



Mónica Maristain*

“Commemorating Should Be More about Questions than Answers”

Ricardo Raphael was born in 1968 and is now the director of the UNAM Tlatelolco University Cultural Center, which will commemorate October 2, 1968 with 112 events of all kinds, an Interuniversity Colloquium with more than 75 activities, and Mexican and foreign guests. As director, Ricardo hopes to be able to do a little history about what he dubs the last great social movement of the twentieth century. Today, all social movements in Mexico owe a debt to it and that year, when everything happened, including, of course, the protest in Helsinki, the May events in France, Martin Luther King’s death . . . the year when the world moved.

Interviewing Ricardo Raphael is interviewing someone who thinks. Of course, saying it like that could even be banal, but, although he’s not a journalist, he brought himself to analyze where we’re going in this very dilapidated profession and published the manual *Periodismo urgente* (Urgent Journalism). Though not a politician, he is a brilliant analyst, who, by common sense, forces readers to always dig deep in their emotions and try, precisely, to think about the phenomenon that week after week he publishes in the *El Universal* daily.

He has two television programs on Channel 11 (*Espiral* [Spiral] and *Calle 11* [11th Street]), and, in addition to being a professor at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE), is now the director of the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center.

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The important thing about him, in addition to the fact that he thinks, is that he broadcasts with the enveloping serenity of a great academic, above all because of what he says and manages to project.

Interviewing him was talking about social movements. Time and again, he referred to 1968 as that watering place we all drank from, in today’s out-of-joint world that is looking to the past for a guide to be able to deal with the present.

MM: What are social movements?



I’m convinced that there are two ways of making social change. One is the slow, gradual change of customs that transform little by little. Human beings discover the fork; another day they use it; another day, it becomes a social norm. . . . These changes are really imperceptible. The other way of changing society is with drastic changes, breaks. If you observe, the last 300 years of human history, from the French Revolution until now, the great changes, the great historic movements, have almost all included the incisive participation of a social movement. Actually, what they do is to distribute new maps; they are societies that feel uncomfortable because the maps they have no longer suffice for measuring reality; they no longer suffice. One example is the Encyclopedia, going back to the French Revolution. This was a critical community that was drawing new maps, and suddenly, those critical communities needed a more powerful microphone to complete those findings, to explain them, to return them to a broader area. The French Revolution, the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution are all movements that not only transform the formal institutions, the constitutions, the laws, but also transform informal institutions. From that perspective, social movements are extremely important, because they explain, among other things, the way we live; and I

have the impression that in Mexico, we haven’t studied them as they deserve. We study their leaders, but not the entire sequence of information. I’m referring concretely to the fiftieth anniversary of ’68, which could be contemporary history and seeing it as the most important movement now, in the Mexican democratic transition, it can be commemorated but also analyzed.

MM: I think that the last great social movement of the twentieth century was Chiapas, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which put that region on the map, precisely a region that hadn’t been on the map...



No, there are very different movements. I think that the last movement of the twentieth century was the democratic transition. I think that, electorally, the PAN taking office would be inexplicable without a social movement behind it. Well, I wouldn’t venture to say that it was the last. I do think that in ’94, the Zapatista movement was fundamental for changing the maps of all the systems: one, to incorporate the indigenous issue in Mexico’s great diversity, and two, to refute the kind of economic and social integration that Mexico was experiencing. Of course it changed things, yes, but it’s not comparable to ’68. Because ’68 wasn’t a movement, but a movement of movements that was replicated in several parts of the world. It’s very difficult to understand feminism today without ’68; environmentalism, its leaders and its causes, without ’68; pacifism, without ’68; the educational reforms, democratic unionism, the guerrilla movement, and—if you’ll allow me—the laws about diversity, without 1968. In that sense, I think that the last great movement of the twentieth century in the world is 1968, which supported all the other movements. The last chronologically or do we say the last, as the most popular, the most powerful?

MM: Are you referring to ’68 in plural?



It’s wrong to talk about ’68 in singular. It’s plural because, in effect, ’68 happened in several parts of the world, with causes that may have been different, but one that unites them: the arrival of the baby boomers, of those born in the 1940s, born during or right after the war, and became political subjects as adults. In ’68, young people were minors and not po-

litical subjects. What happened? May '68 in France is young people's demand to be political subjects. Tokyo, in the face of Vietnam, in the face of nuclear development, is the young people who demand to be political subjects. Columbia, Berkeley, Prague with its spring: all these movements of this kind. And Mexico's, too. Each had its different causes. In the case of Mexico it was democratic freedoms. In the case of Tokyo, the separation of Vietnam. In France it was a rebellion against the adults who were in charge of politics, concretely De Gaulle's style of government.

In 1963, Mexico made the decision to open the windows to let the world in, but above all so Mexico could enter the world. That year, construction work began on the tower where the Ministry of Foreign Relations was, in Tlatelolco. What López Mateos and his successor Gustavo Díaz Ordaz didn't take into account was that, when you open the window, what was happening in the world reached Durango, came through to Veracruz, snuck into Michoacán. So those '68s multiplied in Mexico. Sure, 1968 is October 2, but not only October 2. Not only Mexico City.

I would dare say that another systematic variable in those '68s is that the monolithic authorities reacted according to their own interpretations. Taking the Mexican example: for Díaz Ordaz and Echeverría, '68 has a single explanation, an international Soviet conspiracy, that aimed to destabilize the regime. A single vision. But it was more or less the same vision that Charles de Gaulle had about '68. When he ordered Pompidou to shoot the young people—an order, by the way, that Pompidou ignored—he thought that he had to do away with those rebellious youths who could put an end to the institutions that emerged after the war. There was a single way of thinking about the diversity of thinking. There are two ways of commemorating '68 with dignity. One is to recognize that it was a movement that gave young people the stature of adults to act politically. The other admits a single interpretation of what happened in 1968, which is making the same mistake that De Gaulle or Díaz Ordaz did. Commemorating must be more about questions than answers.

MM: There were absolute, transcendent changes . . .



What catches my attention is that any movement that wants to legitimize itself in Mexico or in the world brings up '68. The movement of

the parents of the disappeared students from Ayotzinapa brings up '68 because the youths were kidnapped in a bus that was coming to Mexico City to commemorate October 2, 1968. The Zapatista movement considers itself the heir of '68. The "132 movement" asked questions about '68. It is a source of legitimacy because it was a genuine, honest movement. I don't think we have seen a social phenomenon again with that strength and genuineness. We should also say that the fact that young participants were murdered and forcibly disappeared sanctified it.

What I'm seeing today are other forms of social mobilization that are not taking over Insurgentes Avenue or just holding a silent march. We shouldn't disregard these mobilizations, and we should see that young people today are experiencing circumstances that are very similar to 1968. The maps of the readings we give them today to understand reality were forged in the past. The crises we see in the world today are generational crises. Young people today are against Donald Trump in the United States. In England they didn't go out to vote because they didn't believe in the politicians; it was the old who voted for Brexit. There is a distance between them and their elders. In Mexico, the victory of Morena and Andrés Manuel López Obrador would be inexplicable if young people had not decided to massively support that option.

MM: It's also true that Mexico's situation is very different from that of the United States and England. Here, as Juan Villoro says, we had gone past the Apocalypse. We either voted for somebody different or what could we do?



Yes. Let's hope it was a vote for someone and not a vote against . . . In any case, when you talk to those young people to try to understand their vote, you hear very similar arguments to those you hear in England or the United States.

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MM: Do you mean that politicians continue to be far removed from people?



From my point of view, with a few exceptions, the answer is yes. Twentieth-century political forms continue to dominate, and what we are seeing are young people trying to change those forms.

MM: One proposal that failed in the twentieth century is neoliberalism. What would you say comes next?



1968 had the Cold War and there were two possible historical currents. The last 50 years have seen seeds of the two ways of looking at things.

The conservatism and neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan and Thatcher, on the one hand, and on the other, consolidating the welfare state or the social democratic state that was in play in those years. What I think is that both models are worn out. There is no longer a way to build the social state we saw emerge after the war because the conditions for its legitimacy do not exist, and there is no financing that can sustain it; and of course, its neoliberal counterpart, this obstinate austerity, this accumulation of wealth, thinking of human beings as merely economic animals, this is completely worn out. That's why our era seems so interesting to me. I would emphasize that the main element of neoliberalism is denying others. Social Man is negated. Man and his environment are denied. Man and his intelligence, Man and his spirit. Man is reduced to someone who produces, and for neoliberalism, that is the only vision. That's why the massive vote for Morena was, speaking of '68, the fight against inequality.

MM: Could any element of '68 be included in the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador?



The young people who rebelled in 1968 were the emerging bourgeoisie. Actually, they weren't fighting for their own equality, but protesting unequal freedoms. From that point of view, yes, I would venture to look at the present: the rule of law in Mexico is not interpreted as equality before the law or equality before the state. I think that one of the great causes we have not achieved is being equal before the law. No matter what part of Mexico you're in, no matter whether you come from a poor family or not, we have to make ourselves equal in these democratic freedoms.

MM: How do you feel, having been born in 1968 and directing the commemorations?



I must confess that that's what led me to accept Enrique Graue and Jorge Volpi's appointment to head up the Tlatelolco Cultural Center. I feel it is a great responsibility. Nacho Padilla used to say that we could include the fact that we had been born in that year in our biography. Commemoration does not mean imposing a view of the events, but creating the conditions so that many can express their own vision of the events. Commemorating means creating a worthy event for those who suffered, for the victims, but also that it be an inter-generational event so that everyone can speak. **MM**

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