

NEW LAW OF THREE STAGES

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[150] [837] At various times in recent years, a view, which is certainly correct, has been formulated that nationalities are a form of social organization that will soon be replaced by federations of peoples united among themselves, not solely by a political pact, or by the sole effect of commercial interests, but by those more intimate ties of tradition, language, and blood. According to this theory—sketched prior to the war [of 1914] by the Germans and contradicted in certain respects by the victors—nationalities constitute a transitional form that begins at the end of the Middle Ages and reaches full splendor at the end of the 19th century. This is an epoch that sees men of the same race and the same language divide themselves into independent partitions and subpartitions in combat one against another or that stay apart even when they come from the same root [tronco].

People of distinct languages and races are more or less forced together to constitute nations that are never fused together, such as Austria-Hungary, or large kingdoms that have come to be almost homogeneous, such as England and Spain. Other times, as in the case of the countries of America, on account of the nature of the terrain, one single bloodline has been seen to separate out and subdivide an ancient, forceful, powerful empire [dominación], so as to become twenty weak nations. And these absurdities, due to circumstances [838] of territory, economics, and politics, circumstances which are petty and fortuitous

¹ All footnotes are translator's notes. This essay ("Nueva ley de los tres estados") was first published in 1921, in the second volume of *El Maestro* (vol. II, no. 2, noviembre de 1921, pp.150-158), a journal which Vasconcelos founded as part of his early initiatives upon becoming the Rector of the Universidad Nacional de México. The essay was reprinted in Vasconcelos's *Obras Completas II* (Mexico, 1958), pp.837-48. The pagination from both the original journal printing and the reprinting in the *Obras* is given inline in square brackets. Thanks to Manuel Vargas and Robert Sanchez for comments on earlier drafts.

from the point of view of spirit, nevertheless take root in the heart of peoples, giving place to the thousand prejudices and aberrations of national patriotism.

Patriotism corresponds to nationalism and resolves itself into the cult of the flag and the adherence to the territory of an ancient province, of a great empire. Where does this feeling come from, one that is strange to a sober reflection?

Before the founding of nationalities there were tribes and great empires. The great military empire was an expression of the tribe, and both arose from the conquest that blindly united peoples together. To be sure, in Greece and Rome, besides the military yoke and the geographical situation, there was certainly a community [151] of blood and a common language, but despite this, both empires consisted in conglomerations of peoples and races united out of necessity and ready to disintegrate as soon as the threat of swords ceased. In these empires, the conqueror does not bring about assimilation but subjugation, does not impose his language or his gods; his conquest is not spiritual and for this reason it neither endures nor transforms the conquered or even attempts to create with them a new humanity.

The national ideal represents progress from such a primitive form of organization, because it tends to form more homogeneous organisms. Sometimes it doesn't succeed, as in the case of Austria-Hungary, because the work of force alone isn't permanent. But when nationality is constituted on the basis of a generous ideal, one achieves success like France, which is admirable for its devotion to liberty, or like Spain, which is great because it knew how to create a new world in America. Nevertheless, nationality is not the final type of social organization, because, like the warring tribe and the ancient empire, nationality is founded on the necessities of geography, on the advantages of commerce and on the dictates of force, causes which are totally foreign to human will. From the outset civilization is a struggle between natural forces, which follow a determinate, fixed, persistent trajectory, and spiritual forces, which strive to create a new order above necessity and above an endless going in circles. This is the struggle between movement in a spiral, which is that [839] of the spirit, and that of the circle, which represents necessity constrained to repeat itself. By imposing laws on things, the power of the spirit is manifest in the social order and in a yearning for a country that is greater and more free. On account of this, each day makes the arbitrary divisions that the environment have imposed on us more intolerable to us, like the fact, for example, that one is a Chilean patriot and another an Argentinian patriot, and so on. In the same manner, our conscience demands that politics is not governed by local conveniences and is not limited by obstacles of geography, but rather that it obeys the dictates of spirit, whose mission is to reshape the environment so as to impose on it a new law and meaning. This contemporary striving to go

beyond patriotism, to expand [dilatarse] frontiers, to observe [celebrar] pacts and alliances according to our taste and not in accordance with material conveniences, this power of spirit that affirms itself in every order as what overcomes is what permits us to formulate a law of development, a kind of ‘law of the three stages’—taking from Comte only the number—a law of three periods of the organization of peoples.²

The first of these stages is the materialist period in which the interactions from tribe to tribe are subject to the necessities and hazards of migrations and bartering of products. The law of this first stage is war. The second period we call intellectualist [152] because in it international relations are founded on convenience and calculation; intelligence begins to triumph over brute force and strategic borders are established after war has defined the power of each nation. The great empires of antiquity were characterized by features of the first and second periods, and modern nation-states still live in the second. The third period is still to come, and we call it the aesthetic period because in it the relations of peoples will be ruled freely by sympathy and taste. Taste, which is the supreme law of interior life and which is manifest outwardly as sympathy and beauty, will then come to be the indisputable norm of public order and of relations between States.³

The arrival of the period of taste and of sympathy will be sufficient to do away with the discord between men, because though the antipathies and opinions of aesthetic judgment are often [840] deep, they are resolved in jubilation and not in rancor, and the other conflicts, the genuine conflicts, depend on material causes which relative economic equality alone is able to do

² Vasconcelos is referring to Auguste Comte’s claim at the outset of the first volume of his influential *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Paris, 1830) that he had discovered a ‘great and fundamental law’ concerning the progressive development of ‘human spirit’, that it necessarily passes successively through three different stages: ‘the theological, or fictional’; ‘the metaphysical, or abstract’; and then ‘the scientific, or positive’ as the highest form of development, in which ‘observation and reasoning’ is used to establish the ‘invariable relations of succession and similarity’ among phenomena (1830: 3-5). For discussion of the pervasive influence of positivism in general and Comte in particular on Mexican philosophy during the early 1900s, see Alexander Stehn, ‘From Positivism to Anti-Positivism in Mexico’, G. Gilson & I. Levinson (eds.), *Latin American Positivism: New Historical and Philosophic Essays* (Lexington, 2012)

³ With this ordering, Vasconcelos directly rejects the ‘positivist’ thesis concerning the ultimate priority of the intellectual-scientific (see previous note), and also signals his continuing allegiance to what might be called the ‘aesthetic suprematist’ theory of value that he had already begun to articulate in his short collection *Monismo estético* (1918) and which will inform his writings on the philosophy and sociology of race and ethnicity (including *La Raza Cósmica* (1925), but which will only find full expression a decade later in his *Estética* (1936).

away with. In fact, discord and war depend upon humans reproducing excessively on a planet whose surface is finite, but education, by shifting the focus away from quantity toward perfecting quality, will convert man into something precious that will be proud of each of its kin and full of joy. On account of this, material conflicts will be resolved and life will retain only the pains that serve for the stimulation of spirit and which prevent it from falling into the conformity which is the cause of all that is mediocre and mundane.

Let us proceed toward the period that is governed by the law of taste! Very strong and intense appetites are still at work, but they will be satiated or disappear, because clear-sighted consciousness rejects these in order to lose itself in the infinite power.

The Third Period in Hispano-America

To make this concrete for our Hispano-American world, what is necessary for us to do in order to hasten the arrival of the aesthetic period of humanity?

Political measures, economic measures, moral measures have been suggested. Political union was foreseen by Simón Bolívar—the most illustrious genius of our race. His enlightened plans appear perfect even today. Unfortunately, the claim of nationality, the prejudices of the church [campanario], and physical barriers have made it so that it exists only as a dream, while it should be a magnificent reality. In this case the physical environment has contributed to our adopting dubious theories which multiply patriotisms in the name of small glories, at the expense of grand humanitarian and ethnic ideals. This disorientation of the sentiments [153] has brought about the whole of this chaotic century of our continental history, in which we have seen brothers attack each other and in which we have contemplated with disgust and amazement that at times our countries had to accept foreign assistance in order to defend their interests against aggression by forces of the same lineage [estirpe]. Fortunately, Mexico has not undertaken a war of aggression, but if tomorrow [841] criminal governments were to try to create a conflict, our duty will be to oppose these resolutions and refuse to fight against the flag of Guatemala or any of the flags that are flying south of us. For in the very moment that we look toward the south, patriotism comes to an end and the much greater love for the race on the continent is born in our hearts.

Today souls are quite close but hands remain distant. The gloomy days of Porfirismo are no longer, when contemporary thinkers made the obtuse despot believe that it was enough to have a good ambassador in Washington, and moreover that it was necessary to send some rich lord to France in order to

convince the French that we didn't all wear feathers [que no todos usábamos plumas]. We are past those sad days, and all of Latin America is past the period of aping of what is French [afrancesamiento] and what is foreign [extranjerismo], a period in which we mimicked like monkeys the gestures of culture without insight into their meaning. All of this has passed, but now it is necessary that a new active era gain momentum, a great epoch of construction and creation, of bridges and railways, of ships and transport, the great epoch in which spirit, taking advantage of the very force of things, makes them in its manner and unifies forever that which nature divided with the august provisioning of mountain ranges, forests, and seas.

Let us take on material projects, but projects whose aim is not profit but service to much nobler interests, and profit will come as an addition. Let us engage in politics and not simply nationalistic politics but continental and human politics, placing Hispano-American criteria at the top of all of our political actions, after justice in internal affairs is achieved, as the invariable norm of all our patriotic actions.

The Economic Barrier

One of the calamities inherent in nationalism is the customs office, which marks the border with the stamp of expropriation and of disunity. The first thing we should get rid of is customs. The 'Zollverein' or customs union: this is the first path of our salvation as a race. During the European war, we were supposed to observe a general pact, but though it was not done this way, we should immediately get rid of [842] the customs that exist between, at the very least, Mexico and Guatemala, [154] between Uruguay and Argentina, between Chile and Peru. A simple treaty of free commerce between Mexico and Guatemala would have meant more for Latin-American unity than all of the exhibitions and absurd projects that the spurious government employed to distract the attention of the naive, not knowing how we could take advantage of the great European conflict. All of the platitudes that were repeated at the time by their advocates with the pompous title of the Carranza Doctrine were empty, just as everything that the hand of the despot touches is criminal and empty.

Propaganda Free of Grudges

A good number of those engaging in propaganda for the Latin-American union base their beliefs on more or less legitimate attacks against the United

States of the North. Particularly in recent years, and in response to inexcusable actions [by the U.S.], the Hispano-American liberals, who had at the start of the century demonstrated enthusiasm for almost everything Anglo-Saxon, now justly view with suspicion the transformation of the noble Republic of Lincoln into a vast, menacing empire. These worries are legitimate, but it is necessary to make it explicit that Latin-American union is not only an act of defense, but also an ideal that is much older than the contemporary situation and much nobler than any interests of the moment, a movement founded upon the right that lies in us to unite ourselves freely on account of our sympathies and interests and in accordance with the spiritual law that, today, is transforming social organization on the planet. The hour of rivalries, if it is inevitable, should be very far away, since on the continent there is ample free space for the activity of the two races which populate it, and both need the benefits that result from fair treatment, without the shadow of hate, though protected by the most zealous autonomy. At the same time, we need to convince ourselves that we do not assert our strength by hurling curses, but by correcting the domestic wrongs that are the determining cause of our calamities. To have the right to criticize foreign peculiarities it is necessary to be morally superior to the foreigner, and a people who are subject to despotism cannot make accusations about the vices of others, [843] nor do they have the right to render opinions about them. The one thing that they have is a duty, the pressing duty, the primordial duty, to overthrow, to destroy, to annihilate the despot. Rightly so, the United States will laugh at our attacks so long as they see that domestically our social life is corrupt. That's why we should not grant the right to present themselves as champions of Hispano-Americanism or of patriotism to Cipriano Castro, or to Victoriano Huerta, or to other such false heroes created by stupidity and wrongdoing.⁴ Those who oppress and debase their brothers do not and will not have a place in the annals [*páginas*] of the glories of the Continent. [155]

Despotism and Patriotism

Countries that do not support prolonged dictatorships rarely suffer foreign aggression. Chile and Argentina, for example, have been left alone because it is difficult to attack a people whose domestic life is dignified. By contrast, the Venezuela of Cipriano Castro was embattled because it was founded on injustice and made enemies of the best sons of Venezuela. A Columbia run by clerics had

⁴ Cipriano Castro was President of Venezuela from 1899-1908; Victoriano Huerta was President of Mexico from 1913-1914. Both took office as a result of the use of force.

to lose Panama. The Mexico of Santa Anna, sick with vainglory and lies, had to provoke the aggressions that were so costly to our country. Despots make illegitimate concessions to foreigners or persecute nationals to such a point that a foreigner comes to enjoy better privileges, but just as the hour of justice arrives, just as the people prepare themselves for revenge, the Victoriano Huertas and with Cipriano Castros of the Continent insult the United States of the North in order to malign the revolutionaries they are fighting against, accusing them of complicity with those in power. Then deceived nationals cry out in the streets in defense of the despot, against whom they should be fighting. In this way despotism and patriotism work against the interests of our civilization and make it so that we cannot unite ourselves. For we cannot unite as long as we are not all free, as long as we do not comprehend that the first thesis of the Hispano-American should be the annihilation of tyrannies, of all the tyrannies on the Continent. [844]

The Problem of Brazil

The force of spiritual impulses is able to reshape geography and erase all the prejudices of nationalism at once. But does not Brazil just have a different language, distinct traditions and origins from ours, and are not its interests going to be in conflict with those of Spanish America?

Brazil achieved its independence peacefully, in such a way that the radical transformations produced from the Bravo to the Plata by the wars of independence have not been manifest there. Socially and politically, Brazil remains united with its country of origin much more intimately than we are with Spain. For this reason and due to the normal evolution of things, Brazil has remained criollo; it has not broken its tradition, it has not made something new to the same degree that we have done.

On the other hand, the great resources that the country possesses, its immense and extremely fertile territory, its growing population, all lead it to turn itself into a great power, one of the foremost of the world, just as science learns how to overcome the inconveniences that excessive heat places upon human life, but without detracting from its [156] enlivening richness or from the magnificent potential which it gives to the environment.

Perhaps within a century, Brazil, swollen with population, will begin to open up new paths; perhaps it will feel itself enveloped by a Hispanic embrace from the Plata, through Bolivia and Peru, up to Columbia and Venezuela, and just as the United States of America coveted and obtained California, Brazil might come to covet Peru and will obtain it, if Peru does not populate

beforehand all of the region of the Amazon that it maintains with its noble hard-working race—a region where Brazil has already made considerable advances, thanks to the stagnancy of the Peruvian population. And in the case of Brazil, there are many other adverse symptoms that must be added: for even if the sentiment of the people affirms the sincere desire for union, why is so much money wasted in those regions when it is needed for domestic development? Together with many benefits, we have inherited an infinity of prejudices and [845] vices from Europe: the ambition for territory even when we do not need it; the nationalism which wastes collective efforts by feeding foolish rivalries but disregards those large-scale projects that are generative and practically productive. One needs to look only at a map of South America to understand the work done by a narrow and ambitious nationalism that has dominated us for a century. Countries that are divided, that are dispersed, disputes about borders, mountain ranges that separate peoples, deserts that extend these distances, jealousies that deepen, and above all, a dream that seems empty, a dream formulated a century ago by the prophetic voice of a liberator that we, little men that we are, have not been able to fulfill.

Facts, we are told, possess an insurmountable force; the hard reality of the facts, in effect, appear to us at times stronger than the value of words, and after all the one who thinks and attempts to reform with thought only has words. At the same time, however, we have to replace this English doctrine with another, one that corresponds to the third period of social relations, the doctrine that spirit is nothing other than a victorious force over the blind law of facts, and that if this force were not able to reshape the surrounding environment then humanity would never have raised itself above the level of brutes. An intelligent study of history shows that the actions, volitions, aspirations of men form a supreme current that runs above the environment and all of the commonplaces of materialism. The soul of vigorous and enlightened peoples constitutes a much more important factor than all of the fates of the environment. The history of our continent began with a change in the geography of the world; it will be nothing strange, then, that over the years we see a spiritual change at work, one which transforms human relations so as to depend, now not on commerce, nor on the physical environment, [157] nor on strategic necessity, but rather on free choice [albedrío] and enjoyment [goce].

Everything I am trying to express, obscurely and vaguely, once appeared very clearly to me, and it was not through the operation of rational reason [razón racional], which is by itself empty of significance, but rather by that other supreme judgment that Kant called ‘aesthetic judgment’, from which it is easy to derive a law of affinities and combinations which are neither a-logical nor logical, but aesthetic and synthetic. This event happened in a theater in

Lima; the announcement of dances and songs of Brazil had filled the room, the lushness of those beautiful and lively women, with sweet and sentimental eyes, entertaining as we wait [entretenía la espera].

Finally the Brazilian performer came out and the *machichas* and *fados* began, alternating with songs in Portuguese. She was sweet and delicate, with immense black eyes and a fascinating smoothness. With a clear voice and a touch of unforgettable grace she sang and repeated a verse: 'there is no place like Sertao', and she moved with the melodious ease of an Iberian ballerina. Watching her, we seemed to be in the presence of one of the sisters of Eça de Queiroz and even were made to think of the inviting caresses that he told us about in his picaresque and magnificent style.⁵

Apart from literary associations, the intense and spontaneous art of the dancer produced enjoyment in us like that of someone who turns to something unknown or very distant from himself, or as if from the bottom of our ethnic consciousness emotions were being born of such profound joy that had never been tasted. It was strange but not discordant. It was not the sound of Saxon 'rag-time', so often listened to but never desired, which seems to develop a sphere of sensibility in which we cannot and do not want to enter. It was a song heard for the first time, and yet it sounded lovely and familiar, like the voice of a lover known in dreams and whose cry reveals the lush forests and boundless confines of prodigious Brazil, where a sister race welcomes us and invites us to stay. Through this the chorus of the song awoke inner music: 'there is no place like Sertao', and the enigmatic Sertao rose in the imagination like a symbol of all of sweet South America.

Many people will say that this is a trivial way to be discussing serious problems. For me, however, the lesson of the dancer seems to be much deeper than many sociological explanations [sociologías]: she teaches that, since these two related races, the Brazilian and our own, are joined together by growth and proximity, they are not going to remain as we are with others, stuck but not blended together [pegados, pero no confundidos]; rather, here sympathy will unite consciousnesses, and amorous passion will break political barriers. Here a common aesthetic sensibility will develop a homogeneous culture; a collective ideal will prevail over the rivalries of interest, and being one [847] in soul, we will be one in history and in resources—the Hispanos and the Lusitanos—until the day when the same thing can be said of all the peoples of the land, in this Indo-Spanish civilization [158] that has already for some time adopted the motto: America for Humanity.

⁵ José Maria de Eça de Queirós was a well-known Portuguese writer from the late 19th century.

If it is true that we are intending to create a civilization that is beneficial for all humanity, then won't our cult of race result in a regressive movement in relation to those socialist ideals that already preach the sacrifice of patriotism in order to better serve the general interest of all men?

It will not be a regress, because the aesthetic era presupposes that not only nations but also individuals govern their actions not by the motive of greed or hate, but by the law of beauty and of love which is innate in our hearts.

Once the economic conflicts are resolved equitably, and since there will then be no exploitation and no slaves, there will no longer exist international enmities, or antipathies of race, and then each people will cultivate its own characteristics without being animated by rivalry, but with the desire to enrich the common wealth of civilization. Individual differences will be a source of stimulation and joy, and they will transform themselves without conflicts into the common yearning that impels us upwards.

Richness within unity, that is, the individual, and each lineage [estirpe] is like a genus in the multiplicity of the aspects of beauty. And in the moral order a lineage is constituted by ideas and the special manner of conceiving of what is beautiful, much more so than by blood. This way of considering the process of history is not based on arbitrary classification, but corresponds to the same process of the human spirit in its development on earth. First the individual is dominated by appetite, which is governed by necessity; then intelligence expands the action of the ego and adapts itself to a part of the world; and finally the aesthetic sense appears, aesthetic judgment as distinct from and superior to the intellectual and the ethical, exploring the universe in order to construct a world that is disinterested and better than the others.⁶ Far from the individual being a product and consequence of their environment, the miracle of consciousness is what constructs and transforms the environment, the universe being nothing more than an illusion of ours, a kind of nebula that surrounds [848] the soul and which perhaps is a faithful representation [trasunto] of divine reality, but not the reality itself.

⁶ Above Vasconcelos has already mentioned Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, and named it as 'supreme'; with 'disinterestedness' Vasconcelos now highlights one of the central values that Kant takes to function as a standard in aesthetic judgment itself. In addition to Kant, however, Vasconcelos is likely also alluding to an influential essay from 1916 by his contemporary, Antonio Caso, which had been recently re-published in an expanded second edition in 1919, with the title *La existencia como economía, como disinterés y como caridad*, in which Caso also offers a critique of positivism by means of appeal to aesthetic and other spiritual (ultimately, Christian) values.