



Photos: Editorial Cilo Photo Archive

1929 rally for José Vasconcelos' campaign.

## “Mexico Abroad”

### The Vasconcelista Movement in the United States<sup>1</sup>

Arturo Santamaría Gómez\*

“The influence of my friends and supporters in the United States extends to the state of Michoacán. Supporters from California have sent letters as far away as La Piedad seeking support for my candidacy. That’s how far the influence of the North reaches. I expect so much from the North because there are so many real men there!” said José Vasconcelos<sup>2</sup> in an interview with José Cayetano Valadez, originally from Sinaloa but who was working in 1929 as a reporter at the Los Angeles daily *La Opinión*.<sup>3</sup>

When the author of *Ulises criollo* (Native Ulysses), *La tormenta* (The Storm), *La*

*raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) and other fundamental works of twentieth-century Mexican culture said, “the North,” he was referring to what many Mexicans living in the United States called “Mexico abroad.” “Mexico abroad” was a fashionable term among many Mexican exiles who were persecuted by the regimen that came out of the Revolution. Leader of the National Antireelectionist Party (PNA), Vasconcelos was intimately familiar with “the North,” having spent part of his childhood in Eagle Pass, Texas, and traveled widely there as an adult, venturing as far as New York. He had friends and followers in the states of Texas, Arizona and California, among them well known conservative writers like Victoriano Salado Alvarez,

Juan Sánchez Azcona, Nemesio García Naranjo, Primo Moheno, Ignacio Lozano (the editor of *La Opinión*) and others. While not all of them believed in the possibility of his winning the Mexican presidential elections, they did share his critique of the new regimen which, they agreed, “had failed.”

Ignacio Lozano, who systematically and conscientiously wrote in his editorials about the failure of the revolution, opened up the pages of his newspaper to Vasconcelos and the movement he created both inside Mexico and in “Mexico abroad.” Nowhere in Mexican territory did the media give Vasconceloism so much space and so many headlines as in Lozano’s daily. In fact, it became the only Mexican daily, written in Los Angeles, that in the 1920s

\* Political scientist and historian.

escaped the control of the new regimen, and it was bought in different cities south of the border by both oppositionists and the sympathizers of the different revolutionary governments. In his analysis of the importance of Mexican newspapers in the United States, Juan Sánchez Azcona said of Ignacio Lozano's dailies,

*La Prensa* and *La Opinión* have become, spontaneously and automatically, the strongest links among all these Mexicans and their work in favor of "Mexico abroad" has surpassed the effectiveness of the work of all our border area consulates....These newspapers have shown Mexicans in Mexico the intensity of the life of Mexicans abroad. Without them, Mexicans inside Mexico would not know that thousands of fellow countrymen live abroad who have not lost their Mexican spirit or broken their spiritual ties with our homeland.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1920s, these newspapers, particularly *La Opinión*, published Mexican news mainly from south of the Río Grande. Seldom did a U.S. report feature centrally on its pages, except when a Mexican or a Mexican American was involved.

Similarly, the opinion and editorial pages frequently dealt with issues related to what was going on south of the border. The most notable exception was the daily front page column by Rodolfo Urange which invariably dealt with the lives of Mexicans in the United States and the relation of the Mexican and U.S. governments to them. Urange wrote about the life and work of Mexican Americans and immigrant Mexicans, although usually without distinguishing between them. More than anyone else, it was Urange who used the term "Mexico abroad" in



José Vasconcelos in 1929.

his column, titled "Glosario del Día" (Glossary of the Day).

Without a doubt, Ignacio Lozano had already been influenced by U.S. journalism philosophy. That is, he had no economic relations with official institutions, and his journalism sought to establish a critical distance from those in power and to strike a balance in the news.

Because of their distance from the power structure and their critique of corruption, Lozano's dailies gave free reign to opinions that unmasked the governments of the Revolution, but they also identified ideologically with the conservative critiques of antipopulist, antisocialist conservatives and with the challenging nationalism of Oaxacan-born philosopher José Vasconcelos. His nationalist theses fit perfectly into Ignacio Lozano's ideological profile. That is to a great extent why *La Opinión* gave a privileged place to the Vasconcelista movement both north and south of the Río Grande. In mid-June 1929, the Vasconcelista movement in the Mexican communities of Texas,

California and other states of the Union was already visible, and *La Opinión* began to reflect that in its pages.

In 1929, the L.A. paper sent a reporter (probably José Cayetano Valadez) to Mexico City to interview PNA President Vito Alessio Robles about José Vasconcelos' presidential campaign. Alessio Robles spoke extensively about the identification of many Mexicans in the United States with the Vasconcelista movement. "These Mexicans are all antireelection. They have joined together in the most far-flung corners of the state of Colorado and sent their support to the National Antireelectionist Party. They have shown their great civic responsibility; they have heartened us in our struggle, with encouraging words and pecuniary aid. I would like to send them our words of thanks and a fraternal greeting."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Vasconcelistas from "Mexico abroad" were organizing different activities to raise money for the campaign. In the months prior to the November 18 presidential elections, the Vasconcelistas kept up constant activities throughout California. June 22, 1929, they held their state assembly to elect delegates to the PNA national convention in Mexico City, where Vasconcelos would be nominated for the presidency.

The antireelectionist committees met frequently and debated profoundly what was going on in Mexico, both to the north and to the south of the border. *La Opinión* reported on their activities regularly. Judging by the newspaper articles, the Long Beach Vasconcelistas were the most enthusiastic, organizing many activities and making programmatic proposals for the PNA to adopt at its congress, July 1, 1929.<sup>6</sup>

They also announced that at the end of June they would hold a victory party with their colleagues from Long Beach, San Pedro and Wilmington to celebrate José Vasconcelos' win at the convention.

The efforts by the Mexican residents in Long Beach were undoubtedly taken into account by the state convention because their proposals are included in the program that the Californian Vasconcelista delegation took to the national meeting in the nation's capital after an enthusiastic send-off by more than 500 of their countrymen in the Los Angeles' Teatro México, according to the June 27, 1929, issue of *La Opinión*.

The program of the California delegation has great historic value. It is probably the first document—at least in the post-revolutionary period—from “Mexico abroad” that makes political proposals with clear cross-border content, reflecting the existence of a Mexican people in the expropriated territory who demand of the Mexican state both the rights and duties of citizens regardless of their living abroad. The entire 14-point program was published in *La Opinión* (see box).

This document reveals the kind of vision of a group of Mexicans who were very well informed and highly involved in their country's political life, but who directed their constitutional, social and political demands to the state which represented them in a land that was not their own. That is to say, these Vasconcelistas participated in the political processes of their country of origin from U.S. territory. They were part of a democratizing movement, but in contrast with previous generations of Mexicans in the United States, they did not seek only to defend their homeland, like the generation who

joined the fight against the French invasion, or those who resisted the Porfirista dictatorship and joined the different revolutionary currents of 1910. This group, in addition to participating in the historical movements that built and rebuilt the Mexican national state, included in the PNA government program the demands stemming from their own situation, that of the Mexican communities in the United States. With those demands, they aspired to the new state, reformed and democratized by the Vasconcelista movement, integrally representing “Mexico abroad.”

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This postrevolutionary generation of Mexican immigrants in the United States, the third since 1848, had not integrated as fully into U.S. society as the descendants of Mexicans born north of the border, who had better assimilated the English language and U.S. social values despite the oppression and discrimination they faced, although simultaneously preserving certain aspects of their ancestral culture. However, the new generation clearly understood that the permanent community of Mexican immigrants north of the Río Grande deserved specific policies and legislation from the Mexican state.

The program of the Californian Vasconcelistas expressed the dual reality that Mexican immigrant communities have always faced in the United States. To defend their most immediate interests, they asked that if the PNA came into office, it have the state assume social and political responsibilities toward its citizens who, though residing in the United States had their hearts south of the border and dreamed of returning to Mexican territory, their homeland.

With regard to social organization, both the Vasconcelistas and the followers of Pascual Ortiz Rubio, the candidate of the official National Revolutionary Party (PNR), and the regimen of the Revolution north of the border had a corporatist vision of workers. The Mexican workers movement both north and south of the Río Grande had very rapidly assimilated an ideology that saw in the state its main organizer and the entity responsible for its social well being.

Inside Mexico, the Vasconcelista movement did not enjoy the support of the workers movement, but north of the border, organized Mexican workers divided their sympathies between Pascual Ortiz Rubio and José Vasconcelos. This was to a large extent because, although the most visible part of the Mexican exile community in the United States were professionals, businessmen, intellectuals and even religious leaders,<sup>7</sup> the largest social group was undoubtedly made up of agricultural and factory workers. It is not that most emigrants to the United States between 1910 and 1929 were workers (the largest contingent was actually made up of peasants), but once in the United States many emigrants were proletarianized both in the countryside and the cities.

If Mexican workers in the United States thought the state should organize and protect them, they did not think the same of the official party. While in Mexico the state party formed a close relationship between the largest workers organizations and the regimen of the Revolution—a relationship that would culminate in the workers' movement becoming one of its corporatist sectors under the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas—in “Mexico abroad” this relationship was an objective impossibility.

“Mexico abroad” had a subordinate, almost hidden, existence with regard to society at large, the society of Anglo hegemony. Emigrants from south of the border tried to form exclusively Mexican unions (particularly in rural areas), encouraged and advised by Mexican consulates. Regardless of their success, however, on most of the occasions when they were noticed by the unions, their participation was generally secondary or ignored altogether because the white union majorities also discriminated against them.

Practically since 1848, the Mexican immigrants in the United States began to create a broad range of social, cultural, religious and political organizations, but no political parties of their own. They were closest to doing so when they gathered together to act around a political cause south of the border. Linking up to the Vasconcelista movement by founding clubs and committees with representatives and delegates, holding frequent meetings, carrying out fund drives and propaganda campaigns to support a presidential candidate who defended the need to reform a state-in-formation were the first activities in which “Mexico abroad” could be seen participating in partisan

electoral politics. The previous generation had contributed men and women who worked for the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM), headed by the Flores Magón brothers, but the PLM sought to defeat the Porfirista dictatorship through an armed insurrection led by the working class and not through an electoral struggle.

## EPILOGUE

In 1929, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, presidential candidate for the National Revolutionary

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Party (PNR), the grandfather of today's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), won the elections by a landslide with 93.55 percent of the vote. Only 5.33 percent of the ballots were cast in favor of José Vasconcelos, while Pedro Rodríguez Triana, running as the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) candidate, barely received one percent. After his defeat, Vasconcelos left Mexico to live in the United States, where he wrote a four-volume autobiography: *Ulises criollo* (Native Ulysses) (1935), *La tormenta* (The Storm) (1936), *El desastre* (The Disaster) (1938) and *El proconsulado* (The Proconsulship) (1939). The series

was completed by *La flama* (The Flame) (1959), a penetrating sociocultural study of modern Mexico written several years after his return in 1940. These historical-philosophical essays reflect the author's gradual evolution toward conservative positions. Another essay, *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) (1925), which praises native Iberoamerican values, based on the indigenous and mestizo tradition, “a bridge of future races,” inspired many Mexican artists like Rufino Tamayo (from Oaxaca like Vasconcelos) in their work. **NMM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Spanish, the original term, “México afuera”, or “Mexico abroad,” also implies the Mexico which is excluded. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> José Vasconcelos was a Mexican intellectual who after participating in the Revolution, was named rector of the National University in 1920 and Minister of Public Education from 1921 to 1924. In 1924, he left the country because of political differences with the Plutarco Elías Calles regime. Returning in 1928, he ran for president in 1929. He coined the UNAM's motto, “The Spirit will speak for my race,” referring to his idea that our race will create a new, essentially spiritual and free, culture.

<sup>3</sup> “Del período del caudillaje al del pelicismo,” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), 1 July 1929.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Sánchez Azcona, “La trascendental importancia de los ‘Periódicos Lozano,’” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), 24 June 1929.

<sup>5</sup> “Vito Alessio Robles explica a los mexicanos de E.U. cuál es la situación actual de PNA,” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), June 1929.

<sup>6</sup> “Programa de un club vasconcelista,” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), 25 June 1929, pp. 5-8.

<sup>7</sup> Just like the 1910 revolution, the Cristero War spurred a great deal of emigration to the United States, in this case for political-religious reasons. From 1926 on, Catholic nuns and priests fled the country to become part of “Mexico abroad.” *La Opinión* wrote on June 28, 1929, “After a Te Deum in the San Antonio Cathedral and a procession of thousands of Mexicans, the Catholic prelates and priests of Mexico, who had been in exile for more than two years, returned to their homeland.”