Gaos Lectures 2019
RECAP OF GAOS LECTURES 1-3 (JUNE 2019)

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The story thus far

The immediate ambition of these lectures has been to identify episodes in the history of Mexican philosophy that are particularly interesting or philosophically valuable. By the end of these six lectures, I hope to have made a case for the value of Mexican philosophy not just in and of itself but also in its merit as a resource for philosophers whose interest is otherwise exclusively concerned with canonical or contemporary academic philosophy.

In the first lecture I focused on some general ambitions and motivations for the project. I argued that the most natural limit case for the project—Nahuatl thought—raises interesting challenges for how we think about the demarcation of the discipline, and the ways in which we exclude or include work as proper to our discipline. I went on to argue that Nahuatl thought is (perhaps surprisingly) indeed philosophy, but that most of us remain ill-positioned to evaluate it, and that it remains an open question how fruitful it is for the kind of academic work we do today.

In the second lecture, I focused on the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda. I argued that some of the central issues between them turn on two different conceptions of how moral knowledge operates, and that in particular, the Sepúlvedan position has generally been badly understood, and that this misunderstanding of it has impaired our appreciation of the complexity and subtlety of the debate. I went on to argue that many of the key issues that separate Las Casas and Sepúlveda remain live issues in contemporary moral epistemology and political philosophy.

In the third lecture, I argued for the fruitfulness of reading Sor Juana as a philosopher. I discussed her views about gender and social construction, and I offered new interpretations of her views in epistemology and theology. By my lights, she articulates an attenuated form of skepticism about the possibility of fruitful theology, but one compatible with the possibility of innovative arguments she offers within that framework.

In the lectures this week my focus turns to roughly the past century of Mexican philosophy. Today, I take up some of Vasconcelos' simultaneously promising and problematic ideas about a philosophy of culture and what possibilities there are for collective ideals and projects. Wednesday I focus on what we might learn from Uranga's Mexicanist phenomenology. Friday, I conclude with some reflections on metaphilosophical fights about what kind of philosophy is valuable and the consequences of those fights for us today. This reverses the initially projected order. So, "The Project of a People" is today and "Quixtotic Meditations" is on Friday. My apologies to those who came to hear a different talk than what you will be getting.

On Mexican Philosophy
Lecture 4: The Project of a People
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DRAFT : NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION

"A work without a conclusion beckons future generations"
—José Vasconcelos [2010] (2017, p. 16).

Introduction

The question of how best to enable cooperation and coordination, and the conditions under which cooperative arrangements can be extended, is at least as old as the fact of human communities. Our strategies for enabling that cooperation and coordination have been diverse. Sometimes it has been done with force or threats of direct violence. More ideally, we now tend to think, it is been brought about by the judicious deployment of human-constructed categories. In some places, that means laws and prescribed offices, and in other cases it is done by appeal to a putatively shared language, morality, or religion. Our varied technologies for social cooperation both express and shape our underlying psychology of selective sociality.

Perhaps the most complicated and powerful form of social organization thus far to emerge has been the modern nation-state. The demands of this form of organization are not trivial. Like many cooperative schemes, nation states require individual sacrifice, and at least some disposition to deference to the demands of the state. To secure that, the state has to find motivationally effective strategies for securing those sacrifices. The shaping of incentives and the cooptation or acculturation of its citizens into identities conducive to state interests are some of the most important tools of the modern state.

One of the most volatile ways of doing this has been by appeal to a group's identity as a people, or a nation, and identity that the state was said to represent. The consequences of nationalist movements wielding state power have frequently been catastrophic, and in the wake of World War II, such movements were met with greater skepticism. Now, though, we are in a moment when, around the world, popular nationalist movements have begun to slip loose from the forces that restrained the open manifestations of this form of tribalism.

One of the difficulties is that effective alternatives to the movements, and the conditions for making those alternatives compelling, do no always seem obvious. For example, it is unclear whether the cosmopolitan alternatives that tend to be favored by educated, affluent populations (Appiah 2018; Harari 2018) can effectively extend to communities without those profiles, or whether we should instead expect ongoing clashes spurred by ethno-national states, religiously-ordered communities, and the like.

Perhaps philosophers can helpfully speak to these issues? In the Anglophone philosophical world, the recent literature has not been entirely divorced from these issues. Indeed, the

discussions have been centrally shaped by, among other things, the influence of Rawlsian conceptions of political liberalism, communitarian alternatives, and the role of partiality or patriotism in both (Rawls 1971, 1993; MacIntyre 1984; Appiah 2007; Primoratz 2017).

What would those literatures look like, though, if those philosophical concerns and presumptions were not shaped by the history of nations ringing the north Atlantic ocean? One especially interesting place to look is among the young or newly constituted countries of the 20th century that were urgently searching for their own basis for social organization, in the context of multi-ethnic, multi-racial nations marked by fears of cultural destabilization.

This chapter is about one of those accounts, and the distinctive resources it suggests for contemporary discussions about nationalism, culture, and social organization. The account I have in mind is José Vasconcelos': it is a startling, sometimes baffling account of race, culture, and utopia that was developed over several works in the decade or so after the Mexican Revolution.

Introduction

For anyone writing about the history of 20th century Mexican philosophy, José Vasconcelos is the Ozymandias that must inevitably be confronted. He was absolutely central to understanding the cultural history of post-Revolutionary Mexico and perhaps the most creative figure in the first half of 20th century Latin American philosophy. Today, though, his work tends to be regarded as a colossal wreck, studied only in the remnants of a monumental but apparently failed project.

Putting aside the thousands of pages he wrote of biographies, histories, speeches, essays, newspaper articles, plays and short stories—not to mention his four-volume autobiography—the breadth of his philosophical works are as great as anyone in 20th century philosophy. He wrote entire books—not just essays, *books*—on Pythagoras, Eastern philosophy, law, aesthetics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, and the philosophy of culture.

The context of his life makes the output even more astonishing. He did not live the life of a conventional scholar, with a university position and its attendant time dedicated to contemplation and writing. His philosophical writing was squeezed in between his participation in the Mexican Revolution, multiple arrests, political intrigues, serving as the first chancellor of the national university, an appointment to the Ministry of Education (during which he overhauled the public education system), his subsequent efforts to use the Ministry of Education as a vehicle for undertaking widespread cultural reform, his organization of the Mexican muralist movement, his eventual run for president, exile, and only later in life an eventual return to Mexico as the head of the National Library.

As Carlos Pereda has noted, Vasconcelos "was, and still is, one of the most controversial figures in modern Mexico" ["fue una de las personalidades que más controversia has despertado y siguen despertando en el México moderno"] (Pereda 2013, p. 25; my translation). He could be difficult and caustic with his opponents, and his convictions and projects too often veered to

the indefensible and the manifestly abhorrent. Toward the end of his life, Vasconcelos tended to be thought of as something of an ideologue whose earlier influence and standing had collapsed into philosophical irrelevance and embarrassment. He was important enough to be remembered, but by mid-century his philosophical projects were, at best, curiosities.

The situation is somewhat different across the US border. In the U.S., no other Mexican philosopher has enjoyed anything like his continuous (if somewhat low-level) visibility over the past seventy years. Vasconcelos has been in print in English for almost sixty years, and his work is subject of a small but steady stream of monographs and articles. The prologue to *La raza cósmica* [*The Cosmic Race*] has a recognizable status as an important text in Chicanx Studies, the history of the philosophy of race, and Latin American intellectual history.

It is a limited kind of visibility, though. Almost no one reads anything beyond *La raza cósmica*, and even that work tends to be read incautiously and with little philosophical context. Ilan Stavans has described it as "a classic even though people do not read it" (2011, 4). Among the small cadre of specialists who do read *La raza*, the work is increasingly held at a distance—something one has to read because of its influence, but not for inspiration.

So, for those who have read any of Vasconcelos' works on these issues, you can think of this as an attempt to convince you that Vasconcelos' work is considerably less stupid than you might think. I won't pretend to rescue all of it. What I will do is offer a reconstruction of the central ideas in his writings on race and culture from that period, with the aim of using some of those tools to discuss some issues that arise for thinking about normatively appealing versions of large-scale social binding.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of my reading of these ideas is that it downplays the role of race in Vasconcelos' picture. Conveniently, the racial dimensions of the work are some of the most unhappy elements in the work. Inconveniently, his picture of race and race-mixing is absolutely central to the influence of that work, especially in the case of *La raza cósmica.* So, I have some explaining to do.

In order to make my case, we will have to attend to Vasconcelos' wider philosophical motivations. Appearances notwithstanding, Vasconcelos was a deeply systematic thinker, and the details of his account of race and culture were intertwined with his developing views in the philosophy of science, in metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. A complete account of all these connections is beyond the scope of a single chapter, but I'll gesture at some places where those connections may be particularly salient, before making a case for what I think is still interesting and fruitful in his work. On the reading I offer, his picture of cultural ideals and their significance for imperialism and nationalism remain promising and largely untouched philosophical resources.

The racial-historical story

Over several works in the mid- to late 1920s, Vasconcelos presents a relatively stable picture about race and history. He argues that there are different periods of human history in which a

different one of four extant races had dominant civilizations whose cultural flowering distinguished that time period. In its basic architecture, the account is racial but not rac*ist*: he countenances the existence of races, but he rejects a fixed and permanent hierarchy of races (32). (What he goes on to say at various points in *La raza* makes clear that Vasconcelos' personal views fall short of the explicit architecture of the account: his characterization of various races trades heavily on racist stereotypes.)

Vasconcelos emphasizes that every historical episode of cultural domination was brought about by some mixture of groups. As examples, he cites the case of the Greeks and the Hindustani, both exemplars of culturally dominant civilizations in their places and eras (9). He thinks that the moment of admixture in Latin America is robust enough to sustain a self-conscious and systematic cultural project (39), and that the locally authoritative cultural overlay (and inheritance of the Spanish) is conducive to an effort at systematic pursuit of total racial integration.

We are now in the epoch of the white race. This racial "trunk" has several civilizations within it, roughly major geo-political networks organized around some urbanized center or centers that are sites of active cultural development. Civilizations bring with them distinct cultural norms that have consequences for how human social relations are structured. In the current era, there is a conflict between the Anglo-Saxon (English) and the Latin (Spanish) branches. From the standpoint of culture, this means a conflict between different institutions, aims, and ideals (10).

The Anglo-Saxon strand tends to emphasize racial separation and ideals of racial purity. The Latin strand has a comparatively higher toleration for race mixing. (He sometimes puts this in terms of the Latin strand having greater "love"—an integrative, assimilative impulse, by his lights.) He seems to regard both as a kind of normative-aesthetic disposition to difference, but for his purposes the chief import for history is the consequences for how human civilizations development will unfold.

On Vasconcelos' picture, Latin America is poised to be the cradle of a new, "synthetic," "cosmic," or fifth and final race that blends together all the existing racial stocks. This possibility matters because his hope is that this race will be uniquely well-positioned to develop a culture that surpasses all prior cultures. This result is not guaranteed. Although there is considerable admixture in Latin America already, the process is a long and delicate one. Contemporary mestizos are of varied racial composition, but they are in some important sense culturally European, and in particular, Spanish. So the creation of a new people and the resultant culture is not a finished product. Then-current mestizos were only a promising start of a long process.

Philosophical anthropology

The foregoing is fairly standard reading of Vasconcelos' views during that time period, but some of the details and motivations benefit from more spelling out of some of Vasconcelos' background views about metaphysics and the human sciences.

Vasconcelos held that at every "revulsion" or level of ontological organization (on his view: mineral, biological, and spiritual), there is some end or function that organizes the activities of things at that level. Biological systems can have elaborate psychologies—desires and intentions emerge in the biological level—and this is an important part of human nature. However, humans and human collectives, are in an important sense also "spiritual" beings, by which he means that we have concerns about aesthetic, transcendent, collective interests not reducible to biological interests (Vasconcelos 2017, p4; Cf. Haddox 1967: 12-39).

His further "law of personal taste," or "law of three social stages," (more about this in a moment) makes it clear that he thinks that even for spiritual beings, it is an as-yet-unachieved possibility for us to organize ourselves on principles that reflect our highest natures (1921; 1925, p. 28-9). The best we have done thus far is to move from organizing ourselves on the basis of violence to organizing ourselves on instrumentally rational principles of response to biological needs.

On this account, rational and empirical inquiry underdetermine the selection of ends for entities in the spiritual cycle. Indeed, Vasconcelos goes further: in some otherwise straightforwardly empirical cases, the available data doesn't settle which theory we should accept, and in those cases, Vasconcelos thinks, we can and should employ non-empirical, value-laden considerations to break the tie (1926a: 96). He goes on to say that many societies have approached the relationship of science to questions of social and political import in just this way.

A recurring theme in his discussions of science is that a commitment to an emergent spiritual or aesthetic domain does not mean that science can be disregarded. Indeed, this may be the oldest and most recurring thread of Vasconcelos work. In an early lecture, "Gabino Barreda and the Contemporary Ideas" [1910] he claims that "in every era there is a set of facts, of experiences, reasons, that intuition, at least philosophical intuition, does not have the right to ignore," and that ""the fundamental intuition of a philosophical system should never conflict with scientific laws as they are understood in the era in which the system is produced" (2017, p. 13). This picture of science and logic constraining philosophical theorizing is echoed in *La raza*, where he insists that philosophical speculation must be "nourished with facts" and that explanations aren't supposed to be the novelist's fantasy but rather "intuition supported by the facts of history and science" (1997, p. 8).

This gap between empirical findings and the proper ambitions for humans and human groups can only be closed by a kind of intuitive knowledge that Vasconcelos identified as aesthetic. Aesthetic knowledge enables us to choose between possibilities that he thinks aren't and can't be settled by science (How ought we to live? What is most beautiful? What goals should we strive for?). So, on his picture, scientific knowledge must necessarily be complemented by a higher form of cognition, one that is (he thinks) primarily oriented to beauty and structured by love.

Part of what has gone wrong with eugenics, Vasconcelos thinks, is that it is a dangerously naïve application of biological principles to beings whose natures exceed characterization in purely biological terms. Social Darwinism is a "false translation of physiological law to the realm of the spirit"' (1979: 33), and he is skeptical that an account of the cultural nature and meaning of human beings is going to be adequately captured by a purely biological story.

Some complexities

Any discussion of Vasconcelos' work from this period, especially of *La raza cósmica*, has to acknowledge some of its decidedly unhappy features.

First, by contemporary lights Vasconcelos' sense of history is prone to entirely untenable flights of wild speculation. Some of this is mitigated by the fact that scholarship about the ancient world, especially the ancient Americas, was in relative infancy at the time. Even so, a good deal of the history he does invoke does not age well. Some remarks of his in another context may be particularly apt on at least this point: "I did not stick to history . . . To those who pointed out the irrelevancy, I said 'I am not writing history; my object is to create a myth" (1963, p. 172).

Second, contemporary readers are bound to find his picture of race and racial categories more than a little puzzling. Although there is plausibly a biological substrate to Vasconcelos' conception of race, it is not obviously a genetically fixed one. In the intellectual milieu of his era, racial theory was often an amalgam of Lamarckian and Mendelian conceptions of inheritance (so: adaptation by behavior and context, and by genetic selection). On this sort of picture, there might be a temporary racial essence for some group—an essence that stabilizes for a time—but what that group is and what that essence was is susceptible to transformation in light of its circumstances and pressures on expression. Culture, geography, and even language could shape racial dispositions, and this is the sense in which nations and regions could produce races (Vargas 2000).

Third, for all of Vasconcelos' celebration of race-mixing (*mestizaje*), and his explicit rejection of racial hierarchy, in *La raza* his characterizations of racial groups and their differences regularly descend into startlingly racist stereotypes (for discussion see Hooker 2017, p. 169-179; Manrique 2016, p. 8-9). These tropes are far less visible in subsequent works, including "The Race Problem" and *Indología*. In general, though, Vasconcelos' writing on these issues is a case of first-order beliefs regularly betraying his stated principles.

Even so, one might worry that there is no version of his view that doesn't work out badly for minority groups. His dismissal of the cultural autonomy of indigenous groups can be readily read as contributing to what Jack Forbes characterized as the "liquidation" of indigenous peoples in the Americas, not necessarily by the destruction of bodies so much as by the destruction of the categories by which indigenous people identify and recognize themselves (1973). (Compare Leopoldo Zea's later assertion that "there are no indigenous peoples, but only Mexicans" ["no hay indígenas, sino mexicanos"] (1952, p. 84). Moreover, subsequent social science work has made it clear that even when Latin Americans have episodically embraced mestizaje and have thereby eroded a variety of racism predicated on the idea of

membership in a descent group, a successor notion of *colorism*— according to which skin tone, hair, and morphology are used in discriminatory ways—has tended to do much of the work of racism without all of its presumptions (Telles 2014).

Once we are done cataloguing *La raza*'s most glaring defects, is there anything left to be said for the work he was doing in this period? I think so. Alas, a few more details are required.

Aesthetic utopianism

Despite Vasconcelos real interest in race, the philosophical center of Vasconcelos' picture is a cultural project of aesthetic utopianism. The otherwise baffling business about a future universal or superior culture isn't just window-dressing, but the entire point of the enterprise.

For us, today, perhaps the most natural place to start thinking about these questions is to ask what sort of ideal could bind us together in a shared community, or in a shared social project. Vasconcelos thinks that this question has typically been asked in the context of a presumption that groups can identify and regulate purity of some or another sort, and that the nature and composition of those groups would be a stable fact. What Vasconcelos is asking is what could possibly bind a group together, in a way that would enable the distinctive cooperative goods made possible by contemporary civilization, but that would do so in the face of the fact of perpetual flux in groupings of human communities?

Vasconcelos is invested in a stage-like (one might, without much unfairness, say *evolutionary*) story about the development of human social relations. Recall the picture of the "law of three stages," noted above (1921; 1925, p. 28-9). Each of the three stages is characterized by a dominant way of human social organization. In the first stage, the material power stage, human relations are organized by power and threats. In the intellectual/rational/political stage, brute force gives way to rational calculation, to the possibility of treaties, laws, and mutually beneficial agreements. It also supports the emergence of powerful social norms, including moral and political norms. This is, he thinks, the contemporary situation among nation states. A third stage is possible, maybe inevitable, but it has yet to emerge fully. In this third (spiritual) stage, conventional moralism will give way to human relations structured by broadly aesthetic or spiritual concerns, including love, joy, and creative expression. But human organization along those lines has been a mostly untapped possibility.

Vasconcelos seems to imagine that the final stage will produce a universal aesthetic trading zone, where people are pulled to harmonize, to make things, life, and relationship beautiful, but to do so with the fullest set of human dispositions and aesthetic sensibilities. It is unclear the extent to which Vasconcelos sees this as necessarily striving for a kind of aesthetic homogeneity, or whether instead the picture is supposed to be one of constant flux, where creative new combinations are produced, and cultural patterns are reconfigured. There are some hints that it is the latter he has in mind as when he employs the "no norms, no rules" language in describing *La raza*'s utopic state (1997, p. 29).

There is, undoubtedly, a mystical, manifestly transcendence-purporting element to Vasconcelos' characterization of the aesthetic/spiritual stage. It is especially explicit in his earlier *Prometeo vencedor* (2009) [1920], but notably attenuated in many of the works after *La raza*, starting with "The Race Problem" (1926). Whatever the full story is about the ethos (esthos?) of that stage, one might wonder how we get there.

On this matter, Vasconcelos' position is elusive. It is relatively clear that he doubts that an adequate answer will be given in terms of the structure of any current, solitary nation. The conditions for producing a society organized around aesthetic utopianism does not seem to be something that he thinks yet exists. At the same time, he recognizes that it can't come into existence ex nihilo. It will need to arise, at least somewhat organically, from real-world conditions in a group of people with a concrete and particular history. The location of the emergence of this project, though, is something he does think he can speak to: Latin America is the place where his particular racial-historical story slots into the account.

Here's a question we should be asking ourselves: if race mixing is always inevitable, and all races are admixtures from some prior era, why hasn't there already been a final, mixed race? Vasconcelos' answer is informative. First, in every era, the dominant group tends to invent a mythology of its own purity. Second, even where dominant groups think of themselves as mixed peoples, there is no guarantee that they won't be overrun by some other competitor group that does accept a purity myth about itself. (This is, of course, how Vasconcelos sees the situation in the 20th century between the two strands of the white race.) Third, and perhaps most importantly, prior to the 20th century, the race mixture has never been global. Indeed, it wasn't until contact between the Americas and Europe had been established that this was at all a possibility.

Here's why these details matter: if the chief barrier to larger-than-national cooperation on the basis of spiritual aestheticism is intra-human hostility to cultural flourishing of outgroups, it wasn't even really possible to build a truly universal culture until all major civilizational groups were in contact with one another. By Vasconcelos' lights, you can't transcend humanity—you can't become *celestial* (as in "Prometeo") or *cosmic* (as in *La raza*)—until you are actually in a position to integrate or assimilate *all* cultural configurations, wherever their origin and whatever their history. That's why, for Vasconcelos, all races and nationalities are "indispensable for the creation of a true culture" ["indispensables para crear una verdadera cultura"] (1926b, p. 3a).

Even so, there is some sense in which the racial-historical element of his account is philosophically secondary. The core of Vasconcelos' account isn't so much a story about race, but a story about, as he puts it, a *mission* or a cultural ideal that can animate and guide a larger-than-nation-sized group of people. He wants a society that tries to enable human relations structured by love, sympathy, and a refined sense of beauty. He offers the ambition of a society that endeavors to produce an original, creative culture that can borrow from and build upon the best that humans have achieved, whatever their origin.

It is, of course, and underdeveloped story. He doesn't tell us what kind of politics he thinks will get us there, nor what the actual social structure of such a society would be like. Instead, his ambition is to get us to take this possibility seriously as a kind of overarching ambition, in the way we might think of equality or justice for all as an ambition that structures the kinds of institutions and social arrangements that we endeavor to bring about. However we get there, we are well-served by achieving it.

Vasconcelos does gesture at some features of that society and, especially in *La raza cósmica*, he is inclined to frame things in terms of an "aesthetic eugenics" that he believes will emerge in the third state. For example, in comparison to the then-common practice of enacting laws restricting interracial marriages (for example, in the United States), he maintains that "correctives" will have no place in the aesthetic utopia. Contemporary relationships based purely on love are a step in the right direction, but contemporary relationships aren't yet themselves works of art shaped by the instinct of beauty. Material and moral impoverishment continue to distort social relations, including romantic ones. Contemporary couples are "ugly in . . . ninety percent of the cases" because of misery, prejudice, and desperation (31). In the utopic third stage, though, freely elected marriages will be works of art (30), he says, freed from the distortions of prejudice and material need and guided instead by sympathy, creativity, and beauty.

One thing that is sometimes overlooked is that Vasconcelos thinks that a society that can make good on human relations unpolluted by fear of difference and histories of bias will be a society in which poverty, inadequate education, and entrenched misery will have been eliminated (Cf. 1926b, p. 3a). Only the erasure of material and structural barriers to universal creative expression and cultural achievement can fully allow the emergence of a universal or fully mixed people. He seems to mean this in both a cultural and physical sense. "As soon as education and comfort become widespread, there will be no danger in the mixture of the most divergent types," he promises; eventually, the "physical makeup and temperament of people in the aesthetic utopia" will become different than it is now, in part because people will seek out and construct relationships in fundamentally different ways (1997, p. 31).

Reconsideration

Let's return to my assertion that despite appearances, the racial issue is not philosophically central to Vasconcelos' account. What is central to Vasconcelos' account is what he indicates in the subtitle to *La raza*: a mission for a people. In a later work, he makes this explicit: "No nation has ever risen to true greatness without an ardent faith in some high ideal . . . Broadness, universality of sentiment and thought, in order to fulfill the mission of bringing together all the races of the earth and with the purpose of creating a new type of civilization, is, I believe the ideal that would give us in Latin-America strength and vision" (1926a, p. 93). And, as we have seen, the content of that ideal, such as it is, is an image of human relations governed by free play of aesthetic sensibility, against a background of a kind of egalitarianism about human value, i.e., that we are all potentially equal, that everyone has value, and that we all have different ways to contribute to a collective project of achieving particular goods. Why think this? Because Vasconcelos says so.

Vasconcelos is explicit that his focus on race is mostly a byproduct of thinking about the barriers to achieving a new way of organizing human relations. He writes that if we succeed, "it will not even matter much that we follow the pure-race, the one-race standard or the mixed-race standard. . . . Spiritual affinities and similar fancies of taste and mind will then prevail, and a superior life will become the endeavor of the human family as a whole" (1926a: 101-2). His ambition is to promote an ideal of human cooperation and social relation. If we attain that, then any racial configurations we find ourselves with will be irrelevant.

In some sense, this should be entirely unsurprising. After all, his recommendation for how to think about race is, ultimately, to stop being invested in patrolling race. He writes that "there is only one sound race policy and that is the policy of old . . . we are all potentially the same and that we are bound to respond differently according to the call that is made upon us, each one bearing a treasure that comes to life at the proper moment in the time of need" (1926a: 98).

So why have so many people focused on Vasconcelos' story of race? One reason is that Vasconcelos' own entry into these issues frequently begins with race. Another reason is purely historical accident. If people read any Vasconcelos at all, they tended to read *La raza*, his book that was most centrally about race. However, *La raza* (and, lest we forget, *Prometeo vencedor*) were only early efforts by Vasconcelos to work through this cluster of issues.

It wasn't really until "The Race Problem" (1926a) and *Indología* (1927) that Vasconcelos' picture took on its mature form, and it is in these later works that the cultural and hemispheric import of the project emerges. Interestingly, in the prologue to *Indología*, he notes that he intends to avoid further writing about the tired topics of race and Iberoamericanism, for he wishes to focus on developing his metaphysics and aesthetics (1927, pp lvii). While he does not entirely succeed in avoiding further discussions of race, the focus of his subsequent monographs does shift away from race to geopolitical, cultural, and yes, metaphysical and aesthetic concerns.

In what remains of this chapter, I want to shift from historical exegesis to consideration about whether and how Vasconcelos' work might be of use to us today. I'll start by contrasting his account with an influential account of patriotism in the Anglophone philosophical literature. Vasconcelos' picture is surprisingly useful for thinking about questions of patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism. At any rate, that's what I argue.

The project of a people

In Anglophone philosophical discussions of patriotism, the organizing questions have focused on what patriotism is, and whether there is some version of it that doesn't collapse into a familiar form of irrational or morally impermissible nationalism (e.g., appeals to blood and soil) (Primoratz 2017). Vasconcelos faces a similar challenge about whether there are philosophically adequate grounds for tolerating or even requiring a privileging of the interests of large collectives. I'll argue that Vasconcelos' aesthetic utopianism does better with this question than at least one established account of nation-state patriotism.

In a justly influential lecture, Alasdair MacIntyre offers an interesting reconceptualization of patriotism, grounding it not in the commitment to an existing set of institutions and office-holders, but instead, to a nation "conceived *as a project*" (1984: 13). He doesn't say enough about what exactly that comes to, but the idea seems to be that patriotism involves a commitment to a set of norms that are taken to properly animate or guide the institutions and aspirations of a nation-state.

In political theory, there have been various attempts to renovate the notion of patriotism that dovetails with the MacIntyrean conception in various ways (for an overview, see Primoratz 2017). The accounts have argued that patriotism might avoid the pitfalls of nationalism by involving a commitment to, for example, a republican form of government, to a constitution, to liberty, to laws and institutions. On these accounts, particular pieces of land or the idea of a community understood as a biological descent group play no role.

In MacIntyre's case, his argument for the importance of patriotism (he construes it as a central, even morally foundational virtue) depends on a particular picture of the nature of morality. He's skeptical about morality detached from particular commitments learned in particular communities. Or at least, he's skeptical that we can learn, internalize, understand and make moral judgments independent of a particular community that gives content to moral claims and a conception of moral agency (1984: pp. 10-11, 16).

One might reasonably protest that the acquisition of concepts and their initial content is one thing, and that the possibility of rational transformation and the possibility that we might subsequently track abstract moral truths is another (Cf. de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2012: pp. 16-19 for a defense of something like this possibility). That is, we might accept MacIntyre's story about the acquisition of moral concepts without accepting the conclusion that if one finds a way to dissociate one's moral understanding from a specific moral community that one is apt to lose one's hold "upon all genuine standards of judgment" (MacIntyre 1984: p. 11).

Still, suppose MacIntyre is right that we acquire and can only make sense of moral concepts and moral judgments within particular communities—or within specific moral ecologies, as I'm inclined to think of it (Vargas 2013: 243-249) As Stephen Nathanson has noted, it isn't clear why this fact about the ground of moral concepts should be thought necessarily to fund a commitment to a state, or for that matter, any political unit at all (Nathanson 1989: 549). One's family, town, or religion may be a more central or constitutive ground for moral meaning and judgment, and indeed, in much of the world nation states are not plausibly even the main determinants for rights, duties, and advantages. To the extent to which the conditions of moral concept acquisition, meaning, and use fix the proper conditions of partiality to a normative project, the sort of partiality that MacIntyre identifies with patriotism may not be properly anchored in a nation at all, and a state that claims partiality on that basis would be enjoying fruits it did not earn.

Here, I think, Vasconcelos' picture does a bit better.

First, on the way I am construing things, Vasconcelos' mission for a people just is a version of a MacIntyrean project. It is a coherent ideal or set of mutually interconnected ideals that articulates normative aspirations for a group, aspirations that can (under particular conditions) induce cooperation and sacrifice on behalf of the ideal.

Second, Vasconcelos is clearly committed to the thought that, within the constraint of ideals that can hope to motivate a group, the bigger the group that buys into the ideal, the better for the project. Why? On the face of it, the wider the buy-in or the commitment to the ideal, the better its chance of withstanding pressures that threaten the pursuit, attainment, or ongoing success of the ideal. So, other things equal, the project of a people has more power if it is the project of a nation or continent or a hemisphere than if it is the project of a family, a town, or a subnational community. The group binding problem is real, though, in that as a community scales up, it can be difficult to retain the motivational force of the project. This is why it matters that one can frame the project as tied into a self-identification, into a history that is identity-constituting, in a way that can make it effect as a project of as large a group of people as it can plausibly sustain.

Third, in the case of Vasconcelos' project, the content also matters. He wants an open-ended community that does not rule out anyone, regardless of their tribe, nation, or origin. This being Vasconcelos, there is some ambivalence in the account, with a tension between its stated principles and some of the incidental remarks he makes along the way. For example, he is careful to insist that his project is not intended to sanction coercion and forced assimilation into the cosmic race; those self-described (and self-deceived) "pure" peoples can persist as they like [LRC citation]. Over time, though, they will come to be disadvantaged as they fail to take part in the fruits of the future universal human culture. Still, he thinks, entrance into the project of a universal culture is open to anyone who is prepared to take it up.

That Vasconcelos' utopic project is, in principle, open to anyone doesn't mean that there are no barriers to entry into the project. His open-ended requirement of organizing relations on the basis of universal love and skepticism about purity will tend to repel those who have been acculturated to prefer purity and the supposed superiority of their local nation. This is one reason why he thinks Latin America is particularly well-suited to taking up this project: it is, he thinks, comparatively less fixated on purity and potentially open to a more-than-national Pan-American, and ultimately, universalist normative project.

These considerations suggest a fourth reason why Vasconcelos' picture does better than a MacIntyrean commitment to the project of a nation. By Vasconcelos' lights, his isn't just a project that is open to all humans qua human, but rather, it is something that *requires* the fact of diversity in human kinds. The building of a maximally creative, maximally assimilative culture cannot proceed on the basis of one or two groups, he thinks, but it needs the fullest participation of the widest swath of human creativity, aesthetic standards, and refinements of the sentiments (1926b, p. 3a).

Overcoming nationalisms

How we get to his utopia, and the politics of that utopia are not things he even attempts to characterize. Instead, he offers a framework—a project for a people—that articulates some guiding principles that require elaboration, contestation, and experimentation in their achievement. That's not nothing, though. One way to see this is to consider the resources in Vasconcelos' view of handling the contemporary challenge of popular nationalisms. Of course, nationalism can take on a wide range of forms, in some cases racial, in others cultural, and oftentimes a combination of the two. Vasconcelos' articulation of a cultural project that attempts to works from (a) the presumption of diversity in human kinds, and (b) the inevitability of change in institutional and political arrangements is not a panacea to the challenge of nationalist tribalisms. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting and distinctive set of resources for challenging once-again resurgent versions of popular ethno-racial nationalisms.

Vasconcelos is obviously happy with race talk, which provides an initial point of contact. As we have seen, for Vasconcelos, though, supposedly "pure" races are simply groups with relatively stable (but ultimately impermanent) configurations of groups traits. That stability is a product of isolation by history, context, or stable conditions of life. Invariably, though, those groups *arose* from prior mixtures of people, and the brute facts of contemporary global society make effortful attempts to live out the myth of purity laughably untenable. The fact of increasing global interconnectedness means that the mythology of racial purity— masked by the always temporary but recent stability of dominant social categories—is coming to an end. He notes that "everywhere the pure-blood groups are being absorbed . . . they will not stand long before the increasing wave of technically educated masses of the complex breed" (2006a, p. 94). This does not preclude imagined communities from tailoring for themselves justifications and aspirations that serve their interests. However, Vasconcelos endeavors to offer a way forward that can accommodate greater realism about people and the tide of history.

In one contemporary guise, popular nationalism does not need the language of race and can do just fine with the language of culture: it is not the *racial* defects of the Other that justify exclusion, social diversion, and protective political action on behalf of the nation. Instead, it is their *cultural* traits, their inability to adhere to social and political norms, or to idealized versions of social and political norms, that is the basis of a right for the nation and its members to protect themselves against the parasitic infections brought by the impure, the Other, and the uncultured.

Vasconcelos's picture is, in at least some respects, tailor-made for responding to this kind of picture. Although his proposed cultural project doesn't obviously require it, he is undoubtedly a vigorous enthusiast for white, European culture (; 1963, p. 152). He is unapologetic about this, and he readily condemns subnational identity politics that, by his lights, threaten to fracture the culturally unifying forces in the West. Moreover, he recognizes that cultural replacement (really, displacement) by outgroup practices can happen. In all of this, he is a fellow traveler for many contemporary ethno-racial nationalists. But he does not share their convictions about what follows.

First, Vasconcelos holds that formerly dominant groups will eventually be supplanted or eradicated from the civilizational stage. In this, Vasconcelos is ruthlessly cynical about how populations interact over time, holding that "whenever two extremely differentiated groups come in contact, it is, in the long run, the lower group that predominates if the superior does not undertake the task of raising the level of the inferior" (1926a, 100). Partly, he thinks, it is matter of a festering revenge motive in the long-oppressed group (99) but partly it is a numerical matter of "instinctual" increases in reproductive rates among the poor, uneducated, and disadvantaged (1926a, p. 100-101).

Here's the kicker, though: the only way effectively to move past this social conflict involves full social integration and erasure of social disadvantages, or at least openness to it. By his lights, "no race suffices by itself . . . [humanity] loses each time a race disappears by violent means" because it takes with a distinctive cultural configuration its own unique sense of aesthetic possibility (1997, p. 34). Moreover, avoidance of mixture is off the table (see: the inevitability of peoples mixing).

The fact of mixture need not be debilitating, though. He argues for this in all his major works from this period, but he makes the underlying claim particularly explicit in "La supremacía de los blancos" ["White supremacy"] (1926b). There, he writes that "any race, no matter what its size or physical appearance, placed in conditions of freedom and justice, progresses immediately and equates to the highest human types" [my translation of "cualquier raza, no importa cual sea su talla o su aspecto físico, puesta en condiciones de libertad y de justicia, progresa en seguida y se equipara a los más altos tipos humanos" (1926b, p. 3a). That is, the difficulties that today face race mixing of "the most divergent types" will be gone when material and structural conditions are altered to allow the flourishing of any race, whatever its dispositions.

The picture of integration is not merely economic; infrastructure investment, for example, is always going to be insufficient for social and cultural integration (von Vacano 2012, p. 128). What is required is something more serious, a genuine concern for eradicating the causes of misery among peoples, whatever their kind, and an ability to appreciate and integrate the gifts and achievements of anyone, regardless of their origin. By Vasconcelos' lights, the capacity of any given group—notice: not a permanent, essentialized, fixed group, but a contingently labelled and, in the end, always shifting group—to deliver cultural excellence depends on whether its individuals have been afforded adequate opportunities to achieve, and whether we can see with eyes free of the prejudices in which we've been acculturated.

Cultural configurations and their ensuing achievements are always temporary, local responses to a time, a place, a history, and a collection of other local dispositions. No great civilization is afforded permanent excellence at cultural production, and indeed, all instances of cultural greatness, he thinks, just are products of synthesizing disparate cultural influences. In holding this view, Vasconcelos doesn't deny that there can be better and worse cultural achievements, achievements that can and should redound through the ages. His position on this is subtle, though. He grants the achievements of the Greeks don't guarantee solutions for today; that the

great art of the past is only contingently responsive to the needs of the present; that the rhythms that inspire are unlikely always to be the same and a hybrid beat, borrowed in part from one's neighbor may always do better yet. To be satisfied with the cultural achievements one already has, that one has already inherited, is to be satisfied with only a fraction of the creative greatness of humanity.

Although Vasconcelos doesn't say it, one might also think that once we abandon mythologies of purity and the fiction of permanent or essential groupings of human kinds, all that is left for us is either to claim each his own purely individual accomplishment (not the accomplishments or race or nation) or instead, to claim for ourselves the entire range of human creative and meaning-making efforts. To claim only a piece, usually a very small piece of some arbitrary and small minority in human history, as the entirety of one's own cultural endowment, is to choose cultural parochialism over literally world-class cultural excellence. It is to choose a dead and fixed past over an unbounded future set of future cultural achievements.

Vasconcelos' aesthetic utopianism invites us to abandon the indefensible and to take up the collective fight for a culturally and aesthetically superior future. We can do without a mythology predicated on false beliefs about human kinds and the possibility of purity. We need not saddle ourselves with the impossible task of doing what no people have ever succeeded in doing for long, that is, to cabin themselves and their culture off from change, transformation, and adaptation. Instead, we can seek these things out with an eye towards how we can transform our culture and ourselves to be even better than we find them. What Vasconcelos offers is a vision that attempts to build on the presumption of cultural change, and to create a community with sufficient creativity and vitality to withstand, integrate, and yes, make itself continuously more beautiful and loving. On this picture, outgroups are not irredeemable, but necessary. They are the only way to access practices, innovations, and forms of excellence that would otherwise be unavailable.

Like all ideals, there are undoubtedly very real costs to adopting this sort of cultural project. Every cultural project plausibly has an underside that gets subordinated or ignored (Cf. Dussel 2008). And, anyway, a full accounting of the promise of his project would require careful consideration of the comparative costs and promises of alternative pictures. That's work I've not attempted to do. Even so, it is to Vasconcelos' credit that, whatever the ultimate merits of the account might be, he forces us to consider the basis and aspiration for our affiliations with one another, the role of nations in our organization, and the kind of world we seek to build for those who come after us.

Further notes

La raza cósmica tends to have pride of place in discussions of Vasconcelos, especially in English-language contexts, but few of his commentators on either side of the border acknowledge just how much Vasconcelos wrote on race and culture from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s. So far as I can make out, his first proposal in the vein of the cosmic race was the play *Prometeo vencedor* (2009) [1920?], in which he depicts a mixed-race utopia of a *raza celeste* that arises in the Americas and, in time, eradicates racial differences and conquers the world. *La raza* was published five years later, and its prologue was only the first of several essays and book discussions that Vasconcelos subsequently wrote. For example, he immediately revisits the same issues in lectures he gave at the University of Chicago in 1926 (published as part of *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*). Then, he took up some of the same issues in at least one newspaper article (1926b). These themes also figured in lectures he gave in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, which became the materials of *Indología*, published in 1927. Important themes re-emerged in several of his later works, including in works such as *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* (1934), and *¿Que es la revolución?* (1937).

These intertextual connections present challenges for anyone trying to keep track of both the overarching picture and the various shifts in audience and emphasis in his works. Alas, there are further headaches awaiting Vasconcelos scholars who are interested in the source materials. Published between 1957 and 1961, the four-volume edition of his complete works, his *Obras Completas*, are manifestly *in*complete. Moreover, several first editions of his individual books don't list dates of publication on them, and oftentimes, later republications fail to note differences between earlier and later editions, or what edition of the work it is. One example of the mess that this makes: it is hard to be certain of the publication date of *Prometeo vencedor* (see Dalton 2016: 553 n. 3). Some places claim a date as early as 1917, but the 2009 reprinting has an introductory notice by Vasconcelos that is dated January 1920. (Naturally, neither that introductory notice, nor an original date and location of publication appear in the *Obras completas*.)

Then, there is the fact that Vasconcelos published in both English and Spanish. The English-language writings have tended to be unknown, untranslated, or otherwise inaccessible in Mexico. For example, it wasn't until the 2010 Heriberto Yepez translation of the "The Race Problem" (translated as *La otra raza cósmica*), that this work—maybe his clearest statement of his views on race and cultural ideals—was first available in Spanish. A useful fact for Mexican philosophy trivia night: Vasconcelos published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* ("The Esthetic Development of Creation") well before any of us (1949).

One issue I haven't much focused on is Vasconcelos' relationship with Comtean and Spencerian positivism of the sort that had influence in Mexico in the generation or so before Vasconcelos. Part of its importance was that positivism was bound up with both the political regime that Vasconcelos fought against, and in his estimates about the cultural alternative represented by the United States. The thumbnail sketch of that history is that the positivists were pro-science and hostile to the kind of project Vasconcelos pursued, and that Vasconcelos' project

represented a decided break with positivism. As Alexander Stehn (2019) has persuasively demonstrated, the thumbnail sketch of positivism fails to recognize important differences in earlier versions of Mexican positivism (as developed by Gabino Barreda) and later incarnations common among Vasconcelos' teacher. One interesting implication of the reading that Stehn offers is that Vasconcelos is, at least as I've construed him here, a return to—and subsequent radicalizing of—Barreda's social ideal founded on love and the sentiments.

Some readers may be puzzled by how to reconcile Vasconcelos' insistence that there are no pure races with his ready employment of the idea of "one-blood" "unmixed" and "pure-blood" groups. Here, at least, the answer is relatively clear: Vasconcelos is speaking with the folk. He uses talk of races to pick out mythologies or ideals of racial purity that he trusts his readers to recognize are fundamentally erroneous, and he marks this at the outset of his discussions.

In the early to mid 1920s, Vasconcelos was actively attempting to use his power and influence as the Minister of Education to foster the development of the sort of culture he valorized. He also had serious concerns about the influence and power of the United States within Mexico, and the ability of the U.S. to impede Mexico's interests. And, of course, he was explicitly concerned to engage with and repudiate the scientific racism and eugenics programs that had currency in the U.S. and Europe. All of these things structure his work of this time period.

Vasconcelos' seemingly genuine but imperfect racial egalitarianism, and his robust anti-imperialist instincts make it all the more startling that later in life he seemed to abandon some of these commitments. No small part of his notoriety came from his later cooperation with Nazi propaganda efforts, his anti-Semitism, his unrepentant enthusiasm for the Spanish conquest of the Americas, and his strident combination of doctrinaire and heterodox Catholicism made him repellent to many in the academy. His personal life was also a matter of some scandal: despite being married, he had numerous affairs and wrote about many them in his autobiographical works. One of his lovers, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, committed suicide on the altar steps at Notre-Dame Paris, using Vasconcelos' gun. As Gabriella de Beer aptly noted "One cannot be indifferent to Vasconcelos" (de Beer 1966, p. iii).

That Vasconcelos doesn't enjoy ongoing influence in Mexico today does not mean he was without philosophical influence in Mexico during the 1930s. Samuel Ramos' *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* echoes Vasconcelos' concern to identify an animating project ("Up to now, Mexicans have known only how to die; it is time they learned how to live,"176 and "What then does the Mexican live for?" (P, 65) check pagination). Vasconcelos also explicitly identifies an inferiority complex rooted in a history of oppression, before Ramos' more famous discussion of it (1997 [1925]: p. 34; see also remarks in *La Tormenta* (1936) p. 1100 vol. 1 of *Obras*; for translation see *Mexican Ulysses* (1963: p. 137-8).

There is an interesting tension in Vasconcelos' treatment of nationalism that bears further note. On the one hand, he's very skeptical of the nationalism that has divided up the Latin American region. On the other hand, Mexico qua Mexico, as a people and a unit, were deep and abiding concerns of Vasconcelos. As much as anyone, Vasconcelos wanted the Mexican revolution to be

both a “recovery and discovery,” as Romanell (1967: 63) put it, of Mexicanness. Here’s how I see things hanging together. Vasconcelos sees the local nationalism in Latin America as a weakening of the Spanish civilizational strand, a kind of advantage handed to the Anglo-Saxon strand. The salient reason was the history of the United States and its recurring interventions in and claims of authority over the rest of the Americas (especially in the Monroe doctrine and its repeated interventions in Latin America). Beyond the usual impulses to anti-imperialism, the United States was a society that, by Vasconcelos’ lights, was organized along all the wrong principles: racial purity and separation, utilitarianism and pragmatism, technocracy, and disvaluation of the aesthetic.

So how does the Mexicanist enthusiasm fit in? Vasconcelos characterizes his own view as a kind “defensive” nationalism that seeks to preserve the particular features of Mexico required for it to not be subsumed (economically, culturally) by, in particular, the United States. I think that’s supposed to be compatible with cooperation between and the eventual unification with a wider Latin American project, but his dream of Latin American political unity never came to fruition.

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