The Ideology of the “Survival of the Fittest” during the Porfiriato in Mexico

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“Herbert Spencer is an exception among the great philosophers. His name is celebrated in England, his birthplace, and throughout the civilized world. There is no language into which his works have not been translated, nor book devoted to the development of a moral or political science that does not constantly cite his name. Newspapers, magazines and publications of all types mention him repeatedly.” The preceding paragraph is taken from a newspaper that supported the current Mexican President, Porfirio Díaz, in 1887.1 It stands out in a long article on Spencer, indicating the importance that his ideas had taken on in Mexico towards the end of the nineteenth century, highlighting above all the scope of his proposal in different disciplines, as well as the impact that it had in different parts of the world (Fig. 7.1).

Spencer’s ideas, promoted predominantly in the press, were of great importance in the establishment and strengthening of Mexican positivism, and at the same time, in a national scientific culture that along with the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin, formed a political, social, and educational background that, among other things, set the stage for the foundation of the country’s most important educational and cultural project, the National University of Mexico. The way in which Mexican intellectuals appropriated and used Spencer’s ideas stands out more clearly in this project. In particular, education and social evolution at that time represented a response to Mexico’s political, cultural and social situation, an alternative via peaceful change, in opposition to the imminent revolution, which sought a profound transformation of the country through violence.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, we briefly outline the context in which positivism was established in Mexico, initially within the Comtean tradition, until the consolidation of Spencerism, and particularly among political groups close to then President Porfirio Díaz. Secondly, we focus on the presence of Spencer in the Mexican context, beginning with the

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1 El Diario del Hogar, January 29, 1887, 1.
translations of his work, which were few in number compared with other countries and which focused directly on issues related to Mexico, as well as pointing out the extracts that were taken up and translated in various newspapers where Spencerian thought was well received. Finally, we concentrate on Justo Sierra, the most important proponent of Spencerian ideas in the late nineteenth century, who from his position as a politician within the Porfiriato,