

to defend an archaic principle of authority and later using massive, genocidal, illegal violence. Even if the influence of revolutionary utopian thinking of the time was obvious and inevitable in some movement leaders and participants, the students' list of demands only sought respect for the most elemental civil and political rights, and, perhaps more importantly, expressed moral indignation at a system that treated Mexicans as subjects, as clientele, as masses, but never as real citizens.²

It is not by chance, then, that many analysts have seen in the 1968 student movement the tragic but decisive beginning of the prolonged, difficult Mexican transition to full democracy. Peasants, workers and middle class sectors of the population had mobilized before, and political and intellectual currents had already proclaimed the need to democratize a quasi-single-party system. However, 1968 is cited as the beginning of democratization because, in contrast with other

struggles, this movement put universal civic, not sectorial, demands at the center of its struggle, therefore challenging the very essence of the authoritarianism of the corporatist, patronage-based regime of the Mexican Revolution.

In this sense, it was not at all by chance that university and polytechnic institute students and professors made up the bulk of that great mobilization demanding respect for the rule of law and basic civil liberties and political rights. It was, in effect, the irruption onto the public stage of a modern middle class not included in the corporatist structure of the "regimen of the Mexican Revolution." In many ways these people were economically and culturally privileged, and yet did not see in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) or in the more or less ornamental "opposition parties" of the time a channel to express their demands and interests. But, in addition, because of their situation and cultural level, they could hardly identify with the top-down, patronage-based traditions of the authoritarian corporations that controlled workers, peasants and government employees. That is why the

movement and its demands challenged not only the PRI's intention of monopolizing legitimate politics —maintaining only a decorative pluralism— but also the "principle of authority" on which all the postrevolutionary governments had based themselves. This principle dictated that the population could aspire to having its interests recognized, but only in exchange for submitting organizationally and politically to the regime, and above all, to the president. As a result, any independent social movement,

any attempt to claim what were, strictly speaking, citizens' rights was seen as an intolerable attack against the regime, to be overcome only through cooptation, repression or a combination of the two.

For all these reasons, the 1968 movement can and must be seen as the beginning of the democratic awakening of Mexican society. After its tragic end, many other social layers (workers, peasants, businessmen, middle classes) carried out mobi-



A symbol of the idealism of the 1960s.

lizations and struggles that, one way or another, would recapture the experience and memory of 1968 and diminish the legitimacy of a state that had bloodied its hands October 2 in Tlatelolco. Administrations after the shameful one of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz would make the most diverse efforts to recover that lost legitimacy. Luis Echeverría's so-called "democratic opening," José López Portillo's political-electoral reform and subsequent reforms of electoral legislation and institutions under Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari are largely explicable in this light, as attempts to recover legitimacy for the Mexican state and make the transition from an exclusively apparent democracy to a democracy led by a still-official party.

However, the attempt to maintain control at least of the executive branch, and therefore to make the transition to democracy in small doses, would give way to an extremely uneven, prolonged process which, with the impact of an infinite series of crises and economic-financial mishaps, would cause the progressive deterioration and weaken the legitimacy of a large part of

state institutions. This is how a pluralist party system would emerge, capable of holding truly competitive municipal, state and federal elections in which the PRI would no longer be guaranteed victory. But this party system is also polarized on the basis of the growing, unstoppable discredit of the old official party and the administrations in office instead of on different programmatic proposals. To say it schematically, in today's Mexico, you can either vote for PRI continuity—which a not unimportant percentage of the population still does—or against it and for one of the two interpretations of the failure of the regime of the Mexican Revolution: that of the National Action Party (PAN), which looks at it from the right, with positions linked to Christian Democracy, or that of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which interprets it with a certain “leftist” nostalgia for the golden age of the regime.

This brings us to a second—much less glowing—legacy of the 1968 movement. The tragic way in which this peaceful, legal movement was repressed could only lead to a highly emotionally charged polarization of Mexicans. Although the regime had used violent repression in the past, never before that fateful October 2 had the entire country been eyewitness to an army massacre of helpless demonstrators demanding only respect for their most basic rights. The massacre caused profound suffering among young students and teachers who, because of their place in the educational system, would relatively quickly become central to the formation of Mexican public opinion in the following decades. In many cases these young people saw no alternative but the terrible, bloody guerrilla adventures that would spark the sordid, prolonged dirty war for a good part of the 1970s. The war declared by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) (the heir to a 1970s guerrilla group, the National Liberation Front) is the ominous aftermath of that fratricidal struggle, which, although contained by societal and governmental action, continues to maintain its antisystemic, violent stance.

But this polarization was not limited to those who erroneously took the path of armed struggle. It would affect and, in truth, poison the country's entire political environment, leading to an



The army in the UNAM.

authentic degradation and decomposition of the rules of collective living, sharpening and complicating each new conflict and problem. Paradoxically, that illegal and illegitimate use of force by the government resulted in the government's increasing inability to use even legitimate, legal coercion. This, in turn, would make it possible for increasing insecurity in society and a sharp deterioration in the effectiveness of practically all state institutions. At the same time, this polarization of public life explains the predominance of negative, irresponsible, purely response-based policies on the part of social forces and political parties, which makes Mexico's infant democracy precarious and inefficient.

For all these reasons, serious, objective reflection and research about what the 1968 movement and its tragic end meant

for all Mexicans seems very important. As with other democratizing experiences, Mexican society must overcome the traumas, injuries and resentments caused by the excesses, abuses and crimes of its authoritarian past. A shared and shareable truth about these unfortunate events must be recognized. Passionate polarization must be overcome and give way to healthy, competitive, but civilized, political pluralism. We must recognize that the only way to reconcile ourselves to our history and make peace with ourselves is to leave behind the traditions of the old state of the Revolution—that produced so many abuses—and build a state with social rights capable of fostering a society where massacres, violence and fratricidal struggles among Mexicans will never happen again. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The author is referring to the student demand for the ousting of the police authorities responsible for the July 23 attacks against Vocational High School 5 students, which led to several violent incidents between students and law enforcement officers.

² The six student demands were: 1. Freedom of political prisoners. 2. Discharge of Generals Luis Cueto Ramírez and Raúl Mendiola and Lieutenant Colonel Armando Frías. 3. Disbanding of the *granaderos* riot police, the direct instrument for repression, and the prohibition of any similar bodies in the future. 4. Repeal of Articles 145 and 145b of the Penal Code (making “social disruption” a crime), legal instruments for aggression. 5. Compensation for the families of the dead and wounded, the victims of attacks from July 26 on. 6. Clear delineation of responsibility for repression and vandalism by authorities through the police, the *granaderos* and the army.