

1968 40 Years Later

Carlos Sevilla*

To understand the significance of the 1968 Mexican student movement, we have to start by mentioning some of the outstanding characteristics of the society which gave rise to it.

The most significant trait of 1968 Mexico was the noticeable spirit of change in the air and the economic and social advances of the previous three decades, a process which—with slight exaggeration—was referred to as the “Mexican miracle.” The fact that Mexico was chosen as the site for that year’s Olympic Games was a recognition of those achievements. From 1930 to 1970, the country’s population increased 146 percent, going from 19.6 million to 48.2 million. Even more surprising was the rise in the gross domestic product (GDP), which increased ninefold, going from 319.03 billion to 2.74 trillion pesos, calculated in 2004 pesos.

These figures make it possible to conclude that Mexican society had taken a great leap forward toward modernization: the population not only grew and rapidly increased its living standards, but also improved its educational levels and contact with the world. It stopped being eminently agrarian to become a more urban society. And this situates the nature of the problem implicit in the student movement: the



Students and teachers arrested in 1968.

clash between a modern society in development and a pre-modern political system, built between 1920 and 1940 by the political class made up of the so-called “revolutionary family.” It also allows us to observe the historic drama of that political class, whose leadership was a determining factor in satisfying the social demands posed by the Revolution and achieving industrial development. It was precisely those policies’ success that gave rise to a new society in which that political class stopped being functional and faced the need to reinvent itself. This would have meant leaving behind authoritarianism, tribal culture, corruption and illegality. Despite the fact that the transition from reform policies to development policies, carried out after 1940, implied a change similar to the one demanded in 1968, the government’s decision was to maintain authoritarianism at all costs. The results are

*Ex political prisoner and member of the National Strike Council in 1968. Professor at the School of Political and Social Sciences, UNAM.

Mexican society had taken a great leap forward toward modernization. It became more urban. And this situates the problem implicit in the student movement: the clash between a modern society in development and a pre-modern political system.

clear to the eye: no one talks any longer about a Mexican miracle, except to refer to something that might stop the process of decomposition of a state incapable of fulfilling its main function: guaranteeing public security and order.

The aim of this essay is to analyze the development of the student movement and its outcome, as well as to evaluate its impact on the country's evolution. To do that, I will use an analogy from the theater.

CAST

Students

Played mostly by junior high school, high school and university students enrolled in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), who were part of the new middle classes that turned these schools, previously the domain of the children of the oligarchy, into mass institutions.

Government

Played by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), who concentrated all power, exercising authoritarian presidentialism reinforced by the development of the conglomerate of companies and institutions through which the state guided the economy.

Party Activists

Political party activists, mainly on the left, among whom the most important were those inspired by the Soviet model, with their two currents: communists and former communists. Then there were the members of small sects of Maoists, Trotskyists and Fidelistas, plus, lastly, some members of the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary

Party (PRI) and even some members of the so-called para-state parties, like the Popular Socialist Party (PPS).

Society

All the classes and groupings whose support was sought by the different political currents and interest groups. Most of society accepted governmental authority, but in recent years, the way in which it governed had been increasingly questioned.

ACT ONE: REPRESSION OF STUDENTS AS A DETONATOR

The student conflict was sparked by police repression of two groups of high school students engaged in a series of street fights in the Ciudadela Plaza on July 23, 1968. This kind of repression was nothing new to the life of the city. The different thing about this occasion was how harsh and sweeping it was. This caused indignation among the students involved, who decided to protest and seek the support of their fellows. After deliberating for two days, they decided to march to the National Palace to present their protest directly before the president and ask him to punish those who had violated their rights and broken the law.

The march was scheduled for the afternoon of July 26, a day on which the sympathizers of the Cuban Revolution celebrated the anniversary of the assault on the Moncada Barracks, also with a march. Although the two contingents left from different points, they met up at the Alameda,¹ making it possible for some party activists to join the protest. But nobody made it to the Zócalo square because the groups that went down the streets from the Alameda toward the Zócalo were brutally dispersed in many clashes, which degenerated into disturbances that would spread throughout the city's entire Historic Center. These would last until two days later when the government used a bazooka to destroy the door of the historic building housing Public High School No. 1. That was how the authorities finally subdued what they considered to be the general headquarters of the students in struggle.

At no time did the president consider the possibility of granting the students' demands because he himself had given the order to ratchet up measures for maintaining order: for that reason, he left those measures in the hands of those who aspired to succeed him in office.

Luis Echeverría, then minister of the interior, limited himself to authorizing the march, calculating that, if a conflict broke out, it would discredit Alfonso Corona del Rosal, the city's mayor, demonstrating his supposed lack of control. Corona, who was very bold, had the trash cans lining the streets on the march route filled with stones, and sent in city cleaning crew workers as provocateurs, ordering them to break store windows, loot and start fights. At the same time, he had a group of Communist Party (PCM) members arrested and then presented them as those responsible for the disturbances and participants in a trumped-up conspiracy against Mexico. Civil society, represented by businessmen's organizations, the Catholic Church, the media, unions and other professional associations, used different means to show their support for the government and express their rejection of the agitators and "fake students." Only intellectuals and artists supported the students. The most backward circles of the administration thought that by chastising the young people and jailing the Communists, the youth "uproar," as Díaz Ordaz called it, had been quelled and its complete disappearance was a matter of days or, at most, one or two weeks.

ACT TWO: THE RESURGENCE OF THE RESISTANCE

The government had not yet finished proclaiming the break-up of the youth protest when indications appeared of its resurgence with bigger actions.

Parallel to the official and semi-official voices that praised to the heavens the new "saviors of the homeland," other voices began to be heard: those of the dissidents, among which the loudest was that of the then-president of the UNAM, Javier Barros Sierra, who publicly denounced the bazooka attack on the high school that left an unknown number of victims and the destruction of its centuries-old door. At the rally he called on the University City campus, Barros Sierra alerted listeners against the dangers of prevailing policy and called on students to defend the university and its values. In addition, he raised the flag to half mast in mourning and later headed up the first student demonstration. The march wound through the southern part of Mexico City, applauded by local residents and under the watchful eye of government secret agents, supported by mobile strike forces discretely stationed a few blocks away.

The dissidents' voices began to be heard, among which the loudest was that of UNAM president, Javier Barros Sierra. At the rally he called on the University City campus, he exhorted students to defend the university and its values.

For their part, and contrary to official expectations, the student victims of government violence did not abandon their demands. They went to their fellow students to inform them of what had happened and ask for their support. The answer was quick in coming: after being informed, they called assemblies in which they agreed to halt classes, form struggle committees, protest the repression and take to the streets to denounce the violation of the law. A distinctive feature of these students making their debut on the political scene was their determination to defend citizens' rights, which, though protected in the Constitution, had really never been respected by Mexican authorities, something known as the "simulated democracy" that dated back to the era of President Porfirio Díaz. Meanwhile, in their naiveté, the students were willing to risk everything to make those rights a reality. That naïve determination would give the movement an unprecedented capacity for struggle: instead of surrendering to the authorities or running away in face of the threat of repression, they decided to resist injustice.

Although it has become fashionable today to present the activists of the time as experienced fighters for democracy, the truth is that all the leftist activists were trying to make the revolution or at least prepare the conditions for its victory. That is why they were so enthusiastic about the forms of organization that emerged spontaneously in the schools: struggle committees, strike councils, flying political brigades, political guerrilla tactics, coordinating councils, etc., that these young people associated with the soviets of revolutionary Russia and that they tried to head up. In the National Strike Council (CNH), the Young Communists and former Young Communists began to compete for hegemony. The activists from other currents joined the struggle committees and often took responsibility for writing and making the propaganda materials, participating intensely in the flying political brigades. However, the party activists were never able to lead the movement, which at all times maintained its spontaneity and creativity; and this clashed with the party organizations and activists' bureaucratic and even

Contrary to official expectations, the student victims of government violence did not abandon their demands. They went to their fellow students to inform them of what had happened and ask for their support.

contradictory culture and practices. That is why Octavio Paz called the rebel students “unconscious democrats,” arguing that the students demanded making public issues public. By contrast, the party activists, guided by their bureaucratic culture, wanted to subject the movement to capricious proposals they imposed through secret manipulation and “packing the meetings.”

ACT THREE: THE IGNOMINIOUS CONCLUSION

In August, the movement spread throughout the country, and in the capital there were several increasingly large demonstrations. Enthusiastic popular support was growing. The student flying political brigades had penetrated all spheres of society, and many took actions, in addition to informing, that tightened their links to society, like cultural activities in public plazas, in parks, in workplaces, churches and schools, where the young people arrived accompanied by singers who sang about the movement and the prevailing political situation. They added dancers, poetry recitation, actors and painters, creating an atmosphere of renovation, fiesta-like, that spread throughout the city.

The movement did not fade away as the government had predicted; rather, it was the administration that began to become isolated. Some thought the authorities had already lost the battle and would end up at least recognizing some of the student demands by firing those responsible for the repression or freeing the political prisoners. This would have been a good starting point for beginning a process of political liberation. However, this kind of reasoning was completely alien to Díaz Ordaz’s authoritarian thinking and that of his inner circle, which manifested itself in the demagogic campaign the president ordered based on a supposed outrage against the national flag during the August 28 demonstration. Later, the authorities dispersed the vigil in the main Zócalo square that had been called to await the president’s

annual report to the nation. Lastly, during the address itself, the president clearly threatened to use the full force of the state to reestablish order and reaffirmed his political creed, which allowed for no concessions. Díaz Ordaz stated that the administration would not succumb to pressure because doing so was not governing, but “opening the door to anarchy, since, once the government cedes to one group, everyone will demand the same treatment and all authority disappears.” Events and the president’s statements did not augur well, and it seemed clear that the movement needed to prepare to deal with the threats. Everything was moving forward with the tempo of a tragedy in which each character was walking blindfolded toward his/her destiny.

Some of the most perceptive observers and activists clearly foresaw what was coming. Writer José Revueltas, a member of the School of Philosophy and Letters struggle committee described the movement’s situation in this way: “They have put the barrel of their revolver to the back of our heads,” and suggested retreating to limit the damage of the imminent offensive. It was agreed then to propose to the assemblies putting an end to the strike and designing a strategy to reorganize the movement and prepare for a long-term struggle. However, the proposal was rejected and the assemblies reiterated their determination to carry the resistance to its ultimate consequences. When the activists heading up the CNH, who had previously agreed to the retreat, saw that the assemblies rejected the proposal, they decided to echo the rank and file and, without a second thought, forgot their role as leaders. Vain as they were, they concentrated on developing their own personality cults. This disarmed the movement, leaving it without warning of the coming storm.

The government, for its part, revealed its criminal ineptitude even in the design and execution of the repression. Based on the strange hypothesis that the movement was made up of a majority of good, but stupid students, manipulated by a group of “perverse agitators,” the authorities came to the conclusion that they could put a stop to it simply by arresting and jailing the latter. That was the basis for their spectacular occupation of University City, where it arrested more than 2,000, but only a dozen or so leaders among them.

The student protest was not silenced. It grew and became more militant, which put the government in the position of either having to review its entire conception about the movement or making the leap to the savage decision to drown it in blood. It chose the second path, consistent with Díaz Ordaz’s political creed, according to which the prin-

ciple of authority simply had to be exercised regardless of the cost.

The Tlatelolco massacre was coldly plotted by Díaz Ordaz, Luis Echeverría and other criminals, without the knowledge of the army and the majority of the cabinet. Many medium- and high-level government officials personally regretted and even rejected the crime, but, curiously, nobody did so aloud. The moral decomposition of the political class had gone so far that officials seemed to be chorusing to Díaz Ordaz the well-known phrase, “with you ever, unto infamy.” But their archaic conception of what constituted authority was not only evidence of moral degradation but also of political backwardness.

FIRST EPILOGUE: THE BEGINNING OF UNINTERRUPTED CRISES

The bloodbath broke the movement’s back, but it did not resolve the historic contradiction between modern society and the anachronistic political system the students were denouncing. The government’s bet on extreme authoritarianism soon began to produce regressive results. The first was deciding the presidential succession in favor of Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976), an obscure, sinister figure who emerged from the dark bureaucratic depths of the state, and who, once in power, made every effort to lead Mexico to lower and lower stages of morality and development. Echeverría has the doubtful honor of having begun the recurring six-year-term, cumulative economic, political and social crises.

The bloodbath, however, did not prevent a handful of students and party activists from deciding to continue to fight for their rights and for respect for the law. Brave, self-sacrificing young people who knew that they could not beat the forces at the government’s service on their own.

When the new administration took office, the regime’s ideologue, Jesús Reyes Heróles, developed the idea, which later became dominant, of carrying out a political reform that would make room in the system for dissidents via the elections, to put an end to the violence. This came about in the following decade and was an important achievement of the long march to democracy: real parties were organized; real electoral competition was developed; and political liberties were broadened out.

This did not mean that a real highway to democracy opened up; new actors, interests and factors took center stage

The moral decomposition
of the political class had gone
so far that officials seemed to be chorusing to
President Díaz Ordaz the well-known phrase,
“with you ever, unto infamy.”

on the new, more complex national political scene, elements that the currents that emerged from ’68 have taken a long time to decipher. Until very recently, it was not public knowledge that there was a devious plan behind Reyes Heróles’s reform. Only recently it was revealed by Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, who said that Reyes Heróles had “sold” the idea of the reform to José López Portillo (1976-1982) and company with the argument that it was not necessary to liquidate or jail the dissidents because that would turn them into martyrs. It would be better to put them in a golden cage that they would enjoy and that would end by discrediting them: the addiction to the public teat, with the enormous privileges and incomes of high-level bureaucrats.

Although this procedure was only developed on a large scale during the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), with the scandalous increase of the budget for financing political parties, it had already begun to be experimented with at the time of the mid-term elections for Congress in 1979. Many of the deputies elected on the former PCM ticket, who suddenly had hitherto undreamed-of incomes, were happy to accept their leaders’ proposal to hand over a large part of their wages to their organization. But curiously enough, at the end of the legislative session, many deputies had left the ranks of the party. That is, they had taken the bait. Another illustrative example was the first reaction to the increase: both the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the National Action Party (PAN) considered it obscene. The PAN announced that it would return a large part of the surplus resources; the PRD said it had invested them in school implements and other items to distribute among the poor. However, the following year, both parties demanded a bigger increase.

Greed and corruption had been let loose. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This park is in downtown Mexico City, next to the Fine Arts Palace. [Editor’s Note.]