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The Hymn to Life that Was 1968¹

The world came to Mexico and University City in 1968. The film clubs showed movies of Cubans after the Cuban Revolution cutting cane and resisting the blockade by what was then called Yanqui imperialism; films about Bolivian peasants; about the war waged by the Tupamaros; and the motion pictures that portrayed people's suffering because of the war in Vietnam and the consequences of dropping napalm on defenseless towns in that battered country. In this context, even Eisenstein's 1925 *Battleship Potemkin* retained its subversive qualities. Equally—or even more—attractive (because of personal affinities) were Jean-Luc Godard's

Breathless (1960), *Pierrot le fou* (1965), and *Masculine Feminine* (1966); these were the films that best expressed the feelings of young university students of the time. According to its publicity, *Masculine Feminine* was about young people adrift, who, in an uncertain, violent consumer society influenced by pop culture, lacked the social and intellectual moorings they needed to find their way through the swamp.

Marxism, which had a great influence at the time and was our daily bread at the UNAM, contrasted with this individualism. The world also came to Mexico in 1968 with the announcement of the nineteenth Olympic Games, the corollary of the stabilizing developing period, which gave great impetus to the country's modernization. Everything was consumed with the preparations; construction was

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going on everywhere; this activity was most noteworthy in Mexico City's Federal District because it could be seen in many different places. You had to go around the University City Stadium because it was being remodeled, and workers were repainting several hectares of concrete with the Olympic symbols, with a strong prevalence of Mexican pink.

Along the brand-new, shiny Peripheral Ring, plinths began to appear for the 19 sculptures that artists from the seven continents would place there on what was called "The Friendship Route." The 19 statues commemorated the 19th Olympic Games held in modern times. The activities drove everyone interested to all the theaters, museums, and concert halls. Who would have believed it possible to see in Mexico the Ballet of the Twentieth Century company, directed by Maurice Béjart, performing to the rhythm of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the recently built Sports Palace; Merce Cunningham dance to the modern music of John Cage and Gordon Mumma; or the prestigious Martha Graham, who, due to her age, had to be seated as she interpreted the role of Hecuba, the queen of Troy, as her company danced around her? To go to the theater to see Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade*, with Angélica María as Charlotte in that madhouse represented with cells like a honeycomb, in front of scenery designed by Toni Sbert? Or to listen to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir from Salt Lake City, the seat of that religion, or go to the Bolshoi Ballet to see Medusa danced by Mercedes Pascual? There was also the Magic Lantern Theater, with brilliant lighting and technological solutions. The biggest thrill was being able to watch Calderón de la Barca's *The Constant Prince*, directed by Krakow Laboratory Theater's Jerzy Grotowski: the production was so vivid that at the end of the performance no one could even applaud, and to leave, the audience had to cross over the inert bodies of the actors on the stage of the Elizabethan Forum.

The zeitgeist was defined by the idea of opposing everything that seemed like authoritarianism, whether that of professors or of parents. You could hear, "We have to criticize the education we have suffered through since childhood," a slogan against the whole traditional, rigid educational methodology most teachers used. So what was fermenting was unrest that found no form of expression and the alert went out everywhere. France's days of May were the scene for polemics and discussions among the students and renowned thinkers, while in the streets

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they were raising barricades to defend the slogan of being free to the cry of "Anything is possible."

In Mexico, events soon went beyond social issues due to the political slogans that, after appearing in July, increased in the heady month of August. Students improvised as subversive writers of short phrases written on walls, where you could read, "Youth is power," "People, defend your UNAM," "Reason and the law, arms of the university," "Let us demand liberty," "Let us fight for the rights of the Mexican people," "Peasants in struggle with students for democratic freedoms," "We're not fighting for victory; we're fighting for reason," "She [heaven] gave you a jail for every son."²

There were also painters to sketch posters with Picasso's emblematic dove of peace, designed for the Olympics, pierced by a bloody lance; gorillas with signs reading "Monkey Díaz Ordaz," in allusion to the president; "People, do you want this hand?" (with a bloody hand in the background alluding to those in power and the president's declaration that he was extending his hand); "Díaz Ordaz: we don't want Olympics; we want an end to poverty." Jailhouse bars are drawn demanding freedom for political prisoners; coffins labeled "Constitution." Placards are unfurled with the image of Che Guevara, raised to mythical status by his assassination the previous year and sanctified with the slogan, "Ever onward to victory!" as can be seen in Rodrigo Moya's forceful photograph of the huge August 14 march.

The movement learned while partying. The students shared significant moments like the night of September 15, Mexican Independence Day, when Heberto Castillo headed the Cry for Independence ceremony from an improvised podium in the esplanade of University City. He was standing next to a metal cube that held the dynamited sculpture of President Alemán that the fashionable visual artists of the day like Cuevas, Felguérez, and Ponce had decorated. The students danced all night at the

School of Philosophy, with a few couples going back and forth for a private interlude in the Islands.³

Only three days later, these dreams of freedom would become a nightmare when, on the night of August 18, the army would invade University City. But the worst came weeks later when, in the Three Cultures Plaza, on the afternoon of October 2, the future of the movement was settled with the memory constructed with the weight of those lying on the rain-moistened ground. The fiesta ended with the repression that finalized in a funeral.

Since that time, mourning has festooned a large part of what was a social movement full of nuances, proposals, learning experiences. It undoubtedly had a strong impact on the organization of academic life and on many cultural manifestations that brought great social changes linked to something under construction across the world. The global began to manifest itself strongly through what were the until-then known media.

The selective memory has been rich, despite the emphasis on the repression in Tlatelolco, allowing a complicated web of interpretations that several thinkers have offered about what happened in Paris, in Prague, in the United States in 1968. Historian Ferdinand Braudel characterized that year as something similar to the Italian Renaissance, which did not have profound consequences, but “did create a new art of living [and] transformed the rules of the game.”⁴ Here he has touched on the key point of the meaning of the student movements and how in the Renaissance a new man emerged, individuals responsible for “their own lives and also their death.”⁵

For Immanuel Wallerstein, 1968 was more important for its questions about the future than for its critique of the past, but his interpretation situated it as one of the constituent events of the modern “world system.” The protest was aimed at the hegemony of the United States with the acquiescence of the Soviet Union, but, above all, it was a countercultural movement opposed to bourgeois ways of life. For that reason, the movement expressed itself in

the immediate sense in fashion (remember the miniskirt, blue jeans, the women’s straight hair, and the boys’ long rumpled manes, as can also be seen in photos from the time), in the music (the well-known Beatles, Rolling Stones, Leonard Cohen), in literature (Kerouac, Salinger, José Agustín), and in new sexual behavior (and the use of the pill more than the condom). “The 1968 revolution had, of course and particularly, a strong component of the spontaneous, and the counterculture became part of the revolutionary euphoria.”⁶

We experienced that movement against the schematic approach of the old left, and it was “the ideological tomb of the concept of the ‘leading role’ of the industrial proletariat,” as José Revueltas would say in Mexico. The movement also expressed itself against sexism and racism, but it was profoundly individualistic and anti-party. That is why 1968 created a strong impetus for the new social movements like feminism, urbanism, ecology, and religious and minority struggles.

Edgar Morin considered it the “youth commune” that irrupted onto the scene as a social-political force, something that aspired to another life, another society, another politics. It meant recovering Montesquieu’s libertarian sentiment, “the right of all to liberty.” It was being able to write that aspiration on the city’s walls, the individualistic bourgeois affirmation of the world that belongs to us.

Alain Touraine defined ’68 as “a revolution without a face, since a thousand faces emerge from a mobilization of a new kind against the apparatuses of integration, of manipulation, which question the omnipresent technocracy.”⁷ And to Michel de Certeau, it seemed like a movement in which “we took over the word like the Bastille was taken over in 1789.”

The idea was to re-politicize society with ideas and de-statize politics, giving it an anti-systemic content different from the ways the institutions and society functioned. The barricades were not there to destroy capitalism, but to consolidate it, to modernize it in the perspective of Ré-

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gis Debray, who called the movement “the cradle of the new bourgeois society.” Perhaps from that perspective, Raymond Aron classified it as “a psychodrama,” or simply and contemptuously as “the May carnival,” in direct allusion to the May events in Paris, sparking strong criticism.

In this quest for freedom, understood as one of the civil rights, without taking power, there was a significant change that affected the whole society. Even the students and groups that did not mobilize benefitted from the changes in educational systems, countering authoritarian patterns and nineteenth-century teaching methods. The generations that followed were heir to the freedoms attained in assuming sexual freedom fully; women, even non-feminists, took advantage of the contributions of those who had fought for their vindication. These were changes in behavior patterns that now seem intrinsic to the middle classes the world over.

Carlos Fuentes called the days in May in France “the first prefiguration of the twenty-first century.”⁸ What happened in Mexico could be defined as a revolution without a revolution, because, despite its many intentions, it did not question the state. It was merely the denunciation of authoritarianism and of the fragility of the institutions. What predominated was the protest against the lack of freedoms and the demand for legal equality. In 1968 in Mexico, a crack opened up in the political system, according to Octavio Paz, “in the area of its greatest beneficiaries, the children of the middle class.” And, since the country was not accustomed to this kind of dissidence, it used the same violent methods that it had utilized historically against workers and peasants.

With the terrible repression that grew in scale until October 2 and the Tlatelolco massacre, a grey cloud was laid over a creative movement with a festive air of profound cultural changes that prefigured the future. For that reason, we must insist on not exclusively remembering the deaths and the repression that sent many to prison.

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The changes from that year enriched today's political culture. In an interview with *El País* published on May 11, 2008, the leader of the French movement, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, said, “1968 wanted individuals to claim the freedom of daily life, the blossoming of music, the new relationship between men and women, life, sexuality.” In Mexico, that egalitarian freedom was also expressed with justice and contributed to the defense of civil rights. The freedoms that emerged preserve something of the original Utopia: the Utopia that does not recognize differences in class, gender, religion, or sexual preferences.

With '68—and there are the images that we carry within us to prove it—, society changed its mask. There is no doubt that it did give impetus to the transformation of the rules of the political game in its eternal capacity for changing everything so nothing changes, even though the weight of democracy is certainly clear. It could be no other way, after having gone through the rebellion of a revolution without a revolution. ■■■

Further Reading

- Dosse, François, “Le métamorphose de mai,” *M. Mensuel Marxisme Mouvement* no. 20, May 1988.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, *Historia del siglo xx (1914-1991)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1994).

Notes

- 1 A Spanish-language version of this article was published in *Revista de la Universidad de México* no. 56, October 2008.
- 2 The last slogan is an allusion to Mexico's national anthem, the last line of the first verse of which is, “Heaven gave you a soldier in every son.” [Translator's Note.]
- 3 The author is referring to small areas with trees dotting the immense central esplanade of University City. Their dense vegetation invited couples to visit them on occasion. [Editor's Note.]
- 4 Ferdinand Braudel, “Renacimiento, reforma, 1968: revoluciones culturales de larga duración,” *La Jornada Semanal* (Mexico City), no. 226, October 10, 1993.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968: revolución en el sistema mundo. Tesis e interrogantes,” *Estudios Sociológicos* no. 20, May-August 1989.
- 7 Alain Touraine, *Le mouvement de mai ou le communisme utopique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1968).
- 8 Carlos Fuentes, *París, la revolución de mayo* (Mexico City: ERA, 1968).