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JOSÉ VASCONCELOS¹

(1882-1959)

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José Vasconcelos is, without doubt, one of the most controversial figures in the social and political history of Mexico. Although he spent a good part of his life in either voluntary or compulsory exile, the impact of his original personality goes beyond his own lifetime, while his vast educative, literary, political and philosophical work is still widely studied and discussed today. He was not a man to inspire indifference, and has therefore been described in all manner of highly contradictory terms. His life covers a large period of Mexican history, from Porfirio's dictatorship, through the revolutionary movement of 1910, and up to the establishment and consolidation of civilian regimes.

Vasconcelos received the best education that was available to an intelligent member of the Mexican middle class at that time. This education, combined with his determined character, helped him to become one of the most promising young lawyers of his generation. At the outbreak of the 1910 revolution he had as yet had no opportunity of getting to know, let alone of understanding, the sad reality of Mexico. This he was to learn as he went through life, more through his emotions than through any profound sociological or historical analysis. He first considered the conflict not so much as a social movement but more as the liberal demands of a middle class, which was very far from being representative of the whole of Mexican society at that time. He then moved towards an assistance-type interpretation of that society which was to pervade all his political activity.

Whatever their political colour, almost all the successive government leaders solicited him; not all of them, however, gained his approval.

After an explosive and prolific career as a civil servant when he was still only in his early forties, he entered a long period of bitterness and growing incomprehension towards his own country: that very country that he had, to a great extent, set on the road to modernization.

Much has been written about the man and it is commonplace to refer to two Vasconcelos: one before and one after 1929, the year in which he ran for the presidency. This attempt was a resounding failure, after which he retired from the political scene for good.

Separated from Mexico, both physically and spiritually, he dedicated the rest of his life to travelling and lecturing, while at the same time writing a vast number of books, essays and articles for the press. These works have never ceased to stimulate the curiosity and astonishment of contemporary readers because of his very unique itinerary for which he has been aptly named the 'constructive revolutionary'. This constructive talent flourished in the field of public education where he held office first as Rector of the National University of Mexico (1920-21), and then as Minister of Education (1921-24).

Vasconcelos: the rector

As Rector of the university, he showed his preoccupation with the enormous needs of the population as a whole and with the university's responsibility towards improving the situation. This was clearly stated in his inaugural speech: 'At this time, I do not come to work for the university but to ask the university to work for the people.'²

His position was clearly far removed from the Anglo-Saxon university model, and this he had already shown some years before when he set up a civilian institution called the Mexican Popular University. Here he had mobilized the intellectuals of the day to offer adult education through lectures and a variety of cultural events, all completely free of charge. This was later to be carried on as one of the branch activities of the National University itself. In the same spirit, as Rector, Vasconcelos launched a massive literacy campaign based on a team of 'honorary' teachers, so called because they were unpaid.

All of this illustrates one of the main features of Vasconcelos' philosophy: education as a means of emancipation for the people. Although this idea is, of course, by no means original, Vasconcelos was the first Mexican to include it in a national educational project, hitherto poorly defined. The project was then to become the main policy framework for subsequent governments. Furthermore, he enveloped the educational task in an almost religious mysticism, the fervour of which has frequently been compared to that of the colonial missionaries. And this was in fact his strong point. The energy he was to invest into the project spread to a whole generation of teachers and university students who regarded themselves as bearers of good news, and who took to the streets to spread this news with an enthusiasm which has never again been equalled. One of those students wrote:

With dramatic gesture and inflammatory word Vasconcelos had pointed to the scars of illiteracy [and] he called upon us to fight against it with the same zeal and the same disinterestedness as the old Spanish missionary who went out to the most distant and humble dwelling places to save the pagan native's soul.³

The new ministry

Very soon Vasconcelos had the opportunity of giving his full attention to the very urgent problem of popular education. The outlook was very bleak because Porfirio's regime had abandoned all social issues and ten years of civil war had devastated the country. There was an eighty per cent illiteracy rate, an acute shortage of schools and schoolteachers in the state education system, as well as a very inadequate capacity for teacher training; only the privileged classes were able to receive instruction either in private schools or abroad. In addition, the vast majority of people requiring state education were to be found in rural areas with, in most cases, poor means of communication. Vasconcelos literally burst onto this dramatic scene in one of his favourite roles: that of redeeming messiah.

It must be pointed out that the extraordinary effort made, over a period of only three years, in favour of Mexican education could never have happened without the steadfast support of the then President of the Republic, General Alvaro Obregón, who headed the first government of post-war reconstruction and who initiated the transition towards civilian government, for which the price to be paid was still more violence.

The first important step Vasconcelos took was to reform the Constitution in order to re-establish the Ministry of Education, which had been abolished four years before, and to endow it with federal jurisdiction. As Secretary for Public Education, he managed to obtain the largest budget ever assigned to this sector, although he himself considered it to be inadequate, given the enormity of the task.

Because he was conscious of the very precarious political situation, Vasconcelos felt he had to work against the clock. In his opinion, courage and imagination, of which he had plenty, were needed to undertake the educational and cultural revolution which had necessarily to follow on after the armed revolution. He thus dedicated himself to defining not only the basic principles of his project, but also the organizational framework required to carry it through.

The theoretical framework

As was the custom of the day, Vasconcelos took up the banner of nationalism in order to overcome the tremendous racial, cultural, socio-economic and even geographical differences in Mexico which the revolution had brought to light.

He put forward a pseudo-philosophical argument according to which a national spirit could only be attained by rediscovering the native values of a people, just like the great ancient cultures of Greece and of India. These cultures, as opposed to decadent Europe or pragmatic North America, carried in them the seed of original creative energy. In addition, all the best of our past colonial humanist legacy had to be recovered and blended into an Ibero-American melting pot which Vasconcelos called the ‘cosmic race’, endowed with unique qualities for the creation of a new world.

From a cultural point of view—as well as from many others—post-revolutionary Mexico was a blank page, just asking to be filled, and Vasconcelos set about filling it without paying too much attention to any rigorously scientific methodological considerations.

With characteristic drive he started up a nationalist movement, which caught on very rapidly. However, ‘it was a nationalism without a single trace of xenophobia; it was not anti-anything, but simply pro-Mexico.’⁴

The new Minister’s concern for national identity met with an enthusiastic response throughout the country: from intellectuals, teachers, workers and also from successive governments, who saw therein justification for the revolutionary fight. Some other Latin American countries responded to Vasconcelos’ call, according to which ‘peoples like ours aspire to autonomy rooted in their own culture.’⁵ They believed that this would provide them with a politico-cultural alternative to the colonialism of the great powers.

The role of education in this context was obvious: to help the Mexican people to rediscover their own country, both in the classroom and in the street, since educational action was not just for children but for the entire community.

Moreover, this nationalistic education was also redesigned to resist the influence of some foreign educational ideas, which, like those of John Dewey in the United States, promoted a society based on utilitarian standards.

Almost all Vasconcelos’ ideas on this subject are to be found in his book *De Robinson a Odiseo* [From Robinson (Crusoe) to Odysseus], where he proposed a vitalistic attitude towards education, which he called ‘structurative pedagogy’. Here again, he pays little attention to the theoretical coherence of his discourse and prefers to resort to a declamatory style, which is in fact very effective. The two characters mentioned in the title are taken from world literature and used as opposing educational models. First, there is Robinson Crusoe, the empiricist, who ‘learns from experience’ but who finds himself trapped in his own mundane daily existence; second, we find Odysseus, the spiritual adventurer, flying high and unrestrained. Determinism enforced by necessity is thus directly opposed to exalted liberation of the mind.

‘I take Robinson to symbolize the astute, improvised and exclusively technical method which characterizes the Anglo-Saxon era in the world: efficient but totally lacking in genius.’ While Odysseus symbolizes ‘the traveller who explores, acts, discovers and creates not only with his hands, and never with his hands alone, because he has neither the ability nor the wish to rid

himself of the creative talent or of the treasures of that millennial culture that he carries with him, and which liberates his mind.’⁶

This ‘structurative’ pedagogy fulfils the ideal which Odysseus symbolizes by searching ‘beyond the mastering of science, into the marvelous unfolding of the mind. [...] So, the educated mind enriches everyday reality precisely because it can modify and outwit certain aspects of necessity, thus developing a free mind, through knowledge.’⁷

Finally, one more characteristic feature of Vasconcelos’ educational philosophy must be mentioned: aesthetics was regarded by him as the means by which liberation of the mind could be attained. Sublimation through aesthetic enjoyment is, at the same time, the way to emancipation, which enables the spirit of the individual, and that of society as a whole, to blossom forth. In Vasconcelos’ opinion, this conception suited the Mexican people because of their natural disposition for aesthetic appreciation. He therefore set about promoting all types of popular artistic expression that had been disregarded and forgotten by the pro-French Porfirist regime.

If to go beyond simple practical instruction involves educating man’s sensibility, then this sensibility in turns brings mankind closer to great ideas. Education is, therefore, not only a question of aesthetics, but of ethics, too.

And so it is that Vasconcelos closes up the classic circle: beauty, goodness and knowledge, thus giving a certain harmony to his educational discourse; he does, however, accomplish a certain number of gymnastic feats in order to bridge the gaps between the various philosophical paradigms. This apparently did not cause him to lose any sleep, as he himself explained:

I am by nature born to poetry and songs of praise rather than to reflection, so I rarely felt that I was a philosopher. It was not so much my reasoning that made me philosophize, but my desire for integrity in all things: thought, emotion and action.

Consequently, it was with the passion, and not the logic, of his arguments that he was able to win over a well-disposed, but very often naive, audience. However, all this can in no way diminish the enormous scope of the work he accomplished in the field of public education.

The practical applications

This concept of nationalistic, vital, aesthetic and ethical education was put into practice through a vast programme that transformed the country in a very short time.

Vasconcelos divided his ministry into three main departments: schools, libraries and the fine arts. Considerable progress was made in the field of popular education in all three areas. The Schools Department decided to increase the educational services offered to both children and adults. At elementary level there was a fifty per cent increase in the number of teachers, pupils and official schools. The idea of promoting a harmonious and complete development of each individual was reflected in the curriculum; as well as traditional subjects, physical and artistic education was introduced, the latter being under the responsibility of the Department of Fine Arts. At the same time, links were established between school and work. Vasconcelos worked towards the advancement of popular trades as opposed to the classical university professions: ‘We would prefer to be the best confectioner in the republic than the worst lawyer in the village.’⁹ So, technical and industrial education were introduced into both rural and urban schools and, at a higher level, the School of Chemical Sciences and the Technological Institute of Mexico were created, both with the most modern equipment.

Special attention must be paid here to Vasconcelos’ interpretation of the role of the teacher, whom he endowed with redeeming faculties: ‘those teachers taking part in our work are

convinced that they not only exercise a civil function but that they are also part of a modern crusade to elevate and liberate the minds and to improve the bodies of their fellow men.¹⁰

For Vasconcelos, a teacher was not a technician but an apostle and an artist. As such, the method he used had to combine example and seduction. This is best illustrated by the 'cultural missions', a strategy designed to take the educational service into rural areas. The teacher-missionary was supposed to be the bearer of the alphabet, as well as the rudiments of civilization: in other words, techniques for the improvement of health, agriculture, handicrafts and the environment as a whole. He was thus aptly compared to a missionary, especially because of the spirit that inspired his work.

This strategy was part of the project intended for native people, who represented the majority of the rural population. The Minister considered this to be only a temporary task since, instead of being kept and educated apart according to the North American system of reservations, the Indians would, once they had learnt Spanish and acquired some rudiments of knowledge, be able to register in rural schools where Indians, mestizos and whites would mix, irrespective of race'.¹¹

The aim, here again, was to attain a national spirit through the mixing of races. There was always the risk that some of the richness of the Mexican cultural mosaic might be lost, but Vasconcelos still chose the path of integration through education.

Another integration project was that of education for women. Women were offered the possibility of becoming teachers in order to emancipate themselves and others. As in all post-war periods, opportunities were opened up for women in order to compensate for the thousands of men who had died. Vasconcelos, with the help of Gabriela Mistral, built up the myth of the ideal teacher. A woman's traditional qualities of self-sacrifice and sensitivity naturally fitted the description of the model teacher. Women were thus helped by Vasconcelos' eloquence to change their social image from that of mother of a family to that of mother of the people.

Perhaps one of the most significant achievements for the teaching profession was in restoring its prestige by transforming its members into the bearers of the revolutionary messianic message. There have been very few periods in our history when schoolteachers have regarded their job with the same spiritual generosity as Vasconcelos conferred upon it, or when teachers have been able to count so totally on the recognition and support of the whole community.

One of the most controversial tasks of Vasconcelos' administration was assigned to the Libraries Department: that of editing and publishing large quantities of books, magazines and educational texts. Vasconcelos, just like his Russian homologue, Lunacharsky, made the state into a publisher of accessible reading matter for the Mexican people in Spanish and at low prices:

We did not want it to be necessary to learn a foreign language in order to learn about the fundamental philosophy of mankind; we wanted to reduce the price of those books already on the market and make them more generally available, but this proved difficult, so we decided to keep our literacy campaign out of the greedy hands of the publishers.¹²

The list of publications is practically endless, as is the list of the subjects that they cover. Not only were over 2 million literacy primers published, together with translations of major classics, but also the best writers of the day wrote original texts and a great number of technical manuals were diffused. These publications were for all types of readers, in school or otherwise, and included special reading for children, young people, and adults, for both men and for women.

Vasconcelos was very severely criticized both by private publishers, who accused him of unfair competition, and by the political opposition, who accused him of squandering public funds on such a costly undertaking for a country with a mainly illiterate population. Indeed, when he left the ministry the publishing programme stopped abruptly and all the thousands of sheets of paper left in the presses were printed with political propaganda instead.

However, most of the books reached their destination: a network of almost 2,000 libraries was set up throughout the country, either in special buildings or in rural schools, in union premises or in town halls. On many occasions Vasconcelos himself took the books to some of the smallest, most out-of-the-way places, to the great astonishment of the local inhabitants.

The work accomplished by the Department of Fine Arts was equally spectacular. This department was in charge of the project to safeguard popular art and also of promoting the plastic arts, and the works of contemporary poets, writers and composers. It was thus responsible for the revival of traditional handicrafts, festivities, songs and dances, as well as of music and literature by educated Mexican composers and writers. Similarly, pre-Hispanic archeology was rediscovered, studied and used as a model for artistic production. Vasconcelos had a hand in the big upsurge in mural art by offering the walls of public buildings, including his newly built Ministry, for artists to execute their clearly nationally inspired works. He was also behind the reorganization of those institutions that had been more or less abandoned, such as the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts, the National Conservatory of Music, and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Once again, the Minister managed to involve all sectors of public life in this undertaking, making them all partners in a true festival of national culture which not only took over the traditional theatres, but invaded parks and open-air workshops too. 'It is in this last action—the creation of a cultural environment where each member of the population can peaceably find his own place—that Vasconcelos really occupies a place of major importance.'¹³

Obviously, this article does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of the work and educative philosophy of Vasconcelos. It merely points out the most important aspects of his work and may thereby stimulate the reader to discover Vasconcelos' very pleasant prose for himself.

As we have seen in the preceding pages, it is hard to define such a singular figure in simple terms, his ideas being regarded as either rich and complex or clumsy and confused. One thing is certain, however: for all his achievements or failings, he left a very clear personal mark on his own generation and on those that followed.

It is probably true to say that his originality is not to be found in his ideas, which in the present-day perspective appear somewhat eclectic, but in his actions. He was more a man of action than of reflection, a talented and impassioned orator and a great individualistic, an authoritarian but distinctly charismatic organizer, who managed to devise a whole programme of educational action that was perfectly adapted to the circumstances of his time. This is, perhaps, the reason why his call for social solidarity was so successful.

His influence was so far-reaching that many of the education ministers who succeeded him did no more than simply reiterate many of his instructions. One exception to this was Moisés Sáenz who, in the 1930s, attempted, without much success, to copy the North American model. Again, during the Cardenist period a little later, a more socialist framework was adopted, although Vasconcelos' ideas were not totally abandoned. Naturally, as time went by, the original mystique and vitality of Vasconcelos' ideas were lost and all that remained was worn-out revolutionary rhetoric.

In spite of his well-known lament: 'the name of the Revolution has been so abused that I have come to rebel against it myself,'¹⁴ it was Vasconcelos who created the most effective politico-educational myths in Mexican contemporary history: the myth of education as a means to satisfy social needs and therefore as the irrefutable responsibility of the revolutionary state; the myth of the teacher in the role of the redeeming missionary; and the myth of the native as a source of inspiration and purification.

Notes

1. This profile first appeared in *Prospects*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1986.

2. *Rosario Encinas (Mexico)*. Assistant director of educational research at the National Institute for Adult Education, Mexico.
3. José Vasconcelos, *Discursos: 1920-1950* [Speeches: 1920-1950], p. 9, Mexico City, Ediciones Botas, 1950.
4. Daniel Cossío Villegas, *Memorias* [Recollections], p. 88, Mexico City, Joaquín Mortiz, 1977.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
6. J. Vasconcelos, 'De Robinson a Odiseo' [From Robinson (Crusoe) to Odysseus], *Textos sobre educación*, p. 55, Mexico City, Secretaría de Educación Pública/Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1981.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 33 and 72.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 49 and 146.
9. J. Vasconcelos, *La tormenta* [The Storm], Mexico City, Botas, 1937.
10. Quoted by José Joaquín Blanco, *Se llamaba Vasconcelos, una evocación crítica* [His Name Was Vasconcelos, A Critical Portrait], p. 106, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983.
11. J. Vasconcelos, 'Conferencia en el Continental Memorial Hall de Washington' [Conference in the Continental Memorial Hall, Washington], *Textos sobre educación*, op. cit., p. 290.
12. J. Vasconcelos, 'Indología', *Textos sobre educación*, op. cit., p. 169.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
14. Blanco, op. cit., p. 98.
15. Vasconcelos, *Discursos*, op. cit., p. 111.

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