

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES BEYOND NATIONALISM: FROM THE FLORENTINE CODEX TO MESTIZAJE

SOFÍA ORTIZ-HINOJOSA*

ABSTRACT: For Benedict Anderson, the idea of a nation is a social imaginary that was also birthed in the 18th century. However, a variety of interesting community concepts in the Americas challenge Anderson's analysis. I argue that despite its Pan-American intent, Vasconcelos's concept of "mestizaje" is a form of nationalism, first by examining one pre-Columbian concept of community, and then by analyzing what I characterize as proto-nationalist antecedents in 17th century colonial New Spain. Finally, I look to widely impactful 19th century ideas. As I will show, each kind of social imaginary influences the next, blurring the boundaries between seemingly distinguishable concepts used to designate groups of people. Thus, "nationalism" is not a phenomenon wholly new to the modern period and, despite its pan-Americanism, Vasconcelos's concept of "mestizaje" is a clear member of a well-populated family of quasi-nationalist concepts in the Americas.

RESUMEN: Para Benedict Anderson, la idea de nación es un imaginario social que surgió en el siglo XVIII. Sin embargo, diversos conceptos de comunidad de gran interés en las Américas desafían el análisis de Anderson. Sostengo que, a pesar de su intención panamericana, el concepto de «mestizaje» que nos ofrece Vasconcelos constituye una forma de nacionalismo; para ello, examino primero un concepto de comunidad precolombino y, posteriormente, analizo lo que caracterizo como antecedentes protonacionalistas en la Nueva España colonial del siglo XVII. Por último, considero ideas del siglo XIX de gran impacto. Como demostraré, cada tipo de imaginario social influye al siguiente, difuminando los límites entre conceptos aparentemente diferenciables utilizados para designar a grupos de personas. Así, el «nacionalismo» no es un fenómeno totalmente nuevo en la era moderna y, pese a su panamericanismo, el concepto de «mestizaje» de Vasconcelos se inscribe claramente en una amplia familia de conceptos cuasinacionalistas presentes en las Américas.

* Associate Professor of Philosophy, Vassar College
EMAIL: sortizhinojosa@vassar.edu

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Introduction: The Paradox of Nationalism

Is the “mestizaje” described by José Vasconcelos a kind of nationalism? In order to understand my answer to this question, we must first examine the concept of nationalism, and then look for antecedents to the concept of “mestizaje” in the intellectual history of Latin America to determine whether they fit within proto-nationalist frameworks. I will argue both that “mestizaje” does have proto-nationalist roots and that they extend back to at least the 17th century. In particular, I argue that 17th-century “Criollismo” serves as a natural proto-nationalist antecedent for Vasconcelos’s “Mestizaje”. This position is in tension with *modernization* theories of nationalism, according to which nationalism arises in the 18th century. I will examine Benedict Anderson’s influential version of modernization theory below, using it as a foil to help make the case for understanding “mestizaje” as a nationalist concept as well as for understanding “criollismo” as its antecedent.

However, this foil will also help me qualify the claim and offer an insight that helps resolve a “paradox” proposed by Anderson, according to which nationalism is, despite being “newer,” both a relatively empty concept and a concept that is treated by communities as if everyone either does have or should have a nationality. I will suggest that paradigmatic nationalist concepts are only a newer member of or an altered expression of a family of older and very robust community concepts rooted in the social imaginary. My view agrees in part with Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolist theory, according to which modern nationalism has antecedents in ethnic community concepts (Smith 1986; 2009). This helps explain why 18th, 19th, and 20th century forms of nationalism do not feel new to the members of those communities. It also helps explain why “mestizaje” fits among the group of nationalist concepts despite Vasconcelos’ own rejection of phenomena like “exclusively national patriotism” (Vasconcelos 1925: 18).

1. Benedict Anderson’s Constructivist Modernization Theory

In the first and second editions of his groundbreaking 1983 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the historian Benedict Anderson contends that, “nationality... as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind,” created “towards the end of the eighteenth century.” This is his *modernization theory* about nationalism. He adds that, “once created, [these cultural artefacts] became ‘modular’, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.” (2006: 4) So, for Anderson, it is after the

creation of modern nationality that it changes into other recognizably altered forms of nationalism.

Anderson lists what he considers “paradoxes” of nationalism: while nationality is a newer concept historically, it is treated by modern communities as if it were formally universal. That is, they treat it as if everyone does have or should have a nationality. Secondly, despite the concept being philosophically impoverished and even incoherent or “empty” according to many, nationalism has immense political power (ibid.: 5).

Anderson ultimately proposes a *constructivist* definition of “the nation:” “it is an *imagined* political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid: 6).

One strength of constructivism is that it helps make sense of the arbitrary and often mythical boundaries of concepts like nationhood. However, constructivism leaves unclear how to decide when a concept of community is or is not a concept of nation or nationality. What distinguishes different “imagined political communities”? How are concepts of imagined communities like race, ethnicity, nationality, or even tribe-group identity interlinked? In the specific case of Latin America, what makes a “pueblo” like and unlike a “raza”? What makes “mestizo” and “mestizaje” like and unlike “criollo” and “criollismo”?

These questions are especially pressing given that political history has traded between these concepts in ways that suggest deep similarities. However, the questions are difficult to answer given that the scope and nature of the communities denoted by those concepts depend on the social imaginary. They extend beyond mere perception. The concepts are also both normative and material: they determine and are determined by the material conditions that create social reality.

Anthony Smith’s *ethno-symbolist* theory resolves some of the difficulties posed by Anderson’s view, ultimately rejecting the strongest version of modernism about nationalism. “While ethno-symbolists agree with the modernist emphasis on nations as active, purposive sociological communities embedded in particular historical epochs, they differ over the period-isation of nation formation and the role of ethnicity” (Smith 2009: 20-21). We could describe Smith as a constructivist but not a modernist, according to which nations are imagined communities that often base themselves on ethnic symbolism. In his seminal book, *The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism*, Smith argues that nations are processes, not static targets, and that they require ethnic cores and historic homelands – invented or otherwise – in order to survive (Smith, 1986: 212-213). My argument could be regarded as partially extending Smith’s largely Eurasian focused analysis to the Americas. However, I do not necessarily see ethnicities as entities that are

any better-delineated than other community concepts.¹ I also am non-committal about whether ethnicity is indispensable to the formation of nation-concepts. What Smith and I agree on is that modern nationalism was not without substantial historical precedents.

Given the ephemeral nature of the social imaginary, consulting specific sources in the history of a particular region becomes imperative. I will examine a few such sources: the 16th century *Florentine Codex*, with its opinionated descriptions of the ethnic groups known to its Mexica informants; the writings of 17th century polymaths like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, which mark the early origins of Criollismo; the writings of the 19th century “libertador” Simón Bolívar, as he describes himself imagining a future Pan-americanism; and finally, the 20th century writings of José Vasconcelos, proposing his theory of “mestizaje.” I choose these texts not because they constitute a definitive tradition, or because they are exhaustive of the potential literature I could draw on, but because they each feature an emphasis on group identity based on the geography or territory of the Americas, a Spanish American (Criollo) appropriative attitude toward indigenous American history and culture (or, in the case of the *Florentine Codex*, a textual basis for this), and a distinction between this territorial-historical American community identity and peninsular Spanish identity. These are the building blocks Spanish American nationalism. Thus I call the earliest of these forms of proto-nationalism.

But before I analyze these texts, I would like to summarize the specific ways Anderson’s own constructivism proposes that nationalism arises and becomes differentiated from its historical antecedents. In many ways my analysis will agree with Anderson’s. My constructivist angle on nationalism concurs with his, that, “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact ... are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished ... by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 2006: 6). However, Anderson seems sure that many political abstractions now taken for granted were *unimagined* or even *unimaginable* before. For example, he suggests that even the idea of *class* came very late, if at all, to the Old Regime in France.

¹ Smith argues that ethnic communities are founded and distinguished by components including a collective name, a common myth of descent or *mythomoteur* that provides a framework of meaning for the ethnic community, a shared history, a distinctive and shared culture which may not require a shared language, an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986: 24-30). However, while this does seem like a worthy paradigm for ethnic identity, several of these components are missing in groups we may still be inclined to call *ethnie*; furthermore, the fact that this definition (rightly) allows for ethnic groups to contain ethnic sub-groups or to overlap with each other calls into question whether ethnicity need be fully distinguishable from other group concepts in order to be effective at explaining historical processes of group identification.

What is it that made the “nation” something imaginable when it was previously unimaginable? In his book Anderson argues that the “very possibility of imagining a nation” only arose when three cultural conceptual pillars began to crumble: (i) a belief in linguistic objectivism for a particular, usually religiously, privileged language; (ii) a belief in the essentialism of centralized, dynastic social hierarchy; and (iii) a belief that cosmology and human history were interlinked. These beliefs were replaced in many places by the prioritization of local vernaculars, a sense of fraternity or horizontality among the members of the community, and an idea of “homogeneous, empty time” (ibid.: 24; but here Anderson is quoting Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*: 265). According to Anderson, “the nation” arises out of a kind of vacuum of meaning occasioned by the death or degradation of certain religious beliefs. These religious beliefs had offered redemptive narratives that made sense of fatality, accident, and tragedy and that provided the reassurance of divinely appointed sovereign power. The newly conceived nation is imagined as *sovereign* according to Anderson because the demise of the power and legitimacy of religious autocracy required a substitute, an emblem of quasi-pluralist freedom. Anderson also suggests that despite any real, extant inequalities within it, the nation is always “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (ibid.: 7), that is, as a community. So, to oversimplify: it seems the nation distinguishes itself from other community concepts for Anderson because it fills a vacuum left by the degradation of sacred or religious narratives. It makes sense then that he would find this occurring in a distinctive fashion in the modern era.

Print-capitalism plays a major role as catalyst for these changes according to Anderson. Anderson argues that expanding access to print made phenomena like the novel and the newspaper possible, and it is these artifacts that accelerated the process of forming a national consciousness. His book covers fascinating examples from around the globe. Novels and newspapers allowed readers to imagine otherwise unmentioned others as fellow-readers and community members, the subjects of depicted events, or sufferers of described and shared injustices. They also further helped erode identification with a sacred imagined community, like Catholicism, which (in 16th century novellas like *Lazarillo de Tormes* and 19th century novels like *El Periquillo Sarniento*, for example) could be criticized in print publications. Further on I will argue print-capitalism was not the only way to foment a national consciousness.

Anderson does not claim that print-capitalism arose from nowhere. He describes some of the conditions that predated the rise of print-capitalism which also contributed to the forming of a national consciousness. For example, he describes the rise of administrative vernaculars as contributing to the erosion of religious community identity. But Anderson adds the caveat that, “[N]othing

suggests that any deep-seated ideological, let alone proto-national, impulses underlay this vernacularization where it occurred" (ibid.: 55).

He offers similar caveats for thinking that other contributing factors to secularization and anti-dynastic sentiment were sufficient for nationalism, such as the Reformation, growing Enlightenment belief in the impacts of climate and ecology on local culture and character, Liberalism, and even economic factors and interests beyond that of print-capitalism. Instead, for Anderson these were just precursors to the eventual and definitive fertile ground of phenomena like print-capitalism.

In the case of the Americas, Anderson proposes that another definitive fertile ground for nationalism was administrative architecture, an awareness of the difference between the "metropole" and the "province" fueled largely by what he calls "administrative pilgrimages" by "creole functionaries" (ibid.: 65). Indeed, in a chapter dedicated to Creole nationalisms in the Americas, Anderson concludes, "What I am proposing is that neither economic interest, Liberalism, nor Enlightenment could, or did, create in themselves the kind, or shape, of imagined community to be defended from these regimes' depredations ... In accomplishing this specific task, pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen played the decisive historic role" (ibid.: 65).

Despite Anderson's breathtaking analytic scope and world-historical sensitivity, I believe he overlooked or understated the impact of the history of ideas on the origins of national consciousness (see, for example, Brading 1973; 1991). While it is true that Spain's chopping-up of its imperial territories and prohibitions on inter-American trade had enormous and lasting impacts on Spanish American nationalism, this was not simply because of "pilgrim creole functionaries" or the very late appearance of the novel and newspaper in Latin America. Instead, other public writing and artwork, like historical narratives, popular religious drama, popular religious choral compositions like *villancicos*, and even triumphal arches could be ways to disseminate proto-national identities and create an imagined community. I will discuss such examples in a moment.

Moreover, these imagined communities are national or proto-national while not seeming directly opposed to dynastic hierarchy (in the case of Sor Juana and Sigüenza y Góngora) or fully embracing secularism (in the case of Vasconcelos, Sor Juana, and Sigüenza y Góngora). For example, as I will argue, Criollo patriotism is proto-nationalist without being especially secular or republican. I will also argue that Vasconcelos' concept of "mestizaje" is nationalist without being secular, and that Vasconcelos defies Anderson's requirement for the nation as an imagined community that replaces "steady, solid simultaneity through time" with another idea of time. Instead, Vasconcelos goes out of his way to create a historical-cosmological narrative of his own. In what follows, I'll begin by sampling some community concepts from the Americas that predate "Criollismo," and then move

into the middle colonial period and beyond. I will discuss Simón de Bolívar's pan-American vision as a modern update on Criollo patriotism: while it seems to meet the conditions of Anderson's definition of nationalism, it is also supra-national, intending to link together many communities under one concept. The last concept I will analyze is Vasconcelos's "Mestizaje." I will argue that "Mestizaje" adopts features of each of these highlighted precedent concepts, while directly challenging Anderson's preferred analysis of nationalism. Vasconcelos' vision is essentialist, non-secular, and embraces a cosmological narrative rather than homogeneous "empty" time.

The upshot of my analysis is that the boundaries of ethnic, racial, and national concepts of community are blurred and often continuous with each other, not unlike the imaginaries, populations, and material circumstances that construct them. This is why nations and nationality can feel perennial or even primordial, as if they were basic aspects of someone's identity, and also why we can coherently claim nations existed prior to the advent of modernity.

2. From the Florentine Codex to Mestizaje

A) Mesoamerican Antecedents: The *Florentine Codex*

How did pre-Columbian communities sort themselves into groups? We can find strong hints in early colonial documents that although imaginary communities in Mesoamerica were classified according to cultural hierarchies, these were not generally based on phenotypes or even on religious beliefs. In the 16th century manuscript often referred to as the *Florentine Codex*, we find Náhuatl-language descriptions of central Mexican peoples from the perspective of opinionated Mexica. As anthropological historian David Tavárez details, in Book 10, Chapter 29, these Mexica sorted peoples or *tlaca* according to a cultural hierarchy, but did not use phenotypic markers as indicators of relevant difference (Tavárez 2025). (The one exception: an acknowledgement in a bone-chilling passage that Spaniards preferred to rape lighter-skinned indigenous women). For example, while the Mexica interviewed in the *Florentine Codex* classified the more rural Otomi and Huasteca peoples as the lowest on their cultural totem pole, especially when it came to taste in fashion and even level of intelligence, they appraised some non-Mexica groups as wealthy or as skilled at hunting or farming. The Mexica also sorted people into speakers of Nahuatl and then *popoloca*, or barbarous peoples. According to this text, all these peoples shared an origin story: these peoples all used to be nomadic *Chichimeca*, and so (except for some easterners like the Olmeca, Huixtotin, or Nonohaulca) were all the same *tlaca*, the same "people." In Book 1 and Book 10 of this same *Codex*, the Nahuatl speaking peoples trace their origins to *Chicomoztoc*, the place of the seven caves. So, while

the Mexica had definite ethnocentric biases, their social categories were not *racial*.

Tavárez points out that several groups otherwise known to the Nahuatl are notably absent from this chapter of the *Florentine Codex*, despite its claim to describe all settlers and founders of cities “who dwelt everywhere here in the land” (Tavárez 2025: 4). Its authors do not mention the Zapoteca or Maya peoples, for example, but they do, curiously, mention the Mixteca. Tavárez does not speculate on this absence much in his article, but one wonders whether perhaps the Mexica had a linguistic or geographic idea of the span of a Nahuatl “nation,” akin to what an ancient Greek might understand as a Hellenic one, a division between “us” and “not-us,” between “ours” and “not-ours.” The Mexica seem to embrace a linguistic ethno-nationalism. They claim the Toltecs as their Nahuatl ancestors because of Toltec use of a Nahuatl dialect. The Mexica contributors to the *Florentine Codex* also disparage the Otomi, whom they displaced when they moved into the Valley of Mexico, and who speak an Oto-Manguean language related to Zapotec and Mixtec.

So shared history and language, but not phenotype, are core to the *Florentine Codex* Mexica’s concept of their *tlaca*. Arguably the Mexica’s concept of their *tlaca* or people fits Anthony Smith’s definition of an *ethnie*, a concept he sees as a building-block of nationalism (Smith 1986). Tavárez remarks at the opening of his article that the, “contemporary emphasis on hybridity and mestizaje ... minimizes how Indigenous people in Mesoamerica conceptualized their own identities through an emphasis on different cultural practices, historical origins, and languages before and after the Spanish conquest” (ibid.: 1). I agree. That said, the historical precedent for this ignorance was laid not long after alphabetized Nahuatl documents like the *Florentine Codex* were produced. Indeed, these very documents would serve as sources for subsequent developments in the concept of Mesoamerican identity. Next I will examine the output of one 17th century luminary who championed an early but strikingly developed form of *Criollismo*, a Spanish-colonial-era form of proto-nationalism.

B) Colonial Nations: Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Triumphal Arches

Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700) is a fascinating and multi-talented figure. His most lasting influence has perhaps been in his zealous collecting of and protection of early indigenous-language documents and pre-Conquest indigenous history, and his related theorizing about the historical ancestors of indigenous American peoples. In short, Sigüenza y Góngora is one of the earliest and most influential of the Criollo “patriots” (Brading 1973), individuals of Spanish ancestry born in New Spain who championed new concepts of belonging in the Americas. Sigüenza’s Novohispanic patriotism harmonized, in his view, with his efforts to study indigenous American history.

In Sigüenza y Góngora's 1680 mixed-media triumphal arch piece to celebrate the arrival of a new Viceroy, Tomás de la Cerda, he went out of his way to criticize the reliance on classical myth and allegory in celebrating important figures and for providing moral models to serve as *mirrors for princes*. Sigüenza argued instead for the importance and relevance of describing real, historical leaders to use as models (see Gallegos Ordorica 2024). Which were Don Carlos's preferred models for the incoming Viceroy? Why, the pre-Conquest rulers of the Mexica, of course! After all, the Viceroy of New Spain was only the latest head of a long line of Mexican leaders.

Sigüenza y Góngora's contemporary, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695), was also commissioned to create a Triumphal Arch: however, even though she chose the god Neptune as her model for the new Viceroy to emulate, Don Carlos went out of his way to try to vindicate her choice. Why would this not fall under Don Carlos' criticism of using myth and fantastical allegory as a model? Well, Don Carlos tells us, citing his sources throughout, this is because the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas are descended from the people of the sunken city of Atlantis. He seems to identify the island-city Aztlán that was said to be the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs with the island-city Atlantis from Platonic myth. The 16th-17th century *Codex Azcatitlan* traces the ancestry of the rulers of Tenochtitlan to Aztlan. Certain colonial-era historians in turn identified or associated Aztlan with the Chicomoztoc of the *Florentine Codex* and of the *Historia Tolteca-Chicimeca*. Atlantis, moreover, was the rightful domain of the god Neptune. (Sigüenza y Góngora takes pains to derive the name Neptune from the Biblical "Nephthium" to avoid un-Christian upshots). In short: for Sigüenza it turns out Sor Juana's choice of emulable leader is *also* proper to the history of the Americas.

This outlines a mythology that will still be adopted as true by José Vasconcelos almost 250 years later.² According to this mythology, on the one hand, the native people of the Americas share a kind of ancestry with the Europeans, in that they all originated in a fabled ancient Mediterranean metropolis. On the other hand, these American peoples are in a way also a separate race. The people of Atlantis, the Platonic myth goes, traced their ancestry to Egypt, a third, more mysterious and more ancient civilization than either the Greek or the Roman.

Another significant aspect of Sigüenza's Triumphal Arch piece is that Sigüenza signs its first main section with the words, "the city of Mexico by everyone's vows ... erected this the 30th of November of the 353rd year since the founding of Mexico," (*"la ciudad de México con los votos de todos... puso el día treinta de*

² This might qualify as the kind of *mythmoteur* or constitutive political myth that Anthony Smith identifies as the heart of ethnicist community identity, should we choose to classify "Americans" as an ethnicity newly invented by Criollo ideology (Smith 1986: 58).

noviembre del año 353 de la fundación de México,") using Mexico's indigenous founding as its formal age. He does not list the years since the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan or even the current year on the Gregorian calendar. This further underscores Sigüenza's opinion that the Viceroy and the Viceroyalty are continuations of, and not substitutions for, pre-Hispanic Mexico. It also explains why he chooses pre-Conquest Aztec leaders as his princely models. He is telling the Viceroy: learn about *our* history, which is now *your* history. Now: who is this "our"?

Sigüenza refers to his community as, "*nuestra Nación Criolla*" (Sigüenza y Góngora 2005 [1680]: 17), "our Creole Nation." Thus Mexico is simultaneously a "nation," a specifically indigenous nation with an indigenous history and distinguished indigenous leaders, and a "Creole" nation. Each of these words is consequential. Sigüenza does not call it a Spanish nation! He is also not suggesting that the Creole nation is new (it is at least 350 years old) or that its composition requires or presupposes a mixing of races.

How can we understand the invocation of a "Creole Nation" here? I suggest the emphasis turns out to be on the territory and how its history unites all people born in the Americas. *Criollo* is someone who is *raised*, who is "*criado*," in the new land. So for Sigüenza, Criollismo, and Creole patriotism, must mean an embrace of a protean *jus soli*, a right to national belonging based on being born in or belonging to a specific land. It is telling that *jus soli*, or birthright, is *the* common way of defining citizenship across the Americas (Price 2024). Although Criollismo appropriates indigenous history and culture as part of this territorial identity, its proposed community is not defined by blood (which would imply a hereditary right to national belonging, *jus sanguinis*) or by racial mixture.

Naturally, because Sigüenza and his compatriots are used to dynastic rulership and to citizenship as defined by a relationship between subjects and rulers, Sigüenza moves to politically link New Spanish viceroyalty to the pre-Conquest Tenocha dynasty. Such a model of citizenship or national identity, while imaginable elsewhere, appears somewhat unique to this particular colonial context.

Sigüenza acknowledges others as belonging to his community when he says any defects in understanding the Mexican past are "ours, because while we all pride ourselves on being lovers of our fatherlands, what is known about them is owed to foreign pens." ("*[E]l defecto es nuestro, pues cuando todos nos preciamos de tan amantes de nuestras patrias, lo que de ellas se sabe se debe a extranjerías plumas*" (Sigüenza y Góngora 2005 [1680]: 17)). Sigüenza draws a clear contrast between "ours/we/us," that is, American-born nationals, and foreigners, like the explorers who have written travelogues about the Americas, missionaries who have interviewed inhabitants, or even collectors of curiosities like Athanasius Kircher.

To make my point about Sigüenza's relevance to Anderson brief, the link between Sigüenza's Creole nationalism or proto-nationalism has nothing to do with Sigüenza's particular status as a functionary, nor with his or the Viceroy's pilgrimage. The geographic separation between the Americas and Spain, coupled with the Spanish disdain for American-born criollos, had clearly been enough by 1680 to have fostered a national consciousness separate from the Spanish one. The Criollo movement had already sought, through figures like Sigüenza, to link itself to – and often appropriate – indigenous American history and through this history to an ancestral territory (for an extensive analysis of other Criollo patriots and their interest in indigenous histories, see Brading 1973).

Another important facet of this particular example is that both Sor Juana's and Sigüenza's triumphal arch pieces were *intended to be viewed by and consumed by the public*, in a shared public space within a shared time-range, and not just for the incoming viceroys. The formal presentation of the arch likely involved a public lecture, public viewings for several weeks or months, and related public spectacles like a military march. No print-capitalism needed!

All of this was deliberately intended to create, not just a guide to virtue for the incoming ruler, but a shared political community. Sigüenza knew that by presenting historical Mexica rulers to his audience, he would be including not only fellow Criollos but also an indigenous public, and evidently also mestizo participants, urging everyone to see themselves as subjects of the Spanish crown. But even though Sigüenza's choice of princely model was appropriative and self-serving, it is nonetheless still subversive: the people gathered in that public square were not being urged to *see themselves as Spanish*, but instead to see this new aristocratic Spaniard as if he were, or were becoming, a *newly naturalized Mexican*.

C) Colonial Communities: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Unifying Spectacle

The work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz exhibits Criollismo of a similar stripe to Sigüenza's, although a bit more subdued. Sor Juana's prologue *Loa* to her sacramental play *Divine Narcissus* features indigenous characters defending themselves against invading and evangelizing Spaniards, who eventually, persuaded that their own religion has similarities with the Spanish one, ask to be told more about Christianity. Thematically Sor Juana's dialogue resembles Sahagún's 16th century *Aztec-Spanish Dialogues*, a bilingual reimagining or recounting of a genuine early colonial interaction between Franciscan missionaries and Nahuatl leaders. Sor Juana includes a *tocotín* or Nahuatl-style drum song in her prologue play.

One reason this piece appears to be a product of Criollismo is that at the end of the prologue play Sor Juana uses both the indigenous character *America* and the Spanish character *Religion* as her authorial mouthpieces: that is, she identifies

with *both* the Native American woman and with the woman representing her profession. As they address the audience, each of these two characters seems to talk as if they're the author of the main play, *Divine Narcissus*. It is as if Sor Juana has already embraced a hybridized American identity, foreshadowing Vasconcelos' centering of mestizos and mestizaje.

More strikingly still, an early scene in the main play has the character "Human Nature" adjudicating a debate between her children or subjects, named Synagogue (an allegory for Abrahamic religion) and Gentility (an allegory for paganism), who are arguing over which one really grasps the truth. Human Nature concludes that both have the right intention, but that Synagogue worships the true god, while Gentility confuses what is apparent and what is real. (Human Nature adds, however, that Gentility may have the truth again in the end). In order to reconcile the two, Human Nature also proposes to write the play that follows, using the "sense" or style of one and the "meaning" of the other. This conciliatory syncretism reflects Sor Juana's choice to write an allegory for the Eucharist using the Greek – pagan – myth of Narcissus: Narcissus will stand as an allegory for Jesus Christ, with the role of his reflection being played by Human Nature. Here Sor Juana embraces a kind of religious symbolic syncretism as a vehicle for endorsing universalism about truth and moral goodness, suggesting all rational cultures have equal access to it.

This religious syncretism as universalism joins hands with an assertion of human racial moral equality. The character of Human Nature is described as having dark skin, echoing the passage in the *Song of Songs*, "though I am black, I am beautiful..." (Solomon 1:5). The main play's prologue play suggests that Human Nature's skin tone is that of the indigenous American people. *Divine Narcissus* concludes when Jesus-as-Narcissus sees Human Nature (purified by Grace, an allegory for Mary) as his mirror image and falls in love with her to such an extent that he chooses to sacrifice himself for her sake. The spurned and white-skinned nymph Echo, an allegory for Lucifer, looks on, consumed with jealousy; she was rejected for her prideful love of her own and Narcissus's surface level beauty more than what is truly beautiful. Thus Sor Juana seems to reject a racist logic that would exclude non-white believers from Christian redemption. In her Platonist vision, God is goodness, and therefore, virtuous people can hail from any race so long as they embrace Christian belief.

Just like with Sigüenza's arch, Sor Juana's play is, counter-intuitively, not written to convince Mexicans to submit to Spain or Spanish religion. Sor Juana tells us in the prologue it is meant to be *performed in Madrid*. It is meant to bring Mexico to the Spaniards! Perhaps the play was meant to show a hypothetical Spanish audience the value of Mexican culture and even appearance, perhaps to convey that human nature is universal, and that the souls of indigenous people, just like Spanish souls, are genuine reflections of God.

This is not a nationalist or even proto-nationalist sentiment in a traditional sense (although see Brading 1973, who argues thematically similar texts by other Spanish Americans were reactions to anti-Criollo and anti-American prejudice in Europe). But it is certainly suffused with the pride and defiance of a voice that knows itself as *other* to Spain and the Spanish crown. Also, just like Sigüenza's arch, Sor Juana's plays are a genre that was typically performed in public before large crowds during religious celebrations. Here, she wanted the Spanish public to be witness to another one. She is announcing this nascent nation to them by means of a shared spectacle.

Sor Juana also sometimes promotes Criollo public consciousness within pieces performed in her own city. Her *villancicos* are key examples of this. These choral poems or songs are composed for religious events, and intended for popular participation: unlike Church ceremonies, which were always in Latin, *villancicos* tended to be in one or more of the public vernaculars. They also tended to be comical or light-hearted. Accordingly, we have Sorjuanian *villancicos* in Spanish, Spanish-Latin, pidgin Portuguese, and even (admittedly spotty) Náhuatl and Afro-Mexican vernacular Spanish. Different groups function as mouthpieces to contribute theological questions, to provide meditations on the theme of the day, and to offer responses to the questions posed. This shared public performance both helped to humanize arcane Catholic dogma and ritual and to offer a bridge for each group to feel included or understood (Gallegos Ordorica 2026).

This shared experience of song and worship was intended to create a shared consciousness and sacred community. Sor Juana, of course, often offers ironic barbs and dramatic contrasts in her *villancicos* that reveal the unrealizability of this endeavor: an uppity student priest who speaks only in Latin comically fails to make himself understood to a commoner; enslaved Black singers plead to the Virgin Mary to advocate for them so they will be free in Heaven; Náhuatl speakers use Nahua religious imagery to worship Mary; at times there are punches-up to authority or the wealthy, or even to a second racial-caste group.

This chorus of voices composes a shared experience, if not necessarily a shared set of identities. But this is Sor Juana reflecting the world around her. The songs she writes are *quintessentially* Novohispanic. They evoke that particular time and that particular place, all at the same time, for anyone listening to them. Because many groups are represented and even lightly satirized, with the main target of criticism being common tragedies of terrestrial and colonial life like hunger, group misunderstanding, and unfreedom, everyone could feel a sense of membership in the community. The 1600s have their own way of producing a "shared consciousness" that Anderson attributes to print-men, newspapers, novels, and print-capitalism in the late 18th century.

D) Bolivar's 19th Century Pan-American Vision

In both the *Letter from Jamaica* and the *Angostura Address*, Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) envisions a future, sovereign, unified pan-American nation. Bolívar's vision is in many senses a Criollo vision: pan-Americanism is only imaginable if one takes, as he does, the shared history of Spanish colonialism as a catalyst for unity. Bolívar refers to Spain as a “parent” to the new nation, in just the way generations of philosophers and historians in the region have. Nonetheless, Spain was a bad and abusive parent, and Bolívar has countably few positive words for inherited Spanish culture. (If anything, he has seemingly adopted the widespread impression of Spanish inferiority relative to other European nations like Britain and France).

Bolívar's vision is not racial. At least, he endeavors to embrace the idea of politically uniting, through emancipation and secular republicanism, groups as diverse as rural indigenous tribes, the formerly enslaved, and wealthy urban Creoles. Bolívar casts the new nation as an assertion of a right to independent self-rule. He also casts the nation as both the birth of a new, ideal future and new *identity* for the people of the region: a self-actualization.

What sort of new identity will the new nation house? Bolívar does not go as far as to imagine that this future requires a particular kind of racial miscegenation or racial overcoming. Instead, the bogeyman is the alleged unvirtuous character of the barbarous – Bolívar uses the word “slavish” – people of the region. But Bolívar's is a genealogical and geographic, rather than genetic, explanation, for this character. It is the rugged land, it is the acculturation to servitude, and the lack of independence previously afforded to the people of the Americas that make them inadequate to the immediate adoption of the freest forms of government, he reasons. As Montesquieu had posited, the character of a government must suit the character of its subjects, which delimits what is possible. (Which is the freest form of government? Bolívar thinks it is the one adopted by the United States. Apparently, Anglo-Americans have more greatly enjoyed autonomy prior to their independence, alongside some other advantages, and thus possess greater virtue).

So far this seems to accord with Anderson's understanding of nationality as a secular solution to the degeneration of religious beliefs and community. However, Bolívar's vision is far from embracing homogeneous, empty time, or even from delimiting the boundaries of his imagined future community: instead he waxes poetic about the manifest destiny of the continent, to allegedly unite all peoples while also enabling a cultural apotheosis.

At the same time, Bolívar's vision has clear links to the Creole consciousness of Sigüenza and Sor Juana's time. He separates the Spanish American nation and its future from that of its Anglo-American counterpart: therefore the unifying core of his community is its Criollo background. Also, with Sigüenza and Sor Juana, for Bolívar, the public is a diverse mass. Its diversity is an opportunity, but it is also a potential undoing. The cacophony of disagreement and misunderstanding,

coupled with the lack of urbane, metropolitan experience, threatens the community's cohesion at every turn. Bolívar's attempted strategy to preempt such natural dissolution was to impose a highly centralized and even authoritarian structure on his proposed new republic, with himself at the helm. The attempt to create unity by sheer force of will failed. Bolívar's vision of a united Gran Colombia was too idealized. I would argue the vision was, not unlike the Jesuit and Vasconcelos case, too detached from local realities, local vernaculars, and localized cultures.

At the same time, Bolívar's seems like a natural candidate for a truly nationalist imaginary. His *Angostura Address* directly aimed to forge a new nation. His *Jamaica Letter* anticipates this through a kind of pure imaginative vision. His nationalism carries a pan-American flavor, which reflects his ambitious dream to create a unified pan-American nation. This suggests Bolívar's supra-nationalism is just one of a variety of forms nationalism can take. Bolívar's vision still captures minds and hearts today, even though the sentiment has not yielded lasting and truly shared popular consciousness.

E) José Vasconcelos's Pan-American Racial Nationalism

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) proposes a vision of the future for the Americas that is more racialized than any of the imagined communities presented so far. For Vasconcelos, the future will be catalyzed by widespread miscegenation, in a process that will create the ideal, mixed-race citizens of tomorrow, possessing the virtues of each of its hereditary parts: *mestizos* will exemplify the ideal future for the Americas. In Vasconcelos's opinion, a Mestizo nation is made possible by its Iberian (and Catholic) ancestry, which is capable of embracing rather than rejecting differences.

Vasconcelos seems to consciously mix the concept of Mestizo-as-Criollo with the Pan-American ideology he praises in Bolívar, while rejecting Bolívar's anti-Iberian sentiment. (Vasconcelos also mixes his ideology with the social Darwinist theory he otherwise claims to despise in Herbert Spencer and other positivist racial essentialists). For Vasconcelos, Mestizos are only the next in line to hold natural racial dominance, following a cycle that had previously upheld white European, indigenous American, and other racialized groups as dominant.

Vasconcelos is explicitly racist against indigenous peoples in a way that both outdoes and defies the Criollo's more typical appropriative attitude toward indigenous culture. Vasconcelos praises the same mythical Atlantean past that Sigüenza y Góngora championed – intending, not to laud contemporary indigenous Americans in a well-meaning but ignorant way like Sigüenza, but to deprecate them – while he also refers to extant indigenous nations as being in decline. Vasconcelos' teleology for *mestizaje* requires that all indigenous American people belong to one "race" and that this "race" has already peaked in

the past. Vasconcelos ignores all historical evidence that most indigenous Americans do not have origin stories that resemble the Mexica's and dismisses out of hand the Bering Strait theory for the population of the Americas. He also contradicts himself in citing an earlier "mestizo" origin story for the Atlanteans in Egypt, perhaps clumsily trying to tie ancient Egyptian civilization's success to mestizaje, before returning to his stage-based teleological explanation of racial dominance.

Vasconcelos's pro-Iberianism is all but synonymous with his anti-US sentiment. In his view, championing indigeneity is a mistake, partly because for him, indigenous cultural success and indigenous American reality is so far in the past that it is unlikely to be useful in countering the "Saxons;" for Vasconcelos, Indigenists, who see the future for the Americas in indigenous terms, are selling falsehoods. For Vasconcelos, the future for the Americas requires reconciling with and embracing a *Spanish* identity.

It is not a mystery that Vasconcelos flip-flops between this essentially Spanish ethno-nationalist angle – more extreme even than colonial-era Criollismo, which had at bottom a quiet suspicion of Spain and Spanish parentage – and the ideal of "mestizaje." In the same breath Vasconcelos attacks individual nationalisms in the Americas and yearns for a new appreciation of Iberian culture.

For Vasconcelos, *la raza cósmica* is quintessentially *Iberian*. Vasconcelos does not say this explicitly, but as is suggested extensively in his discussions of Roman and Egyptian white-leaning mestizaje, the Iberians are already mestizos themselves, even by the time of the Conquest! "The Saxons," by contrast, seek white racial purity. This is why the Iberian "race" is the proper "bridge" to the eventual dominance of the "cosmic race." Spanish Americans thus have both the *jus sanguinis* or a right by blood and sovereignty over the future *mestizo* paradise, the *jus soli* or right by birthplace.

But for Vasconcelos, none of this apotheosis will be achievable while Hispanic Americans deny or dislike their Spanish ancestry. Spanish ancestry is, as it is even with Bolívar's vision, one of the key *unifiers* of the Americas as one super-nation. (The other is Catholicism: Vasconcelos blames under-conversion of Asians to their lack of incorporation thus far into the *mestizo* racial mixture).

What is the core point? Vasconcelos' *mestizo* vision is clearly a direct evolution of the Criollo concept, taking on the preoccupations and biases of his particular time and perspective. While Bolívar admires the United States and resents Spain, Vasconcelos sees the aggressively capitalist, imperialist, and wealthy United States as a far greater threat than the now much less empowered Spain. Even US culture is a threat, as its positivist scientific ideas, which for Vasconcelos likely represent the repugnant ideals of the Porfiriato, lure young people and businesses to friendliness and obsequiousness toward the United States. Vasconcelos

identifies Catholicism, a clear legacy of Spanish culture, as the needed anti-positivist remedy for pro-US sentiment and the prior failure of pan-Americanism.

3. Imagined Communities Beyond Nationalism

Now I will return to the question of whether Vasconcelos' "mestizaje" is a form of nationalism, using Anderson's theories as a foil. Then I will revisit the question of whether the modernization theory of nationalism is true for the Americas.

It is important to reiterate that I reject Anderson's at times univocal characterization of nationalism. Vasconcelos's *mestizaje* seems to me a clear form of ethno-nationalism. Despite Vasconcelos's anti-nationalist and pro-universalist protests to the contrary, his teleological race miscegenation theory clearly appears to be a substitute form of nationalism rather than a true universalism. We can see in its Bolivarian and colonial antecedents that "the nation" as conceived in the Americas frequently transcends both political boundaries imposed by the Spanish crown and the challenges of complete integration. What is even more important is that Vasconcelos's *mestizaje* was more or less adopted, only slightly sanitized, by the Mexican state, in a form of "official nationalism."

Another aspect of Anderson's characterization of nationalism involves a temporal flavor. Anderson suggests the novel and newspaper contributed to the creation of a "nation" concept because both present a kind of homogeneous *now* shared by everyone reading that particular publication or in that local vernacular, something allegedly unimaginable before print-capitalism. Anderson contrasts this with how, in medieval times, ancient people were often depicted in the same garb as their depictees, obscuring the separation between the "now" and the past.

Finally, before we turn to Vasconcelos again, Anderson's characterization of nationalism emphasizes its secularism. Recall that for Anderson, the nation-concept replaces spiritual and religious cosmological predestination, spiritual community, and religion-based dynasticism as sovereignty with secular mythologies and often local, vernacular-language-based, fraternal and horizontal community concepts.

In contrast Vasconcelos goes out of his way to create a historical-cosmological narrative that centers and lionizes his future imagined "mestizo" race. Vasconcelos' vision is also firmly non-secular. He celebrates the potential Christianization of the world as synonymous with its universalizing empathy, and predicts its fulfillment in this successfully evangelized and evangelizing imaginary "mestizo" community of the future. In Vasconcelos's early 20th century vision, modernization and industrialization are but an intermediary stage in an eventual cultural apotheosis. This is almost an inversion of the much more secular but equally teleological Comtean positivist version of the same.

It just doesn't seem to me that Anderson's analysis about the origins of nationalism is poised to deftly handle battles between competing kinds of

nationalist movements: in Mexico, the dictatorial secular nationalism of the Porfiriato laid the groundwork both for the fraternity-embracing Mexican Revolution as well as for new versions of ethno-nationalism and anti-positivist spiritual revival. The fact that political fates remain intertwined across the Americas – Mexico's was not the only positivist dictatorship – motivated a continued search for a shared Pan-American identity as well. According to the present analysis, 17th-century *Criollismo* and 19th century Bolivarian Pan-Americanism provided tantalizing proto-nationalist and pan-nationalist frameworks atop which Vasconcelos's *Mestizaje* could be built to suit his 20th century interests.

Perhaps Anderson would reply that these features of *Criollismo* and *Mestizaje* render both concepts non-nationalist. On such a picture of nationalism, the concept of a nation and the power of nationalism require horizontality or fraternity as the basis of sovereignty, simultaneity in time of the community, and sometimes a shared vernacular to delimit its boundaries. If one of these is missing, the imagined community is not properly "limited" in the way a national community typically is.

That seems *prima facie* correct. But if we remember the European, Napoleonic 19th century, one thing that seemed important to the continent-wide effects of the French Revolution was precisely its seeming *universality*, what Anderson describes as the "modular" nature of nationalism. Napoleon pushed nationalist, pseudo-democratic ideas onto many places ahead of his advancing armies, and these were well-received. One can imagine at least two mechanisms for this: the first, the humanist universalist element that produced "*égalité*" and "*fraternité*;" and the second, the sort of very specific or delimited community, united often by things like vernacular, that Anderson describes. The second thing resisted Napoleonic imperialism, while the first could sometimes boost it. All of this fits well with the idea that the Napoleonic era was in fact a massive contradiction. The impulse to conquer and absorb pushes against the inherent limitations of nationalism. Even Bolívar, in his 1819 *Angostura Address*, seemed to think democratic republics resist expansionist tendencies, which makes them more "practical" than monarchies (Bolívar 2003: 35), but the opposite has often been demonstrably the case. US American "Manifest Destiny" was not far behind.

So the *criollismo* that predates and shapes Vasconcelos' *mestizaje* is also the model for Bolívar's dream of pan-American unity. The shared creole history of the continent, and broadly shared imperial language, is a formidable basis for a kind of "nationalism" so large in scope that it is almost unimaginable for the often fractured, war-torn European republics. Perhaps what we have instead are competing imagined communities, with differing scopes.

Anderson may have a reply. In a chapter on contemporary nationalisms, he contrasts "official nationalism" with the earlier model. "[O]fficial nationalism

assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of their visions" (Anderson 2006: 159). Though he does not mention Mexico, this understanding is applicable to Vasconcelos' case, as he was ultimately a contributor to and beneficiary of the Mexican Revolution. *Mestizaje* was certainly a form of "official nationalism" promoted by the Mexican state, and assumed, discussed, or even championed by a generation of Mexican writers as distinguished as Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz.

In my opinion, it is the *continuity* of these national or quasi-national concepts across three or four centuries that is the most striking. Rather than a sudden shift in the 18th or 19th centuries, this brief study shows that Vasconcelos' form of nationalism was not especially new at all.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show throughout this piece that the ethnic self-understandings and imaginings of communities in each century in the Americas often have clear nationalist or proto-nationalist characters: they unify differing groups of people, often of varying phenotypes, behavior, and values, into one group with shared characteristics. Often those shared characteristics are historical-geneological, but these can join elements of shared experience, shared location, shared narratives, and shared frustrations to make that diffuse public into a *community* with a shared outlook or aspiration for the future. That community can then be the subject of something as radical as an independence movement, and begin to understand itself as rightfully sovereign.

I did not discuss horizontality very extensively here, partly because the history of Latin America gives as many examples of *failed* and even *actively undermined* horizontality as it gives of *ideals* of horizontality. Bolívar's at first reluctant embrace of emancipation and reluctant inclusion of indigenous people is written about by him as a great and baseline ideal for his future nation. (This also more or less mirrors the structure and history of these pluralist ideals in the continent). But in the same document Bolívar legislates himself as first among equals because he thinks that without his unique competence the whole political project would fall apart. This too is reminiscent of, for example, Sigüenza and Sor Juana's acknowledgement of dynastic rulers as ideal sovereigns, and of missionaries who both wanted to protect and emancipate indigenous people as equal and noble Catholic souls but insisted on always having a Catholic order at the top of the pyramid of otherwise "autonomous" governance. Vasconcelos, too, does much the same when he assigns a seemingly divinely appointed destiny to the "cosmic race": its Catholicism is, for him, synonymous with its cosmic or universal character.

I also did not much discuss the relationships Anderson ascribes to nationalism, time, and perceived destiny. This is not because they are not pertinent, particularly in Vasconcelos's case, but because Anderson's theory is too indebted to Walter Benjamin, whose theories lie outside the scope of the present exercise. These relationships also strongly resonate with what I will call "meta-modernism," an attempt to structurally distinguish the "modern" period from the "pre-modern" period using not just the progression of historical events but looking to identify differences from within the practice historiography as well. It is as if the history of ideas itself is meant to go through a Copernican revolution, because of which certain possibilities or actualities will never be imaginable or actualizable again.

Instead of embracing such "meta-modernism," I favor theories that offer explanatory continuities rather than jarring discontinuities between transitional periods in history. Anderson relies on the idea that if just enough continuous processes join forces, explosive discontinuities will result. Perhaps this is necessary in analyzing conflicts that change the structures of power. However, the heart of Anderson's analysis is that nation-concepts themselves carry a mysterious power that must spring out of insufficient wellsprings. By contrast, according to the present analysis, if the nation and nationalism are distinct concepts conceived in the late 18th century, their mysterious power is a direct consequence of the power of antecedent "proto-nationalist" concepts, rather than largely a result of modern phenomena Anderson favors, like print-capitalism.

Maybe I'm too Latin American to think these structures are ever too radically removed from their pre-revolutionary forms. Revolutions are made, but they are also, like their constituent concepts, often also re-made.

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