renato Nalini (2003), a jurist with considerable environmental experience as a federal criminal magistrate. Both Pelizzoli and Nalini express ethical concerns about urban environments, a topic often overshadowed in Brazil by biodiversity discussions<sup>20</sup>.

This paper on the intellectual origins of Brazilian environmental philosophy has focused more on philosophers than theologians. But at least two national theologian-writers, both dedicated to the environmental justice movement, deserve mention. The first, Leonardo Boff (1995), formerly a member of the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans), has attempted to mix African and Brazilian native religious world views with the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). The second, Ivone Gebara (1998), member of a congregation dedicated to the teachings of Saint Augustine (354-430), has written much about the relation between theology and ecofeminism. Because of their dissidence with official ecclesiastical doctrine, both Boff and Gebara were officially censured and have become estranged from the Roman Catholic Church.

Boff is one of the principal proponents of Liberation Theology, a controversial school that developed during the 1970s after the Second Vatican Council. He has been professor of theology and spirituality in various Brazilian universities and abroad. Today he criticizes the traditional manner of treating Earth as if it were "a footlocker full of things to get" and then use without limits. Boff proposes a new paradigm for civilization based on four pre-conditions: 1) understand planet Earth as being Gaia, 2) supersede anthropocentrism, 3) redefine human beings in the presence of Earth and 4) recuperate sensitive rationality and cordial reason given our growing awareness that we live together in a common abode<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> I. C. M Carvalho, "A invenção ecológica: narrativas e trajetórias da educação ambiental no Brasil," (Porto Alegre: UFRGS, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Grün, *Em busca da dimensão ética da educação ambiental* (Campinas, SP: Papirus, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> R Trajber and L. B Costa, "Avaliando a educação ambiental no Brasil: materiais audiovisuais," (São Paulo, SP: Fundação Peirópolis: Instituto Ecoar para a Cidadania, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> M Grün, *Em busca da dimensão ética da educação ambiental* (Campinas, SP: Papirus, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> M. L Pelizzoli, "Correntes da ética ambiental," In: 2nd edition ed (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> S. N Tesh and E Paes-Machado, "Sewers, garbage, and environmentalism in Brazil," *Journal of Environment and Development* 13 (2004): 42-72.

<sup>21</sup> V Bonnani, "Leonardo Boff: 'Oggi la mia lotta è per l'ambiente'." *Liberazione* (Roma, 2008).

Ivone Gebara also supported Liberation Theology when it began in Brazil. However, today she considers the movement to be patriarchal and characterized by suffering. Because of these differences, she has sought new theological underpinnings, including ecofeminism. She believes in social actions lived in the “here and now” within the context of cheerful “miniliberations” realized each day, even under conditions of poverty. For Gebara, religion needs to reconnect people not only among themselves but also with planet Earth and the forces of nature. She envisions that this new religious paradigm will include social criticism; its followers should actively support radical environmental movements. Also in this vision there exists a biodiversity of religions that accompanies the biodiversities of the Cosmos, of Earth and of cultures. In this sense, Gebara is tolerant of differences among religious beliefs. She alleges that we know today through science that eternal laws, including ideas of natural order, do not exist; each individual group relates itself to the place and time in which it lives<sup>22</sup>.

### Future Directions

Linguist Monica Rector points out that one reason Brazilian thinkers seldom receive outside recognition is because of the Portuguese language. Internationally, Portuguese is little known despite being the seventh most spoken language.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the frustrations felt by Brazilian thinkers in general, the present isolated status of Brazilian philosophy is likely to change because of today’s digitally interconnected world. According to Friedman (2006)<sup>24</sup>, there is an overwhelming trend for anyone, anywhere, to upload thoughts and ideas on an international scale as blogs. According to the Brazilian information agency *IBOPE* (CETIC.br, 2007), by the end of 2006, approximately 22 million people already had Internet access in Brazil. While this was fewer users than Italy, Brazil still had more people with access than Spain. Environmental philosophy in Brazil now has a chance to be an important emerging area of world thinking.

In 2004, the Federal University of Viçosa’s environmental extension periodical, *Revista Ação Ambiental*, published a special edition on environmental philosophy. It featured articles by authors from diverse institutions representing a variety of philosophic schools in Brazil. The University (UFV) in conjunction with the Society for Forestry Research (SIF) and the International Association for Environmental Philosophy (IAEP) is now planning to conduct in Brazil, in 2010, an International Symposium on Environmental Philosophy. To be called FILOSAMBRASIL 2010, this event promises to make a significant contribution to international environmental thought. Its intent is to create a circle of positive feedback as idealized by Hess and Ostrom (2007) in their recent book, *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*.

Through these efforts and others, Brazilian knowledge of the commons will increasingly enrich the world’s commons of knowledge and vice versa. This contribution will be based on Brazil’s own intellectual and environmental traditions merged with new concepts. Environmental philosophy is expected to grow. This present review shows that the country has a rich intellectual heritage capable of embracing the immense physical and cultural diversity that is Brazil. Now it is up to Brazilians to take

<sup>22</sup> M Rector, "Semiotics in Brazil: trends from the last century to the present." <http://www.semioticon.com/semiotix/semiotix7/index.html> (2007).

<sup>23</sup> Mônica Rector, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> T. L. Friedman, *The world is flat: a brief history of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)

advantage of this rich tradition, adapting its historical strands of thinking to new ideas, one of these being environmental philosophy. It will thereby be possible to better conceptualize what is meant by *environment*, specify an ideal relationship with nature and undertake environmental actions which are consistent with these concepts.