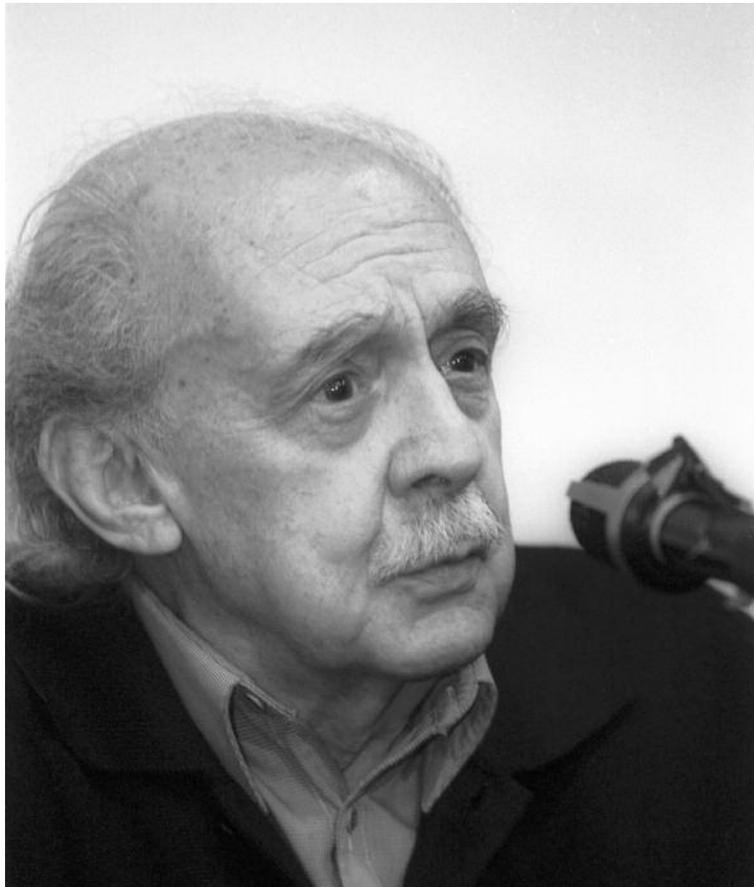


Gastón García Cantú (1917-2004)

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Gastón García Cantú was born in the city of Puebla, November 3, 1917. After studying law, he began to teach at the old State College High School. His participation in the defense of the Dean's House, one of this colonial city's most emblematic buildings, forced him to leave his

native state.¹ He decided to go to Mexico City, where he began working as a journalist as co-editor of the cultural supplement *México en la cultura* (Mexico in Culture), then headed up by journalist and researcher Fernando Benítez, who revolutionized the concept of cultural supplements.

From 1961 to 1966, García Cantú worked for different government institutions, such as the National Indigenist Institute and the

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Ministry of Public Works in the areas of information and publications. In 1966, he was invited to the UNAM by Rector Javier Barros Sierra to take over the General Office of Cultural Dissemination. Among his initiatives, we should remember the creation of the magazines *Punto de Partida* (Starting Point), which writer Margo Glantz enthusiastically coordinated, and *Controversia* (Controversy), in which a group of young academics concerned with different political issues participated. We should also remember that he broadened out the literary project *Voz Viva* (Live Voices) to *Voz Viva de América Latina* (Live Voices from Latin America).²

A fundamental achievement of his administration was the professionalization of the UNAM Philharmonic Orchestra under the batons of Eduardo Mata and Armando Zayas, who opened up spaces like the School of Philosophy and Letters Justo Sierra Auditorium, among others, making the greatest music of all time available to the university community.

Those of us who were studying in the UNAM at that time remember that the campus had the same lay-out its originators had given it in 1954. The Cultural Dissemination Offices occupied the tenth floor of the Rector's Tower and other cultural spaces like University Radio, for example, were near the schools. This immediacy, this contact between the research and dissemination institutions must surely have increased the spirit of belonging to the university itself; and Gastón García Cantú, with an unprecedented spirit of openness, facilitated practically unrestricted access to these cultural spaces not only to the university community, but to the populace in general.

During the heated months of the 1968 student movement, García Cantú headed up the UNAM Information Office, which he led with intense vision and commitment to the university. This office put out communiqués about the development of what was then a

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movement of practically unsuspected repercussions. Those months, those tense and intense days and hours are preserved in some of the pages written by our academics, by our university poets like Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, and in a *Voz Viva* recording of Rector Barros Sierra's words at the end of the first demonstration (taped by researcher Raúl Hellmer Pinkham with the tape recorder he was never without).

In those unforgettable, unrepeatable moments emerged a fundamental work for understanding Rector Barros Sierra's behavior and García Cantú's thinking: 1968: *Conversaciones con Gastón García Cantú* (1968: Conversations with Gastón García Cantú), a long dialogue that has been reprinted several times. In one paragraph, the book reads, "The conflict begun in August 1968...was the attempt at freedom given the consciousness of tyranny," a reflection of these intellectuals' position vis-à-vis the causes of the student movement, a true watershed in the history of social movements.³

That attempt at freedom was something that concerned García Cantú. A brief look at some of the titles of his works shows that in *El pensamiento de la reacción mexicana. Historia documental (1810-1962)* (The Thinking of Mexican Reactionaries. Documentary History [1810-1962]), in *Las invasiones norteamericanas en México* (U.S. Invasions of Mexico), and even in *Los intelectuales y el poder* (Intellectuals and Power), he reflects about the moments in which the country, its institutions and the legal order have been threatened, assaulted, by clashing ideological tendencies, by radical groups or by foreign

A brief look at the titles of some of García Cantú's books shows that freedom was one of his main concerns.

powers. Thus, with a masterful power of summary, he writes in the prologue to the first work:

In 154 years, we Mexicans fought 11 years for our independence from Spain; 35 years to establish Republican institutions; [we experienced] sieges from Europe; the separation of the vast territory of Texas; a war of conquest, the result of which was that they seized more than half our territory; three years of civil war to impose respect for the liberal Constitution; four years of French intervention; two dictatorships for 34 years (almost three years in Santa Anna's two terms and 31 years under Porfirio Díaz); and more than 100 armed invasions, raids and attacks by the United States.⁴

Another facet of this high-level intellectual endeavor was teaching, which occupied García Cantú from 1972 to 1976 in the International Relations Center and the Political Studies Center of what is now the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences.

By invitation of then-Minister of Public Education Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, he became the director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History between 1976 and 1982. Under his direction, the excavation and conservation of the Central Temple in downtown Mexico City was completed, as well as the establishment of the boundaries of the city's Historic Center and intense work to recover hundreds of archaeological sites in the Gulf of Mexico.

Once he left the chancy world of the public administration, García Cantú went

back to work that was more gratifying academically and intellectually. For more than ten years he produced a Saturday radio program at the Mexican Radio Institute station. He was also a distinguished contributor to the *Excélsior* daily newspaper and went every week to his hometown, Puebla, to give series of lectures to students.

He died in Mexico City last April 3 before he could see the finished version of his book *Temas mexicanos* (Mexican Themes), published by the Vicente Lombardo Toldano Center for Philosophical, Political and Social Studies, a work which came out posthumously.

Consistent with his political thinking and as a return to his roots, he donated his splendid library to his *alma mater*, the Autonomous University of Puebla.

An intellectual of many talents, historian, university professor and official by choice and journalist by decision, Gastón García Cantú leaves a legacy that deserves to be remembered. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The building was so named because it had previously belonged to a dean of the Puebla cathedral. When a proposal was made to demolish it to make way for a movie theater that is now next door, a battle ensued over this cultural patrimony. Only part of the house was salvaged. In 1953, murals that had been hidden for several years were discovered and their historic value made public; this was the weightiest argument to prevent the building's total demolition. [Editor's Note.]

² These projects brought together some of the most important representatives of Latin American literature to tape readings of their own work, recordings produced by the UNAM. [Editor's Note.]

³ Javier Barros Sierra, 1968: *Conversaciones con Gastón García Cantú* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1972), p. 11.

⁴ Gastón García Cantú, *El pensamiento de la reacción mexicana. Historia documental (1810-1962)* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, S.A., 1965), p. 7.