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Lessons for Today

This article presents my memories of the 1968 student movement; my viewpoint is that of a young man who intensely experienced every moment.¹ I will put the events in their social context to situate their origins; then I will mention certain data and relevant events that, by their nature, make for a point of transition; I will explain a few more personal experiences; and finally, I conclude with an overall reflection and look at their implications today.

The Social and University Context

In the months from July to October 1968, the authoritarianism of then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) reached a critical point. This was the final stage of a process that had begun in the 1940s, a process with big milestones,

such as the adoption of what was called the economic stabilization model and intense social mobility due to different factors; outstanding among the latter were higher educational levels among most of the population, since Mexico had previously had high illiteracy levels. The economic model was framed in a mechanism for industrializing the country, which prompted internal migration to the more developed regions such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Nuevo León. Nevertheless, although certain glimmers of development could be discerned, it was limited compared to the growth of other years.

In 1968, I was studying actuarial science in the UNAM School of Science. This major was usually considered rigid in the sense that most graduates did not get involved in social causes. It was also common to hear that people studied sciences because they “knew math,” and therefore their intellectual level was “higher.” For some people, this explained that they were apathetic regarding the country’s social movements. Despite this, some groups were interested and became involved in social movements, although their participation was not as visible as

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those in the Schools of Political and Social Sciences, Economics, and Philosophy and Letters.

Among the few active groups in the School of Sciences were those drawn to the ideas of the Communist Party, the Trotskyists, and a few independents; I was among the latter. The independents organized meetings to discuss not only school-related issues, but also national issues and the need for public participation to solve them. All of this was rather marginal, since the School of Sciences was a complex place, dominated by the Catholic, anti-communist ultra-right (Opus Dei; the “Tecos,” who operated out of the Autonomous University of Guadalajara; and the MURO [the Renovating Orientation University Movement, associated with the National Action Party, or PAN]). This meant that the few general assemblies held were carried out against the will of these forces.

What Lit the Fuse

Several events became pillars of how the movement played out, but the July 22 clash between students from the Isaac Ochoterena High School (part of the UNAM) and the Vocational Schools Number 2 and 5 (the “Vocas,” part of the National Polytechnic Institute [IPN]) over a football game, and two gangs, The Spiders and the Ciudadelos, undoubtedly lit the fuse.

The next day, the Isaac Ochoterena High students took their revenge by throwing rocks at Vocational School Number 2. In response, Voca 2 and 5 students marched to the UNAM high school to settle the score. When the Voca students returned to their respective campuses, the riot police and Company 19 metropolitan police, who until then had not intervened, gave them a beating. The Voca 5 students took refuge in their school, but the riot police pursued them and even went through the school indiscriminately hitting men and women professors also. Dozens of young people were arrested.

As a result, on July 24, the Executive Committee of the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences made a statement supporting the National Polytechnic Institute students, who had stopped classes to hold a rally in the Casco de Santo Tomás area to protest the riot police attack on the Voca 5 students. The UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences then declared itself on indefinite strike. At the same time, the School of Sciences was hold-

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ing its first assemblies to raise awareness about the events, with increasing student participation that filled the auditoriums, and beginning to organize student information brigades. The brigades mobilized daily with the agreement of bus drivers who they paid with the funds raised by passing the hat on the street and in buses.

The Brigades and Their Links to Society

The brigades were fundamental for the movement: that was the way the students began to come into close contact with the public. Their aim was to hold rallies not only in industrial areas, but everywhere possible. At first, we organizers and participants were seen as people who only wanted to defend student interests and counter the constant media campaign against us. However, in the following months, the movement began to be more structured and win over working people and then other sectors of the public, despite the exhaustive attempts by the official media, right-wing civilian groups, and the authorities to discredit it.

In the following days, the students continually clashed with security forces. On July 27, these confrontations took place in the area around the San Ildefonso College. The next day the IPN Strike Coordinating Committee, representatives of several UNAM schools, the Chapingo Agricultural School, and the Normal School held a meeting where they discussed the possibility of striking on all campuses until the following demands were met:

- 1) Disappearance of the National Technical Students Federation, the University, University Cheerleaders [association],² and the MURO;
- 2) Expulsion of the students who were members of these groups or the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI);
- 3) Compensation from the government for injured students and the families of students who had died;
- 4) Freedom of all detained students;

- 5) Disappearance of the Riot Police and other repressive police forces; and
- 6) Repeal of Article 145 of the Penal Code, which deals with the crime of “social dissolution.”^{3 4}

After these events, the movement began to be violently repressed. I was personally involved in two examples of this. The first began with the detention of a few *compañeras* (one, the wife of a student leader), who were jailed in Santa Martha Acatitla. The UNAM School of Science immediately organized and a bus full of students went to the jail to ask that the young women be freed. But before they arrived, other students who had gone ahead in cars sent word that the place was surrounded by riot police, and that therefore it was better to return to the school to decide on alternative action. On the way back, the participants invited the public to join the movement, explaining the reasons, but also the effects that it could have.

I was in charge of the brigade, and suddenly, in the blink of an eye, we were surrounded by *granaderos* (riot police) armed with truncheons and shields. I realized that what was coming was an inevitable, unequal brawl, so I had no choice but to shout at the top of my lungs, “Get out and run!” That afternoon, Salvador Martínez della Rocca and other students who were ahead of us in returning to the School of Sciences were detained before getting to the Tlalpan campus. That was when the order to systematically arrest people was carried out.

In mid-September 1968, we organized another brigade that headed for a market in Xochimilco. When we arrived, we were again surrounded by *granaderos*. However, this time, people supported us in solidarity and began throwing fruit and vegetables at the police to drive them away; they opened up an escape route for us, protected us, and bid farewell to us with applause. This moved us greatly and filled us with hope, so, as we returned to University City, we once again explained to passersby the importance of the movement.

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Finally, the sad morning of October 2 arrived. By then our brigades had thinned out. That day, at the School of Sciences, we organized to go to the Three Cultures Plaza. Once there, we could see how flares were falling from a helicopter; that’s when they began to surround the plaza. I crossed paths with Gilberto Guevara Niebla, who said, “We’ll see you at the school. We’re going to have a meeting to organize.” Unfortunately, Gilberto never arrived; I got there because I left by San Juan de Letrán Avenue (today, Lázaro Cárdenas Central Boulevard), which was the first exit the army closed down. When I got to Peralvillo, I was protected by local gang members; this kept me safe during the clashes. Then I went back to the area and the students outside the Three Cultures Plaza were holding protest rallies while the army occupied that part of Tlatelolco.

Undoubtedly, the Olympic Games that were about to be held were the perfect pretext for unleashing the constant repression against those who were mobilized, but also to justify the authoritarianism against young people. Nevertheless, society’s solidarity was something the authorities had analyzed and tried to repress in the ways we were already familiar with, since the movement had awakened the interest of several sectors of the public. That is why the Díaz Ordaz government urgently needed to dissolve it as soon as possible, before it reached dimensions that the regime could no longer control.

The indignation in Mexican society at the events of October 2 was felt worldwide. This could be seen directly, first, at the Olympics, when the public booed the president when he inaugurated the games. The second time was at the 1970 soccer World Cup, also held in Mexico, where something very similar happened.

Final Thoughts

Our memory of the student movement is, on the one hand, that of constant repression, marginalization, criminalization, and stigmatization of Mexican youth. Unfortunately, this situation continues today, 50 years later. It is worth visualizing what we are experiencing now in light of this movement, since approximately 33 000 people are missing in our country and a considerable number of them are victims of forced disappearance.

1968 has left an eternal mark on Mexico’s collective memory. Today more than ever before, we must put that

at the center of the debate, not only to commemorate the 50 years of that tragedy, but also to analyze and visualize many social, security, labor, and educational problems, etc. Their solution must never again go hand in hand with repression and genocide. ■■■

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Notes

1 I want to thank actuary Dalia Reyes García for her contribution to this article.

2 This group originally existed to cheer on the teams at university sports events, but it turned into shock troops at the service of the authorities to repress any attempt at rebellion or protest movement, particularly if it was organized by students. Since that time, being called a “porro” (or “cheerleader”) is one of the biggest insults that can be hurled at a university student. [Editor’s Note.]

3 “Chocan dos marchas estudiantiles con la policía,” *Gaceta UNAM*, Special Supplement no. 2, 2018.

4 Mexico City’s Penal Code Article 145 and 145b, passed in 1941 at the beginning of World War II, condemned to from two to six years in prison anyone who made propaganda that tended to “disturb public order,” understood as tending to produce rebellion, sedition, or a riot (<https://mexico.leyderecho.org/disolucion-social/>). In practice, this was used to imprison anyone attending meetings of three or more people, deemed to threaten public order. [Editor’s Note.]