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Youth Counterculture In 1968

We forget that the student movement included members of both the Institutional Revolutionary and the National Action Parties. If you go to the UNAM Institute for Research on the University and Education (IIISUE) and look at the images of '68, you'll be surprised to find the photo of a young bearded man speaking in favor of the students. This is none other than Diego Fernández de Cevallos when he was a member of the National Action Party (PAN) youth group.¹ This means that post-Vatican II Catholics participated; however, all those memories have been replaced by the narrative cen-

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tered on the left, which has meant that we remember a series of events in a specific way and not in their plural entirety.

If we think about '68, it's like we're listening to a soundtrack with the voices of Judith Reyes and Óscar Chávez. But, what happens when we look at some very interesting audio-visual materials like, for example, *Mural efímero* (Ephemeral Wall), by film-maker Raúl Kamffer?² It turns out that at the end of the University City esplanade, a statue of former President Miguel Alemán had been erected, and, in 1968, after many attacks, it was covered by a corrugated metal structure. A group of artists in solidarity with the student movement painted a temporary mural on it in August of that year.

Raúl Kamffer, a student at the University Center for Film Studies (CUEC) at the time, filmed the process. What catches the viewer's eye first is the color. It contrasts with other films made at the time, but in black and white, like

the ones about the famous Silent Demonstration. Second, the music is *Deep Purple*. Yes, rock groups were part of the student movement; this says something to us about the diversity and counterculture present.

What happened in '68 was worldwide. People who study some of the specifics of what happened in São Paulo, Berlin, Paris, or Mexico often think that each movement was a local phenomenon, but it turns out that the May Days in Paris were also marked by counterculture. The subversion that had an impact on a series of important political events cannot be understood without including the cultural. However, we must recognize that it is true that while '68 was global and counterculture was probably one of the keys to that globality, it also had a specific character in each place, and the political reading of it is part of that vision. I would venture to go further and say that '68 is also a specifically Latin American and Mexican phenomenon that is part of a left-identified political line.

This global/local dichotomy speaks to a dual tension that I will use as the starting point for my analysis. To that end, it would be important to define just exactly what we understand by counterculture. I would begin by saying that it is one culture moving *against* another, opposed to an "established" culture (bourgeois, racist, conservative, opposed to women's freedom, and the civil rights of Afro-descendants). Out of that grew a worldwide mobilization in which Latin America participated, because here, just like elsewhere on the planet, many young people oppose that system of values.

Counterculture promotes integration, recognition, and respect for women's rights; it is opposed to the subjection of women; it wants society to recognize and defend the exercise of freedom, including sexual freedom, among other issues. While it is a worldwide phenomenon, in Mexican society, which is very modern and at the same time very conventional and traditional, it is worth asking how

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much counterculture there actually was in 1968. And the answer would be a great deal, that the counterculture was opposed to the political, and that music played a central role.

When 57 participants in the student movement were interviewed about what music they listened to, the answers varied widely. There were those who liked to listen and dance to tropical music, like Roberto Escudero, but also those who listened to Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Simon and Garfunkel. Film-maker Margarita Suzán remembered that as she was being hunted by the police in those years, she listened to "Light My Fire," proof that the counterculture from other countries existed in our midst. This was clearly due to the changes in Mexican society under stabilizing development, since, as Octavio Paz writes at the end of his *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, for the first time, we Mexicans were contemporaries of the rest of the world's inhabitants.

There was a middle class that lived in or had family in the Narvarte Neighborhood, who, of course, listened to the Beatles, to Eric Burdon, to Joan Baez, and who also obviously identified with a series of the Latin American political causes that gave them their specific identity; that is, both realities co-existed. There was also a contradiction: when the first Early Bird satellite television broadcast featured the Beatles playing "All You Need Is Love" amidst a psychedelic scene filled with flowers and hippie symbols, Mexico responded with Lola Beltrán singing "Cucurrucucú paloma." This gesture seemed to strengthen our identity, as though with that, we were saying, "I'm going to be modern, but I don't want to lose what defines me," what was very peculiar to Mexican society.

Coming back to counterculture à la Mexico in the student movement, in addition to the aforementioned ephemeral mural musicalized with *Deep Purple*, we have the graphic arts of '68. If you take into account the diversity of our cultural traditions, it is also there that we will find work from the Popular Graphics Workshop and Adolfo Mejía's engravings, with indigenous faces in resistance and elements of pop culture. Other works are almost post-Vatican II because the Catholic Church was also opening up to a renovation marked by the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, from 1962 to 1965.

Focusing on the issue of sexual freedom associated with the 1968 counterculture, we tend to think about it as something absolute, but it was relative: it had its lim-

its, dictated by the prevailing morality of the time, which also permeated the progressives. In an interview, writer Luis González de Alba, who had been imprisoned in Lecumberri, complained, “Don’t tell me that the student movement was tolerant of homosexuality. Not at all! When somebody came to talk to me in my cell in Cellblock M, my *compañeros* from the Communist Party would meet to censor me. They argued that homosexuality wasn’t revolutionary.”

And this was happening at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. Women also participated in the movement, but we’d have to look at how many were members of the National Strike Council. Among them was Roberta “La Tita” Avendaño Martínez, who had an attitude like movie star María Félix, very empowered and cocky. That is, the ’68 movement did not necessarily put into practice all the countercultural freedoms; but it positioned them as the starting point so many more could be exercised years later.

In that context, and following up with the visual arts, one noteworthy experience was the first contest for experimental film held in 1970. A group of cultural promoters, including playwright Juan José Gurrola and poet Leopoldo Ayala Blanco, opened an existentialist café-concert, The Muses Forum, which miraculously survived the persecution of Mexico City’s mayor, ultra-right-wing Ernesto P. Uruchurtu. About 35 films were presented in the 8mm and super-8mm categories, and Ayala Blanco, who went to the screenings, said that he was very impressed by the fact that all the young people from the ages of 20 to 24 seemed to have agreed to film the same movie: ’68 was very present as a common thread throughout, as something that had also had an impact on the upper layers of society.

Here, counterculture has a very important role to play. A couple of films were key in this contest: *El fin* (The End), by Sergio García Michel, and *Mi casa de altos techos* (My House with the High Ceilings), by David Celestinos. The first is a short a little over eight minutes long that portrays the harmony and decline of a couple with music first by the Rolling Stones and then by the Doors, to finish, paradoxically, with Armando Manzanero.³ The film won the Luis Buñuel Prize.

I think the other film is very important because it deals with the political/countercultural dichotomy in a story about two young art students from Mexico City’s

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San Carlos Academy. They are friends, but they have opposing ideologies: one has a social conscience and is trying to develop committed art, while the other is bearded, dedicated to counterculture, practices Zen meditation, and is depressed by ’68.

This quandary emerged after the ’68 events, this doubt about where we are going: are we moving toward continuing to fight for democratic freedoms through activism or toward escapism in the exercise of the counterculture; are we going to form guerrilla groups or be hippies? In the first half of the 1970s, counterculture played a very important role in the narrative about ’68, always through metaphor, its warhorse. So, when Arturo Ripstein directed *El castillo de la pureza* (The Castle of Purity), in which Claudio Brook played an authoritarian father who imprisoned his family at home, everyone—above all the critics—began to speculate that the character was Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the metaphor for the authoritarian father. In the counterculture, this notion meant that it was not the president who governed, but in a certain sense, it was our own father. The same was the case of the patriarch of *La oveja negra* (The Black Sheep), starring Fernando Soler and Pedro Infante, which shows the impact of an arbitrary, brutal, tyrannical, repressive family head. The parallels with Gustavo Díaz Ordaz abound, given that in his annual government reports, he used to say that we had believed Mexico was an untouchable island, and of course, he wanted it to be one.

In *La montaña sagrada* (The Sacred Mountain) (1973), by Alejandro Jodorowsky, the viewer sees the symbolic force of metaphor and counterculture in its 1970s representation of ’68. This allusion led to the film-maker having to leave the country, since government spies had him under surveillance. I should underline that few representations or artistic images are as eloquent as the scene of the indolent bourgeoisie on their knees in front of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe pretending that they

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don't know what's happening in their country, contrasted with the images of a long line of skinned, crucified individuals, a clear allusion to the sacrifice and murder of students. The surgical tape on their mouths reminds us to the September 13, 1968 Silent March, which happened in the very same country where the bourgeoisie was perfectly aware of what was going on.

The film is very striking. However, when you ask activists about how important this director was to them in the 1970s, you find that almost all of them speak badly of him. They distance themselves from his forms of representation because what predominated at the beginning of the decade was a different logic altogether, that of leftist activism, eliminating the possibility for the counterculture to have its own effect. So, the sources of Latin American radicalism had to be, *a fortiori*, the Latin American struggles, the Cuban Revolution, its leaders, and their plan for transparency.

Along these same lines, a key event for the counterculture, for example, would be the Avándaro Festival in September 1971. Writer Carlos Monsiváis wrote a famous letter from London—which he later clearly said that he regretted having written—referring contemptuously to the young people who listened and danced to songs in English sung by Mexican groups. He called them a bunch of colonials, the first generations of U.S. Americans born in Mexico, who didn't understand the country they were living in and played no part in what was being built there.

Someone who went to Avándaro told me a story that I think is very memorable: in Alfredo Gurrola's film of the festival, in one very strange scene, some young Mexican hippies, with their allusions to Aztec culture, our version of counterculture, are holding a ceremony with copal incense and seem to be meditating. According to the person who told me the story, this is linked to the fact that one

of the concert's MCs asked for "a minute of silence for our dead." Naturally, all the young people accepted this, and, in this case, "our dead" were those from October 2, 1968 and June 10, 1971, just recently murdered, even though the MC was referring to Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

This shows that the counterculture and politics were not so very counterposed at that time. However, the disassociation and confrontation seemed to be a line of thought that many people explored. If you read "Luz externa" (External Light), by José Agustín, later filmed in super8mm, you will encounter the story of a countercultural young man at the beginning of the 1970s who travels from Huautla de Jiménez. He's a macho, trying to hook up with all the little princesses attracted by the hippies, and he wants to do a million things. Along the way, he meets an ex-hippie involved in the radical, revolutionary struggle. This leftist is now critical of the hippies, reproaching them that they get high when what's needed is an exercise of conscience and a revolution. But the other character responds that his revolution is internal.

Positions as distant from each other as this make both worlds' coexisting impossible and remind us that activists in the 1970s were very hard on everything countercultural. In that world of folk music *peñas* and middle-class youngsters singing revolutionary songs, it was very difficult for anyone who ended up being part of the rock milieu of the 1980s. Eblén Macari composed "Yo no nací en la Huasteca" (I Wasn't Born in the Huasteca),⁴ a song that was a banner raised in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the face of those who claimed counterculture was illegitimate. Among its stanzas are the following:

I wasn't born in the Huasteca,
Nor in Tierra Caliente.
For better or for worse,
I was born in this city.

A city southerner,
A product of the Beatles.
That was my folklore:
Being born without a label.

Sometimes I think that it's a blessing
To be a rudderless mestizo.
Therefore, it's a curse
To be born without a label.

It was the complaint of the people who had taken the counterculture on board and experienced it as their own and had opted for rock as a form of expression, a decision that was harshly criticized. It would not be until the 1980s that left opposition music festivals would include rock groups.

That is, this supposed separation between the countercultural view and politics is false and artificial. I will be self-critical: when I wrote *El cine súper 8 en México. 1970-1989* (Super8 Film in Mexico. 1970-1989),⁵ I fell into this same mistake because I included a chapter about countercultural expressions and another about political cinema as though they were two different phenomena. As we have seen, however, politics was profoundly countercultural, and they

were both part of the same cultural matrix. So, this reflection about '68 should lead us to think about the many '68s, allowing us 50 years on to begin to reclaim those other parts of the experience expelled from our memories. **MM**

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Notes

- 1 Fernández de Cevallos is today one of the deacons of the conservative National Action Party. [Editor's Note.]
- 2 <https://www.filmoteca.unam.mx/cinelinea/videos/video37.html>. [Editor's Note.]
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odAk6-2iA3s>. [Editor's Note.]
- 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01wKJoEYVSI>. [Editor's Note.]
- 5 https://issuu.com/filmotecaunam/docs/cine_s-8_prueba2. [Editor's Note.]

NOVEDADES



EDUCACIÓN Y CIENCIA, Y OTRAS PÁGINAS

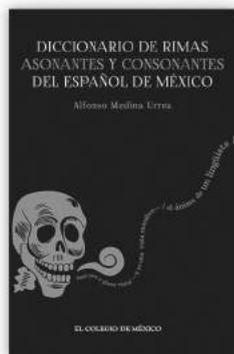
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DE CONTRIBUYENTES Y CONTRIBUCIONES EN LA FISCALIDAD MEXICANA, SIGLOS XVIII-XX

(coedición con la Universidad Veracruzana)

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DICCIONARIO DE RIMAS ASONANTES Y CONSONANTES DEL ESPAÑOL DE MÉXICO

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MILITANTES DE LA IZQUIERDA LATINOAMERICANA EN MÉXICO, 1920-1934. PRÁCTICAS POLÍTICAS, REDES Y CONSPIRACIONES

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