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Leonardo Curzio*

The University, 50 Years after the 1968 Student Movement

Interview with UNAM Rector Dr. Enrique Graue

LEONARDO CURZIO: Thank you very much, Rector Graue, for giving this interview to *Voices of Mexico*. Let me begin the conversation with a very specific question about what 1968 meant to the university. Fifty years later, it is clear that for the university community, its students, and its rector, the UNAM played a central role on two levels: its defense of freedoms and its constructive safeguarding of autonomy. What is the importance of these two issues in the construction of today's Mexico?

ENRIQUE GRAUE: We must remember first that '68 was a year that had a huge impact not only on the university, but on the whole country. We also have to remember the

cost to institutions of higher learning like the National Polytechnic Institute. And what's more, we cannot forget that it was a year in which young people the world over sought greater freedom, spaces for expression, and less government interference in private lives.

In this context, it's natural that young people responded to police repression. They also did so with an enormous capacity for organization and mobilization that sought not only to put an end to authoritarianism by a state with absolutely rigid structures, but also to guarantee greater freedoms for all. In that sense, '68 was not a purely defensive movement.

With regard to the National University as an institution, the obvious violation of its autonomy put it in a very delicate position. However, it also meant that the authorities, headed by UNAM Rector Barros Sierra, and the mobilized

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students identified with each other. If the bazooka attack on the colonial door of the San Ildefonso [school] caused enormous indignation, the army's entry into University City made more and more people join the movement and empathize with the students.

In the face of the state's attacks on the university, Rector Barros Sierra behaved in a way that should be acknowledged, just as has been the case over the last 50 years. On the one hand, he was able to read the magnitude of the threat to the UNAM and understand the absolute necessity of remaining firm in his defense of its autonomy. But he also clearly identified with the reasons that had made the student movement grow. These are not unrelated issues: a national, autonomous university must guarantee its students complete rights and freedoms, rights and freedoms that were being violated.

'68 was a movement that involved important social and political issues and that transformed the way the citizenry understood our country. This has a natural impact on the way in which we understand rights and freedoms, and how we conceive the relationship between the citizenry and the government. After '68, this changed forever. Starting in '68, the rigid structure of a hegemonic-party regime changed and in the long run would end by collapsing, opening up spaces for political participation from other spheres of society.

I think autonomy was crucial at that time and it continues to be now. The autonomy of an institution like the university guarantees the education of critical, free citizens; they are the ones who pushed through the changes in those years and they continue to do it now; they are the ones who demand more freedoms and rights and who make the state structures and the forms of exercising power flexible.

LC: Please tell us about the activities planned by the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center, which is itself the emblematic site of that turbulent year.



The UNAM Cultural Dissemination Coordinating Office and the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center developed a series of activities to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 student movement. Last March, we launched a program that includes more than a hundred events in different venues that will conclude in January next year.

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The activities range from exhibits of visual art, concerts, dance performances, radio documentaries, a publishing project, and an architectural tour, to book launches, lectures, courses, and workshops.

The venues are also diverse: the House on the Lake, the Tlatelolco University Cultural Center, the Echo Experimental Museum, the El Chopo University Museum, the University Contemporary Art Museum, and the Nezahualcōyotl Hall, among others.

I want to emphasize two events: first of all, the exhibition "Citizenries in Movement," a digital collection of documents, images, and recordings about the social, political, and cultural movements from 1968 until today that have fostered the recognition of rights in Mexico. This is slated for October. The other was in the last week of September: the International Colloquium M-68. Citizenries in Movement hosted outstanding academics, intellectuals, and creators to think critically together with different protagonists of the movement and young students about the 1968 student movement.

LC: I have seen that during this 50-year celebration an attempt has been made to ensure that our university does not overshadow what was happening at other educational institutions. I understand that a consortium of universities has been formed that has been working on this all year. What is your assessment of this inter-institutional dialogue?



It seems to me that all the young people who actively participated in the movement must be recognized equally. Naturally, the UNAM and Polytechnic students receive the most mentions because they were the first to organize and because violence took place on our campuses. But students from other institutions also played an equally important role. In that sense, '68 belongs to that entire generation of students. It is also true that the University City became a refuge for many and was the place where a large number of assemblies were held, pamphlets were written . . . in short, it operated as a center for organization until it was taken over by the army.

From the start, we knew that commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of '68 should be a joint effort and the result has been very positive. When so many institutions work together with a common goal, not only is the offering in terms of events enriched, but also, many pieces of history and experiences of '68 are recovered. Personally, for me it has been an extraordinary experience.

On the other hand, the institutions of higher learning are better when they work together toward a common goal. The result has been an extremely varied program that includes lectures, the visual arts, dance, theater, and film, just to mention some of the cultural activities, and a program designed for people to see the multiple aspects of a series of events that undoubtedly transformed the relationship between government and society, with an irreversible impact on the country.

LC: An enormous dispute still exists even 50 years later about the history, about the assignation of responsibilities, and I suppose that an investigation is still pending. At the UNAM, we have specialized centers and researchers who've studied that year from different angles. Could we say that today it is a historical event and that, therefore, we can look at it with the serenity of someone analyzing the nineteenth-century Reform Laws, for example? Or does it continue to be a political event that still sparks animosity?



I think it has always been a historical event. That is, any event that transforms the life of a country, that opens up spaces, that changes the way people exercise rights and freedoms, is a historical event in and of itself and deserves to be studied, as you say, from different angles.

I also think that not having concluded an investigation that clearly assigned responsibility means that a part of the story is incomplete; and that's why it's still cause for a great deal of debate. There is a huge volume of literature, photographic material, film, and magazine articles that make it possible to reconstruct the events up to a certain point. But only a profound legal investigation could have provided certainty about what happened then. In that sense, for many people, justice has not been served.

LC: I would ask you to share with our readers the possible links or intellectual activities that can come out of remem-

bering these 50 years with some universities in the United States and Canada. I'm asking you this because in Mexico, we tend to see history exclusively in our own terms, and as though things had only happened in our country. But it is well known that that pro-civil rights, anti-racist, and peace movements also existed in U.S. universities.



It seems to me that what I mentioned about young people in a previous answer also responds to this question. Everywhere in the world, young people try to broaden freedoms and question the validity of the rules and their relationship with those in authority, including that of the state. In that sense, there's an implicit identification that goes beyond the content of the movements. For example, those who have seen the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics feel one of those forms of identification with them and their cause. The vast majority of young university students reject impositions and mandates that have not been sufficiently backed up with arguments. This is similar in the United States, Canada, or any other country; and, in that sense, I don't agree that we see history exclusively in our own terms; at least young people don't.

LC: Finally, Rector Graue, I would like to ask you what university autonomy means 50 years later in a completely different context.



Autonomy continues to be a way of defining the relationship between the university and the state; it marks the limits of what the government can do inside the university. Also, autonomy guarantees that decisions about university management and education are made exclusively by those who are familiar with and experience the university day-to-day.

In addition, autonomy guarantees a unique space for exercising freedom of expression, which helps in guaranteeing the education of critical, reflective citizens, capable of understanding the nation's most urgent problems. It implies giving students a universal, tolerant, diverse education that provides them with the competencies needed for dealing with changing situations. Autonomy also means self-organization with social commitment, transparency, and being accountable to society.

LC: Thank you very much for talking to *Voices of Mexico*. **MM**