
An Inter American Discourse on Race, Nationality, and Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

One can identify in the work of Alain Locke two unreconciled strivings, or perhaps better, clusters of strivings which constitute a paradoxical paradigm for philosophical understandings of race, particularly as they bear on the prospects for cosmopolitanism and world citizenship. Most generally, these strivings could be expressed as the reality of race, and of particular races, for instance Black or Asian, on the one hand, and the non-reality of race on the other. More specifically, it poses an existential question concerning, if, and why, persons ought to continue to self-identify as members of a race. The tension is as difficult as it is longstanding in the philosophy of race, has been a salient feature of racial thinking by various American thinkers even some outside the racial context of the United States.

The following paper is divided into four parts. The first three sections offer a critical presentation of three different theories of race, and the last considers the value of an inter-American approach to philosophy of race. The racial perspectives of three American thinkers, José Vasconcelos, Alain Locke, and José Martí as each relates to their cosmopolitan visions are considered. The aim is to engage in an inter-American exploration of attempts to overcome race as a barrier to a broader cosmopolitan outlook. The chapter begins with a presentation of Vasconcelos's vision of a "Cosmic Race" as a uniformitarian form of cosmopolitanism. Vasconcelos is a racial realist, who also believes that races are biological, as well as social kinds. However, he is not a racial purist, quite the contrary. He, like Locke, recognizes races as historically composite even if biologically distinct populations. The "Cosmic Race" is the projected result of cultural and biological amalgamation. Vasconcelos develops this notion as a response to the problem of how to forge a genuine Mexican and Pan-Latin American identity, one that ameliorates conflict over racial difference and can move the country and the continent forward.

Alain Locke, on the other hand, holds a social constructionist view of race. Race, for him, is a matter of distinctive variations within culture transmitted across generations. Locke held that race was in point of fact a social and cultural category, rather than, a biological one. For this reason he developed the notion of ethnic race or culture group. By ethnic race, Locke means a peculiar set of psychological and affective responsive dispositions, expressed or manifested as cultural traits, socially inherited and able to be attributed through historical contextualization to a specifiable group of people. The concept of ethnic race is a way of preserving the demonstrated distinctiveness of various groupings of human beings in terms of characteristic traits, lifestyles, forms of expression; without resulting to the scientifically invalidated notion of biological race.

*Speaker

José Martí is a racial eliminativist and a racial anti-realist. Martí argued that race was neither a biological nor a social kind. Moreover, he astutely pointed out that racialism is a double-edged sword. Racialism is the belief that human beings can be sorted into distinctive racial types, whether those types are biological or socially determined. Martí was keenly aware that racialism served to both perpetuate racial chauvinism and strife, but that it also functioned as a means of cultural correction and advancement. Martí cautioned, however, that racialism in itself was divisive, and contrary to the success of an independent nation.

All three of these thinkers radically reconceived the concept of race and argued, for different reasons, in favor of the radical transformation, if not elimination, of races. I argue that Martí's position poses serious challenges to the racialism of Vasconcelos and Locke. Against Vasconcelos, Martí argues that the supposed superiority of the "Cosmic Race" is false, that the notion of racial amalgamation itself reifies racial difference, and that all forms of racialism obstruct the success of an independent nation. I consider possible responses to these arguments by Vasconcelos, and conclude that although their various positions are not at odds in ways that the two philosophers may have envisioned, a number of Martí's challenges are unanswerable by Vasconcelos. Against Locke, Martí argues that even racialism aimed at social uplift for an oppressed group perpetuates racism, and that racial identification impedes individuals' abilities to form more meaningful associations. I then consider Locke's likely response to the challenges posed by Martí. I argue that Locke's and Martí's positions are not as opposed as either may have thought, and that in fact they are complementary, given that Locke's pragmatist racial realism does not commit him to the continued existence of races into an indefinite future. Given that, he may well come to accept the racial eliminativism of Martí. I further argue that something like Locke's reconstructionist view of race would likely be required by Martí's position in the interim as one works towards elimination.

In the end, I argue that this inter-American philosophical approach to race has theoretical, practical and historical advantages. It has the theoretical advantage of broadening our racial perspective to fit various contexts, offering multiple critical perspectives, and yielding in the end a more accurate and useful racial perspective. Additionally, there is the practical advantage of diverse philosophical traditions coming to better understand what they have in common, and perhaps deriving renewed support from that discovery. Finally, there is the historical benefit of better understanding various contexts, and knowledge of prior inter-American exchanges that can serve as a theoretical foundation for future investigations.

Keywords: race, nation, cosmopolitanism, vasconcelos, locke, marti, constructionism, eliminativism