

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 Darío, 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.



Cortés and La Malinche, a mural by José Clemente Orozco.
(National Preparatory School, Mexico City)

Ponce and Julián Carrillo. At odds with the Mexican government after 1924, he ran unsuccessfully for president in 1930 in an energetic campaign plagued by violence and fraud on the part of the newly formed official government party.

Greece laid the foundations of Western or European civilization; the white civilization that, upon expanding, reached the forgotten shores of the American continent in order to consummate the task of re-civilization and re-population. Thus we have the four stages and the four racial trunks: the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White. The latter, after organizing itself in Europe, has become the invader of the world, and has considered itself destined to rule, as did each of the previous races during their time of power. It is clear that domination by the whites will also be temporary, but their mission is to serve as a bridge. The white race has brought the world to a state in which all human types and cultures will be able to fuse with each other. The civilization developed and organized in our times by the whites has set the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past...

Let us recognize that it was a disgrace not to have proceeded with the cohesion demonstrated by those to the north, that prodigious race which we are accustomed to lavish with insults only because they have won each hand at the secular fight. They triumph because they join to their practical talents the clear vision of a great destiny. They keep present the intuition of a definite historical mission, while we get lost in the labyrinth of verbal chimeras. It seems as if God Himself guided the steps of the Anglo-Saxon cause, while we kill each other on account of dogma or declare ourselves atheists. How those mighty empire builders must laugh at our groundless arrogance and Latin vanity! They do not clutter their mind with the Ciceronian weight of phraseology, nor have they in their blood the contradictory instincts of a mixture of dissimilar races, but they committed the sin of destroying those races, while we assimilated them, and this gives us new rights and hopes for a mission without precedent in history.

For this reason, adverse obstacles do not move us to surrender, for we vaguely feel that they will help us to discover our way. Precisely in our differences, we find the way. If we simply imitate, we lose. If we discover and create, we shall overcome. The advantage of our tradition is that it has greater facility of sympathy toward strangers. This implies that our civilization, with all defects, may be the chosen one to assimilate and to transform mankind into a new type; that within our civilization, the warp, the multiple and rich plasma of future humanity is thus being prepared. This mandate from history is first noticed in that abundance of love that allowed the Spaniard to create a new race with the Indian and the Black, profusely spreading white ancestry through the soldier who begat a native family, and Occidental culture through the doctrine and example of the missionaries who placed the Indians in condition to enter into the new stage... Spanish colonization created mixed races, this signals its character, fixes its responsibility, and defines its future. The English kept on mixing only with the whites and annihilated the natives. Even today, they continue to annihilate them in a sordid and economic fight, more efficient yet than armed conquest. This proves their limitation and is indication of their decadence. The situation is equivalent, in a larger scale, to the incestuous marriages of the pharaohs which undermined the virtues of the race; and it contradicts the ulterior goals of history to attain the fusion of peoples and cultures. To build an English world and to exterminate the red man, so that Northern Europe could be renovated all over an America made up with pure whites, is no more than a repetition of the triumphant process of a conquering race. This was already attempted by the red man and by all strong and homogeneous races, but it does not solve the human problem. America was not kept in reserve for five thousand years for such a petty goal.

The purpose of the new and ancient continent is much more important. Its predestination obeys the design of constituting the cradle of a fifth race into which all nations will fuse with each other to replace the four races that have been forging History apart from each other. The dispersion will come to an end on American soil; unity will be consummated there by the triumph of fecund love and the improvement of all the human races. In this fashion, the synthetic race that shall gather all the treasures of History in order to give expression to universal desire shall be created. . . .

The so-called Latin peoples . . . are the ones called upon to consummate this mission. . . . [They] insist on not taking the ethnic factor too much into account for their sexual relations, perhaps because from the beginning they are not, properly speaking, Latins but a conglomeration of different types and races. Whatever opinions one may express in this respect, and whatever repugnance caused by prejudice one may harbor, the truth is that the mixture of races has taken place and continues to be consummated. It is in this fusion of ethnic stocks that we should look for the fundamental characteristic of Ibero-American idiosyncrasy. . . . In Latin America . . . a thousand bridges are available for the sincere and cordial fusion of all races. The ethnic barricading of those to the north in contrast to the much more open sympathy of those to the south is the most important factor, and at the same time, the most favorable to us, if one reflects even superficially upon the future, because it will be seen immediately that we belong to tomorrow, while the Anglo-Saxons are gradually becoming more a part of yesterday. The Yankees will end up building the last great empire of a single race, the final empire of White supremacy. Meanwhile, we will continue to suffer the vast chaos of an ethnic stock in formation, contaminated by the fermentation of all types, but secure of the avatar into a better race. In Spanish America, Nature will no longer repeat one of her partial attempts. This time, the race that will come out of the forgotten Atlantis will no longer be a race of a single color or of particular features. The future race will not be a fifth, or a sixth race, destined to prevail over its ancestors. What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the syncretical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision. . . .

How different the sounds of the Ibero-American development [from that of the Anglo-Saxons]! They resemble the profound scherzo of a deep and infinite symphony: Voices that bring accents from Atlantis; depths contained in the pupil of the red man, who knew so much, so many thousand years ago, and now seems to have forgotten everything. His soul resembles the old Mayan *cenote* [natural well] of green waters, laying deep and still, in the middle of

the forest, for so many centuries since, that not even its legend remains any more. This infinite quietude is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust. There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle, and discover I know not what folds and newer dimensions. The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes: Judaeic striae hidden within the Castilian blood since the days of the cruel expulsion now reveal themselves, along with Arabian melancholy, as a remainder of the sickly Muslim sensuality. Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all? There is the Hindu, who also will come, who has already arrived by way of the spirit, and although he is the last one to arrive, he seems the closest relative. . . . So many races that have come and others that will come. In this manner, a sensitive and ample heart will be taking shape within us; a heart that embraces and contains everything and is moved with sympathy, but, full of vigor, imposes new laws upon the world. . . .

We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race.