

FROM *LA RAZA CÓSMICA* TO *ASPECTS OF MEXICAN CIVILIZATION*: DISCREPANCIES OR CONTINUITIES IN VASCONCELOS' THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines an apparent tension between two works by the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos: *La raza cósmica* (1925) and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926). While *La raza cósmica* deploys a rhetoric of struggle and opposition between Latin Americans and Anglo-Saxon North Americans, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* foregrounds complementarity, spiritual kinship, and the potential for mutual collaboration between the two Americas. A superficial reading suggests either a radical change of mind or a case of pandering to an Anglo-Saxon audience. This paper argues for a different interpretation: the collaborative and complementary vision articulated in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is already present in germ in *La raza cósmica*. A close reading of both texts reveals deep structural continuities—particularly the claim that the opposition between Latins and Anglo-Saxons is spiritual rather than material, and therefore productive rather than destructive. The paper concludes that the two works are best read as a single, unified philosophical project and that reading *La raza cósmica* in isolation risks generating a truncated and distorted picture of Vasconcelos' thought.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina una aparente tensión entre dos obras del filósofo mexicano José Vasconcelos: *La raza cósmica* (1925) y *Aspectos de la civilización mexicana* (1926). Mientras que *La raza cósmica* despliega una retórica de lucha y oposición entre latinoamericanos y norteamericanos anglosajones, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* pone en relieve la complementariedad, la afinidad espiritual y el potencial de colaboración mutua entre las dos Américas. Una lectura superficial sugiere un cambio radical de parecer o un intento de congraciarse con el público anglosajón. Este trabajo propone una interpretación distinta: la visión colaborativa y complementaria articulada en *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* ya está presente, en germen, en *La raza cósmica*. Un análisis detenido de ambos textos revela profundas continuidades estructurales, en particular la tesis de que la oposición entre latinos y anglosajones es de índole espiritual más que material y, por tanto, constructiva en lugar de destructiva. El artículo concluye que ambas

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obras deben entenderse como un proyecto filosófico único y unificado, y que leer *La raza cósmica* de forma aislada conlleva el riesgo de ofrecer una imagen truncada y distorsionada del pensamiento de Vasconcelos.

1. Introduction: A Tension in Vasconcelos' Writings

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) occupies a singular place in the history of Latin American and Chicanx philosophy. A prolific writer, educational reformer, and public intellectual, he served as Mexico's Secretary of Public Education during the early 1920s, a period of sweeping post-revolutionary cultural reconstruction. His philosophical writings—in particular, *La raza cósmica* (1925)—have exercised a lasting influence not only on Mexican nationalist thought but also on Chicanx intellectual traditions in the United States. As Stehn and Alessandri (2020) have shown, prominent Chicanx feminist philosophers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, whose landmark work *Borderlands/La Frontera* appeared in 1987, drew substantially on Vasconcelos' concept of a cosmic race in developing their own accounts of mestiza consciousness and border identity.

Despite the originality and influence of Vasconcelos' thought, *La raza cósmica* has attracted substantial criticism. Among the problems that some commentators such as Heriberto Yépez (2010) have raised is a charge of serious discrepancies—or, at minimum, a significant tension—between *La raza cósmica* and his subsequent work, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926). The latter text was delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago and addresses many of the same themes as *La raza cósmica*, but in a strikingly different register.

The apparent tension is easy to characterize. In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos portrays Latin Americans and Anglo-Saxon North Americans as locked in a continental struggle for dominance—a struggle that mirrors and extends the prior colonial conflict between the Spanish and the English. He insists that it is imperative for Latin Americans to prevail in this struggle, since only their victory can guarantee the emergence of the fifth or 'cosmic' race, which will synthesize and transcend all previous racial types. In *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, by contrast, Vasconcelos foregrounds not a conflict between the two Americas but rather a mutual complementarity: he stresses the spiritual affinities and the psychological similarities between Latins and Anglo-Saxons, and argues that they can and should collaborate harmoniously in building a hemispheric harmonious civilization in the New World.

This divergence raises a cluster of interpretive questions. Did Vasconcelos fundamentally revise his views between 1925 and 1926? Or was he simply adjusting his rhetoric to suit the expectations of a North American audience at the University of Chicago—what might be called, less charitably, pandering? This

paper aims to answer these questions by examining both texts carefully and in parallel.

My thesis is that neither of these interpretations is correct. Vasconcelos did not fundamentally change his philosophical position between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, nor did he cynically modulate his rhetoric for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Rather, the collaborative and complementary vision that comes to the fore in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is already present in embryonic form in *La raza cósmica*. The tension between the two works is, on my reading, merely apparent: a product of focusing too narrowly on the rhetorical surface of the earlier text while neglecting the philosophical substance that runs through both. I argue that the two works are best understood as a single, continuous philosophical project, and that reading *La raza cósmica* in isolation—as is the common practice in both academic and pedagogical settings—risks generating a seriously distorted understanding of Vasconcelos' thought.

I proceed in the following fashion. In section 2 I present what many commentators of Vasconcelos take to be one of his central theses in *La raza cósmica*, which is the confrontation and opposition between Anglo-Saxon North America and Latin South and Central America, and I show how an initial reading of *La raza cósmica* supports the claim that Vasconcelos sees this opposition as a fundamentally antagonistic relationship where the inevitable outcome is the subduing of one America by the other. In section 3 I turn to examine *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* and I show that, instead of emphasizing struggle and confrontation, Vasconcelos foregrounds therein complementarity and collaboration between the two Americas. In section 4 I consider in more detail both *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* and I show that, beyond the apparent discrepancies and tensions, there are deep continuities between both texts insofar as they both emphasize that the opposition between the two Americas plays out in the spiritual level and not in the material one. In section 5 I argue that a further sign of the unity between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is in the fact that they both deploy the same argumentative strategy—namely, the crafting of extended and admiring portraits Latin American leaders who implemented democratic reforms—to show that Latin America has the same democratic potentialities as Anglo-Saxon North America. Finally, I offer in section 6 a brief conclusion that highlights the importance of reading *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* as two moments of the same philosophical project to have a clear understanding of Vasconcelos' philosophy.

2. Vasconcelos' Position in La Raza Cósmica

Any reader who approaches *La raza cósmica* for the first time will quickly encounter a rhetoric of confrontation and opposition. Vasconcelos frames the history of the Americas as a continuation of a centuries-old struggle between two

civilizational lineages—the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon—that has its roots in the colonial rivalries of early modern Europe. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 are invoked as landmarks in a long contest whose American chapter is still being written. Vasconcelos is unambiguous about this historical framing:

Our age became and continues to be a conflict of Latinism against Anglo-Saxonism; a conflict of institutions aims and ideals. It marks the climax of a secular fight that begins with the disaster of the Invincible Armada and gets worse with the defeat of Trafalgar. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 10)

On this picture, the American continent is the theater in which a definitive episode of this long rivalry will be played out. The stakes, for Vasconcelos, are immense. Latin America's unique demographic composition—the fact that all the world's existing racial groups are already present within it—makes it the natural site for the synthesis that will produce the cosmic race. But this possibility is conditional: it can only be realized if Latin Americans put aside their regional and national differences and present a unified front against Anglo-Saxon ambitions for complete hemispheric dominance. The alternative is bleak:

If the Amazon is dominated by the English, either of the islands or the continent, both champions of the pure White, the emergence of the fifth race will be defeated. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 24-25)

The stakes are further clarified by Vasconcelos' vision of what Anglo-Saxon domination of the continent would look like. It is not merely political or economic supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons throughout the continent that he fears, but a racial imperialism that would extend its reach globally:

If the Amazon becomes English, the world metropolis would not be called Universopolis but Anglotown, and the armies would come out of there from there to impose on other continents the stern law of the predominance of the white blond and the extermination of his dark rivals. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 30–31)

In addition to these passages, the conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Latins emerges in other parts of the book where Vasconcelos contrasts the attitudes of Anglo-Saxons and Latins in the American continent after the revolutions that they respectively mounted against their respective colonial rulers in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Vasconcelos, despite the American Revolution, the Anglo-Saxons of North America have managed to stay united to their European brethren in a common goal to control the whole continent:

The old colonists of Virginia and New England severed themselves from England, only to grow better and become stronger. Political separation has never been an obstacle for England and her former

colonies to maintain their unity and agreement in regards to the business of their common ethnic mission. Emancipation, instead of debilitating the great race, made it branch off, multiply and spread, all-powerful, over the world, out of the nucleus of one of the greatest empires of all times. Since then, what is not conquered by the English of the Isles fails is taken over and kept by the English of the New Continent. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 14)

In contrast, Vasconcelos bemoans the provincialist, short-sighted and selfish attitude of most Latin Americans who, with some notable exceptions, lacked a common vision to create a common nation after the Independence wars as well as the will to put aside their differences to unite in the pursuit of a shared goal. This has led, according to Vasconcelos, to a process of “balkanization” of Latin America that has prevented the emergence of a unified Latin American nation that would encompass all of the Latin populations and that would act as an effective bulwark against the imperialistic endeavors of both North American and European Anglo-Saxons:

Despite this firm unity against an invading enemy, our war of independence was limited by provincialism and the absence of transcendental plans. The race that has dreamed of a world empire, that presumed to be the descendants of Roman glory, fell into the puerile satisfaction of creating little nations and sovereign principalities, encouraged by mentalities that saw a wall and not a summit in each mountain range. Our liberators, with the illustrious exceptions of Bolivar, Sucre, the black Petion, and no more than half a dozen others, were dreaming of Balkan glories. The rest, obsessed with the local outlook and a confused pseudo-revolutionary phraseology, simply busied themselves in belittling a conflict that could have been the beginning of the awakening of a new continent. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 14)

Taken in isolation, these passages strongly suggest that Vasconcelos conceives of the Latin-Anglo relationship across the Americas as fundamentally antagonistic—a zero-sum struggle in which one side must ultimately be subdued. It is this reading that generates the apparent tension with *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*.

3. Vasconcelos' Position in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*

When Vasconcelos delivered his lectures at the University of Chicago in 1926—published that same year as *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*—he introduced what appears to be a substantially different framework for thinking about the relationship between the two Americas. Rather than foregrounding conflict, he emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of the difference between Latin and Anglo-

Saxon cultures and argues that this kind of difference is, far from being a source of irreconcilable antagonism, actually a basis for mutual enrichment and collaboration.

A central move in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is Vasconcelos' distinction between material and spiritual differences. While he acknowledges that significant differences exist between the civilizations of North and South America, he insists that these differences are spiritual in character rather than material. And spiritual differences, he argues, have an entirely different valence from material ones:

It is only material differences that create bitterness and rivalry between men. On the contrary, spiritual differences tend to strengthen human bonds because we derive pleasure from every difference in taste, and every particularity enriches the species. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (2010, p. 47)

This claim—that spiritual differences enrich rather than divide—leads directly to Vasconcelos' positive assessment of the division of the American continent between two distinct civilizational traditions:

The fact that this continent is divided between Anglo-Saxons and Latins must be seen as a blessing because we all yearn for a more elevated and richer spiritual life, and it is only through the labor of particularly talented groups that a type of civilization that encompasses everything can arise. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (2010, p. 48)

Importantly, Vasconcelos does not rest content with emphasizing spiritual complementarity. He also identifies psychological similarities between the two cultures—shared traits that can serve as a basis for genuine communication and understanding across cultural difference. Chief among these shared traits is what he describes as a 'gambling disposition': a taste for risk, a willingness to confront the unknown, a refusal to be governed entirely by calculation and prudence:

Our psychology as a rule is the psychology of a gambler; we gamble with our wealth and with our chances in life; in fact, we even gamble with our lives. A popular saying is frequently applied whenever we hesitate before unknown, possibly unexpected developments: A ver que sale, 'Let us see what comes out of it.' ... A similar psychology can be perhaps traced to the first Yankee miner since nature imposed its influence on the wild and mysterious high plains of the New World. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, pp. 27–28)

On the basis of these complementary spiritual profiles and shared psychological dispositions, Vasconcelos arrives at his central prescriptive conclusion in *Aspects*

of *Mexican Civilization*: rather than competing, Latins and Anglo-Saxons should adopt a model of cooperation and mutual enrichment:

Instead of the competitive manner of life advocated by the defenders of the pure-race civilization and by the imperialists and conquerors, we shall have to adopt the cooperative, collaborative manner of interracial organization; instead of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest, a collaboration of all the human efforts for the production of a variety in quality reproduce variations of quality—a salvation brought about by, not through the elect of a certain type more or less strong but through the utilization of every particular aptitude for the purpose of creating superior values. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, p. 101)

The contrast with the passages quoted in the previous section is striking. Where *La raza cósmica* seemed to insist on the imperatives of conflict and the necessity of Latin victory, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* advocates collaboration, mutual enrichment, and cooperative civilization-building. It is this contrast that motivates the interpretive question this paper addresses: how should we reconcile these two moments in Vasconcelos' thought?

4. Resolving the Tension: Continuities in Vasconcelos' Thought

My central claim is that the tension between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is, on careful examination, merely apparent. The key to resolving it lies in attending more closely to a passage from *La raza cósmica* that is frequently overlooked by readers who focus on the text's more confrontational rhetoric. In this passage, Vasconcelos articulates a view of opposition and struggle that is quite different from a zero-sum antagonism:

Opposition and fight, particularly when transposed to the realm of the *spirit*, serve to better define the contenders, to take each one to the summit of its destiny, so that they take each opposite to the culmination of its destiny and, in the end, to join them into a common and victorious superiority. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 21; emphasis added)

This is a remarkable passage, and its significance for interpreting Vasconcelos' overall position can hardly be overstated. What it tells us is that, even within *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos does not view opposition as an end in itself or as issuing necessarily in the defeat or elimination of one party by the other. Rather, opposition—when it operates at the spiritual level—is a dialectical process through which both parties are refined, brought to their fullest development, and ultimately synthesized into something higher.

The contrast between material and spiritual opposition is thus not an innovation introduced in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*; it is already operative in *La raza cósmica*, albeit in a less explicit form. Vasconcelos makes this point directly:

If Latin America were another Spain, to the same extent that the United States is another England, then the old conflict of the two stocks would do nothing else but to repeat its episodes on a vaster territory, and one of the two rivals would end up prevailing and imposing itself.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 21)

The hypothetical here is crucial: Vasconcelos is not describing the actual situation in the Americas, but a counterfactual scenario that he regards as fortunately inapplicable. Because Latin America is not simply a reproduction of Spain, and because the United States is not simply a reproduction of England, the continental opposition between them does not recapitulate the old material struggle between the colonial powers. It operates at a different—spiritual—level, and this difference is precisely what makes it productive rather than destructive.

This reading is further confirmed by a passage that makes Vasconcelos' collaborative vision explicit even within the context of *La raza cósmica*:

Nevertheless, we accept the superior ideals of the White, but not his arrogance; we want to offer to him, just as we offer to others, a free country where he can find home and shelter, but not an extension of his conquests.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 31)

The gesture here—acceptance of ideals coupled with rejection of arrogance, and an offer of welcome rather than exclusion—is precisely the gesture of collaboration, not of zero-sum conflict. What Vasconcelos envisions is not the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon but the transformation of the relationship between the two Americas from one of colonial domination to one of mutual recognition and cooperative coexistence. And this future transformation is made possible by the openness of Latin Americans to welcome their northern Anglo-Saxon neighbors, which is underscored by Vasconcelos when he declares: “the advantage of our tradition is that it has greater facility of sympathy toward strangers” (*La raza cósmica* 1997, p. 17). The crux of his project, even in *La raza cósmica*, is collaboration.

5. The Unity of *La Raza Cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*

The argument for the unity of the two works can be strengthened further by attending to sections of *La raza cósmica* that are rarely discussed in the secondary literature (and that have not been fully translated into English): the lengthy passages devoted by Vasconcelos to his journeys through Brazil and Argentina.

These sections, which many readers skip since they are deemed to belong to the register of a travel book instead of a serious philosophical essay, are in fact philosophically important because they pursue a line of argument that is developed further in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*. Both texts make the case that Latin America—despite its troubled history of political instability, coups, and caudillismo—possesses the same democratic potential as Anglo-Saxon North America.

In *La raza cósmica*, this argument is advanced through an extended and admiring portrait of the Argentine president Hipólito Yrigoyen, who is held up as evidence that Latin American political culture can produce democratic leadership of the highest order:

Yrigoyen devoted himself to the government with honesty and tenacity, a masculine tenacity to fulfill his duty and his convictions. But he never used power to annoy or persecute his adversaries. He reformed the legislation, democratized the government, promoted the development of a socialist movement, and he did all this without shedding blood, without exiling anybody, without jailing or harming his adversaries, or abusing of the impunity granted by his position.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1948, p. 155-156)

This portrait is not a digression. It is a contribution to a philosophical and political argument showing that the supposed incapacity of Latin Americans for democratic self-governance—a stereotype frequently deployed by Anglo-Saxon commentators to justify paternalism or exclusion, even to this day—is empirically unfounded and ideologically motivated. Vasconcelos is doing, in the idiom of exemplary biography, what a political philosopher might do through argument: he is demonstrating by example that the democratic values associated with Anglo-Saxon political culture are not exclusive to it given that they emerge also in Latin America.

The same strategy is deployed in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, where Vasconcelos turns to the figure of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento—the Argentine statesman, educator, and author of *Facundo* (1845)—as another exemplar of Latin American democratic statesmanship:

Sarmiento devoted all his life to eradicate this militarism, this caudillismo from the Argentine soil. And, after a long, noble struggle, Sarmiento succeeded in gaining control, first, of the educational movement of his country, later, of full power by becoming the president of Argentina. Then, Sarmiento, as president, managed to carry along the policy outlined in his novel years before: the policy of Europeization, the policy of democratization of Latin America as against the policy of the

caudillos that are constantly struggling for personal rule.
 Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, p. 53)

The structural parallel between these two passages is striking and, I think, deliberate. In both texts, Vasconcelos reaches for the same argumentative form—the portrait of a democratic Latin American leader—to make the same substantive point, which is that democracy is not a culturally specific achievement of the Anglo-Saxon world but a universal aspiration that Latin American civilization is fully capable of realizing.

The argument is stated explicitly in both texts. In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos draws on the Argentinian University Reform movement of 1918 as evidence of the democratic energy latent in Latin American civil society: the students who drove this movement employed not armed revolt but peaceful methods—'strikes, discussion, peaceful protests, the confederacy of faculties and universities for joint action' (1948, p. 159). And in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, he makes the normative claim directly:

The theory that democracy is good for this country but is not fit for such and such another does not find support in facts. The Argentina of the days of Facundo was as miserable as any of the other caudillo countries, and in only one generation, an enlightened intellectual generation, the whole moral contour of the country was changed. The facility of quick, enlightened change in a Latin American virtue. Democracy is the only form of government fit for any country of the New World. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, pp. 73-74)

The implication is clear and philosophically significant: if democracy is the only appropriate form of government for all the nations of the American continent—North and South alike—then the relationship between those nations cannot be one of domination or colonial tutelage but must be one of equality and mutual respect. The collaborative democratic vision of *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is thus grounded in a normative political philosophy that is already implicit in *La raza cósmica*.

6. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the apparent tension between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is, on closer examination, a surface phenomenon. The two texts are not in conflict; they are distinct but complementary moments of a single philosophical project. Several structural continuities link them: both distinguish between material and spiritual differences and assign a positive, productive role to the latter; both present the opposition between Latin and Anglo-Saxon Americas as a form of spiritual complementarity rather than a zero-sum conflict; and both advance the argument that Latin

America possesses the same democratic potential as Anglo-Saxon North America, supporting this claim through portraits of exemplary democratic leaders.

The democratic collaborative vision that comes explicitly to the fore in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*—the call for a 'cooperative, collaborative manner of interracial organization'—is not a departure from the position of *La raza cósmica* but its natural development and explicit articulation. Read carefully, *La raza cósmica* already contains the seeds of this vision in its insistence that the continental opposition between Latins and Anglo-Saxons is spiritual in character, and that spiritual oppositions are dialectically productive, issuing not in the elimination of one party but in the mutual enrichment and ultimate synthesis of both in a higher form of civilization.

This interpretation has consequences not only for Vasconcelos scholarship but for pedagogy. The common practice of assigning *La raza cósmica* in isolation—in courses on Latin American philosophy, Chicanx studies, or the history of political thought—risks producing a systematically distorted picture of Vasconcelos' thought. Students who read only *La raza cósmica* are likely to come away with the impression that Vasconcelos is primarily a theorist of civilizational conflict very much like Samuel Huntington was, an advocate for Latin victory in a continental struggle. Students who also read *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* will encounter a thinker who is equally, and perhaps more fundamentally, a philosopher of complementarity and collaboration who also defends the shared democratic vocation of all the peoples of the New World.

The works of Vasconcelos should not be read piecemeal. *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* are not two separate works that happen to share a subject matter; they are, taken together, a single philosophical statement about what the Americas are and what they can become.

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