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ASK A MEXICAN!

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

SPECIAL LA RAZA EDICIÓN

Dear Mexican: What's with calling yourselves "La Raza"? Being Mexicans, Chicanos or whatever isn't enough—now you're THE race? Sounds pretty racist to me. — The Race is On



Dear Gabacho: Few things annoy the Mexican more than the Know Nothing Nation's deliberate ignorance with this most nebulous of Mexican idioms. Despite the patient explanations of Chicano yaktivists who say the phrase doesn't exclusively mean "the race" in Mexican Spanish but is a synonym for "community," idiot commentators insist that "*la raza*" as used by Mexicans betrays their *Reconquista* tendencies and alludes to a Mexican sense of racial superiority akin to Nazism and white supremacy. No group gets the brunt of criticism more than the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), one of the largest civil-rights groups in the United States, and one in the news recently because both John McCain and Barack Obama addressed the organization during its recent national convention. Professional *pendejos* like Michelle Malkin hissed a fit, calling NCLR seditious and accusing the two presidential candidates of legitimizing hate by visiting them — all this over two Spanish words.

Betcha they've never read the primary source from which "*la raza*" originated — José Vasconcelos' 1925 booklet, *La Raza Cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*). Vasconcelos — Mexico's first Secretary of Public Education — wrote his piece as a reaction to the race thinking of the time, one dominated by adherents of Darwinism and Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest" prism that placed the *gabacho* above all people. The Mexican intellectual also subscribed to racial stratifications, but whereas others saw unavoidable strife, Vasconcelos imagined something greater. *La Raza Cósmica* is a classic work of the prophetic tradition, one where Vasconcelos predicted humanity would evolve into a fifth race, one free of the negative attributes each racial group possessed to create a harmonious existence — the cosmic race, *la raza cósmica*. Crucially, Vasconcelos never stated Mexicans were that race but rather wrote that Latin America's legacy of *mestizaje* posited "Ibero-Americans" as prime acolytes to spread the gospel of fusion — not through violence but "the triumph of fecund love."

The *raza cósmica* theory is utopian and even goofy in execution — Vasconcelos cited the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Atlantis, alchemy texts and even the Pythagorean concept of the number eight as possessing divine qualities to bolster his position — but it's ultimately an anti-racist dream. Vasconcelos was by no means perfect — he didn't like ugly people and was too fixated on the superiority of Spanish qualities — but his ideal is one not that removed from that American standby, the melting pot. He even understood the humanity of *gabachos* — "The exclusion of the Yankee [from *la raza cósmica*], like the exclusion of any other human type, would be equivalent to an anticipated mutilation, more deadly even than a later cut." I don't remember Hitler talking about including non-Aryans into his Thousand-Year Reich, or Americans including non-*gabachos* in Manifest Destiny, for that matter.

Needless to say, Vasconcelos' theory gained fans across Latin America — imagine a sociologist stating miscegenation was okay! But it wasn't until the 1960s Chicano movement that the concept of *la raza cósmica* gained further followers. Like most things they took from Mexico (food, women, the language), Chicanos corrupted Vasconcelos' vision, interpreted "*la raza*" as referring exclusively to Mexicans and forgot the whole brotherhood bit. "It is true that *mestizaje* is one of the central concepts of the Vasconcelos essay," states the introduction to Didier T. Jaén's excellent translation of *La Raza Cósmica*, "but, of course, it is also clear that the racial mixture Vasconcelos refers to is much wider, much more encompassing, than what can be understood by the *mestizaje* of the Mexican or Chicano." Like Vasconcelos, however, the Chicano definition of "*la raza*" was rooted in its turbulent time. It was during this era that the organization that preceded NCLR incorporated that term to its name in 1972. But over the decades, the *cósmica* part of *la raza* was largely dropped as was the ethnocentrism, and what remained was a benign synonym for Mexicans.

People can disagree with NCLR's policies — amnesty for illegals, better education for Latinos (not just the Mexis), funding other nonprofits — but to classify them as the Tan Klan because of their name is like a prude getting offended over the name of the titmouse. By the way, coming haters: Don't paint me as an NCLR apologist. I think the organization's president, Janet Murguía, is stupid for trying to get right-wing pundits off the air, mostly because they're so easy to prove wrong. Besides, the only *raza* that truly matters is mine: the Nerd race. *Por mis Nerds todo; fuera de mis Nerds, nada.*

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