

HOW TO READ *LA RAZA CÓSMICA*

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ABSTRACT: The first edition of José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* appeared in 1925. Although the book is recognized as a classic of twentieth-century Latin American philosophy, its interpretation has been much debated. In order to achieve a better understanding of the work, five discursive levels are distinguished within the text: the struggle between the two Americas, the destiny of South America, the relations between human races and miscegenation (*mestizaje*), the philosophy of history, and the travel memoir.

RESUMEN: La primera edición de *La raza cósmica*, de José Vasconcelos, apareció en 1925. Aunque la obra es reconocida como un clásico de la filosofía latinoamericana del siglo XX, su interpretación ha sido objeto de intenso debate. Para lograr una mejor comprensión del texto, se distinguen en él cinco niveles discursivos: la lucha entre las dos Américas, el destino de América del Sur, las relaciones entre las razas humanas y el mestizaje, la filosofía de la historia y el relato de viajes.

Keywords: Vasconcelos, *raza*, miscegenation, Latin America.

The first edition of *La raza cósmica* was printed in Madrid in 1925 by the Agencia Mundial de Librería. The book achieved wider circulation after the publishing house Espasa Calpe released a second edition in 1948 and distributed it throughout Ibero-America. It should be noted that the 1925 and 1948 texts are not identical. The second adds a brief prologue, eliminates the chapters on Uruguay and Chile, and cuts several passages from the chapters on Argentina and Brazil. On the centenary of its first edition, I will examine both versions of the book from the perspective of discourse analysis. I will argue that *La raza cósmica* should not be read as a philosophical monograph or a scientific article, but as a multidimensional essay in which biographical, biological, geographical,

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sociological, historical, literary, and philosophical elements are combined. My proposal consists of discerning within the work five discursive levels with different antecedents, traditions, contexts, arguments, rhetorical strategies, and purposes. Although these levels are interwoven within the text, it seems to me that if we distinguish them in order to then reconnect them, we will achieve a more illuminating reading of this classic work of thought in the Spanish language.¹

1. Discourse on the Two Americas

The first discursive level of *La raza cósmica* that I will highlight here concerns the conflict between Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America. The intellectual tradition to which Vasconcelos belongs is distrustful of the powerful neighbor to the north and proposes that Latin American countries unite to resist it. This project goes back to Simón Bolívar's proposal to create a confederation of the nations that had formerly belonged to the Spanish empire. Vasconcelos always subscribed to the Bolivarian ideal, as he believed that this project was the only way in which the countries of Latin America could shake off the political and economic yoke of the United States, which, with its Monroe Doctrine, had declared the entire continent its zone of influence. Vasconcelos's discourse belongs to what we might now call a decolonizing current, with the distinctive feature that it does not find its principal antagonist in Europe—or not only in Europe—but above all in the United States, the new imperial power that sought to subjugate the entire continent.

The struggle between the two Americas is a deep and enduring preoccupation in Vasconcelos's life. The theme reappears again and again in his writings until the end of his days. As a child, the author experienced racial discrimination firsthand when he lived on the border, and later, as a young man, he was outraged by United States interventions in Mexico and other countries. It is no exaggeration to say that his animosity toward the country to the north functions as a compass for his thought. One cannot understand Vasconcelos's disconcerting sympathy with Germany during the Second World War without taking into account that he believed a German victory would liberate Latin America from the yoke of the United States. Nor can one understand his return to the Catholic Church in those same years without recalling that he reached the conclusion that reinforcing our Catholic tradition was indispensable for resisting American cultural penetration.

Vasconcelos maintains that the *raza cósmica* will be the triumph of the Iberian civilization that has known how to mix with other *razas*. However, Vasconcelos carries his reflection beyond that struggle and conceives of it as a definitive moment in the history of humanity. This turn that Vasconcelos gives to his discourse distinguishes it from other writings about the struggle between the two

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Americas. From a reflection on the political history of the continent, Vasconcelos advances toward a reflection on the philosophy of human history. In this way, the triumph of the *raza cósmica* will also be a triumph of humanity, which will reach the highest moment of its becoming. This historical leap cannot be made by the white Anglo Saxons because they have not wished to mix; moreover, they have been determined to exterminate the races that previously occupied their territory—as was the case with the indigenous peoples of the United States—to enslave distant peoples—as happened with the millions of human beings extracted from Africa—and to discriminate against the races they consider inferior—as with the Mexicans who remained in the territory won in the war of 1848. For all these reasons, it will not be the white Anglo Saxons who provide an impetus to the process of forming the new *raza cósmica*; on the contrary, they will most likely do everything they can to obstruct it.

Before Vasconcelos, other authors reflected on the conflictive relationship between the two Americas; one of them was the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, author of *Ariel*, a work that had great impact throughout Latin America. Rodó contrasted the conceptions of life of the Anglo-Saxon Americans with those of the Latin Americans, affirming that while the former had an advantage in the material domain, the latter had one in the spiritual. This thesis was taken up by Vasconcelos and plays an important role in *La raza cósmica*. Although other distinguished authors such as José Martí, Rubén Darío, Manuel Ugarte, Carlos Pereyra, and the aforementioned José Enrique Rodó had developed the theme of the two Americas in various ways, it was Vasconcelos who injected it with a fully philosophical, even universal character. We can say, therefore, that the treatment of the theme has a before and an after marked by *La raza cósmica*. What characterizes this book is the philosophical turn it imparts to this political and intellectual movement. It would not be easy to imagine the subsequent Latin Americanist philosophy of authors such as Leopoldo Zea without the impetus that Vasconcelos gave to the theme in *La raza cósmica*. And, for the same reason, it would not be easy to conceive of Latin American liberation philosophy without the Vasconcelian antecedent—for example, Enrique Dussel's critique of Eurocentric history owes a great deal to Vasconcelos. Even though these authors may not have adopted the theses of *La raza cósmica*, one can maintain that they are inspired by the spirit, ambition, and loftiness with which Vasconcelos wrote his book.

2. Discourse on South America

The second intellectual tradition into which *La raza cósmica* is inserted concerns South America in particular and its potentialities. What is defended within this current of thought is that South America is a land unique in the world, one destined to become the nerve center of humanity's future. In no few studies of the region, *mestizaje* was seen as a blight; such is the case with *Nuestra América*

(1913) by the Argentine positivist Carlos Octavio Bunge. However, in other studies conducted in those years, *mestizaje*, even with the indigenous race, was valued as an advantage, as the Argentine Ricardo Rojas maintained in his work *Eurindia* (1924). Accordingly, one could say that *La raza cósmica* belongs among studies of this second type, which view the mixture of races in South America favorably. Nevertheless, for Vasconcelos it was important to clarify that this mixture had as its primordial element the white race—or rather, the white races of southern Europe, principally of Spaniards, Portuguese, and Italians. Around this nucleus, the other races were added in a smaller proportion: Blacks, Asians, and Indians.

An approach to *La raza cósmica* from the perspective of discourse analysis must attend to the textual unity of the work. As I noted above, the 1948 edition cut Vasconcelos's visits to Uruguay (pp. 138–50 of the first edition) and Chile (pp. 240–290). The book loses a great deal as a result, because the narration on Chile is one of the most interesting. The section on Uruguay is briefer and more superficial, but it is not without interest. Why were these sections removed in 1948? We can imagine several answers. One is that Vasconcelos was critical not only of the governments of Uruguay and Chile, but also of certain sectors of both countries' societies, which seemed to him dominated by a landowning, militaristic, and foreign-oriented oligarchy. Vasconcelos's stay in Chile was embroiled in a controversy that caused several sectors of the press and public opinion in that Andean country to condemn the attitude of the itinerant Mexican ambassador. The anecdote is as follows: Vasconcelos visited the mausoleum of General Manuel Baquedano, which commemorates the Chilean victory in the War of the Pacific. Vasconcelos was irritated by this gesture of arrogance and declared that the peoples of the Americas should overcome their petty nationalisms and unite as brothers in the struggle against the true enemy: the United States. But Vasconcelos did not merely pass judgment on Chile's proud nationalism; he also openly supported students opposing the government. In a speech to the young rebels, Vasconcelos passionately attacked Chilean landlordism, militarism, and clericalism and held up the Mexican Revolution as an example of a social movement that defended the legitimate interests of the people. It is likely that the editors at Espasa Calpe thought that some Chilean and Uruguayan readers might still react negatively and that, for commercial reasons, it was preferable to eliminate those sections. But it cannot be ruled out that Vasconcelos himself decided to cut them because he no longer identified with the revolutionary message he had delivered in Santiago, given that his political positions had shifted to the right.

There is another explanation for why the Chile and Uruguay sections were removed: both narratives diverted the reader from the argument. The focus of the book was on the journey to Brazil and Argentina; the visits to Uruguay and Chile were irrelevant to one of the principal theses defended in the work, namely, that

the future of humanity lay in the territories of the first two countries. Vasconcelos was fascinated with South America, above all with Argentina and Brazil. One cannot understand *La raza cósmica* without that fascination, which reached the deepest recesses of the author's spirit. There is a South American poetics in *La raza cósmica* that, at times, recalls Neruda's *Canto General* in its exaltation of the natural landscape. The book is the testimony of a man who is spellbound by everything he discovers. It is an aesthetic journey, but also a spiritual one. Vasconcelos was awed by the richness of the territory, the beauty of the landscapes, the abundance of nature. He was also charmed by the people—the beauty of the women, the gallantry of the men, the culture of the cities and the countryside, the spirit of work and progress, the zeal for education and civilization. When one reads the pages of his journey through those regions, one gets the impression that Vasconcelos does not know where to put so much enthusiasm. Nevertheless, as I already noted, Vasconcelos could also be critical of the societies he visited, in which there was nothing equivalent to the transformative process of the Mexican Revolution. Vasconcelos served as an ambassador of Mexico's revolutionary government. For that very reason, his ideas struck the oligarchy of those countries as socialist and subversive.

It must be borne in mind that Vasconcelos's South Americanism does not encompass the entire subcontinent. What he champions is an ideal of the South America that faces the Atlantic—the one that includes Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, and part of Bolivia. The other South America—the one that, crossing the Andes, faces the Pacific and includes Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and parts of Bolivia and Colombia—falls outside that ideal. The South America that captivates Vasconcelos, as it did many other authors, is the former, not the latter. What excites Vasconcelos is discovering that in Atlantic South America the geographical, racial, cultural, and spiritual conditions existed for building an alternative to the United States—one that could even surpass it. He had not found this in Mexico, Peru, Colombia, or Cuba. In those countries, the geography, the racial mixture, and the social organization did not allow, he thought, for the construction of that option. All they had in their favor was the legacy of Hispanic culture and Catholicism, but that was not enough to surpass the United States.

Vasconcelos's proposal not only excludes the South Americans of the west, but is moreover founded upon a bloody prior exclusion. Those immense territories that Vasconcelos saw as lands of opportunity had—or had had until very recently—as their original owners indigenous populations that had been exterminated, expelled, or subjugated by the South American Creole republics. In this way, the condition of possibility for the new civilization of the *raza cósmica* was planted upon the destruction of indigenous peoples and the appropriation of their lands. Vasconcelos praises the *bandeirantes paulistas* and paints them as peaceful colonizers, but he omits that they killed and enslaved the Guaraní and

other peoples of the region. Whether through ignorance or bias, his historical vision of the region was profoundly mistaken.

This discursive level of *La raza cósmica* does not form part of a tradition of thought about Mexico. Emilio Uranga saw this clearly when, in 1951, he stated that for the young Mexican philosophers—he was referring, of course, to the members of the Grupo Hiperión—Vasconcelos seemed more like a South American philosopher than a Mexican one. Uranga's assertion is too drastic, a typical *boutade* from the philosopher, but as far as *La raza cósmica* is concerned, it carries some truth. The book contains not a shred of philosophy of mexicanness (*lo mexicano*), of reflection on Mexican history and culture, on the characteristics of Mexican *mestizaje*. That the author of *La raza cósmica* is a Mexican is an irrelevant fact, because the work belongs to a long series of reflections on the history and destiny of South America.

3. Discourse on the Races and *Mestizaje*

Vasconcelos has been criticized for not defining with precision what he means by "*raza*"; however, this criticism should be leveled at all who participated in the racial debate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including those with scientific pretensions. The discussion about races revolved around that polysemous concept—something that now strikes us as not only lacking in rigor but very dangerous from a political and ethical standpoint. The breadth of the concept of "*raza*" generates no few difficulties when it comes to understanding what exactly Vasconcelos is arguing. At times, he gives the impression that race is something exclusively biological, as when he affirms that there are four original races: the white, the yellow, the black, and the red. However, it soon becomes evident that this classification is not exhaustive, because a premise of the book is that there is a historical struggle between the white Saxon *raza* of the United States and the white Iberian *raza* of the Latin American countries. These two *razas* in conflict are, in turn, not pure but mixtures. The white Nordic *raza* of the United States is a mixture of English, German, Dutch, and Scandinavian peoples, among others, while the white Iberian *raza* of the Americas is a mixture of Castilians, Catalans, Basques, Portuguese, Arabs, and Jews, among others. An additional difference between these two *razas* is that, in the second, besides southern white races, there is a mixture with Indians and Blacks. In this way, we can see that by "*raza*" Vasconcelos refers not only to the four pure races but also to instances of *mestizaje* with delimited geographical and chronological coordinates. In that sense, "*raza*" would be a synonym of "*pueblo*", understood as a variegated conglomerate of human beings who live in a region and share ancestors, language, religion, and culture. Thus Vasconcelos affirms that the *raza* of the United States has a Protestant culture and that of Ibero-America has a Catholic one, and that while the former inclines toward material and technological

goods, the latter inclines toward the aesthetic and the spiritual. In the end, the difference between the two *razas* is between two civilizations; for this reason, the strictly biological question can recede into the background. In Ibero-American society there has been greater racial inclusion of Indians and Blacks. And it is that openness that allows Vasconcelos to maintain that Ibero-America will be the land in which the new *raza cósmica* will arise.

To understand the discourse on *raza* in the book, it is useful to examine it from a dialectical perspective. The starting point is to determine against whom it is aimed. The opponent in *La raza cósmica* is the white supremacist who defends the following two theses:

(R1) The white Saxon race is superior to all others and, for that very reason, has the right to dominate, enslave, or even eliminate them.

(R2) The mixture of the white Saxon race with any other is always descending—that is, the *mestizo* will be inferior to any white Saxon; therefore, miscegenation between that race and the others must be prohibited.

White supremacism, wielded by authors such as Francis Galton, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Madison Grant, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, had an enormous impact worldwide: it was the foundation of the Nuremberg Laws, promulgated in 1935, and of the laws that, until 1967, prohibited interracial marriage in the United States. It should be emphasized that white supremacism is a pseudoscientific ideology of European and American colonialism. In Latin America, too, we had fervent defenders of this doctrine. Prominent intellectuals of the region have affirmed that the problem of our countries is their racial composition. Among them, we may point to the Mexican Francisco Bulnes and the Argentine José Ingenieros. These authors not only suffered from what José Enrique Rodó had called *nordomanía*—the excessive admiration for everything associated with the United States and northern Europe—but were convinced that the only salvation for our countries was the eventual eradication—violent or peaceful, abrupt or gradual, physical or cultural—of what they considered inferior races. The adoption of white supremacism within Latin America is connected with what Pablo González Casanova called the internal colonialism (*colonialismo interno*) of the Creole elites, but also served as a justification for those elites' alliances with foreign capital. Vasconcelos saw and denounced all of this, and it gives his argument an incontestable value and relevance.

Against (R1), Vasconcelos affirms that, although the white Nordic race may be the dominant one in economic, military, and technological terms at the time he writes his book, it does not follow that it is superior to the rest. The white Nordic race has not always been dominant and will not always be so; therefore, its power over other races has no natural foundation. On the other hand, against (R2), Vasconcelos affirms that miscegenation is not always recessive, that some mixed

razas are not inferior to the supposedly pure races that preceded them and that they can even surpass them in certain respects. Nations with *mestizajes*, such as Mexico, should not feel lesser than those of the white Nordic race that seeks to dominate them within a racist colonial regime. For this reason, the philosophical defense of *mestizaje* is a way of combating colonialist ideology, both external and internal.

Up to this point we could summarize Vasconcelos's critique of white supremacism. That critique was just, timely, and courageous, and for it alone *La raza cósmica* deserves a place on the list of classic works of thought in the Spanish language. The problems begin when we examine the propositional ideas about races and *mestizajes* that Vasconcelos offers in his book. Here we discover many loose ends and not a few highly questionable ideas.

The simplest way to refute white supremacism is to deny the existence of races and, therefore, of racial mixtures. Vasconcelos does not follow this strategy. He accepts the existence of races and *mestizajes*. Under that assumption, the second simplest way to refute white supremacism is to uphold the thesis of the equality of all races and, therefore, of all racial mixtures. However, it is evident that Vasconcelos does not subscribe to the equality thesis. The proof is that he affirms that the *raza cósmica* will stand above all others that have ever existed—above all, above the white Nordic race that at the beginning of the twentieth century dominated the world mercilessly.

Vasconcelos affirms that there are historical moments in which some races surpass others and therefore exercise dominion over them. However, it must be noted that this superiority is never permanent and never absolute. Before the white Saxon race was the predominant one, others held that position: Persians, Romans, Mongols. Nevertheless, Vasconcelos maintains that although in certain historical periods some races are better than others in some respects, they are never so in all respects. For example, one might concede that whites are better than Blacks in some matters, but this does not imply that Blacks cannot be better than whites in others. In this way, one could maintain that each race has a unique value, and therefore none has the right to eliminate another, since humanity would lose something valuable in so doing.

As for *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos argues, against the supremacists, that miscegenation is not always descending—that the best traits of the mixed races can be preserved. Moreover, drawing on Mendelian biology, Vasconcelos defends the stronger thesis that from racial mixture a race better than the originals can arise—that is, that *mestizaje* can be ascending. The *raza cósmica* is the ascending *mestizaje* of all human races. For this reason, it would be the highest moment in the evolution of the species.

However, it must be observed that Vasconcelos does not claim that any mixture of existing races would be superior to the white Nordic race. That mixture

would have to be based on a precise proportion of each of them. What is that proportion? An exact balance among the four original races—that is, 25% of each? Or a mixture in which one predominates over the rest? Vasconcelos states with complete clarity what he thinks on the matter. The mixture of the *raza cósmica* will resemble the one that existed in regions of Brazil and Argentina—that is, one in which the factor of the southern white race predominates, with a smaller proportion of the other races: Black, Red, and Yellow.

But what guarantee is there that the final mixture will have that proportion? Why not suppose, for example, that the predominant racial factor in the future will be the Yellow race? Vasconcelos's answer is no less than disconcerting. What he affirms is that the *raza cósmica* will be the result of a human inclination that, over the years, will manage to impose itself above all others. What will lead us to achieve the perfect mixture is the pursuit of beauty. The most beautiful individuals of each race will come together to procreate still more beautiful individuals. The ugly, the ungraceful, will gradually die out. No one will want to procreate with them. What is more, they themselves will step aside, out of shame. As with all eugenics, this process inevitably entails a measure of cruelty.

It is striking that Vasconcelos does not seem troubled by the possibility that the *raza* of the most beautiful might not also be the most good, or the most just, or the most wise. It is important to bear in mind that Vasconcelos does not propose a moral, political, or epistemological utopia, but an aesthetic one—and, to a degree, a eudaimonic one. The beauty Vasconcelos speaks of is primarily physical, though he also takes into account, without fully clarifying it, a spiritual dimension. In any case, if the *raza cósmica* will resemble that of South America, it will be because of the beauty of its members, not because of any other political, economic, or moral factor. It is hardly necessary to insist that this propositional moment of the discourse of *La raza cósmica* is very tenuous—so much so that it can hardly be taken seriously. The inevitable conclusion is that, despite his rejection of white supremacism, Vasconcelos continues to adopt some form of racism. In several passages of his book, he makes denigrating comments about Blacks and Asians that stain his discourse and that have been highlighted by his detractors, who are not few.

In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos does not deal in depth with the phenomenon of *mestizaje* in Mexico. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the authors who defined the discussion on racial and cultural *mestizaje* in the first half of the twentieth century were others, such as Andrés Molina Enríquez and Manuel Gamio. No one took the fantastic *raza cósmica* into account when thinking about Mexican *mestizaje* in those years. It is evident that, for Vasconcelos, although the average Mexican *mestizo* is not necessarily inferior in every respect to the white Anglo-Saxon, he is not a model of the *raza cósmica*. Vasconcelos implies as much when he states in *La raza cósmica* that in Mexico *mestizaje* has not been

completed—that there is still too large a proportion of pure Indian race that has not mixed with the southern white. Moreover, Vasconcelos asserts that the Mexican indigenous race is a tired race (*raza cansada*), whose moment in history had passed. The redemption of Mexico's Indians consisted in integrating—racially, through *mestizaje*, and culturally, through education, culture, and religion—into Mexican Creole society. Vasconcelos was not an indigenist (*indigenista*); that much is clear.

In sum: the discourse on the races and *mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica* is marked by its contrasts. In its pages there is material both to praise and to repudiate.

4. Discourse on the Philosophy of History

The fourth discursive level of *La raza cósmica* that I distinguish here is the philosophy of history. Read in this way, the book belongs to a distinguished Mexican tradition of thought that includes the names of Gabino Barreda, Antonio Caso, Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea, and Edmundo O'Gorman. This philosophy of history is set out by Vasconcelos in the third section of the book's first chapter. It should be noted that Vasconcelos had already conceived this doctrine before his journey to South America. In his essay "Nueva ley de los tres estados" ("New Law of the Three Stages"), published in Mexico in 1921, he had formulated in broad strokes the philosophy of history that he would later develop in *La raza cósmica*. This shows us that when he traveled to South America, the author already carried with him a preconceived idea about how to fit his experiences into a scheme devised beforehand. However, the journey allowed him to reformulate his ideas in a more articulated manner. In particular, what Vasconcelos developed in *La raza cósmica* was the combination of his theory of universal *mestizaje* with his law of the three stages of humanity.

Gabino Barreda had adopted from the philosophy of Auguste Comte the doctrine that humanity passed through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positivist. Antonio Caso had distinguished three concepts of human existence: as economy, as disinterestedness, and as charity. Vasconcelos offers another triad, according to which humanity passes through three stages: the material or warlike, the intellectual or political, and the spiritual or aesthetic. The first is based on the demands of the material. The second is the one in which humanity currently finds itself. Reason directs, but turns its back on feeling. Norms dictate the direction of action but take no account of the imagination. In the third stage, which Vasconcelos believes is being gestated, the orientation of human conduct will be dictated not by reason but by feeling. Instead of obeying, people will seek to create. Beauty, not goodness, will be the most admired value.

Why not suppose that the third stage of humanity can be reached without universal *mestizaje*? Why not imagine that human beings, of any race, of any

originating culture, can live in accordance with the principles of beauty and the spirit? Vasconcelos's answer is that as long as the white Anglo-Saxons continue to dominate the world, that ideal can never be realized. The values upon which that stage of humanity would be founded are contrary to the ones they uphold. The only way humanity can reach that ideal is if the white Anglo-Saxons lose their hegemony. And here is the turn Vasconcelos gives the argument. It is not a matter of waging war against the white Anglo-Saxons; if some other race—the Yellow race, for instance—were to defeat them by their own means, those of military technology, industry, and finance, then all that would happen is that another race would take the place of the white Anglo-Saxons, but humanity would not take a step forward in its progress. To advance, one must not defeat the white Anglo-Saxon but incorporate him into a new *raza*, a new way of understanding the world in which the white Anglo-Saxon will cease to be what he is now: the dominator of the world. Against the racial hatred of the white supremacists, Vasconcelos offers universal racial love. Instead of races killing one another, he proposes that all of them mix, moved by desire, sympathy, and love.

A question for understanding what that final stage of human history would look like is what culture the *raza cósmica* would have. Would it be a mixture of all existing cultures, or one in which the antecedent of one of them in particular would predominate? Would that mixture of cultures not erase all individuality of peoples? Samuel Ramos posed these questions to Vasconcelos in a colloquium on *La raza cósmica* held in 1948. We do not know the answer Vasconcelos offered on that occasion, but we can imagine it. The culture of the *raza cósmica* could not be identical to that of any of the existing *razas*; it would have to be different. Consequently, there would no longer be, as there is now, a diversity of cultures; instead, there would be a single global culture, the same everywhere. It is understandable that Vasconcelos has been criticized from an indigenist perspective, because his idea of cultural *mestizaje* presupposes the disappearance of the original American cultures. However, one must bear in mind that Vasconcelos anticipates the disappearance not only of the original cultures but also of the rest of the national Creole/*mestizo* cultures of the continent. In the end, all national cultures would be superseded by that of the *raza cósmica*.

It is evident that Vasconcelos considered that the culture of the *raza cósmica* would have more to do with European culture than with those of other civilizations. Its ethics, for example, would have a Christian orientation. However, the Western culture adopted by the *raza cósmica* would have to be purged of all the harmful elements that have developed within it: materialism, scientism, mechanicism, industrialism, militarism, savage capitalism, and Bolshevik communism.

Could Vasconcelos be reproached for the fact that his philosophy is, in the end, one about the destiny of a single *raza*—the Ibero-American, crucible of the future

raza cósmica? Should philosophy not always be a universal reflection, above any human particularity? Vasconcelos has an answer: Latin American philosophy cannot be neutral because the philosophy of the white Saxon *raza* has never been so—it has always been in the service of the political and economic interests of that *raza*. The true universality of philosophical thought can only be achieved when human beings cease to think from the standpoint of their racial, cultural, and political interests. What is sold to us as "universal philosophy" is, in the end, theirs.

What does the book offer us? A utopia? In 1948, Villoro maintained that it was, rather, a prophecy. The difference is enormous: a utopia is a fantasy; a prophecy is an announcement. Understood in one way or the other, Vasconcelos's conception of history, founded on the racial struggle rather than the class struggle, was naive and profoundly mistaken from a Marxist standpoint. One need not be a Marxist to doubt that Vasconcelos's prophecy will ever be fulfilled. Rather than as a utopia or a prophecy, I think the book can be studied as a myth. Interpreted in this way, we can explain why it begins with the account of the extravagant legend of Atlantis. If Atlantis is the mythical origin of civilization in the Americas, the *raza cósmica* would be its mythical destiny. The power of this myth explains why *La raza cósmica* continues to gain thousands of new readers every year. Over the course of a century, its readers have found in it a poetic power that continues to captivate them. One must bear in mind that Vasconcelos's philosophy of history does not claim to be scientific; its purpose is another: to provide a profound meaning to existence, to offer an exhaustive vision of reality, and to share a solid motive for action—and only when it is understood in this way can it be judged fairly.

5. Discourse of the Travel Memoir

The fifth discursive level of *La raza cósmica* is the one that recounts the details of his journey to the Southern Cone from August to December of 1922. This narrative is an antecedent of the fabulous memoirs Vasconcelos wrote a decade later. Here we find all the biographical, literary, and essayistic attractions that the author would later deploy in his memoirs. Some suppose that the account of the South American tour is irrelevant to the first part of the book, which deals with *mestizaje* and the philosophy of history. This seems to me a serious error, since it loses sight of the fact that Vasconcelos's theory of *mestizaje* is sustained—argumentatively, but above all rhetorically—by his narration of the journey to South America. The book is a unity that must be read as such. Or, put another way, the five discursive levels I have distinguished here constitute a communicative totality.

La raza cósmica deserves inclusion among the classic works of intellectual travelers of all times. Vasconcelos traverses not only territories of mountains and rivers, but of ideas and fabulations. There are antecedents of Mexican travelers who found admirable aspects abroad that were worth making known in their

country. What distinguishes Vasconcelos's journey from previous ones is that, instead of heading north, he went south.

Another important difference between Vasconcelos's journey and those of other Mexican travelers is that his expedition does not go to gather information but, principally, to impart it—to explain to the countries visited the highest meaning of the Mexican Revolution, which was viewed with suspicion. Vasconcelos realizes that, on an educational level, Mexico had nothing to teach the nations of the south. In all of them, primary schools and universities functioned better than in Mexico. However, on a political, legal, and social level, Mexico did have something to teach them. The multitudes of students and workers who congregated to listen to Vasconcelos came to know the representative of a revolution that promised to change the reality of Mexico but also served as an example for all the countries of Latin America. That socialist, Latin Americanist, anti-imperialist public, which had been loyal to Vasconcelos, was left bewildered when, at the end of 1933, the author returned to Argentina with a very different discourse: speaking ill of the government of Lázaro Cárdenas and the Spanish Republic, and defending a position that verged on fascism and the most retrograde Hispanism (*hispanismo*). Another disturbing tendency was beginning to become visible in Vasconcelos's discourse before the Second World War: his repudiation of Judaism.

The travel diary in *La raza cósmica* has two interspersed voices: that of the man and that of the ambassador. These two voices sometimes come into conflict. On a diplomatic mission, one is not free to say whatever one wishes or to move about freely. However, Vasconcelos did everything possible not to be constrained by his function as the head of an official Mexican government delegation, and this gets him into trouble on not a few occasions. The autobiographical narration of that tension between the two perspectives is, without a doubt, one of the novelistic attractions of the book.

As already noted, the second edition of 1948 eliminated the sections recounting the visits to Chile and Uruguay, but also cut several parts of the journeys to Argentina and Brazil. The expurgated paragraphs almost always have to do with political positions with which Vasconcelos no longer sympathized in 1948—such as his encounter with a group of anarchist workers who told him about the military repression in Patagonia—with certain traits of local societies and cultures that displeased him—such as the superficial atmosphere of the Buenos Aires Jockey Club—with the aim of erasing from the narrative several figures from whom he had become estranged—such as Leopoldo Lugones, whom he publicly criticized in 1925 for his support of the Chilean military coup—or with certain intimate matters he decided to cut out of discretion—such as the romance he had with a beautiful Argentine lady who believed the author was unmarried. The old man of 1948 censored the young man of 1925.

Vasconcelos the traveler is a man of contrasts. He frequently gives the impression that he sees what he wants to see, that he idealizes people and landscapes. At other times, by contrast, he is very critical—sometimes with discernment and fairness, and other times with superficiality and unfairness. With regard to the former, it should be added that Vasconcelos had already formulated in *Estudios indostánicos* (1920) the thesis that civilization is a product of warm lands and that, in the near future, when the domination of the northern Europeans, who live in cold lands, comes to an end, the civilizing impulse will return to the torrid zone. Therefore, when Vasconcelos travels to Brazil, he already carries that idea in his head; he does not formulate it there. In *Estudios indostánicos*, the author had also declared that the great creations of humanity had been made by *mestizo* peoples, not by supposedly pure races, such as the blond Aryans of northern Europe. What is novel in *La raza cósmica* is the conviction that the final stage of history will be realized by a universal *mestizaje* that will develop in the tropical zone of South America. Vasconcelos acknowledges that when he shared his ideas with the haughty Uruguayan intellectuals, they received them with derision. The Uruguayans replied that they were white Europeans. The idea that the future of humanity would be built by a *mestizo raza* in the warm zone of Brazil struck them as an eccentricity of the Mexican visitor. Many times, one gets the impression that Vasconcelos is disconnected from the places he visits, from the people with whom he speaks. However, we should not reproach him for the fact that, like Don Quixote on his journeys through La Mancha, he does not always see things as they are. Among other things, *La raza cósmica* is a fabulous travel book to an imagined future of humanity.

6. Conclusion

A critical reading of *La raza cósmica* faces several difficulties. Although its reflections are often captivating, its arguments are not always clear. The book puts forward powerful and edifying ideas, but it has weak flanks and even uncomfortable ones. This explains why, even to this day, it provokes such divided reactions. In this essay, I offer a hermeneutic key to the work based on the distinction of five discursive levels within it: the struggle between the two Americas, the destiny of South America, the relations between human races and *mestizaje*, the philosophy of history, and, finally, the travel memoir. I maintain that a thorough understanding of the book requires the interconnected examination of these five levels. A corollary of my analysis is that the book must be read in its entirety, without skipping—as is common—the part in which the author narrates his journey through South America. Another corollary is that to

assimilate its original message, it is indispensable to consult the text of the first edition, that of 1925.²

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