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## HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dreaming of a cosmic race: José Vasconcelos and the politics of race in Mexico, 1920s–1930s

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the role of Mexican philosopher, José Vasconcelos, in consolidating *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixture) as the national ideology through a textual analysis of his essay, “La raza cósmica” (The Cosmic Race), his educational magazine, “El Maestro” (The Teacher), and other writings. The paper takes on a historical approach to explore how Vasconcelos’ ideas on mixture circulated within the culture at large, influenced the eugenics and education movements, and helped shape the politics of race, culture, and social engineering in early twentieth-century Mexico in order to account for what persists in the present.

**Subjects:** Communication Studies; Humanities; Latin American & Hispanic Studies; Latin American History; Latin American Politics

**Keywords:** eugenics; science; education; race; culture; hybridity; *mestizaje*; history; Mexico; Latin America

### 1. Introduction

The philosopher and educator José Vasconcelos is a central figure in the shaping of racial politics in Mexico, whose work consolidated the *mestizo* as the superior, universal race. In this paper, I examine how he develops the theory of *mestizaje*<sup>1</sup> in his essay, *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race, 1925), and his lectures delivered in English at the University of Chicago in 1926; and how his theory converged with the educational and eugenics movement of the time. The lectures were sponsored by the Norman Wait Harris Memorial Foundation and compiled in a volume entitled *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*.

Vasconcelos emerged from the *Ateneo de la Juventud* (Athenaeum of Youth), a society of young Mexico City intellectuals founded in 1909 notable for its rejection of positivism. Among its members were philosopher Antonio Caso, writer Alfonso Reyes, artist Diego Rivera, architects and poets, many of whom were sponsored by the government to study art, music, and literature in Europe. As historian Vaughan (1982) points out, the *Ateneo* initially had little to no interest in Mexico and “the social

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Linnete Manrique is a PhD candidate in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her thesis explores how race and nation are entangled in the historical development of the nation-building myth of *mestizaje* in Mexico. She works as an associate lecturer for the Media and Communications department at Goldsmiths and currently teaches the course titled, “Race, Empire and Nation.” Manrique obtained her MA in Media, Culture and Communication from New York University in 2012 and her BA in Communication Studies from the University of San Diego in 2009.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The paper explores how José Vasconcelos helped consolidate *mestizaje* as the national ideology through his written work and educational crusade, and how this left a lasting imprint on the politics of race and culture in Mexico. The aim that animates this historical paper is to become aware of how and why *mestizaje* persists in our modern times in order to challenge it and to begin imagining political alternatives.

revolution brewing around them” (p. 241). Instead, they were immersed in the readings and debates of the works of Bergson, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and sought to pursue “art for its own sake” and create a space for “individual artistic expression” (pp. 241–242). The exception here was Vasconcelos whose involvement in the revolution dates as early as 1910 when he actively participated in the Francisco I. Madero movement against the reelection of president Porfirio Díaz. The Ateneo developed within the context of a Latin American literary movement led by the Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó who stressed “the inherent “spirituality” of Latin American culture in contrast to the materialist and scientism of the Anglo-Saxon world ...” (p. 242). This dialectical opposition between Latin and Anglo cultures is a key aspect of Vasconcelos’ racial theory and is discussed in detail below. Many of the Ateneo members worked in higher education and were instrumental in reinstating humanist studies in Mexican universities (p. 242).

Vasconcelos became prominent for his educational crusade. He first served as the dean of the National Autonomous University of Mexico from 1920 to 1921, providing the university with the still current motto, “The spirit shall speak for my race,” meant to signify the “awakening of our race after a long night of oppression” (Vasconcelos, 1982, p. 75). He then founded the Ministry of Education in 1921 where he served a three-year tenure. Historian Brading (1984) notes the achievements of Vasconcelos in education include the promotion of rural schooling, the provision of public libraries, the establishment of agricultural research institutes and vocational schools to train teachers, and the effort to incorporate indigenous peoples into “the national community” (p. 72). Vasconcelos opposed permanent special and separate indigenous schooling, which he viewed as the North American educational model, and called for “the incorporation of the Indian, still isolated, into the Mexican family” (1982, p. 20). A final point to make here is that Vasconcelos launched a national cultural renaissance in music, literature, and the arts, ranging from folk ballet to mural paintings. As Brading comments, Vasconcelos inspired a whole generation of intellectuals and artists to enter public service and to in turn “implement the policies of the revolutionary government” (p. 72). Well aware of his influence, Vasconcelos declared in one of his lengthy memoirs, *El desastre* (The Disaster; 1938, 1982), “And in that moment ... I was the government ...” (p. 12). Such grandiose statements are typical of his writings.

The work of Vasconcelos is illuminating for it shows how the mestizaje ideology has traveled and materialized in the many projects of national consolidation, and why it has proved resilient. Latin American and Latino Studies scholar Stavans (2001) points out, for example, how the concept of the cosmic race, which positioned the mestizo as the “leader in a new world order,” became gospel for students in Mexico and the Chicano movement (which took “*La Raza*” as its slogan) in the United States during the political upheaval of the 1960s (pp. 42–43).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, historian Stepan (1991) argues that the idea of the cosmic race “has tended to be taken at face value” and has thus “proved highly resistant to demythologization” (p. 149). The goal of this paper is to critically explore Vasconcelos’ racial thought and its implications within the sociopolitical context. The first section of the paper examines the emergence of the Mexican eugenics movement in the 1930s. The second part looks at the educational reform and its relation to eugenics, with a focus on *El Maestro* (The Teacher) magazine launched by Vasconcelos and delivered gratis to the public. The final section provides a textual analysis of *La raza cósmica* and the lecture entitled “The Race Problem in Latin America:” how do Vasconcelos’ ideas on race mixture begin to take shape and to operate within the culture at large?

## 2. Eugenics in Mexico

Eugenics was a scientific and social movement worldwide based on hereditarianism that involved a set of policy proposals to encourage the reproduction of “fit” individuals and restrain those deemed “unfit” in order to achieve the goal of “better breeding.” British scientist Galton (1904) defined eugenics (from the Greek *eugenes*, meaning “wellborn”) as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.” Similarly, in 1911, leading American eugenicist Charles Davenport described eugenics as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding” (quoted in Stern, 2005, p. 11). Stern (2005) and other scholars (Chitty, 2007; Kline, 2001; Kluchin, 2009; Saade Granados, 2004) note that while eugenics tends to be associated with the horrors of Nazism, it did not disappear after

World War II. Eugenics was repackaged in various forms, such as family planning, population control, genetic and marital counseling, and standardized testing. Moreover, eugenics was not the exclusive domain of extremists, but was rather a heterogeneous movement that involved well-respected scientists, anthropologists, social activists, feminists, scholars, politicians, and many others,<sup>3</sup> all of whom shared “faith in the application of biology and medicine to the perceived problems of modern society” (Stern, 2005, p. 6).

Latin American eugenics emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century as part of the debates about evolution, nationalism, progress and modernity. Stepan (1991) points out that Latin America, often ignored, is an interesting case study for it not only was receptive to European science, values and ideas, but was the only postcolonial region where eugenics was developed in a more or less systematic way, with specific eugenic societies and organizations established after World War I (p. 2, 8). Furthermore, while most eugenicists located in the US and the UK regarded Latin Americans as “tropical,” “backward,” racially “degenerate,” and not eugenic enough, Latin Americans nonetheless carried out their own eugenic activities (p. 8). How was eugenics then interpreted in a context where mestizo, mulatto, and indigenous peoples predominated? What form did eugenics take? How did it influence the politics of national identity? And what implications did it have in policy and practice?

Eugenics in Mexico emerged amid the countless deaths and displacements caused by the revolution (1910–1917), the growing problems of poverty and sickness, and a renewed sense of nationalism sponsored by the state. As Stepan comments, the revolution’s socialism and anticlericism made Mexico ideologically “receptive to new developments in science and social thought” (p. 55). Eugenics responded to a longstanding debate about how to integrate the Indian population into the national community and how to improve the health of the poor. Hispanic Studies scholar Schell (2010) notes that eugenics materialized in an array of ambitious health and social policy programs (p. 484). For example, in 1917, the law of family relations that legalized divorce stipulated in Darwinian terms that marriage was to be regulated for the “benefit of the species.” The law sought to prevent marriages among alcoholics and those with venereal diseases and tuberculosis, which were perceived to be not only contagious but hereditary. The reproduction of such people was then framed as “detrimental to the nation, whose vigor depends on the strength of its children, as well as detrimental to the same species, which in order to *perfect itself* needs ... a sane and prudent *artificial selection* aimed at mitigating the rigidity of *natural selection*” (emphasis in original; quoted in Suárez, 1999, p. 55). An aspect to note here is that the language of vigor, denoting good health, strength and energy (from the Latin *vigere*, meaning to “be lively”), is a recurring trope in the discourse of eugenics and in the writings of Vasconcelos, who imagined that the hybrid subject was to become the strongest of all races. Moreover, the law highlights the belief to which Mexican eugenicists adhered that direct intervention in the environment and education of the people would help improve the national race.

Eugenics contributed to the public health, education, and welfare policies of the Mexican state well into the 1930s, focusing especially on maternal and infant hygiene programs (usually known as *puériculture*)<sup>4</sup> (Schell, 2010, p. 485). Managing women and their reproductive choices was of particular concern to the state because they were seen as integral to the development of the nation. In fact, in the mid-1930s, the Public Health Department declared, “every woman living in the territory of the Mexican Republic ... has the duty to contribute within the law and according to the principles of eugenics, to fomenting a strong and healthy populace” (quoted in Stern, 1999a, p. 375). Moreover, the First Mexican Congress of the Child, held in Mexico City in 1921, discussed issues of maternal health and narrowly approved the forced sterilization of criminals. Schell (2010) observes that many of the conclusions reached at the first and second (1923) child congress were implemented through the School Hygiene Service, under the Ministry of Education’s Department of Psycho-Pedagogy and Hygiene, whose objective was to improve the overall health of Mexican children (p. 485).

The eugenics movement in Mexico became more institutionalized with the founding of the Mexican Eugenics Society for the Betterment of the Race in 1931. Among its members were five women involved in pedagogy, medicine, hygiene, and the feminist movement, and 15 men of

various professions, including politicians, criminologists, scientists, medical professionals, and others, many of whom had been active in public health campaigns, in the Mexican Puericulture Society and in official institutions, such as the Ministry of Education (Saade Granados, 2004, p. 17). Schell (2010) points out that one of the organization's main goals was to disseminate eugenics to the public at large. To achieve this, it offered courses on reproductive health to nurses and social workers; promoted sex education courses; collaborated with the government to create radio propaganda against alcoholism, venereal diseases, and prostitution; and published its own journal, *Eugenics*, which ran from 1931 to 1954, as well as books, brochures, and magazines (p. 485).

The Mexican Eugenics Society also supported sterilization laws, in part because these were viewed favorably by the leading eugenic countries such as the US, Sweden, and Norway (Stepan, 1991, p. 131). In 1932, the anticlerical and socialist governor of the state of Veracruz,<sup>5</sup> Adalberto Tejeda authorized the only eugenic sterilization law in the country. Considered a “protective measure in the interest not only of the species and the race, but also beneficial for the home,” the law became a central component of the governor’s “multipronged reform,” but received strong opposition from the elite and the traditional middle-class of Veracruz (Stern, 2011, p. 431). Stepan (1991) notes that the law introduced sex education in schools, legalized birth control, made the registration and treatment of venereal diseases mandatory, and banned the sale of alcohol (p. 132). According to an article published on the *Eugenics* journal regarding the law, birth control was legalized to curtail the excessive reproduction of the lower, “less desirable” classes, who threatened to degenerate the Mexican race (p. 132). Universal access to birth control was framed as a means to achieve eugenic improvement. Finally, the law legalized sterilization in “clear cases of idiocy” and for the “degenerate mad,” the “incurably ill,” and “delinquents” (p. 132). Stepan argues that because the law in Veracruz passed during a moment of crisis (i.e. conflicts between radicals and conservatives, and peasant revolts), it is unlikely that any actual sterilization took place (p. 132). And as early as 1933, the Mexican Eugenics Society began to debate the limits of eugenic sterilization.

The eugenics movement in Mexico is further interesting for its inextricable relation to the racial ideologies of the time and the projects of nation formation. Mexican intellectuals had to contend with the issue of what it meant to be racially mixed at a time when the hybrid subject was almost universally condemned as degenerate and not eugenic.<sup>6</sup> They pondered whether mixing could produce beneficial results and whether it should be encouraged as a process of national consolidation. Vasconcelos then reformulated the dominant notion of hybridity in *La raza cósmica* to argue that mixing, in fact, could produce superior beings. Stepan (1991) shows that the tendency to counter European racial science with “mythologies of their own” began in Mexico well before the Mexican Revolution, especially during the days of Porfirio Díaz (p. 145). For example, positivist thinker and educator Justo Sierra rejected the “excessively negative” views about hybridity that the likes of Gustave Le Bon endorsed and “replace[d] them with more positive views of the mestizo as the dynamic element in national life” (p. 145). But it was the Revolution that brought about “the full development of counterracial mythologies” (p. 146). The 1920s saw the rise of the discourse of indigenismo, which celebrated indigenous peoples on a purely symbolic level, with no real commitment to social reform. The discourse led to anthropological studies of indigenous groups, archeological excavations of pre-Columbian monuments, and the romanticization of the Indian in art and literature (p. 146). But it was the mestizo that was to become the one and only protagonist of the Mexican nation and mestizaje the official ideology of the state.

The members of the Mexican Eugenics Society viewed indigenous peoples as an object of redemption that needed to be incorporated into the nation. In this way, heterogeneity could be eliminated and the Europeanized mestizo could rise. Indigenous peoples were only accepted in this vision of the nation to the extent that they adapted to modernity and adopted the dominant way of life. Moreover, many eugenicists opposed immigration of non-white groups on the grounds that they would complicate the process of racial fusion and national unification (Stepan, 1991, p. 152). Eugenicists were particularly against blacks, Jewish, Chinese, and Syrians because they were perceived to be “unassimilable” and incompatible to the Mexican character, and “would therefore cause further

fragmentation of the nation” (p. 153). Blacks were especially targeted because they were seen as “racially inferior,” “occupationally incompetent,” and “dangerous to the national indigenous population” (Saade Granados, 2010, pp. 237–238). The reasoning against black immigration, debated in numerous confidential official documents and supported by intellectuals and civil servants, was that in Mexico’s nation-building model “the mestizo is not colored” (p. 246). On the other hand, doctor Rafael Carrillo and other eugenicists argued that the Mexican state should give preference to white immigration because it was established that “the white race, especially the European Nordic race, possesses the highest values according to Galton’s scale” (Suárez, 1999, p. 73).<sup>7</sup> This hierarchical language of high and low helped to create an “Other” that was both racialized and classed, thereby legitimizing the regulation of indigenous peoples, peasants, and the urban poor in Mexico. However, eugenicists’ activities also revealed a profound anxiety over the impossibility of realizing the dream of a cosmic race. As Stepan concludes, mestizaje was not so much a reality as a myth of national unity that served to obscure “the very real cultural, social, class, and political divisions of Mexican society” (p. 151).

Mexican eugenics in the 1940s developed into biotypology, or the theory of human differentiation, whose objective was to classify people into “biotypes” according to the seemingly neutral categories of normal, average and median, which left an imprint on the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and criminology (Stern, 1999b, p. 2). Although eugenics remained mainly at the level of prescription, it had a significant impact across all aspects of society as it produced a series of medical expectations and moral codes about who the Mexican citizen should be and how she or he should behave. In the next section, I explore the overlap between Vasconcelos’ educational crusade and the eugenics movement in terms of their ideas, concerns, and aims to modernize the Mexican people.

### 3. Educational reform

During his tenure as dean of the National University, Vasconcelos devised the proposal that would result in the creation of the Ministry of Education (SEP in its Spanish acronym). The proposal called for the constitutional reform of Articles 14 and 73 that would allow the federalization of the school system. The reform passed the House in February 1921 and the Senate shortly thereafter (Vaughan, 1982, p. 135). Vasconcelos then traveled to various states to rally support for his legislation. Vaughan notes that on these trips, Vasconcelos took with him Mexico City intellectuals and artists who performed their art at gatherings to win over state officials, teachers, and other members of the middle class (p. 135). The SEP officially came into being in October 1921, with Vasconcelos as its first minister.

The SEP was divided into three general sections: schools, libraries and the fine arts. The Department of Schools was responsible for all primary, secondary, technical and rural schooling, as well as for school hygiene and medical inspection (Vaughan, 1982, p. 136). Historian Aréchiga Córdoba (2007) observes that the educational campaigns and propaganda on hygiene instituted by the SEP and the Department of Public Health became ubiquitous between 1917 and 1934, and were central to “the civilizing discourse that the state and dominant classes adopted” after the revolution (p. 59). The gospel of cleanliness was imagined to bring about the “regeneration” and “redemption” of the popular classes, conceived as indolent and ignorant, and in turn justified their increased surveillance (p. 58; Bliss, 2006). The state’s concerted efforts to teach, improve, and modify the population’s hygienic habits can also be seen as part of the elite’s larger concern on how to transform Mexico into a modern and civilized nation.

The Department of Libraries helped to create thousands of small libraries and to publish cheap editions of European and Mexican literature with the aim of inculcating in the public the habit of reading. The Department of Fine Arts for its part became “the center of a cultural renaissance in music, the plastic arts, and literature” (Vaughan, 1982, p. 136). The Literacy Campaign<sup>8</sup> and the Department of Indigenous Culture was also established, but as provisional and independent departments. Vasconcelos mentions in his memoir *El desastre* (1938, 1982) that the Indigenous Department was meant to follow the action of the early Christian missionary in order to teach indigenous peoples Spanish and to incorporate them into the nation (p. 20). Such an elitist attitude was further reflected in his crusade to publish the European classics in a country that was largely illiterate. In the same

memoir, for example, he states, “What this country needs is to start reading *The Iliad*. I will distribute thousands of Homers in national schools and libraries ... (p. 46). For him, it was necessary that the public learned “in our language ... the essential ideas of all times” (p. 48). Vasconcelos here reveals that his educational plan was to remain a paternalistic effort more interested in civilizing the masses than in offering real structural reform.

A central aspect of the SEP was rural education. Under the Department of Indigenous Culture, so-called “missionary” teachers traveled to rural areas “to interest communities in education and to recruit teachers locally” (Vaughan, 1982, p. 138). To assist teachers in their training, the SEP created regional rural normal schools and offered courses in agriculture, crafts, sports, hygiene, and pedagogy. In addition, it distributed pamphlets, periodicals, instructional manuals, and other publications (p. 138). Vaughan (1982, 2006) observes that there was a deep ideological divide between rural and urban educators. While the former was committed to social reform, the latter tended to “view education as disciplining, civilizing, and controlling” (p. 143). Urban educators were more conservative in their approach to schooling in part because of their previous involvement in the Porfirian school bureaucracy, their middle-class background and “their lack of identification with the popular revolution” (p. 142). The top officials who dictated rural education programs had the belief that peasants were backward and isolated, but could be redeemed and transformed into “a productive unit within the nation” (p. 145). As such, education emphasized skill training and the introduction of modern agricultural methods and tools. For rural teachers, however, the SEP’s efforts seemed naïve as they ignored the fact that structural changes were needed in order to significantly improve the lives of peasants.

The urban educators’ personal and class biases are in full display in the SEP magazine *El Maestro*. Vasconcelos introduces the first volume by stating that the purpose of the magazine is “to disseminate practical knowledge among the country’s population” (p. 5). He notes that the magazine will be distributed gratis precisely because it is meant for the general public. However, it is clear that his five-page introduction addresses one particular group of people and not all, that of intellectuals. Vasconcelos critiques his colleagues for their lack of action and indifference toward the masses, and rallies them to become involved in his educational crusade. In his characteristic grandiose speech, Vasconcelos declares, “[the masses] will become a ruinous burden if we abandon them, if we maintain them ignorant and poor; but if we educate them and make them strong, their strength merged into ours will make us invincible” (p. 7). From his point of view, the intellectual is the only one capable of leading the Mexican nation toward modernity and into the world stage. In a similar vein, Vasconcelos explains that the content of the magazine will not be what people want but what they need, with “the continuous purpose of elevating them” (p. 6). Note the use of the word “elevate,” meaning to raise to a higher position—this high and low distinction frames the racialized and classed others as needing to be brought into civilization. Moreover, the fact that the intellectual gets to decide what is in people’s best interest effectively denies them any agency. Throughout the first volume are articles by authors as varied as French novelist Romain Rolland, Irish writer George Bernard Shaw and Leo Tolstoy, which serve to highlight Vasconcelos’ aspiration that through European literature the Mexican people would become civilized.

The first issue of *El Maestro* is divided into six sections: News; Educational Talks; Social Recommendations; Literature and Art; Practical Knowledge; and the children’s section, *Aladdin*, penned exclusively by Mexican educator Rosaura Zapata. The practical knowledge part, written on a more didactic tone, is of particular interest here for its focus on health, hygiene, and the home. For example, the magazine warns of the dangers of narcotics and discusses how to maintain an “attractive dining room” (e.g. sunlight, fresh flowers, paintings on the wall, etc.) in order to cultivate the happiness of the family (p. 72). Within this section, there is a short article entitled, “Organization of the family at home,” written by the teacher Estefanía Castañeda who, like Zapata, dedicated herself to developing kindergarten education in Mexico. Much like eugenicists, Castañeda conceives of women as mothers of the nation, “[their role] is to lead the family, to create a new race that must live forever ...” (emphasis in original; pp. 73–74). She laments that women are not fulfilling this role because of lack

of education when it comes to motherhood. If they were to be educated, she continues, they would be able to found a proper home and, in turn, to foment happiness and harmony at large (p. 75). The sentiments expressed in this article reflect the “notion of responsible motherhood,” as Stern (1999a) calls it, that the Mexican state introduced in the 1920s. The health of the family became the individual responsibility of the mother, whose rearing practices and activities at the home “were increasingly monitored and tied to the nation’s ‘need to secure a vigorous and healthy descent’” (p. 375).

The practical knowledge section is further interesting for its focus on the rural population and its way of life. For example, the first volume offers information about domestic animals and how to take care of them in terms of diet and hygiene. Moreover, it explains the uses of modern agricultural machinery and recommends that older methods of agriculture be substituted with this machinery in order to cultivate more land (p. 80). The article also posits that modern machinery will allow peasants to enjoy leisure time and to forge a “social life, which is indispensable for the formation of a nation ... [but] it is nonexistent when one lives in the countryside” (p. 80). The author, agronomist Ernesto Martínez de Alva, perpetuates the dominant view that peasants are isolated and need to be integrated into the national whole. As Vaughan (1982) argues, many of the SEP’s efforts in rural areas ignored that peasants were not so much isolated from the market economy but “were marginalized within it by their meager land resources, technology, and exploitative market relationships” (p. 144). Although Martínez emphasizes the need for new technology, he places the responsibility of material improvement on the individual peasant and her or his capacity to not only increase work productivity but to strengthen social relations.

Browsing through *El Maestro* is a fascinating activity for the almost random manner in which it seems to have been assembled. The second issue, for example, begins with an educational article on how the earth came into being and is followed by everything from a French intellectual manifesto to Tolstoy’s dry writing to the practical knowledge section, which encourages vegetarianism and praises *Las tribus indígenas mexicanas* (akin to the boy scouts) as patriotic, to poetry and literature, all interspersed with pictures of the School of Fine Arts in Mexico City. One striking article is “Universal History” by American journalist William Swinton who makes no effort to hide his racism. He defines History as the study of nations, “that is, man in *civilization*” (emphasis in original; p. 118). He argues that Caucasians are the only race that can be called historical and as such, “we can say that civilization is the product of this race” (p. 118). He mentions that the Chinese, Mexicans, and Peruvians played a role in civilization, but “their civilizations remained stuck” (p. 118). Immediately following this six-page piece is “History of Mexico,” written by Marxist intellectual Rafael Ramos Pedrueza who challenges Swinton’s white supremacist fantasies. Ramos extols pre-Columbian societies, such as the Aztecs, and affirms, “if our past is full of grandeur, then we have no right to doubt our future” (p. 123). These two opposing articles and the magazine in general point to the confusion and ambivalence the Mexican intelligentsia felt toward Mexico and its predominant mestizo population. As discussed below, Vasconcelos viewed the mestizo as rising to the status of a cosmic race as long as he became that which he was not: Europeanized, educated, and cultured.

One final aspect to note here is that Vasconcelos’ influence extended to the cultural nationalist movement that nationalized popular and indigenous culture, and thus helped to define a common notion of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness). A central component of the movement was mural art led by the likes of Diego Rivera. Although Vasconcelos oftentimes complained that Rivera painted too many indigenous peoples and brown peasants, and wanted subjects like *The Iliad* to be represented, he defended, and sponsored the mural movement in part because he viewed art as the highest mark of civilization and because he wanted to promote Mexican artists on an international scale (Vaughan, 1982; 1997). Vaughan contends that muralism was as contradictory as the SEP’s endeavors because while it made the mestizo, Indian, and mulatto the protagonists of the Revolution, and aligned with their aspirations and ideals, it also obfuscated class conflicts and the unequal power structures (p. 265). For many intellectuals like Vasconcelos, art could be used as a means of social control over those who needed to be civilized. Having developed the sociopolitical context that Vasconcelos navigated, I now proceed to analyze his own written work.

#### 4. The cosmic race

The central thesis of *La raza cósmica* is that the accelerated mixing of the world's races will pave the way for the emergence of a new type of people, that is, the "future Cosmic Race" (p. 43). In the prolog, Vasconcelos questions whether such mixing can benefit or hamper the growth of culture. He asks, "can the mestizo's contribution to culture be comparable to that of the relatively pure races that have made history until now, such as the Greeks, Romans or Europeans?" (pp. 43–44). He briefly mentions that while in powerful civilizations like ancient Greece and the US mixing has occurred among similar European races, mestizaje in Latin America has developed among "distant types," mainly Spaniards and indigenous peoples, which accounts for its "underdevelopment" (p. 45). But Vasconcelos remains optimistic and concludes this section of the book by affirming, "even the most contradictory mestizajes can have beneficial results as long as the spiritual factor contributes to raise them. In fact, the decline of Asiatic peoples can be attributed to their isolation, but also, and without doubt, to the fact that they have not been Christianized. A religion such as Christianity made the American Indians advance, in a few centuries, from cannibalism to a relative degree of civilization" (p. 45). The first aspect to note here is that Vasconcelos redeems the figure of the mestizo only at the expense of other groups, particularly Asians, whom he continually denigrates. Second, Vasconcelos frames religion as a civilizing agent, as a gift that can improve the seemingly backward condition of the natives. Third, he perpetuates the stereotypical view that Latin American nations are "new" and need to play catch up with Western modernity to enter the world stage.

The first part of *La raza cósmica* entitled "Mestizaje" recounts the myth of the rise and fall of Atlantis in the American continent to highlight that races appear and disappear after fulfilling their mission and are then replaced by others. Vasconcelos notes that at the current moment the white race has become the "world's invader," but that its "predominance will surely also be temporal" (p. 49). He observes that the mission of whites, begun with the colonization of the Americas, is to "serve as the bridge" that brings together and unifies all other races into one, into "a fifth universal race" that is to be totalizing and superior to all earlier races (p. 49).

Vasconcelos views Latin America as the chosen land ripe for the development of the fifth race because of its greater "openness to strangers;"<sup>9</sup> for its ability to assimilate the distinct races that the Anglo nations exterminated (p. 57). He praises the Spanish colonizers and their "abundance of love that allowed [them] to create a new race with the Indian and the Black" (p. 57). In contrast, he argues that the English refusal to mix with other races points to their inevitable decay because "the ultimate aim of History is to achieve a fusion of all peoples and all cultures" (p. 58). Such statements are convenient because they frame racism as existing elsewhere (in those homogeneous white nations) and as in opposition to the tolerant nature of Latin America. However, Vasconcelos reveals that the love for others is not equally distributed. For example, in his critique of the US and its strict immigration laws, he concedes that borders must be protected when it comes to "economic competition" and to reducing the large influx of the Chinese population (p. 59). In one of his most racist moments, Vasconcelos declares, "[It is] unjust that peoples like the Chinese, who under the pious guidance of Confucian morality multiply like rabbits, should come to degrade the human condition just as we are beginning to understand that intelligence can rein in and regulate our base animal instincts ... If we reject them, it is because as man progresses, his rate of reproduction decreases and he feels a horror of quantity, precisely because he has come to esteem quality" (pp. 59–60). His comment reflects the larger xenophobic attitudes that predominated at the time in Mexico regarding "undesirable" immigrants, such as the seemingly over-reproductive Chinese.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Vasconcelos here anticipates the eugenic movement's concern to produce a strong and fit population through "better breeding."

The first section concludes with Vasconcelos reiterating the spiritual and tolerant character of Latin America vis-à-vis the cold Anglo-Saxon world. He observes that in Latin America "we find countless bridges towards the sincere and cordial fusion of all races. The contrast between the northerners' ethnic immurement and the southerners' openness is for us the most important as well as the most favorable fact if one thinks ... of the future, because it will then be immediately plain that

we belong to tomorrow and they belong to yesterday” (p. 60). With such statements about the future supremacy and universality of the mestizo, it is not difficult to see why *La raza cósmica* may have been taken as gospel by the student and Chicano movement, which struggled to achieve sociopolitical autonomy in the face of white hegemony. However, this is a book that requires close scrutiny for it is full of contradictions that more often than not reveal the author’s preference for a white and Europeanized mestizo.

The preference for whiteness is made more explicit on the second and third untitled parts of *La raza cósmica*. Vasconcelos here notes that while the fifth race does not exclude and makes use of the abilities of all, “the characteristics of the white race will perhaps predominate among those of the fifth race, but such supremacy must result from free choice and taste, and not violence or economic pressure” (p. 65). In Vasconcelos’ view, mestizaje is a matter of esthetics rather than necessity or propinquity as was the case during the colonial period. He observes that the world is now entering the third stage<sup>11</sup> in which “the laws of emotion, beauty and joy will govern the choice of partners, with results infinitely superior to those of a eugenics based in scientific reason ... The mysterious eugenics of esthetic taste will prevail over the eugenics of science” (p. 70). In this new era, ugliness and its root causes, such as “poverty, deficient education ... wretchedness,” will vanish (p. 70). Vasconcelos proposes educating the “inferior races” in order to make them “less prolific,” but otherwise he imagines that the law of beauty will be sufficient for the rise of the cosmic race. “Step by step,” he argues, “[and] by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome ... The Indian, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years that separate [him] from our times, and in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the black may disappear ...” (p. 72). In Vasconcelos’ notion of mestizaje, the Indian must become modern, or disappear, and blacks, deemed already too ugly and deficient, must simply disappear. As Ethnic Studies scholar Sexton (2010) points out, the mode of eugenics in *La raza cósmica* takes on a different form, “but its ends remain frighteningly consistent—a ‘selection’ more efficient than a brutal Social Darwinism. Less carnage, less coercion, and less political controversy, this appears to be “evolution” at a discount” (p. 248). In its effort to integrate everyone and everything into one (super) race, mestizaje must not only absorb the white stock but abolish the “uglier stocks,” that is, the inferior, the uneducated, the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the themes present in *La raza cósmica* recur in a series of lectures Vasconcelos delivered at the University of Chicago in 1926—a year after the book’s publication. For example, the opposition between Latin and Anglo cultures, Christianity as a civilizing agent, mestizaje, and esthetics,<sup>13</sup> all make an appearance. The lectures are grouped under the heading “The Latin American Basis of Mexican Civilization” and are divided into three parts: “Similarity and Contrast,” “Democracy in Latin America,” and “The Race Problem in Latin America.” The lectures were sponsored by the Harris Foundation whose mission statement was “the promotion of a better understanding on the part of American citizens of the other peoples of the world, thus establishing a basis for improved international relations and a more enlightened world-order.” The statement concluded, “the aim shall always be to give accurate information, not to propagate opinion.” But opinion is the bread and butter of Vasconcelos’ work whose own *modus operandi* is described as being based on intuition, as taking “a spiritual leap, sustained by facts” (1925, p. 49)—this is reflected in his opaque writing style and simplistic view of history.

The lecture of interest here is “The Race Problem in Latin America” for it expands on the topic of mixing. Vasconcelos begins with the observation that North and Latin America are essentially different because the former follows “the one race-standard,” which excludes and refuses to intermarry with dissimilar stocks, as against “the mixed-race standard” of the latter (p. 95). This mixture, Vasconcelos explains, produced the mestizo who is neither Indian nor Spanish, but a “hyphen” seeking to reconcile the conflicting personalities of his ancestors into one. Because the mestizo is “unable to connect fully with the past, [he] is always directed toward the future—is a bridge to the future” (p. 97). Vasconcelos proceeds to acknowledge that the dominant racial theories of his time do not share his optimism about hybridity. He singles out Herbert Spencer, who conceived of the hybrid as

degenerate and inferior, to note that the so-called pure-race theory is nothing but a myth that serves to maintain the power of the dominating people (p. 98). He inverts this theory, without disavowing the language of biology, to argue that “hybridism in man, as well as in plants, tends to produce better types and tends to rejuvenate those types that have become static. If we go through history, we find that after a period of adaptation the results of the renewal of blood are always beneficial”<sup>14</sup> (p. 99). Vasconcelos cites the Spanish method of colonization through assimilation as an example of the benefits interbreeding produces. While the English remain “completely strangers” in their colonies, he comments, “the Spanish have succeeded in reproducing their blood in part and their culture in full in twenty nations that are today as Spanish as Spain itself can be ...” (p. 100). In Vasconcelos’ *mestizaje*, the European side of the equation is the superior and dynamic element that is responsible for reinvigorating the “static” natives. In fact, in *La raza cósmica* he argues that “Latin America owes what it is to the white European and will not disavow him” (p. 65). His imagined Latin American community is a purely Europeanized one.<sup>15</sup> Vasconcelos denies any agency to indigenous peoples and expresses ambivalence, if not outright contempt, about their contribution to culture (or lack thereof), as he asserts that “the Indian has no civilized standards upon which to fall back” [p. 102]).

In his conclusion, Vasconcelos cautions against the reliance on foreign theories that can restrain the growth of the Latin American spirit. He notes that the only “sound race policy” for the region is “the policy of old—the policy of the Spaniard and Christian who took it for granted that we are all potentially the same and that we are bound to respond differently according to the call that is made upon us ...” (p. 108). He contends that there are no differences among races in terms of evolutionary development, but only differences in abilities and talents—all races are potential contributors to this new spiritual civilization. However, he quickly contradicts himself when he exhorts the “superior” stocks to “take pains to educate the inferior and to raise its standards” (p. 110). He continues, “if we do not wish to be overwhelmed by the wave of the Negro, of the Indian, or of the Asiatic, we shall have to see that [they] are raised to higher standards of life, where reproduction becomes regulated and quality predominates over numbers” (p. 110). Vasconcelos here reveals that in *mestizaje*, not all races are created equal. Moreover, he reproduces many of the racial theories he claims to disavow for he positions the non-white European as a subordinate subject who needs to be redeemed (or disappear) through eugenic-related measures.

Vasconcelos’ Europeanized education and middle-class biases are evident in his writings. As Vaughan (1982) remarks, Vasconcelos and other members of the Ateneo felt a profound alienation from and even “contempt for Mexican realities” (p. 251). The perceived poverty, misery, and violence of Mexico were for Vasconcelos “a constant source of anguish,” which he partly resolved through his interests in esthetics and art (p. 251). In *La raza cósmica* (1925), he articulated a utopian vision of a Latin America ruled by beauty, without racism and greed. The book glorified Spanish culture at the expense of others that only appeared as stereotypes (e.g. blacks as musical and sensual, Arabs as melancholic, and Asians as mysterious [p. 62]), which in turn revealed Vasconcelos’ ambivalence toward the non-European and his lack of knowledge of historical processes. But most important for this project is that *La raza cósmica* influenced the eugenics and education movements in Mexico whose main concern was to deliver on the promise of *mestizaje*: to improve the race (or *mejorar la raza*) and to in turn civilize the nation.

## 5. Conclusion

Vasconcelos’ ideas circulated across all aspects of public culture in Mexico and beyond, and left a lasting imprint on educational and racial politics. As Stavans (2001) comments, Vasconcelos is often remembered less because of his educational crusade than as a result of his essentialist theory of the supremacy of the mestizo (p. 42), which inspired student movements across Latin America as well as Chicanos in the US.<sup>16</sup> Stavans notes that there is no proof that Chicano activists, such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, had read *La raza cósmica*, rather, Vasconcelos’ notion of hybridity “was simply in the air” (p. 43). The book then became a sort of classic, “unread yet in the background” (p. 43). In Mexico, Vasconcelos helped consolidate *mestizaje* as the national ideology, which had a profound

impact on the politics of race and culture. For example, the art movement in the 1920s redefined Mexico as brown and mestizo. In 1930, state statisticians dropped racial categories from the census, thereby endorsing the belief that Mexico was a homogeneous mestizo nation. Today, the legacy of mestizaje can be observed in varied forms of everyday life: the continuous denial of race and racism in public discourse; the fact that “*mejorar la raza*” is a popular saying and aspiration; the late-night infomercials selling skin-lightening products; the whiteness pervading prime-time *telenovelas*—all of which highlight that mestizo is not so much a state of being but of becoming something more. It would be interesting to undertake ethnographic research, as some scholars (Moreno Figueroa, 2012; Sue, 2013; Telles, 2014) have begun doing, to explore what it means to be mestizo to different people across different regions in Mexico. Future social research could also investigate if the discourses of neoliberalism and multiculturalism, which embrace the language of plurality and diversity, have posed a legitimate challenge to the homogenizing tendencies of the mestizaje ideology.

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#### Notes

1. Mestizaje refers to the fusion of races and cultures, and was endorsed by Mexican intellectuals as a crucial process of national development and unification.
2. A bilingual edition of the book was published by the Department of Chicano Studies, California State University, Los Angeles in 1979 and was reprinted by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1997.
3. For example, historian Kluchin (2009) notes that by the 1930s there were over 300 colleges and universities in the United States that offered a course in eugenics, thus further endorsing eugenics as a “fact” (p. 13).
4. Stepan (1991) explains that because of cultural and linguistic affinities, many of the biological ideas on which Latin Americans relied came from France. Of considerable influence was the naturalist Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck who posited that acquired characteristics could be inherited. neo-Lamarckism was embraced because it “often came tinged with an optimistic expectation that reforms of the social milieu would result in permanent improvement” (p. 73).
5. Stern (2011) documents that Veracruz had a “long-standing interest in improving hygiene and combating disease” (p. 436). The state’s leaders directly collaborated with the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1920s on everything from eradicating yellow fever and hookworm to promoting healthy baby contests. Such contests insisted on the moral duty of Mexican women to produce a strong and healthy race (p. 436).
6. Postcolonial theorist Young (1995) notes that Latin America was always cited in the works of British intellectuals “as the prime example of the degenerative results of racial hybridization” (p. 175). For example, ethnologist Robert Knox blamed the instability and revolutions of Latin America on its race mixture, which he described as “a disgrace to human nature” (p. 175).
7. It is worth noting that Mexico at the time recorded one of the lowest immigration rates in Latin America (Yankelevich & Chenillo Alazraki, 2010). For example, between 1928 and 1932, immigrants did not exceed 0.1 percent of the total national population (p. 209).
8. When Vasconcelos launched the literacy campaign in 1920, Aréchiga Córdoba (2007) points out, he emphasized that acquiring hygienic habits was necessary to achieve successful literacy rates. Vasconcelos recommended teachers to begin their classes addressing the topic of personal hygiene, a healthy diet, and so on (p. 78).
9. Latin America is conceived as a hospitable place in two different ways. The first follows the narrative of the nation as a generous host offering hospitality to its guests. As postcolonialist scholar Behdad (2005) observes, this narrative is often mobilized “to mask the exclusionary and regulatory practices of immigration” (p. 22). Furthermore, Vasconcelos frames Latin America as hospitable in terms of its environment (fertile lands, abundant natural resources, and warm climate) in order to counter the European theories of the time, which posited tropical regions as conducive to degeneracy and a weak character (Larrain, 2000). In fact, he argues that the environment of Latin America is an advantage to the rise of the mestizo: “The great civilizations of the past arose in the tropics and the final civilization will return to the tropics” (p. 63).
10. Sinophobia was particularly rife in the northern state of Sonora, which culminated in the expulsion of the Chinese population in 1931 (Romero, 2010).
11. Vasconcelos draws from Auguste Comte’s “Law of Three Stages” to explain that society develops in three stages: the first is the material or military in which force prevails; the second is the intellectual or political and is ruled by reason; and the third is the spiritual or esthetic (p. 68).
12. Vasconcelos was not alone in his fantasy of an esthetically superior race, but was shared by scientists of the time. For example, in 1921, Mexican evolutionist Alfonso L. Herrera imagined that in the near future laboratory science would produce a “supreme beauty of form, intellect, and virtue.” A form so perfect, it would be “Hellenic” (quoted in Stepan, 1991, p. 135).
13. In his first lecture, Vasconcelos correlates physical beauty with class status: “Where there is no comfort at all, the human body turns back to the beasts. Leisure and wealth develop beauty in any racial stock” (p. 39). Hard work and miserable living conditions are why indigenous peoples are “decidedly plain looking” and “a race of slaves cannot be beautiful” (p. 39). For Vasconcelos, a dark face, body, and skin are the visible stigma of a lower civilization that must be improved for the benefit of the nation.
14. Vasconcelos here refers to the work of anthropologist Eugène Pittard whose own contention against the pure-race theory appeared in the book *Les Races et l’Histoire* in 1924.

15. The (over) valorization of a Europeanized culture was not uncommon among Mexico City intellectuals. For example, over a decade later, philosopher Samuel Ramos stated in *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (Ramos, 1938) that Mexican culture could never be original because it was “European by definition ...We have European blood, our language is European, our customs and morality are European, and the sum of our vices and virtues is a legacy of the Spanish race” (p. 75).
16. Ironically, Vasconcelos never acknowledged the place and role of Latinos in the US, which was a common trend among Mexico City intellectuals. And when the Mexican diaspora was indeed represented, as in Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (Paz, 1950), it was full of negative stereotypes.

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