

JOSÉ GIL FORTOUL. BEYOND HISTORY

ALFREDO RODRÍGUEZ IRANZO

Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas, Venezuela

arodriguez@unimet.edu.ve

Summary

This work offers a critical review of the life and work of José Gil Fortoul, a Venezuelan intellectual of the 19th and 20th centuries. It examines his role as historian, politician, diplomat and writer, highlighting his contributions to constitutional philosophy. Although he was an influential figure, his relationship with the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez has generated controversy in historiography. This article analyzes his positivist thought and its impact on the political evolution of Venezuela.

Keywords: José Gil Fortoul, history of Venezuela, positivism, Juan Vicente Gómez, historiography, constitutional philosophy, politics.

RECEIVED: 12-03-2025 / ACCEPTED: 15-05-2025 / PUBLISHED: 15-06-2025

How to cite: Rodríguez, A., (2025). José Gil Fortoul. Beyond history. *Cuaderno Unimetano*, 2025-1, 83 - 102. <https://doi.org/10.58479/cu.2024.144>



INDEX

Summary	83
Introductory Note	87
Diplomacy, journalism, politics and literature	89
A top international chronicler	90
Smooth meeting with the gomecismo	91
Brilliant parliamentarian and exceptional Minister of Public Instruction	92
A president without protocols or charges of conscience	93
The high price of bad alliances	95
On the road to the Presidency of the Republic	96
How to justify the unjustifiable	98
Positivist pragmatism as a philosophy of life and action	99
Bibliography	101
Internet sources	101



Introductory Note

Those who have studied in detail, not only his work as the great historian he was, and have delved into his multifaceted existence, have stumbled upon the fascinating trajectory of a character with an overwhelming personality, who also stood out as a brilliant and well-known lawyer, diplomat, politician, statesman, journalist, parliamentarian, functions that he performed with such efficiency in each one of them, Although he was also a great educator, poet, sociologist, sportsman, fencer, charlatan, womanizer, brawler and gambler, neither his contemporaries nor history have forgiven him for his close and complacent alliance with the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez.

Undoubtedly, the richness of Venezuela's history is immense, in terms of the presence of extraordinarily valuable personalities, due to the significance of their work and the scope of their actions for the political and social evolution of the nation.

José Gil Fortoul is one of those admirable characters, despite the fact that a good part of his life and achievements took place in a country subjected to the designs and abuses of the oppressive regime of General Juan Vicente Gómez, who counted precisely on Gil Fortoul as one of his most important intellectual supports.

Hence, it is that shadow that predominates in the mind of any Venezuelan, who fundamentally retains in his memory Gil Fortoul as the author of a fundamental work such as the Constitutional History of Venezuela, a must for any research of any depth that seeks to clarify aspects of the political-social evolution of the Nation.

How to understand the value of a character who assumed enormous responsibilities during the Gomecista dictatorship, including the Presidency of the Republic, but who at the same in his work Constitutional Philosophy, works on concepts ahead of his time and circumstances, such as advising the implementation of universal suffrage and in this the proportional representation of minorities, principles that he developed together with the renowned humanist Lisandro Alvarado.

The positivism in which Gil Fortoul militated undoubtedly sheds some light on his unconditional support for the tyrant Juan Vicente Gómez, from whom he was able to earn respect and consideration, which was surely influenced, in addition to his intellectual prestige, by the overwhelming personality that characterized him.

His biographer Juan Penzini Hernández says of Gil Fortoul:¹

...lawyer, poet, historian, sociologist, diplomat, politician, statesman, journalist, parliamentarian, sportsman, fencer, charlatan, womanizer, brawler, gambler and gifted, in , with that protean and multiple gift of knowing and being able to model at the same time the impossible brotherhood of a firm nationalist heart within an irrepressible passion of universal anxiety and dispersion...

Later in his work, Penzini Hernández refers to a passage in the life of this extraordinary man, which occurred in his native Barquisimeto, which says a lot about his captivating personality:

Gil Fortoul, once he graduated as Doctor of Law at the Central University of Venezuela in 1885, settled in Barquisimeto where he set up a law office, practiced his profession as a lawyer, intervened in local politics, gave lectures, served on the faculty of educational institutes, was even an occasional judge and, as a distinguished social factor, danced and socialized a lot, being a passionate dancer and a gentleman of brilliant spiritual gifts. For these reasons, his visit to Barquisimeto caused a commotion in the society and even more now that Gil Fortoul, for his remarkable intellectual prestige founded by his studies and his triumphs in Europe, was one of the most outstanding national scientific values and was considered a personality of notorious greatness and greater reliefs of hope in the process of the future political life of the country.²

1 Penzini Hernández Juan. Life and work of José Gil Fortoul (1861-1943). P. 6.

2 Ob.cit. p. 9

Diplomacy, journalism, politics and literature

According to the rich and varied historiographic material on his life and work, José Gil Fortoul was born in Barquisimeto, Lara State, on November 25, 1861. Son of José Espíritu Santo Gil (el Pelón Gil) and Adelaida Fortoul Sánchez, his childhood and adolescence took place in the nearby town of El Tocuyo, where he completed his basic and secondary education, until he obtained his bachelor's degree in philosophy at the La Concordia school in 1880.

Caracas would be his immediate destination, to study law at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, where he completed his doctorate in political science in 1885. Parallel to his training as a lawyer, Gil Fortoul gave free rein to his insatiable thirst for knowledge, under the guidance of Professor Adolfo Ernst, who guided his preparation in natural history, but the restless student also wrote poetry, publishing his first work in 1880, a collection of poems entitled *La infancia de mi musa* (The Childhood of My Muse).

Journalism was also fertile ground for this multifaceted character, who already in El Tocuyo participated in the production of the first newspaper that circulated in that town, *El Aura Juvenil*, whose disappearance served as motivation to found the weekly *El Ciudadano*. In both publications, politics and literature, activities that also occupied in an important way the concerns of Gil Fortoul, would be the predominant theme.

In Caracas Gil Fortoul would collaborate with the newspaper *La Opinión Nacional*, from whose pages he polemicized with fellow youth and religious representatives, particularly with the then presbyter Juan Bautista Castro, future archbishop of Caracas.

In 1886, our character embarked on a long and varied journey in diplomatic activity during which he would develop a good part of his rich intellectual production, which would cover the fields of literature, history, philosophy, law and an interesting facet of journalism.

France would be his first destination as a diplomat, which would mark the beginning of ten years of permanence in Europe fulfilling these functions. In that country he would serve as consul in the city of Bordeaux. Later he would fulfill consular functions in Hamburg, Germany. It was a period during which he published *Recuerdos de París* (1887), a beautiful reminiscence of his stay in the City of Light, and the work *Filosofía Constitucional* (1890).

His next destination in the old continent would take him to Liverpool, in the United Kingdom, where he would be Consul, to later return to France, this time to Paris, as secretary of the Venezuelan embassy in that city. During this period, from 1890 to 1892, he would publish his works *Filosofía penal* (Criminal Philosophy), where the brilliant lawyer would emerge, and "El Humo de mi pipa" (1891), a compendium of chronicles about his impressions regarding the work of European writers and manifestations of his own creative capacity.

It is the same time in which he wrote his first novel, *¿Idilio?*, and also when he demonstrated his proverbial ability to cover the most diverse themes and forms of expression, by writing,

for example, a work on Modern Fencing and also debuting as a contributor to the literary magazine *El Cojo Ilustrado*.

In 1894 he would be appointed *Chargé d’Affaires* in Berne, Switzerland, where he would begin to write and publish his *Letters to Pascual*, an imaginary character that he would use to express himself as the teacher he essentially was, not only to impart knowledge, but also orientation and guidance to those who had the fortune to read or listen to him, in this case through Pascual, to whom in each letter, he offered explanations on matters of politics, economy or any topic that merited it because of its impact on the existence of each person; advice, suggestions, behavioral guidelines, to perform in life in a correct, productive and civic way.

His diplomatic activity would be interrupted until 1900, after a productive two-year recess in Caracas, during which he dedicated himself, among his many activities, to writing in the magazine *El Cojo Ilustrado* and in the newspaper *El Pregonero*, as well as lecturing at the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* on sociological and anthropological topics. But it is also a recess that he uses to undertake the preparation of one of his most important works, the *Constitutional History of Venezuela*, whose assignment was assigned to him by the National Government, by Decree of President Ignacio Andrade, to commemorate the passage from the XIX to the XX century.

The new century welcomed Gil Fortoul back to diplomatic activity. He first served as consul in Trinidad (1900), later as Venezuela’s representative at the Second International Pan-American Conference in Mexico (1901) and then returned to Europe to exercise consular responsibilities in England and France (1902-1905), and in 1906, when he was in charge of business at the diplomatic representation of Venezuela in Berlin, Germany, he finished the first volume of his *Historia Constitucional de Venezuela* (*Constitutional History of Venezuela*).

A top international chronicler

While developing his extensive diplomatic work, Gil Fortoul became an authentic and fine international chronicler, a task that would be well worth a detailed study, because at the same time that his chronicles constitute in their very content, materials of immense informative value and impeccable literary quality, they could be considered an extraordinary contribution to journalism, considering the work of analysis and interpretation that he carried out around the selected topics, to feed his “*Revista*”, a publication in which he condensed these materials for their dissemination.

About this work, what Gil Fortoul himself said, reveals the clarity that encouraged him to do it, in terms of its scope as materials that analyzed and contextualized each topic covered, in order to provide a global and detailed perspective to its readers, on issues such as the following complex and difficult to understand, just as the most experienced international correspondents do today:

These magazines will not be simple notes of events, names and dates. If they were, my work would be superfluous or extemporaneous, because everything that is condensed and condensed is transmitted daily by cable... But the immense majority of readers, who live in the whirlwind of the mercantile business, hurriedly go through the condensed cable news, paying attention only to those that concern their momentary interest or excite their fickle curiosity. The same ones like, however, to go over in hours of rest, the most remarkable events of the month or of the fortnight; they look for the thread that weaves them, the idea that animates them, their origin, their cause, their consequences; in a word, they reconsider them from the philosophical-historical point of view.³

Gil Fortoul could well be considered an innovator of journalism, an innovator ahead of his time, considering that information management with such characteristics was still a long way off, since it would have to wait a long way into the 20th century to be adopted as a professional practice of information management.

Smooth meeting with the gomecismo

When Juan Vicente Gómez took power after a coup d'état against his compadre Cipriano Castro in December 1908, José Gil Fortoul was already a figure of enormous prestige in his homeland, due to his long diplomatic career and above all for his intellectual projection as a man of letters, lawyer, educator and historian who had just published the second volume of his Constitutional History of Venezuela.

He was still a young man around 47 years of , but in full maturity, who even knew Juan Vicente Gómez personally, with whom he coincided at the racetrack in their common love for the equestrian activity, which had brought about a rapprochement and sympathy between the two characters.

In 1907, while diplomatically representing Venezuela at the Second Peace Conference in The Hague, a disagreement arose between Gil Fortoul and Cipriano Castro, when the latter, as president, ordered the Venezuelan delegation to withdraw from the event due to disagreements with the United States delegation.

Gil Fortoul tried to dissuade Castro that Venezuela's withdrawal from the Hague event was wrong, which aroused interpretations in the Caracas newspapers of an "insubordination" to the President's orders, which caused him to be removed from his diplomatic post upon his return to Berlin at the end of 1908.

Coincidentally, however, 1908 was the year in which Juan Vicente Gómez, in office as Vice- President of the Republic, executed a coup d'état against his compadre and President

3 Ob. Cit., p. 98.

Cipriano Castro, who had traveled abroad for health reasons, Gómez in charge of the government as President in charge.

The de facto president then reversed the decision of dismissal against Gil Fortoul, who was thus reinstated to the position he held as Minister Plenipotentiary in Berlin, and a close relationship was sealed between the vindicated diplomat and the ruler, which would even lead Gil Fortoul to the position of President of the Republic.

Brilliant parliamentarian and exceptional Minister of Public Instruction

Gil Fortoul's diplomatic work, this time representing Gomez's Venezuela, would continue until 1910, when he returned to the homeland, and thanks to Gomez's support, he joined the National Congress as Senator until 1916 (1910-1911 and 1914-1916).

As a parliamentarian, the multifaceted character would stand out, just as he did in the fulfillment of any mission or responsibility entrusted to him. In this function as Senator, his training, intellectual dimension and personal qualities, adorned with exceptional brilliance the fulfillment of such a transcendental public task.

In this regard, his biographer Juan Penzini Hernández stands out:

It can be said that until today there has not been a man in Venezuela who has replaced Gil Fortoul in that refulgent and resounding gift of making the parliamentary tribune a luminary of ideas and of being able to combine verbal impetus with elegant demeanor, successful and sudden improvisation and graceful grace within a torrent of profound knowledge of science presented with a simplicity, clarity and emotionality within the reach of all hearts and heads⁽⁴⁾.

As for his parliamentary work as such, "Gil Fortoul stands out for the progressive initiatives he proposes in the reform of civil legislation on the rights of women and children, the modification of the matrimonial regime, the adoption of rules for the issuance mortgage bonds, and for the regulation of labor contracts."^{562 (5)}

Now, if his performance as a congressman was brilliant, as Minister of Public Instruction he would be no less so, once again because of his unparalleled education and his personal qualities, which made him an innovator, thanks to that vision always ahead of his time that characterized him.

4 Ob. Cit., p. 204.

5 Polar Foundation. Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela. Caracas.

|Juan Penzini Hernández comments on the ministerial facet of our character:

Dr. José Gil Fortoul's most salutary and reforming work as Minister of Public Instruction. (...) Of course, he could not be an ordinary minister, one of those who are comfortable with the normal placidity of public service and the idea of serving without leaving a lasting mark. Even within a dictatorship, his action had to have a stamp of ideological advance and freedom to act and reform, because a strong and restless personality like his necessarily had to stir in the dead sea of prejudices and lift the arid and heavy crust of the old pedagogical customs. From his actions would remain a deep and luminous trail at the height of his name and his glory.⁶⁶

But beyond his personal qualities on the intellectual level and as a born innovator, it is necessary to list the outstanding achievements of his ministerial administration, which impacted the education sector through reforms and executions, many of which are still valid and effective today:

As Minister of Public Instruction (1912), he left for posterity his Report to Congress, in which he diagnosed the Venezuelan educational situation in all its aspects: the need for education for the training of technicians, especially in agricultural matters; the need for a change in primary instruction, the only one that many Venezuelans would receive throughout their lives; the need to train teachers, the construction of school buildings, the implementation of school hygiene systems, the use of pedagogical material, the adoption of school statistics, the creation of new schools, the reform of female education and the adaptation of the university to the new requirements of the country. The educational system proposed by Gil Fortoul was partially reflected in the Code of Public Instruction of 1912, which would later be annulled by the Federal Court of Cassation in 1914, for alleged unconstitutionality in its provisions.⁷⁷

A president without protocols or charges of conscience

Walking through the nine months of José Gil Fortoul's term as President of the Republic is undoubtedly one of the most exciting episodes in the life of this truly exceptional character in all facets of his life, whether as a public man or as a human being of flesh and bones.

What more can an intellectual aspire to in the exercise of politics than to occupy the first magistracy of his country, despite the fact that in the case of Gil Fortoul, it was a mandate subordinated to the will and tutelage of an fist, as was the case of Juan Vicente Gómez, who pulled the strings of power at his free will from Maracay, where he was in charge.

6 Penzini Hernández p. 153.

7 Polar Foundation. Dictionary of Venezuelan History.

In Miraflores, a decorative figure artificially exercised the Presidency of the Republic to keep the appearances required by the Constitution, the laws and the governmental protocol, which Gómez kept with the intuition and the zamarrería that characterized him, attending to the indications and advice of the “doctors”.

Several of the “doctors” that Gómez made use of, in exchange for adulation and submission as the price for the enjoyment of such privilege, would occupy the presidential chair under these conditions, without shame or glory.

But even in such circumstances, José Gil Fortoul knew how to face such responsibility with decorum, making use of the friendship and respect that united him to the dictator, for whom the proverbial intellectual prestige of the historian was an ancestry that he honored in an exceptional way.

Gil Fortoul’s biographer, Juan Penzini Hernández, says of this relationship:

Gil Fortoul before President Gomez, both before and after he became Provisional President of the Republic, was not a passive entity and a useless and colorless force. General Gómez felt respectful deference for him, something instinctive that stopped the man of force before the intellectual man.⁽⁸⁾

Penzini Hernández adds:

...Gil Fortoul (...) was not proud of the glory of power nor was he faded by the height of political situations. When he was President of the Republic, he followed his same life habits and the routine of his democratic simplicity. Presidential pomp bothered him and he was not seen surrounded by military stiffes or a sycophantic entourage. Gil Fortoul president was the same Gil Fortoul citizen. He dealt hand in hand with the people in the street and the people understood his attitude and his educational mission. He never gave an order of imprisonment against anyone and if, in an outburst, he could issue one, he cancelled it instantly (...) He hated political intrigue and that is why he neither attacked with it nor defended himself with it. He thought and acted on a plane of moral superiority that is not common in our country. On a certain occasion, General Gómez himself made this known in public: “Dr. Gil Fortoul has never spoken to me to harm anyone and from his enemies that I knew of, I received bad reports and Dr. Gil Fortoul kept quiet”⁽⁹⁾.

8 Penzini Hernández p. 244.

9 Ibid pp. 250-251.

The high price of bad alliances

Despite his integrity and uprightness of behavior, both in his public and private life, Gil Fortoul was not without harsh, bitter and ironic criticisms, even from prestigious pens with enormous weight of public opinion, who expressed themselves through the press of the time, as was the case of no less than writers such as Rufino Blanco Fombona, José Rafael Pocaterra and Pío Gil.

In this regard, Penzini Hernández points out the following:

Rufino Blanco Fombona, in his book titled “Camino de Imperfección” presents Gil Fortoul as an individual troubled by the “love for public jobs, which he has lived all his life, and the fear of losing them, deprives him of all others”. (...) Also José Rafael Pocaterra in “Memorias de un Venezolano en la decadencia” and Pío Gil in one of his pamphlets ironized with cruelty about the politicization of Gil Fortoul.¹⁰

Penzini Hernandez himself, however, takes it upon himself to alleviate Gil Fortoul’s public image with the following comment:

The charges of Blanco Fombona, José Rafael Pocaterra and Pío Gil were practically unfair and passionate. Gil Fortoul did not love money nor was he proud of the glory of power. The most prosperous periods of his life were when he dedicated himself to the practice of his profession as a lawyer in Caracas, in the interregnums that public life gave him. When he descended from the Presidency of the Republic in 1914, he was full of debts and the inventory of his assets showed balance of some fifty thousand bolivars, which he paid by periodic installments with the money earned in the practice of his profession.¹¹

But history does not forgive and a little more than half a century after the performance of Dr. Gil Fortoul, the biting pen of Domingo Alberto Rangel, a brilliant historian, journalist and writer, would recall with fine irony the legal support of the doctors, including Gil Fortoul, who with their advice and counsel, accepted by Gómez, paved the way for him to give a tinge of legality to the exercise of his iron dictatorship.

One of the loopholes created by the doctors, which Gómez would use to give his regime a legalistic veneer, and for other purposes tailored to his political calculations impregnated with the authoritarianism that characterized him, would be the Federal Council of Government, which according to Rangel explains

...has by the Constitutional Charter the mission of giving its opinion on the most important State matters. The Gomez government, which for the foolish is cons-

10 Ibid pp. 247-248.

11 Ibid p. 248.

titutional from 1908 to 1914, submits to the body, with scrupulous regulation, all matters that the Cabinet will then have to sanction with the force of law. (...) Gómez shares power with Mocho Hernández, with Nicolás Rolando, with Juan Pablo Peñaloza who occupy the seats of the Council of Government. There are no disagreements between the very new organism and the Executive Cabinet that under the aegis of Juan Vicente Gómez is the custodian of the Law.¹²

But also doctors, among them Gil Fortoul, would warm the armchairs of that decorative Government Council, which Gómez used to neutralize and liquidate the caudillos, who, by way of a rebatiña, governed Venezuela, until the power of their fiefdoms was snatched from them with skill and force, by the man from La Mulera.

Referring to that devious maneuver that would forever rid Venezuela of the caudillos- mo, but to plunge it into the pernicious personalism of Gómez, Domingo Alberto Rangel argues:

...Juan Vicente Gómez has stuffed them (the caudillos) into an organism of sarcastic inefficiency, but of strategic advantage for the regime. It is Federal Council to which the Caracas irony has given the name of “potrero”, because it is there that the old swords of the civil wars shelter their impotence. Through the Council, which Gómez invents when he needs to give a figurehead, but sparing the power to the promenaders of the Liberators who have returned on December 19, those prestige are yellowing like old paper. The idea of forming an organization of purely ornamental significance is a trick that Gómez forges to administer the fiefdom that has fallen into his hands.¹³

On the road to the Presidency of the Republic

If the rough men, with blood on their swords spilled on the battlefields of nineteenth-century Venezuela were tamed in the deceitful armchairs of the Federal Council of Government, doctors like Gil Fortoul would also share those seats, but to fulfill other purposes different from their political annihilation. Rather as authors and custodians of the formalities and legal chicanery that were required by the astute and ambitious Andean leader, who stood as lord and master of power at the dawn of twentieth century Venezuela.

Gil Fortoul would undoubtedly more than fulfill the role assigned to the doctors of the regime in the Council of Government, to the point that he became president of the organization, a position that would determine that, in 1913, he was appointed Provisional President of the Republic, as established by the Constitution, in case of absence of the incumbent in exercise of the Head of State.

12 Rangel Domingo Alberto. Gómez the master of power. P. 245.

13 Ibid. p. 244.

This circumstance materialized when, precisely at the suggestion of Gil Fortoul himself, Juan Vicente Gómez had to step down from the presidency in order to quell a presumed rebellion led by Cipriano Castro in Falcón, although his troops would not leave Maracay.

That maneuver was nothing more than a legal ruse proposed by Gil Fortoul, to open the way for Gómez to remain in , given the fact that the period for which the Congress had appointed him president (1909-1914), perennially expired in 1914, with the express constitutional prohibition of reelection.

In the year 1913, in view of the precept of the National Constitution of 1909 prohibiting the reelection of the President of the Republic, General Gómez, who held such high office, found it necessary to consult with the sagacious statesmen and several of the most notable lawyers of Caracas, on the possibility of a reform of the Constitution in order for him to continue in power, avoiding the stumbling block of the non-reelection of the President of the Republic. He asked all those consulted for their answers in writing. One day, as all those consulted hurried to answer and Dr. Gil Fortoul not, when Gil Fortoul arrived at General Gomez's house, he told her that he was waiting for her reply. Gil Fortoul, among other excuses, told her that he expected to give her the answer personally and, moreover, because he considered the case to be very simple. First of all, he advised him: "General, do not become a dictator". Then, since there was a guerrilla uprising in the plains and there was talk of subversive movements apparently led by former President Cipriano Castro, Gil Fortoul thought that it was enough to prevent the opening of the electoral process by declaring martial law. Thus broken, the constitutional thread would be resumed later by means of a Congress of Plenipotentiaries of the Municipalities which would be in charge of dictating a new Constitution. General Gómez, by the way, intuitively afraid of being involved in extraordinary situations, thought Gil Fortoul's plan was a good one and, in an exclamatory tone and with a shrewd malice, told him "look doctor, come and see (taking him to his work cabinet): in all those letters they advise me to declare myself dictator and that the people support me. I don't think so. That is why I like your idea and that is how it will be done, because, although everyone advises me to do so, the truth is that "I do not want to be a dictator". And in this way, Dr. Gil Fortoul, by personal and scientific aesthetics, saved the idea from the violent qualifiers of the fact and from the rudeness of the political intemperance.¹⁴¹⁴

Regarding the alleged military campaign undertaken by Gómez to support Gil Fortoul's legalistic suggestion, with the purpose of promoting a constitutional reform that would give political and legal ground to his reelection, Domingo Alberto Rangel says ironically:

Juan Vicente Gómez mobilizes the logistical meticulousness that the Benemérito put his campaigns. The official troops are supposed to travel to Coro where they

14 Penzini Hernández. p. 250.

disembark Castro. But it does not go beyond Maracay where the General has steers and land. There the farce ends (...) It is the scarecrow that will allow General Juan Vicente Gómez to clean the birds with which he does not want to share the corn of a cornfield called Venezuela ⁽¹⁵⁾.

How to justify the unjustifiable

The historiography leaves no doubt as to the civic and intellectual qualities of José Gil Fortoul, demonstrated by the actions that he performed from the highest positions that power and political influence can provide to any citizen.

However, the question will always remain to the justification that could have prevailed in a man of Gil Fortoul's immense human and intellectual quality, to ally himself with the designs of a dictator like Juan Vicente Gómez, to whom it is necessary to recognize a positive work of government, which in no way justifies the dark balance that his administration represents, in blood and backwardness for the country,

This is a blemish in Gil Fortoul's career, which both his contemporaries and history have severely criticized, although the immense value of his written work as a historian and man of thought has also been recognized, although perhaps without the breadth that his career deserves. The latter regime made use of his talent and professional capacity to perpetuate itself in an authoritarian and dictatorial manner in the exercise of , with ferocity and without any scruple against those who dared to criticize or question such procedures.

The prestigious journalist and writer Simón Alberto Consalvi, now deceased, is a good example of those critics that even in our times have not been silenced. With the fine irony that characterized him, Consalvi claims to Gil Fortoul for having been part of the group of "doctors" that gave sustenance and legal oxygen to the opprobrious Gomecista dictatorship:

One hundred years ago, Juan Vicente Gómez, the dictator who dominated the 20th century, was elected for the first time as constitutional president of Venezuela for the period 1910-1914. This was the beginning of what Manuel Caballero called the "dictablanda".

Gómez was pleasant, spoke little, promised to respect the laws, and, in , a period began that made everyone assume that a period of stability and alternation of power had finally arrived. That freedom of expression would be respected, the functioning of the parties, in short, what the people without ambitions of great changes humbly desired. Venezuela was a rural country and only the caudillos dominated the scene. So everything was going to depend on Gómez and his relations with the caudillos. That was what politics came down to.

15 Rangel Domingo Alberto pp 243-244.

Gómez was elected on April 27, 1910 by the National Congress. Venezuelans acclaimed him as a man who would govern democratically, and considered him the opposite pole of Cipriano Castro, their boss and compadre. The country was tired of Castro, of his extravagances, of his violent speeches, of his imaginary or real wars. The last two years of Don Cipriano, or “El Cabito” as he was called, had been insane.

(...) The likeable Don Juan Vicente governed as provisional president until 1910, when his first constitutional term began. A “honeymoon”. But in 1913, when his end was near, Gómez stopped being Gómez el campecha- no, and helped by doctors César Zumeta, José Gil Fortoul and other lawyers who cleared the for him, he put together a scheme to take all the power. The military is always blamed because history (written by civilians) unfailingly treats them with kid gloves. Let no one hear us, but Gómez was invented by doctors.

When journalist Rafael Arevalo Gonzalez, director of El Pregonero, launched a candidate for the presidency, Dr. Felix Montes, Gomez sent him to La Rotunda, and the innocent candidate had to leave Venezuela. This was not enough. Gómez and his enlightened doctors decided to suspend the “electoral process”, alleging that General Castro “was near the coast of Falcón state and would invade Venezuela”. A useful lie, like so many other lies.

In the name of the sovereignty of the Homeland, the likeable Gómez declared himself on campaign, at the head of thousands of soldiers, drums and timbales, he left in power Dr. José Gil Fortoul, our great historian, but the general did not go beyond Maracay.

End of the story: on April 14, 1914, a National Congress of Plenipotentiaries appointed Dr. Victorino Márquez Bustillos, a straw president, as president of Venezuela, and Juan Vicente Gómez as Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Farewell, “dictatorship”. From then on, came the iron Venezuela. A history that began a century ago, in 1910⁽¹⁶⁾.

Positivist pragmatism as a philosophy of life and action

Those of us who today, with admiration and amazement, in the light of history, observe Gil Fortoul’s trajectory, must accept the criteria of scholars of the subject, who attribute Gil Fortoul’s complacent conduct of the brilliant historian in relation to the Gomecista dictatorship, as a product of his conception of life, attached to positivism as a philosophical doctrine⁽¹⁷⁾.

16 Consalvi Simón Alberto. Juan Vicente Gómez: The years of sympathy, 1910-1914. In: [://juanvicentegomez-zpresidente.blogspot.com/2018/](http://juanvicentegomez-zpresidente.blogspot.com/2018/)

17 See: Vitoria María Ángeles in: Philosophica. Enciclopedia filosófica online. <http://www.philosophica.info/voces/positivismo/Positivismo.html>.

The term “positivism” usually indicates a current of philosophical and cultural thought, dominant in Europe during much of the 19th century, particularly in France, England, Germany and Italy. The movement also spread to the United States and Latin America. It owes its name Saint-Simon-who used it for the first time in the *Cathéchisme des industriels*, published in 1823, but it was refined and popularized, above all, by Auguste Comte (1798- 1857), who is considered the father of positivism.

The term “positive” has different meanings. It means that which has its origin in an institutional act, divine or human, which has been established; it is opposed, therefore, to natural, stable or eternal and, in this sense, one speaks, for example, of positive law, or of positive religion. According to another meaning, which follows the etymology more closely (*positum*= “the given”, “the datum”), it means that which is given in experience and, consequently, that which is directly accessible to all. Comte assumes this second meaning: for him, positive indicates, above all, that which is “real” (as opposed to fictitious or abstract, or chimerical), that which is observable, that which can be experimentally controlled, in such a way that it is removed from all doubt, that is, that which is “certain”. In a third meaning, positive also means “fruitful”, “effective”, “useful”. This meaning is also accepted by Comte: positive is that which is useful, that which is usable for the benefit of man, above all, through the mastery of nature. Finally, for the founder of positivism, the term positive includes the meaning of “organic”, that is, that which can be related in a whole endowed with unity, with systematicity.

A distinction is usually made between scientific and philosophical positivism. The former is a way of understanding science, which limits itself to affirming that scientific knowledge should be limited exclusively to the observable “facts” or phenomena, to their description and to the formulation of the laws that relate them. This modality of positivism does not deny metaphysics, at least explicitly. Philosophical positivism, on the other hand, denies metaphysics a priori, considering that pure empirical facts are the only basis of knowledge, thus vanifying the pretension of going beyond the empirical.

“Everything that is not strictly reducible to the simple statement of a particular or general fact can have no real or intelligible meaning” [Comte 1965: 54].

From this point of , in the mind of the historian there was only a pragmatic and comfortable perspective, which only looked at achievements, results in the government administration of Juan Vicente Gómez, of which he was an active part, above any other consideration that implied questioning and judging the means used by the dictator to achieve those results, which, although satisfactory for the Republic, brought with them persecution, jail and exile for those who dared to criticize his authoritarian and cruel methods of exercising power. As one might say, using the psychological analogy of the glass half full or the glass half empty, those who

practice positivism, or those who are positive, as was the case with Gil Fortoul, always see the glass as half full.

Hence, criticism, and somehow indifference in terms of merit, has been the price that history has charged to such brilliant men as José Gil Fortoul, when not the ironic questioning as that of Simón Alberto Consalvi, or the biting, cruel and hurtful as that of Domingo Alberto Rangel and so many other historians or scholars of the social and political evolution of Venezuela, who, in the face of the great historian, place a low volume in front of myths and applause, when it comes to considering his intellectual and human worth, since it could be said that the merit that has been recognized in its full dimension, is fundamentally that of having been the author of his masterpiece, the Constitutional History of Venezuela.

Bibliography

Fundación Polar (1988). Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela. Caracas.

Penzini Hernández Juan (1972). Vida y obra de José Gil Fortoul (1861-1943). Edited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Caracas.

Rangel Domingo Alberto (1975). Gómez el amo del poder. Vadell Hermanos. Valencia, Venezuela.

Salcedo Bastardo J. L. (1974). Historia Fundamental de Venezuela. Universidad Central de Venezuela. Ediciones de la Biblioteca. Caracas.

Internet sources

Consalvi Simón Alberto. Juan Vicente Gómez: The years of sympathy, 1910-1914. At: <http://juanvicentegomezpresidente.blogspot.com/2018/>

Vitoria María Ángeles. Philosophica. In: Enciclopedia Filosófica online. <http://www.philosophica.info/voces/positivismo/Positivismo.html>.

