The Cosmic Race
José Vasconcelos

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) was among the most important and influential Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century. His childhood was spent partly on the U.S.–Mexican border, where he attended schools in Eagle Pass, Texas. During his formative years, Vasconcelos developed a profound suspicion of Americans, whom he viewed as crassly pragmatic, arrogant, shallow, aggressive, and lacking in spirituality. Undoubtedly, he was also offended by the fact that many Americans continued to endorse ideas like those espoused earlier in the century by their compatriot Joel Poinsett. Like certain other Latin Americans of the turn of the century—such as the Uruguayan philosopher José Enrique Rodó, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Dario, and the Cuban patriot José Martí—Vasconcelos’s thought developed in part as a reaction against North America and its materialistic values. He felt that Latin Americans must avoid imitating American culture, and that in order to do that successfully they would need a guiding philosophy, one that celebrated their strengths and virtues. In this spirit, he argued that the Latin American mestizo constituted a new race, a “cosmic race,” which combined the virtues of Indians and Europeans. This, Vasconcelos believed, would be the race of the future.

While Vasconcelos’s theory turned the white supremacist racism of the day on its head, it remains at heart a racist theory. By imputing inevitable characteristics to the various races of the earth, Vasconcelos engages in rather reckless stereotyping. His romantic notion of the spiritual essence of his people and of the soullessness of Anglo-Saxon culture, together with his increasing bitterness at the course of events in Mexico, would lead him to embrace fascism and anti-Semitism during World War II.

For all his failings, Vasconcelos remains a uniquely engaging figure. Active in the Mexican revolution from its earliest days, he would serve as Mexico’s secretary of education, and in this capacity he acted with boundless energy and idealism. An advocate of Indian literacy, he greatly increased the presence of education in the countryside; his Ministry of Public Education produced massive quantities of inexpensive workbooks and textbooks; and the ministry’s department of fine arts sponsored the work of some of Mexico’s greatest modern artists, including the muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as musicians Manuel M.
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