

A large, stylized, light gray tree graphic is positioned on the right side of the page, extending from the top to the middle. The tree has a thick trunk and several branches with rounded, cloud-like foliage. It is partially obscured by the title text.

Bonanza or False Riches: Changing Mexican Imaginaries of The Tropics and the Civilizing Impulse

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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship on “tropicality” emphasizes how Europeans and US-Americans constructed the tropics discursively and visually in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scientists, investors, and travelers denigrated tropical spaces to legitimize imperialism, labeling them backwards, racially degenerative, disease-ridden, and uncondusive to civilization without white European intervention. These works unwittingly reproduce a central assumption of the very imperialists they critique: namely, that North Atlantic elites controlled knowledge production. They thus marginalize the important theorizing and conceptualizing that transpired in tropical spaces. Following independence, Latin American national elites agonized over how to integrate their tropical territories, many of which remained isolated, and make them legible for economic modernization. This article uses Mexico as a case study for Latin American representations about the tropics given its diverse temperate and tropical geography, its key role in the global commercial economy, and its robust intellectual production. I argue that the ways in which Mexican intellectuals—public officials, geographers, philosophers, and others—thought about their low-lying tropical lands molded nation-building projects and contributed to the global production of environmental knowledge at a time when notions of tropical peril and degeneracy were giving way to the promise of tropical bonanza. By tracing the changes and continuities of Mexicans’ tropical discourses in a global context, I underscore the underappreciated environmental and geographic thought of influential Mexicans—from Matías Romero and Francisco Bulnes to José Vasconcelos—who rarely appear in environmental historiography. A focus on these different imaginaries regarding the significance, purpose, and place of Mexico’s tropical lands also reveals the extent to which material interventions in the tropics and discursive representations of the tropics have co-constituted each other.

Keywords: Mexico; the tropics; tropicality; environmental thought; development; José Vasconcelos; intellectual history.

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El trópico entreñable
sostiene en carne viva la belleza
de Díos. La tierra, el agua, el aire, el fuego
al Sur, al Norte, al Este, y al Oeste
concentran las semillas esenciales,
el cielo de sorpresas,
la desnudez intacta de las hojas
y el ruido de las vastas soledades²
Carlos Pellicer, *Una oda tropical*, 1933

On the eve of the Mexican Revolution, the young Mexican lawyer José Vasconcelos traveled the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, from the Gulf coast to the Pacific coast, to organize anti-re-election clubs for Francisco Madero, the liberal opponent of Porfirio Díaz. In his widely celebrated 1935 autobiography *Ulises Criollo*, Vasconcelos reflected on his journey through this section of Mexico's lowland tropics. From a standard political reading, given the insignificant contribution he made to Madero's eventual victory, his experiences there appear to be a minor act in his otherwise dramatic life. From the vantage point of the changing representations of tropical nature, however, his prose is instructive. He described his experience as a uniquely tropical experience, belying the contemporaneous accounts of most foreign visitors to the tropics. Rather than dwell on disease, death, or barbarism and racial degeneracy—the common notions held by Europeans and Americans about Mexico's (indeed most) tropical places—Vasconcelos related “a sensation of inexhaustible vitality [that] infects and expands the spirit” in the Veracruz jungle. By entering the jungle, Vasconcelos continued, “one feels that life has roots in the planet” and that beauty is found “in the crowd [muchedumbre] of a paradise that finds its rhythm...in the clamor of plentiful life.”³ Likewise, he praised the bustling Salina Cruz as a “great world port” with “splendid engineering works,” a vibrant hub where many nationalities

² Carlos Pellicer, *Esquemas para una oda tropical* (Colima, Mexico: Circuito Cultural Centro Occidente, 1993), 8.

³ José Vasconcelos, *Ulises criollo* volume II (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), p. 316

converged thanks to the opening of the trans-Isthmus railroad.⁴ The extent to which the mature Vasconcelos, writing 25 years later, may have recounted his experiences to conform to his fully formed philosophy about tropical America is unclear. Nonetheless, it is likely that those experiences as a young intellectual on the Isthmus laid the groundwork for his later theories on the relationships among history, tropical geography, and race in the making of world civilization.

Vasconcelos exemplified a regional cultural impulse whereby diverse Latin Americans—politicians, philosophers, revolutionaries, poets, and geographers—challenged imperialist representations of the American tropics as necessarily backwards, racially degenerative, disease-ridden, and uncondusive to civilization without white European intervention. Following much of the region's independence in the early nineteenth century, national elites agonized over how to consolidate their remote territories, many of which were located in the lowland tropics, and make them legible for economic modernization. The prevailing Euro-American climate determinism, at its apogee in the nineteenth century, created a quandary for Latin American patriots, one that paralleled (and sometimes overlapped with) the quandary of race and indigeneity. The following questions occupied national elites around tropical America: What can be done with these supposedly backwards tropical territories? Can they form an integral part of new nations aspiring to be recognized as fully civilized? Are they places of peril destined to be sites of resource extraction exclusively, or do they hold promise for fuller settlement and development? Whereas the question of race and ethnicity has drawn immense interest from Latin American historians, few have explored the relationships between geography, especially tropical geographies, and elite projects of territorial integration and modernization.

It is beyond the scope of this article to comprehensively address the entirety of Latin American intellectual production about the American tropics in the post-independence period, but Mexico serves as a fascinating case study given its diverse temperate and tropical geography, its key place in the global commercial economy, and its robust intellectual production about the tropical world. I argue that the ways in which Mexican intellectuals—public officials, geographers, philosophers, and

⁴ "Picturing Tropical Nature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001);"

others—thought about the nation’s low-lying tropical lands molded nation-building projects and contributed to the global production of knowledge about the tropics at a time when ideas of tropical peril and degeneracy were giving way to the promise of a bonanza. Mexican *letrados* stood at the cutting edge of global discussions and represented the tropics in ways that rarely conformed to standard Euro-American representations.

Most scholars emphasize how Europeans or U.S.-Americans constructed the tropics. Scientists, colonial officials, and travelers denigrated tropical spaces to legitimize colonial projects, prove the superiority of the imperialist, and serve as a foil for European modernity.⁵ This scholarship unwittingly reproduces a central assumption of the very imperialists they critique: namely, that North Atlantic elites controlled knowledge production. They thus marginalize the important theorizing and conceptualizing that transpired in the spaces subjected to European and U.S.-American expansion. The representational and discursive making of tropical Mexico, like that of other parts of the American tropics, was not unidirectional from North Atlantic center to the periphery.⁶ Creole and postcolonial elites sometimes reproduced and oftentimes challenged the central assumptions of tropical Mexico articulated by Europeans and U.S.-Americans. Their representations, moreover, had substantial bearing on the ways these spaces were settled (or not) and integrated (or not) into the nation-state and commercial economic relations. Analyzing discursive formations in Mexico, as well as transnational dialogues, in turn evinces the ways tropical Mexico has been defined and redefined over time in accordance with economic drivers, changing political priorities, the quest for national integration, and scientific achievements. In effect, a focus on the different imaginaries regarding the

⁵ See, for example, Paul Sutter, “The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary” in *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856* (Seattle: Univ of Washington press); Alfred H. Siemens, “The persistence, Elaboration, and Eventual Modification of Humboldt’s View of the Lowland Tropics” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 14, 27 (1989): 85-101; Andrew Sluyter, *Colonialism and Landscape: Postcolonial Theory and Applications* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); and John Pat Leary, *A Cultural History of Underdevelopment: Latin America in the U.S. Imagination* (Charlottesville: Univ of Virginia, 2016).

⁶ For some examples in the history of science, environmental history, art history, and geography that begin to address Latin American representations of “tropicality,” see Daniel Clayton, “Militant Tropicality: War, Revolution and the Reconfiguration of ‘the Tropics’ c.1940- c.1975” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (January 2013): 180–92; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “How Derivative was Humboldt: Microcosmic Narratives in Early Modern Spanish America and the (Other) Origins of Humboldt’s Ecological Sensibilities” in *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World* ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (Stanford Univ Press, 2006); Reinaldo Funes Monzote, “Geotransformación: Geography and Revolution in Cuba from the 1950s to the 1960s” in *The Revolution from Within: Cuba, 1959-1980* edited by Michael J. Bustamante and Jennifer L. Lambe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Rita Eder, *Narraciones: Pequeñas historias y grandes relatos en la pintura de Antonio Ruiz El Corcito* (Mexico: UNAM, 2016) “México, 1935;” and part two of Claudia Leal, John Soluri, and Jose Augusto Padua eds. *A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

place of Mexico's tropical lands in the nation reveals the extent to which material interventions *in the tropics* and discursive representations *of the tropics* have constituted each other. And, by tracing the changes and continuities of Mexicans' tropical discourses in a global context of geographical knowledge production as well as technological and economic change, I underscore the underappreciated environmental thought of influential Mexicans—from Matías Romero and Francisco Bulnes to José Vasconcelos—who rarely appear in environmental historiography.

CONSTRUCTING THE MEXICAN TROPICS

The first fully formed conception of the tropical lands, in the Americas and elsewhere, was of a prodigious paradise, replete with wild natives and unknown fauna and flora. Early Spanish explorers and natural philosophers such as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Francisco Hernández, and Juan de Acosta were amazed by the bountiful tropical nature they encountered and eager to report their discoveries back to the Crown.⁷ Acosta and Oviedo, in particular, painstakingly explained to Europeans the fallacy, drawn from Ancient Greek philosophy, that the tropics were uninhabitable due to excessive heat. Conquest and settlement, they reasoned, were feasible.⁸ While many Spanish thinkers recognized and theorized the difference between the temperate and the tropical, the idea of the tropics as fundamentally inferior and perilous could not fully develop in the political and cultural context of early colonial Ibero-America.

It was not until the eighteenth century, at the dawn of a new era of European imperialism, that modern conceptions of the tropics as places of filth, disease and unhealthy climate, native indolence surrounded by prodigious nature, and sparse settlement, coalesced. Two descriptions of Mexico's Pacific coast, one by William Dampier, an English buccaneer with a naturalist's bent, from 1685 and the other by the French explorer Monsieur de Pagés from 1767, underscore this changing tropical imaginary. Dampier sailed north from Nicaragua to Huatulco, where he admired the

⁷ See, for example, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Natural History of the West Indies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959). On the wonder and amazement that early colonizers and explorers expressed in reports back to Europe, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁸ José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* ed. Jane Mangan (Durham: Duke Univ Press, 2002), p. 77-93; and Mercedes Serna Arnaiz, "Discursos sobre la naturaleza americana: desde el descubrimiento de América hasta la visión ilustrada" *Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana* (vol. 39, 2010), p. 254-256.

cliffs near the shore blanketed by stunning trees, “extraordinarily pleasant and delightful to behold at a distance: I have nowhere seen anything like it.”⁹ Dampier praised the resourcefulness and skills of some indigenous groups while others were described as “poor and innocent.”¹⁰ Dampier’s main concerns revolved around his attempt to seize the trans-Pacific Manila galleon outside Acapulco, but his mental meanderings into questions of landscape and indigenous culture betray a typical mentality about the new world tropics at the end of the seventeenth century—beautiful but not particularly noxious and inhabited by skilled, if poor, savages. More often than not, travelers understood the ports of New Spain (and Spanish America in general) to be entrepôts of commerce with the wealthier, mineral-rich highlands and the coastline itself in terms of its propitiousness to anchoring and docking. Monsieur de Pagés, who traveled through New Spain, presented a different view of Acapulco and its surroundings. Eager to arrive to the Pacific port to witness the bazaar in which East Asian goods were traded, and board the Manila galleon for the Philippines, Pagés was rather disappointed in what he saw. He called Acapulco “a miserable little town,” described the fort of San Diego “in miserable repair,” and demeaned the local Indians, mestizos, and mulattoes as “idle and destitute of every species of traffic,” failing to prosper from the pearl industry.¹¹ This backwardness and decay contrasted with the productive fields and great towns of highland (and temperate) New Spain.¹²

The personal proclivities of Dampier and Pages notwithstanding, the difference in their views about New Spain’s Pacific coast stemmed from a northern European intellectual movement to cast Spain’s American colonies—its lands, its histories, and its present development—in a negative light and project a northern European modernity against indigenous barbarity and Spanish backwardness. My purpose here is not to rehash old scholarship on this well-studied aspect of the Enlightenment but rather to explain how formative this new line of thinking was on the cultural construction of the tropics in general and Mexico’s tropical lowlands in particular. In fact, the ideas propagated by philosophers and historians as diverse as Cornelius de Pauw, Buffon, Robertson, Raynal, and Montesquieu laid the ideological

⁹ William Dampier, *Voyages, or a New Voyage Round the World*, volume 1 of A Collection of Voyages 4 volumes (London: Knapton, 1729), p. 235.

¹⁰ Dampier, *Voyages*, p. 238 and 248.

¹¹ Monsieur de Pages, *Travels Round the World* 3 volumes (London, J. Murray, 1792), p. 147-54.

¹² Pages, *Travels*, p. 142.

foundation for the flourishing tropicalist thinking of the nineteenth century that would justify European and U.S-American imperialism of tropical regions elsewhere.

While some philosophers aimed to denigrate all of the Americas—regardless of latitude and altitude—the tropics held a special place in much Enlightenment thought. Climate determinism, and its provenance in the Ancient thinkers Hippocrates, Pliny, and Aristotle, was the lynchpin from which the new tropical thinking sprung. Air, water, and climate, in this perspective, nourished or impeded the development of civilization, understood as agriculture, industry, science, and commerce. The Americas, and the tropical regions especially, were understood to be more humid and hotter than Europe, climatic characteristics that stymied human development. Whereas the cooler climes of Europe bred hardiness and industriousness, the moist and hot tropics spawned indolence. The humid climate of the new world, according to these philosophers, also led to human degeneration, a claim most explicitly articulated by Pauw and equivocally by Buffon, who dwelled more on non-human organic degeneration—hence his infamous statement about the feebleness and smallness of America’s animals.¹³ Later, in the nineteenth century, the notion of degeneration by virtue of climate was appropriated by the proponents of scientific racism who set out to prove that miscegenation, seemingly rife in the tropics, led to racial degeneration.¹⁴

Epidemiology bolstered this burgeoning climatic determinism and the degeneration thesis. European colonists in tropical regions encountered a host of strange diseases, and scientists fit these maladies into the reigning environmental theory of disease. In the American tropics, the primary fear was yellow fever and malaria, diseases that could decimate non-immune European populations, including, in times of war, entire armies.¹⁵ The tropics came to be seen as noxious, unhealthy places ill equipped, with their swamplands and humid environments, to sustain European civilization.

¹³ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 2001), p. 47.

¹⁴ Nancy Lee Stepan, *Picturing Tropical*, chapter 3 “Racial Degenerations.”

¹⁵ See J.R. McNeil, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Oxford: Cambridge Univ Press, 2010).

Prussian geographer Alexander von Humboldt put the finishing touches on modern European tropicality. Humboldt's widely read books based on his travels throughout Spanish America between 1799-1804 captured the imagination of European readers. He reiterated many of the claims made by his Enlightenment forebearers and added other crucial elements: that tropical nature was prodigious, abundant, and sublime. He helped disseminate the belief that it was the fertility of tropical soil, the ease at which subsistence from it could be obtained, that rendered their inhabitants idle, indolent, and devoid of educational pursuits. Tropical peoples did not need to work since nature alone provided and were thus perceived to be closer to nature—even another component of it like the flora and fauna. The image of the lazy tropical savage served as a foil to the supposedly industrious European man capable of subjugating nature to foster civilization.

Upon Humboldt's visit to the spectacular indigenous ruins of lowland Veracruz, for example, he suffered a severe bout of cognitive dissonance. It was impossible, given his theory of the tropics, that the local inhabitants could have constructed such magnificent structures and lived in such dense settlements. Rather, Humboldt reasoned, the ruins before him were the work of Old World migrants from long ago.¹⁶ The indigenous people of Veracruz were too “enriched by nature” and lazy, “an effect of the bounty of nature” to have advanced to such a stage of civilization.¹⁷ For Humboldt and many others who followed, the Mexican—indeed all—tropical regions required industrious (read European) outsiders to bring material progress.¹⁸ Early nineteenth century traveler accounts of tropical Mexico—immediately prior to and following independence—reflected the increasingly dominant views propagated by Humboldt and other European natural historians and philosophers. British delegate Henry George Ward, who resided in Mexico from 1825 to 1827, relished the abundance of fruit produced with “little or no labor” in the hinterlands of Veracruz. He groused how unproductive the natives were and alluded to the meager sustenance they garnered from their lands. In 1822 British Naval officer Basil Hall described Acapulco as a mongrel town of wretched people in steep decay from its halcyon galleon days

¹⁶ Sluyter, *Colonialism*, p. 190.

¹⁷ Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (Longham, 1810): p. 205-207.

¹⁸ However, unlike some Europeans, Humboldt hailed the Aztecs and Mixtecs for their civilizational accomplishments. Humboldt understood better than any other scientist at the time how altitude, as much as latitude, determined climate in the tropics.

and labeled San Blas to the north a place of disease and degeneration due to rampant malaria.¹⁹ The Prussian botanist and coffee plantation owner Carl Sartorius remarked in the 1850s that “hard labor is not approved of by the dweller of the coast” who sits idly by while enjoying the “banquet of nature.” Given the prodigious land, Sartorius maintained, progress fell upon the “Spanish” who could plant in “these favored regions” all of the fruits of the earth.²⁰ In 1852, the American John G. Barnard, chief engineer of the projected Tehuantepec Isthmus railroad, lauded the comparatively high civilization of the Zapotecs due to the healthier climate in the south of the Isthmus but excoriated its other inhabitants. The land “is capable of producing in the greatest profusion of all kinds of native vegetable growth,” he wrote, “but at present little more than enough is cultivated to supply the immediate wants of the inhabitants, whose agricultural pursuits are conducted in the most primitive manner, and who are often driven, by their indolent habits, to the verge of famine.”²¹ The narrative of tropical wonder was now overlapped, and generally superseded by, one of a “green hell.”

COUNTERVAILING PERSPECTIVES IN BOURBON NEW SPAIN

This imaginary of the tropics—as places of prodigious and luxuriant nature, indolent peoples, racial degeneration and social backwardness, and disease—became dominant in the North Atlantic world by the beginning of the nineteenth century. But Creole elites throughout Spanish America were less convinced. In Mexico, several *letrados* presented their tropical lands in a different light, conforming to what Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has called a “patriotic epistemology,” even if we avoid conferring a nationalist sentiment to their challenges to European tropicality.²² Rather than evidence of nationalism, their more positive portrayals of the colony’s diverse landscapes were more likely overdetermined by the growing agro-commercial and

¹⁹ Basil Hall, *Extracts from a journal written on the coasts of Chili, Peru and Mexico, in the years 1820, 1821, and 1822* (London: Edward Moxon, 1856), p. 35-57.

²⁰ Carl Christian Sartorius, *Mexico about 1850* (Stuttgart, Brockhaus, 1961), p. 6 and 13

²¹ J.G Barnard and John Jay Williams, *Isthmus of Tehuantepec: Being the results of a survey for a railroad...* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1852), p. 193

²² See, for example, Stuart M. McManus, “The *Bibliotheca Mexicana* Controversy and Creole Patriotism in Early Modern Mexico” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 98, 1 (2018).

extractive opportunities present under Bourbon rule. Likewise, Bourbon officials also presented a different image of lowland tropical New Spain.

Historians have meticulously studied Jesuit priest Francisco Javier Clavijero's *Historia Antigua de México* (1780-1781) as an emblematic text of creole patriotism and a stinging rebuke of European imperialist arguments about the animal life, land, and history of New Spain. Few have addressed how Clavijero both reproduced and challenged European tropicality. The coastlands of Mexico were, according to Clavijero (himself from Veracruz), indeed unhealthy, in contradistinction to the temperate highlands within the Torrid Zone. He asserted that in the hot lands "Nature is more prodigious," a claim Humboldt drew upon to construct his representation of the tropics. The plant life was more diverse and more useful for human sustenance, he maintained, but the heat was excessive and mortal disease a constant threat. The frigid zones of high mountain peaks in central and northern Mexico lay at the opposite extreme. They were the healthiest, but nature was more barren there. For Clavijero, the temperate highlands were the Goldilocks zone, a region that, not coincidentally, was the center of the colony's population and economy. Yet a close reading of his text reveals a more nuanced perspective on the tropical lowlands: these environments helped explain why Mexico was so well endowed with natural riches. Furthermore, nowhere in his tome does he show contempt for the native peoples who lived there. Clavijero extolled the coastal civilizations of pre-conquest Mexico, including the "many well-populated cities and towns" of the Mijteques, who extended to the Pacific coast and "carried out active trading," and the Cempoallans with their "beautiful city" on the Gulf Coast.²³ The decline of indigenous societies, in this perspective, owed little to environment or climate and much to the ravages of colonization. Although Humboldt relied heavily on Clavijero for knowledge of New Spain's natural and human history, their views on the historical settlement of the tropical coasts were radically different.

Clavijero dedicated pages of *Historia Antigua* to the diverse flora and fauna of New Spain, drawing on the earlier works of Bernardo de Sahagún and Francisco Hernández. Although descriptive in nature, the argument was implicit: Mexico was

²³ Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Historia Antigua de México* (London: 1826): p. 5-7.

awash in natural resources that could produce great wealth. Other creole *letrados* made this evaluative leap more explicit. In the tradition of Antonio de Leon Pinelo, the Peruvian naturalist who maintained that Peru's climatic niches made it a paradise on earth, Juan Manuel Venegas and José Mariano Mociño, argued at the end of the eighteenth century that New Spain could provide Europe not only silver but all sort of plants and medicines due to its various climes.²⁴ Here lies the origins of Humboldt's polemical claim that New Spain possessed abundant natural resources due to its climatic diversity and mountain mineral veins and was, with rational direction, on the brink of economic progress.²⁵ The tables had been turned; the prodigious nature of the tropics became an asset, not a handicap, and tropical lands would foster modern civilization rather than impede it.

Bourbon authorities neither openly propounded such visions of their colonies nor discredited them entirely. In coastal Guerrero, for example, officials apprehended the fertility of the tropical soil for the cultivation of cotton, cacao and other valuable crops, and while they re-enforced notions of tropical peoples' idleness, they contended that the lack of market incentive and Acapulco merchants' monopoly on trade accounted for it. Poverty and perceived indolence on Guerrereros's coast resulted from economic inefficiencies, not immanent environmental obstacles.²⁶ In the city of Veracruz, authorities implemented sanitation reforms to remake the port, from, in their words, 'the most unhealthy spot in the world,' to 'one of the healthiest cities in all of New Spain,' rid of the dreaded *vómito negro*.²⁷ Late colonial elites, therefore, advanced some of the major tropes of North Atlantic tropicality—disease prevalence and prodigiousness, especially—but challenged its most pernicious aspects regarding racial degeneration and the incapacity of civilization (understood primarily as trade) to thrive in the tropics. Together, these counterpoints influenced later Mexican representations of the tropics.

²⁴ Cañizares-Esguerra, "How Derivative was Humboldt," 122-6; and José Mariano Mociño, *La real expedición botánica a Nueva España* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2010).

²⁵ Cañizares-Esguerra, "How Derivative was Humboldt."

²⁶ See Jonathan D. Amith, *The Mobius Strip: A Spatial History of Colonial Society in Guerrero, Mexico* (Stanford Univ Press, 2005): p. 66, 281, and 314.

²⁷ Quotes in William Bullock, *Six Months Residence and Travels in Mexico Containing Remarks on the Present State of New Spain* (London: Kennikat Press, 1824), p. 23; and Andrew L. Knaut, "Yellow Fever and the Late Colonial Public Health Response in the Port of Veracruz" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 77, 4 (1997), p. 637-8.

POSTCOLONIAL TROPICALITY

Whereas concepts such as civilization, barbarism, and citizenship became globalized in the first half of the nineteenth century, tropicality narratives, at least in Mexico, experienced an interregnum due to political instability.²⁸ Discussions about tropicality fully returned to Mexico during the 1870s when liberal elites centralized rule, worked to consolidate national territory, and attracted foreign investment to commercialize a wide range of cultivars and foster Mexico's re-entrance into the booming global commercial economy. Furthermore, European and North American scientists and engineers gained confidence in their capacity to subjugate tropical nature and control the deadliest tropical maladies. Postcolonial Mexican responses to nineteenth-century tropicality must be analyzed within this context of nation-building, empire, and commercial expansion. Rather than imitate Euro-American representations, Mexican officials, intellectuals, and commercial boosters forged their own visions of the tropics and debated their place in the modern nation.

During the first few decades of independence—even as North American and European travelers and investors in Mexico repeatedly pushed conventional notions of tropicality—Mexico's national elites, initially, disengaged from the debates in which many creole elites had participated only a few generations earlier. Conservative historian and politician Lucas Alamán, in his *Historia de México*, conferred no import to climate or environment in his account of Mexican history. In fact, Alamán lamented the popularity of the claim, which he attributed solely to Humboldt, that the nation was incredibly wealthy in resources and the belief that, because of this, Mexico “once independent, would become the most powerful nation in the universe.”²⁹ Vicente Riva Palacio also ignored geography, climate, and environment in his multi-volume *México a través de los siglos*, the liberal response to Alamán's treatise. For these renowned historians of Mexico, social, cultural, and political variables—colonization, indigenous superstition and ignorance, liberal and conservative elites, and the Church—determined history, not geography or climate.

²⁸ See Christopher L. Hill, “Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century” in *Global Intellectual History* edited by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (Columbia University Press, 2013).

²⁹ Lucas Alamán, *Historia de México desde los primeros movimientos...* (Mexico City: FCE, 1985), p. 56

At most, Mexico's elites subtly questioned the Euro-American discourse of tropicality. For example, writer Manuel Payno preferred highland Jalapa, but he waxed poetically about the cleanliness of the port city of Veracruz and its beautiful sea that "kisses the beach with its loving waves" and described inhabitants of the state as "active, enterprising, and with a high degree of enlightenment."³⁰ Liberal journalist and politician Francisco Zarco foreshadowed at mid-century the thinking about Mexico's natural wealth that would soon pervade elite circles. He reaffirmed the Mexico-as-cornucopia narrative popularized by Humboldt, celebrating the fertility of the land and the climatic diversity that would allow Mexico to be an exporter of all the world's grains and plants. Although he called for foreign immigration, he warned, as one of Mexico's more radical liberals, against too much foreign activity and was optimistic about the "regeneration" of the Indian so that they could "exploit the wealth of our soil" and foster Mexican democracy.³¹ This view contrasted starkly with that of contemporaneous U.S.-Americans. Barnard, the Tehuantepec railroad investor, held "refreshing hopes," that "amid the atmosphere of degradation, ignorance, and depravity which overshadows the land" the example of foreign activity might "rekindle their dormant energies and the neigh of the 'iron horse'...awaken them from their indolent dream"³² Similarly, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter remarked that tropical Mexico's "hidden riches have waited for centuries for the aggressive force of the Anglo-Saxon."³³

Following the execution of Maximilian of Austria in 1867, Mexican liberals shed their more inclusive and democratic past—represented by the likes of Zarco—to embrace a vision of modernity organized around authoritarian rule and material progress. The tropics proved integral to their political and economic ideologies. Under Porfirio Díaz, who assumed the presidency in 1876, the científicos (his inner circle of powerholders) approached the tropics in two ways: by either disparaging them in the tradition of Pauw and rejecting any place they might have in constructing

³⁰ Manuel Payno in Xavier Tavera Alfaro, *Viajes en México: Crónicas mexicanas* volumen 1 (Mexico City, FCE, 1984), p. 149 and 161. The great Chilean-Venezuelan poet and Bolivarianist diplomat Andrés Bello similarly appreciated life in the tropics, evoking the moral value of working tropical lands across newly independent Spanish America. See his *Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida* (1826).

³¹ Francisco Zarco, *Obras completas de Francisco Zarco, vol 1 Periodismo político y social* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación Jorge Tamayo, 1989), p. 272-3.

³² Barnard and Williams, *Isthmus*, p. 227.

³³ *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1883 quoted in Jason Ruiz, *Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Porfirian Mexico and the Cultural Politics of Empire* (Austin: Univ of Texas Press, 2014), p. 15.

a modern Mexico; or, more commonly, by trumpeting a Humboldtian-inspired vision in which their current backwardness might be overcome through climatic variation and tropical fertility.

Diplomat and conservative philosopher Francisco Bulnes exemplified the categorical rejection of the tropical lowlands as irredeemably backwards economically, politically, and culturally in relation to the temperate highlands. He was no imitator of European thought, however; Bulnes explained this backwardness not by means of climatic determinism but through environment, specifically the kinds of foods each “race” had access to. Based on dubious evidence about the health and cultural effects of the three major grains—wheat, corn, and rice—and other foods such as fish, dairy, and meat, he posited that the “race of wheat” was the most civilized, followed by the races that consumed corn and rice. While the rice peoples trailed the other temperate, or as he called it “extratropical,” grain civilizations, they were superior (as a grain civilization of temperate latitudes) to the peoples of tropical lands, who had no staple crops that could lift them out of barbarism. Bulnes found a glimmer of hope in the “insipid” legumes so common in tropical places, but he lamented that tropical peoples, “always excited by fruits of penetrating scent and exquisite taste,” resisted consuming them.³⁴ Bulnes agreed with the most negative tropicalist thinkers that bountiful tropical nature encouraged laziness (and alcoholism), but he negated Humboldtian claims of the national wealth and greatness that tropical agriculture might bring about. The tropics, full of “false riches,” simply produced the wrong crops, amenable to fruits and flowers but not the hearty grains and meats that sustained civilizations.³⁵ “The great curse and calamity of Latin America,” Bulnes claimed, “is to have had the great majority of its land mass within the tropical zone.”³⁶ Rather than locating the degree of civilization in historical cultural and political forces, as conservatives and liberals earlier in the century had done, Bulnes maintained that social and racial evolution played out in the physical environment and the kind of food regimen those environments could sustain.

³⁴ Francisco Bulnes, *El porvenir de las naciones latinoamericanas ante las recientes conquistas de Europa y Norteamérica* (Mexico City: El Pensamiento Vivo de América, 1940, 1899 first edition), p. 54.

³⁵ Bulnes, *El porvenir*, p. 51.

³⁶ Bulnes, *El porvenir*, p. 60.

Bulnes took his critique of tropical nature—including of course his own nation's tropical coastlands—to the heart of export-oriented boosters of tropical nature so prevalent by the end of the nineteenth century. Not only were grains and cattle ranching unsuitable to tropical lands due to the excessive heat and the storage obstacles in hot and humid environments, so too were cotton and tobacco, which both grew better in extra-tropical regions. Bulnes identified only coffee, because of its increasing demand, as a potential tropical product that could uplift the tropics, but even this commodity would not be sufficient given its negligible nutritional value. Regardless, he reckoned that Mexico could never compete with Brazil's coffee production.³⁷ The American tropics, Bulnes concluded, were worthless, and the native peoples living there, who were “stuck in the period of the human subspecies..., have to become extinct more or less quickly.”³⁸

According to Bulnes, these conditions doomed Central America, the Caribbean, and the northern nations of South America. He also foresaw a bleak future for Chile and Argentina, which, despite their extra-tropical environmental advantages, possessed “Jacobin” (republican) tendencies that stymied their progress. Only extra-tropical Brazil and Mexico, Bulnes reasoned, might enter the civilized world. So long as Mexico continued its positivist reign under the científicos and pursued massive irrigation works in the highlands (especially the arid northern states) where corn and wheat would thrive, Mexico might advance in the “race struggle.”³⁹ Writing at the end of the period of revolutionary upheaval in *El Universal*, Bulnes continued to denounce Mexico's geographical optimists, especially those who envisioned a tropical agricultural future: “for a century we have had, and will continue to have, a bunch of quacks as geographers, meteorologists, and agronomists who have deceived us Mexicans and foreigners into thinking we are rich ‘because we possess all the climates.’”⁴⁰ Bulnes joined social Darwinism to environmental determinism (more specifically an alimentary determinism) to create a Mexican inflection of tropical

³⁷ Bulnes, *El porvenir*, p. 62-76.

³⁸ Bulnes, *El porvenir*, p. 200.

³⁹ See Francisco Bulnes, *El Porvenir de las naciones hispanoamericanas: compendio integral* (Mexico City: Editorial Contenido, 1992), 79-81 and 139-161; and Bulnes, *Los grandes problemas de México* (Mexico: Secretaría de Reforma Agraria, 1981), p. 154-5.

⁴⁰ Bulnes, *Los grandes problemas*, p. 197.

thinking, one that scorned Latin America's tropics as backwards in the past, present, and future.

The reception of Bulnes' tropical thinking was mixed. Another prominent *científico*, Justo Sierra, who also espoused Social Darwinist and positivist approaches to Mexican history, shared Bulnes' rejection of the Mexico-as-cornucopia narrative and alluded to the backwardness of tropical peoples. In his 1910 address for the opening of the National University of Mexico, Sierra associated Mexico's cultural greatness with its gigantic mountain ranges that emerged from the ocean "in the middle of the torrid zone."⁴¹ In a more direct rebuke of the tropics, he belittled tropical natives of mixed race, who incapable of exploiting its agricultural wealth, strew "its potential seeds carelessly on the soil."⁴² Despite these occasional references to the inferiority of the tropics, Sierra did not explicitly build his theory of civilization around a tropical-temperate binary. Roberto Gayol, one of Mexico's leading hydraulic engineers at the end of Díaz's rule, had even less to say about Mexico's tropics, but his irrigation and European immigration proposals to the supposedly more fertile highlands also did invoke Bulnes' thinking.⁴³

Bulnes was an influential figure in elite circles, but most positivist thinkers of the Porfiriato presented a more favorable vision of Mexico's tropical spaces, if not necessarily the peoples who inhabited them. Mexico's international image as a nation entering global modernity was at stake, and commercial boosters sought to make tropical resources legible through scientific studies and inventories to maximize economic pay-off.⁴⁴ Porfirian boosters revitalized creole depictions of a bountiful Mexico of distinct climatic niches, the cornucopia that its geographic outlines invoked, to persuade foreign and Mexican investors to establish agricultural (and mining) enterprises in both the tropical coasts and temperate highlands, which were being connected via new railways. Matías Romero, diplomat and coffee pioneer in tropical Soconusco, Chiapas, anticipated the time "when we shall be able to provide

⁴¹ Quoted in Amaya Larrucea Garriz, *País y paisaje. Dos invenciones del siglo XIX mexicano* (Mexico: UNAM, 2016), p. 52.

⁴² Justo Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People* (Austin: Univ of Texas Press, 1969), p. 171, quote on 106.

⁴³ Roberto Gayol, *Dos problemas de vital importancia para México. La colonización y el desarrollo de la irrigación* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1994).

⁴⁴ See Stuart McCook, *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and the Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

the U.S. with most of the tropical products.”⁴⁵ The Pacific coast of Chiapas, for Romero, brought into sharp relief the Edenic qualities of Mexico, and he highlighted two export crops with skyrocketing demand that could be profitably grown there: coffee in the higher altitudes and rubber in the lowlands. In promoting the Tehuantepec Isthmus Railway, he also praised the fertile lands and healthier climes of the Isthmus.⁴⁶ His portrayal of the Isthmus notwithstanding, Romero did reiterate the usual tropes about the tropics—oppressively hot and notoriously unhealthy due to high humidity and stagnant, miasma-inducing waters—but contended that the lands could be made healthy through better drainage.⁴⁷ And while he too argued that natives of the tropics were less energetic and industrious, he suggested that the backwardness of those regions was not determined by climate but by the lack of technical ingenuity to render them habitable and conducive to tropical agriculture.⁴⁸ Indeed, for Romero, the indolent and scarce tropical laborer was a key obstacle to developing Mexico’s tropical lowlands, but he envisioned the remedy in not only foreign colonization (the American, he claimed, could prosper in the tropics) but also the technical education of the indigenous people as well as the migration of *Mexican* campesinos from the more populated highlands.⁴⁹

Texts by Mexican boosters exalting the country’s natural endowments were legion, and most of them presented a near-fanciful portrait of Mexico’s climatic and natural advantages while downplaying the disadvantages.⁵⁰ One of the nation’s leading cartographers, Antonio García Cubas, meticulously described dozens of plants that could grow in all of Mexico’s microclimates, reminiscent of Clavijero’s writings a century earlier.⁵¹ While he favored colonization efforts in more temperate highlands and above the Tropic of Cancer, García Cubas, eager to integrate national territory and commercialize resources, also argued that “well-mannered” immigrants unaccustomed to the endemic diseases and humid climate could prosper in the

⁴⁵ Matías Romero, *Coffee and India Rubber Culture in Mexico* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1898), p. 9.

⁴⁶ Romero, *The Tehuantepec Isthmus Railway* (Washington, 1894), 5.

⁴⁷ Romero, *Coffee*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Romero, *Coffee*, p. 79-80.

⁴⁹ Romero, *Coffee*, p. 105 and 127-9.

⁵⁰ Gene Yeager, “Porfirian Commercial Propaganda: Mexico in the World Industrial Expositions” *The Americas* 34, 2 (1977), p. 240.

⁵¹ Antonio García Cubas, *Mexico: its Trade, Industry, and Resources* Trans. William Thompson (Mexico City: Fomento, 1893); and García Cubas, *Cuadro geográfico, estadístico, descriptivo e histórico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (Mexico City: Fomento, 1884), 139-143. For a similar overview of the nation’s riches and tropical potential, see Rafael de Zayas Enríquez, *Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, sus condiciones naturales y sus elementos de prosperidad* (Mexico City: Fomento, 1893), p. 173-5 and 449

tropical lowlands.⁵² Mexican diplomat and poet Gustavo Adolfo Baz claimed Mexico could produce any crop in the world and boasted that the Veracruz coast “displays itself in all its richness; millions of lemon, orange and cotton trees, mangroves and all the plants of the Torrid zone, flourish over the whole horizon.”⁵³ Adolfo Baz issued his botanical encomium to Veracruz to support the new Mexican railway connecting Veracruz to Mexico City, so it was no surprise he, like Romero before him, trivialized the dangers of yellow fever. He insisted that foreigners had unnecessarily whipped up fears of tropical diseases and asserted that simple precautions to avoid “irritating [the] blood by continued excitement” (i.e., temperance) would stave off various maladies.⁵⁴ A fanciful portrayal of Veracruz’s health undoubtedly, but Adolfo Baz—and to a lesser degree Romero and García Cubas—offered a retort to the stigma of tropical insalubrity at a time many temperate cities, including Mexico City, suffered from epidemics of cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis. And for Adolfo Baz, in typical liberal fashion, it was not climate that had degenerated the tropical native but rather Spanish colonialism. Only Mexico’s embrace of liberal modernity could unleash the progressive spirit of all Veracruzanos who displayed “intelligence, bravery and love of freedom.”⁵⁵ Boosters from the adjacent state of Tabasco witnessed Veracruz’s integration into the commercial economy and followed a similar strategy. They courted “the enterprising man” by lauding the fertility of the soil, the precious tropical forests, the inhabitants fit for arduous labor in the heat, and a climate that yielded three harvests per year.⁵⁶

These liberal boosters concurred that Mexico, as a cornucopia awaiting exploitation, stood to become a future emporium of global agricultural commerce as long as national elites and foreign investors coordinated their efforts. Nature, including tropical nature, was advantageous rather than an obstacle. Few discussed the high mountains that hampered transportation and the dearth of navigable rivers, and they sometimes understated the dangers of tropical disease. Where tropical lands were unhealthy, technical ingenuity and well-behaved and well-educated people,

⁵² García Cubas, *Cuadro*, p. 152-3.

⁵³ Gustavo Adolfo Baz, *History of the Mexican Railway* Trans by G.F. Henderson (Mexico: Gallo & co, 1876), p. 10.

⁵⁴ Adolfo Baz, *History*, 12.

⁵⁵ Adolfo Baz, *History*, p. 11-12 and 32.

⁵⁶ León Alejo Torre, *Tabasco y su agricultura* (Mexico: Castañeda y Rodríguez, 1873), 7-10.

both foreigner and Mexican, could pave the way to prosperity. Where tropical nature led to indolence among native populations, state-sponsored colonization, immigration, and education could solve the problem. This Edenic narrative, therefore, did not simply invert the more pessimistic environmental determinism paradigm whereby tropical climate and civilization were antithetical; they agreed that tropical nature alone would not catapult Mexico into modernity. Mexico's científicos needed to commit to the task, and with the assistance of outsider expertise and capital and the cooperation of the nation's popular classes, they could turn latent riches into a veritable bonanza.⁵⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of Mexico's tropical regions as places of prodigious nature, noxious climate, poor health, and indolent peoples, all radically different from the more temperate highlands, had become hegemonic whether one resided in New York, Mexico City, or London. However, the Euro-American thinker tended to denigrate the American tropics through the lens of climatic determinism. If progress was possible, it would arrive solely by means of the interventions of white outsiders, although even this possibility remained doubtful because of fears of disease, or worse, racial degeneration. Even someone like Bulnes, whose ideas best reflected the imperialist tropicality of the North Atlantic, put an alimentary twist on hegemonic environmental determinism and reserved hope for certain Latin American nations whose alimentary geography and conservative political regimes favored them. On the other end of the tropicalist spectrum lay the Porfirian economic boosters who, thanks to Mexico's insertion into the global commercial economy, triumphed over Bulnes' defeatism. They shared with their Euro-American counterparts the conviction that tropical lands held great commercial value, but they tempered some of the bleaker elements of climatic determinism—such as tropical insalubrity and the hopelessness of their inhabitants. They, therefore, created an opening for nation-building and national progress to be directed by a cadre of elites rather than strictly by means of neo-colonialist intervention. In effect, elites held a vision of the lowland tropics in which foreign investment and foreign colonization figured prominently, but

⁵⁷ This was the case whether the goal was agricultural or industrial development. See Casey Marina Lurtz, "Developing the Mexican Countryside: The Department of Fomento's Social Project of Modernization" *Business History Review* 90 (Autumn 2016), 431-55; and Edward Beatty, *Technology and the Search for Progress in Modern Mexico* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2015).

so did technical education in hygiene and agriculture and the migration of productive laborers to the sparsely populated but resource-rich tropics.

JOSÉ VASCONCELOS AND THE COSMIC RACE AS TROPICAL RACE

Despite the vast tracts of land controlled by U.S.-American landowners at the dawn of the twentieth century and the notable expansion of tropical agriculture throughout Mexico— coffee, bananas, sugar, and henequen most notably—the country hardly became the emporium of agricultural commerce that Porfirian boosters had hoped. Perhaps Mexico’s revolutionaries had interrupted an otherwise unrelenting trend towards tropical export agriculture, but most postrevolutionary intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s dispensed with the old tropical cornucopia boosterism. Their focus laid more in resolving the internal social and political contradictions that had triggered the revolution and in rebuilding infrastructure than in foreign colonization (largely a failure anyway) or production endeavors in distant tropical regions. Yet the Mexican tropics did not disappear from national elite imaginaries altogether. The tropics infused post-revolutionary Indigenismo, the ideological and state-sanctioned cultural project to root the Mexican nation in its indigenous heritage and integrate indigenous peoples into the modern nation. In 1922, Diego Rivera, at the behest of one of Mexico’s foremost postrevolutionary intellectuals José Vasconcelos, traveled to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec where he became mesmerized by the tropical nature and exotic Zapotec culture. The Isthmus’ culture and natural beauty soon became one of the backbones of *Mexicanidad*, in part thanks to the efforts of Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and the artist Miguel Covarrubias.⁵⁸ But, it was Vasconcelos himself who, through his travels around the Americas, engaged most directly with the global discourses of tropicity. For Vasconcelos, the tropical lowlands of the Americas shaped the region’s history and served as a beacon for its bright future.

Literary scholars have tended to subordinate Vasconcelos’ considerations on the American tropics to his thought on race in general and the “cosmic race” in

⁵⁸ Mexicans’ identification with the tropics paralleled a similar movement in Brazilian modernism where influential writers such as Mário de Andrade turned to the Amazon for the cultural roots of the nation. See Francie Chassen-López, “The Traje de Tehuana as National Icon: Gender, Ethnicity, and Fashion in Mexico” *The Americas* 71, 2 (2014), 285-86; Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954); and Candace Slater, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 199-201.

particular.⁵⁹ Yet his geographic suppositions about the past, present, and future of the American tropics were inseparable from, and fundamental to, his vision of Latin American mestizaje and the march of civilization. Vasconcelos' ideas about the tropics drew on decades of Mexican responses to Euro-American tropicality, including the positivist thought he publicly disavowed. But he also formulated his ideas within the context of global changes in tropicalist thinking. Those changes can be understood as a simultaneous double movement. The West's self-congratulatory conquest of the tropics through agricultural investments, tropical medicine, and large infrastructural works such as the Panama Canal debilitated climate determinism to the point where tourism, if not permanent white settlement, to tropical lands became imaginable. This "conquest of the tropics" opened the door to tropical civilization so long as Western guidance was assured.⁶⁰ On the other hand, imperialist geographers at the height of scientific racism, sought to legitimize old oppositions between climate and civilization through social-scientific methods. The work of Ellsworth Huntington, Ellen Churchill Semple, and Pierre Gourou, among others, exemplified this deeply pessimistic mode of thought that forbade tropical places from advancing to the stage of the civilized.⁶¹

Vasconcelos's thought revolved around a theory of progress and civilization in which race and geography together drove history on a teleological march. Vasconcelos opened his most famous work, *La Raza Cósmica*, with the vision of an American Atlantis, an ancient tropical civilization of mixed Indian races that predated any other. As Juan Carlos Grijalva has argued, placing the origin of civilization on the American continent, remnants of which could be found in Maya, Aztec, and Inka ruins, supported his nationalist (and Latin American regional) project in which a future cosmic race would prevail.⁶² Vasconcelos reasoned that history was guided by a metaphysical force, and once "the particular mission" of this first tropical civilization was fulfilled, once it "completed its cycle," civilization moved to other places directed

⁵⁹ For a fascinating exception that centers bioethics in Vasconcelos' philosophy, see Jorge Quintana-Navarrete, "José Vasconcelos's Plant Theory: The Life of Plants, Botanical Ethics, and the Cosmic Race" *Hispanic Review* 89, 1 (2021).

⁶⁰ See Catherine Cocks *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Frederick Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics: the Story of the Creative Enterprises Conducted by the United Fruit Company* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1914).

⁶¹ See Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of the Geographical Environment* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911); Archibald Grenfell Price, *White Settlers in the Tropics* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1939); Ellsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915); and Pierre Gourou, *The Tropical World: its Social and Economic Conditions and its Future Status* (London: Longman, 1954).

⁶² Juan Carlos Grijalva, "Vasconcelos o la búsqueda de la Atlántida. Exoticismo, arqueología y utopía del mestizaje en "la raza cósmica" *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 30, 60 (2004), p. 333-37

by other mixed races.⁶³ Vasconcelos, interestingly, reversed his position on the lost Latin American Atlantis a decade later. He reasoned that tropical America was too geographically disadvantaged—few navigable rivers in temperate climes, poor tropical soils, and hot climes—to have hosted advanced civilizations.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, he adhered to the historical teleology that white European civilization, which followed the Egyptian, Hindu, and Persian, planted the seeds of ever-greater mestizaje and the birth of a cosmic race, a fifth race, that would mark the culmination of humanity by settling the tropical jungle.

A bullish optimism coexisted with a rampant pessimism in Vasconcelos' reflections on tropical Mexico. What may appear to be an uneasy co-existence at best or a blatant contradiction at worst is, in fact, a fluid temporal relationship in which the pessimistic side inhabited the past and present and the sanguine side the future. The two sides of his tropical thinking undergirded his key historical argument: whereas in the past Mexico's unfavorable geography impeded economic progress, Mexico, and indeed all of Latin America, would prosper once Western science and technology unlocked the latent wealth of the world's tropical regions. According to Vasconcelos, Mexico and much of the tropical Americas was cursed by geography. He went far beyond the typical rejection of the cornucopia narrative to claim that Mexico was downright poor in agricultural and hydrological resources. Where there may be fertile valleys in central Mexico, high mountain ranges blocked easy transportation to markets. It was this rather "scarce environment," he asserted, that led to the gradual deterioration of the Indians.⁶⁵ The tropics, in particular, "simulated wealth;" while plentiful, they were too hot, too mosquito-ridden, and too scantily populated to exploit.⁶⁶ The geography of Europe and the United States, however, had favored rapid economic growth. Plains, fertile soil, long and navigable rivers, rich veins of coal, and

⁶³ José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: Misión de la raza iberoamericana, notas de viajes a la América del sur* (Paris: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1926), p. 4-5.

⁶⁴ This about-face, which is rarely mentioned by Vasconcelos scholars, put him at odds with some pre-revolutionary positivists, such as Rafael de Zayas Enríquez, who celebrated the riverine Maya civilization as among the most advanced of its time due to the fertile land and warm climate. See José Vasconcelos *Breve historia de México* (Mexico City: Ediciones Botas, 1937), p. 203-4; and Rafael de Zayas Enríquez, *El Estado de Yucatán: Su pasado, su presente, su porvenir* (New York: J.J Little & Ives Co., 1908), p. 130-33

⁶⁵ José Vasconcelos, *Breve historia*, p. 179.

⁶⁶ Vasconcelos, *Breve historia*, p. 177-8.

temperate climates had driven the advances of civilization.⁶⁷ However, mountainous and tropical environments had conspired to keep much of Latin America backwards.

At times, Vasconcelos suggested that geography and environment trumped race in the march to civilization. Whereas the Latins of the fertile plains of Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil had achieved remarkable economic progress similar to North Americans, the British, the Dutch, and the French, “three first-class races,” had failed to bring the slightest degree of progress to the three Guineas where tropical heat and disease prevailed.⁶⁸ For much of the first half of his *Breve historia de México* and his 1926 University of Chicago lecture titled “The Latin American Basis of Mexican Civilization,” Vasconcelos seemed to contradict the Porfirian commercial boosters, invoking instead some of the most racist qualities of the imperialist thinkers of the Enlightenment and of his fellow Mexican, Bulnes, an odd bedfellow for this supposed revolutionary.

Vasconcelos’ tropical imaginary ends up being much more optimistic, however; instead of a fatalistic impediment, the tropics turn into limitless possibility. For contemporaneous racist scientists, racial miscegenation in the tropics constituted barbarism; for Vasconcelos it anticipated a progressive future and embodied a singular Latin American modernity. Vasconcelos maintained that once the Latin cosmic race learned the Western (predominantly Anglo) advances in science and technology, the riches of the American tropics would foster not only material abundance but spiritual transcendence.⁶⁹ In his 1935 *Breve historia de México*, Vasconcelos proclaimed: “the future of America will be ours...because the future is of the tropical regions, as soon as modern technology finishes dominating them.” The cosmic race would construct the ultimate civilization, “centered on a metropolis at the mouth of the Amazon River that will be called Universópolis,”⁷⁰ There, abundant

⁶⁷ Vasconcelos, *Breve historia*, p. 203-04; and José Vasconcelos, “Latin American Basis of Mexican Civilization” in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization [Lectures on the Harris Foundation]* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), p. 6-8.

⁶⁸ Vasconcelos, “Aspects,” p. 16-17.

⁶⁹ On the underappreciated importance of science and technology to Vasconcelos’ educational philosophy, see Luis A. Marentes, *José Vasconcelos and the Writing of the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), chapter 3.

⁷⁰ Vasconcelos, *Breve historia*, p. 204. This was not Vasconcelos’s invention. Both Humboldt and Romantic British naturalist Henry Walter Bates had imagined something remarkably similar. See Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, p. 55. It also was not an outcome that Vasconcelos had always seen as pre-ordained. In his earlier *La Raza cósmica*, he equivocated about the future of the races. He left open the possibility that the white race would conquer the Amazon basin before the cosmic race, the superior spiritual fusion of all the other races, could form and settle the tropics. He initially foresaw, in effect, a race of the races to conquer the tropics, and whichever race won would acquire world domination—either one of peace, conviviality, and spirituality or one of domination, conquest, and materialism. See *La raza cósmica*, p. 21-25.

plant life favorable to what he deemed a superior vegetarian diet, warm weather, and fertile lands would nourish this ultimate mestizo culture.⁷¹

Mapa 1. Map of Tropical Mexico



Fuente: Mapping Specialists Ltd

Vasconcelos was no geographer, but his thesis on the relation between geography and history foreshadowed, and likely contributed to, the field's radical transformation from pessimistic determinism to optimistic possibilism. His influence on racial theory and politics has been well studied, but his tropicality also gained followers. The Colombian liberal Luis Enrique Osorio predicted a new culture would take root in the South American tropics. The Chilean writer Gabriela Mistral championed Osorio's work and agreed that "within another century tropical America would be the dominant zone of the continent."⁷² In Mexico, Vasconcelos' close friend and travel companion to South America, the Tabascan poet Carlos Pellicer, made tropical America his muse, regularly waxing about the vibrancy, wonder, and spiritual power of the jungle. He expressed a particular love for the tropical landscapes of Tabasco that, despite being "fertile fields for laziness," could be overcome by humans

⁷¹ See Quintana-Navarrete, "Plant Theory," p. 87-89.

⁷² Luis Enrique Osorio, *Los destinos del trópico* (Bogotá, 1932) and Gabriela Mistral and Otto Morales Benítez *Gabriela Mistral: Su prosa y poesía en Colombia* volumen 1 (Bogotá: Andrés Bello, 2003) p.136.

who would discover “their capacity to work” there.⁷³ Miguel Covarrubias lacked the direct ties to Vasconcelian tropicality like some other Latin American thinkers, but he too pronounced, in his “Pageant of the Pacific” murals for the Golden Gate International Exhibition in 1939, the dawn of a new civilization distinct from the Anglo-American—A Pacific civilization similarly united by one “Mongoloid race” and replete with resources in both temperate and tropical latitudes.⁷⁴ We must not, however, exaggerate Vasconcelos’ reach, even in Mexico. His postrevolutionary brethren, the anthropologists Manuel Gamio and Alfonso Caso, who also rejected Porfirian positivism and sought to identify *La Mexicanidad*, generally ignored geography in their explorations into Mexican history and culture. Gamio equivocated about an easily attained tropical bonanza and called for rational experimentation of a wide range of crops in tropical soil so that only the most fruitful seeds would be sowed there.⁷⁵

A few direct linkages notwithstanding, Vasconcelos’s resurrection of a tropical paradise civilized by modern science and technology was emblematic of a greater Latin American intellectual pattern in the first half of the twentieth century. Over a decade before Vasconcelos toured Brazil, famous engineer-turned-journalist Euclides Da Cunha had called on the Brazilian republic to secure the Amazon amid neo-colonialist incursions and boundary disputes and build infrastructure and bring migrants to exploit its great riches. In Da Cunha’s view, the Amazon’s environment, purifying and moralizing, selected the “most worthy for life” and prepared the strong, the good, and the steadfast to prosper.⁷⁶ Later, the diplomat and poet Raul Bopp followed in the footsteps of Da Cunha to predict that the Amazonian city of Belem would soon surpass Buenos Aires as the great metropolis of South America.⁷⁷ In Cuba, two professional geographers—Salvador Massip and Antonio Núñez Jiménez—challenged the climatic determinism of their Euro-American counterparts to stake out a place for Cuba in the pantheon of modern nations capable of cultural and

⁷³ José Vasconcelos, Carlos Pellicer, and Manuel R. Mora, *Geopolítica de Tabasco. Visión retrospectiva* (Mexico: Editorial Política Nueva, 1965) p. 34; and Carlos Pellicer, “Iconografía” (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), p. 13 and 146.

⁷⁴ Mónica Ramírez Bernal, *El océano como paisaje. Pageant of the Pacific: La serie de mapas murales de Miguel Covarrubias* (Mexico: UNAM, Instituto de Geografía, 2018).

⁷⁵ Manuel Gamio, “Indian Basis of Mexican Civilization” in *Aspects*, p. 164-5.

⁷⁶ Euclides Da Cunha, *The Amazon: Land Without History* Trans. By Ronald Sousa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 42-3.

⁷⁷ Slater, *Entangled*; and Seth Garfield, *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States, and the Nature of a Region* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

material progress.⁷⁸ In contradistinction to his contemporary, Vasconcelos, Núñez Jiménez rooted his vision of tropical development in political-economic terms and material relations, not spirituality.⁷⁹ Despite agnosticism or outright contempt for the tropics among some Latin Americans, by the 1940s, enthusiasm for the potential of tropical progress pervaded the region's political culture.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

In 1941, as the politics of national economic development strengthened, Mexican president Manuel Ávila Camacho declared that Mexico must commence a “march to the sea.” About forty years later President José López Portillo issued a similar statement: “Now let us advance to the sea. Its response will be generous.”⁸¹ In the period between their two presidencies, state engineers built highways, dams, and other hydraulic works to open up millions of acres of low-lying and flood-prone tropical land in three major river basins—the Papaloapan in Oaxaca and Veracruz, the Grijalva-Usumacinta in Chiapas and Tabasco, and the Tepalcatepec in Michoacán—to agricultural production and ranching. The state's leading mid-twentieth century technical experts espoused the idea that Mexico's tropics—particularly those of the humid southeastern states—could support the growing national population's food needs and provide abundant and fertile land for tropical export crops as long as government provided infrastructures and modern agricultural inputs. The central highlands, they maintained, were overpopulated and their soil exhausted, and the sparsely populated tropics, whose resources had been poorly utilized by native inhabitants for centuries and whose soil could give two to three yields per year, was the panacea.⁸² Other tropical nations also began putting the concept of tropical

⁷⁸ Funes Monzonte, *Geotransformación*.

⁷⁹ Funes Monzonte, *Geotransformación*.

⁸⁰ Colombian novelist José Eustabio Rivera was one example of this ongoing pessimism. See Claudia Leal, “From Threatening to Threatened Jungles” in *A Living Past*, p. 116-17

⁸¹ Quoted in Jean Revel-Morouz, “Mexican Colonization Experience in the Humid Tropics” in *Environment, Society, and Rural Change in Latin America* ed. David Preston (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), p. 83.

⁸² Jorge L. Tamayo and Enrique Beltrán eds., *Recursos naturales de la cuenca del Papaloapan* 2 volumes (Mexico City: IMRNR, 1977); Agustín de Neymet Leger, “Regiones Tropicales,” *Ingeniería Hidráulica* X, 1 (January-March, 1956), p. 3-4; and “Los problemas del trópico” *Ingeniería Hidráulica* X, 2 (April-June, 1956) p. 2-4; Instituto Mexicano de Recursos Naturales Renovables, *Mesas redondas sobre problemas del trópico mexicano* (Mexico City: IMRNR, 1955).

bonanza into practice. Brazil and Bolivia launched equally massive engineering and settlement projects in their tropical jungles in the 1940s and 1950s.⁸³

What explains these roughly simultaneous state-run tropical development projects? Certainly, the region shared a rather unique set of political and economic conditions. As the only long-standing independent states of an incongruous geopolitical space soon to be dubbed the Third World, governing elites rolled out national industrialization plans, and increased budgets and financing opportunities made those plans more achievable. Transportation technology and industrialized agriculture with fertilizers and pesticides, meanwhile, further incentivized the integration of far-flung territories through settlement and resource extraction—including sparsely populated and underutilized tropical jungles. These political, technological, and economic conditions intersected with the intellectual history of the concept of tropical civilization. These massive state investments were conceivable—that is, within the realm of the possible and desirable—because of the conviction among a wide array of elite thinkers—from scientists and engineers to philosophers—that the tropics were both bountiful and amenable to dense settlement. Consequently, Latin American elites, who inaugurated national Third World development programs, surmised that their route to progress passed through the tropics and the comparative advantages those regions offered.

What this analysis of the regional intellectual genesis of these mid-twentieth century projects in Mexico and beyond does is highlight how unstable the universal concept of “the tropics” has been when viewed from beyond the North Atlantic world. Europeans initiated tropicality discourse, but they did not monopolize it or direct it without considerable resistance. Moreover, by tracing the debates about the significance and purpose of Mexico’s tropical lands before and after independence, I reveal the dialectical interplay between material-economic changes and discursive representations. In other words, the representation of tropical Mexico over several centuries—whether it was considered an anathema, a place of death and

⁸³ Garfield, *In Search of the Amazon*; and Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, *Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia’s Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021). The Dutch pursued an interior tropical settlement project in colonial Java; however, the rationale had more to do with easing political tensions and social control than a notion of tropical bonanza. See Karl J. Pelzer, *Pioneer Settlement in the Asiatic Tropics: Studies in land utilization and Agricultural Colonization in Southeastern Asia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

degeneration, or an antidote for backwardness—molded material interventions in tropical spaces as much as material conditions, in turn, shaped how tropical Mexico (and beyond) could be imagined and understood.

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Bonanza o Falsas Riquezas: Cambiantes Imaginarios Mexicanos del Trópico y el Impulso Civilizadorio

RESUMO

Las investigaciones académicas sobre la “tropicalidad” se han enfocado en las maneras en que los europeos y estadounidenses construyeron el trópico discursivamente y visualmente durante los siglos XVIII y XIX. Los científicos, comerciantes y viajeros menospreciaron los espacios tropicales al considerarlos insalubres, atrasados, degenerados y opuestos a la civilización. De esta forma legitimaron ideas imperialistas y justificaron la intervención de los europeos blancos. Esta forma de estudiar el problema, inconscientemente, reproduce un presupuesto básico que contradice la crítica al imperialismo: que las élites europeas controlaron la producción del conocimiento. Por lo tanto, se ha dejado a un lado a los pensadores en los espacios tropicales que sí problematizaron o rechazaron las representaciones europeas. Después de la independencia, las élites nacionales latinoamericanas se preguntaron cómo integrar sus territorios tropicales, muchos de ellos aislados, y hacerlos viables para una modernización económica. Este artículo usa México como caso de estudio sobre las representaciones latinoamericanas del trópico, debido a que es un país con una geografía tropical variada, a su inserción en la economía comercial global y a la robusta producción intelectual de las élites nacionales. Argumento que las formas en que los intelectuales mexicanos –oficiales, geógrafos, filósofos y otros– concibieron las tierras tropicales moldearon la construcción del estado-nación. También aportaron ideas a la producción global del conocimiento sobre todo en una época en la que la noción sobre el peligroso trópico se transformaba en la promesa de la bonanza tropical. Al rastrear los cambios y las continuidades de los discursos mexicanos sobre el trópico en un contexto global, enfatizo el menospreciado pensamiento geográfico y ambiental de figuras clave como Matías Romero, Francisco Bulnes y José Vasconcelos, quienes raramente figuran en la historiografía ambiental. El enfoque en estos distintos imaginarios tropicales en México también revela la manera en que las intervenciones económicas y materiales en el trópico y las representaciones discursivas del trópico se han conformado mutuamente.

Palavras-chave: México; el trópico; tropicalidade; pensamiento ambiental; el desarrollo; José Vasconcelos; historia intelectual.

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