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Not Even all the Bullets Can Beat Us The Literature on '68

The literature about Mexico's 1968 student movement is vast and the types of works, very diverse. They range from historical, critical reflection in a huge number of essays and books dealing with these iconic events from different perspectives and disciplines, to almost all genre of literature (outstanding among which are a few novels and a great deal of poetry) and a huge proliferation of chronicles, chronologies, memoirs, and personal accounts of the events by participants themselves or journalists who interviewed them, gathering information from very different sources. In this article, I will venture a few thoughts.

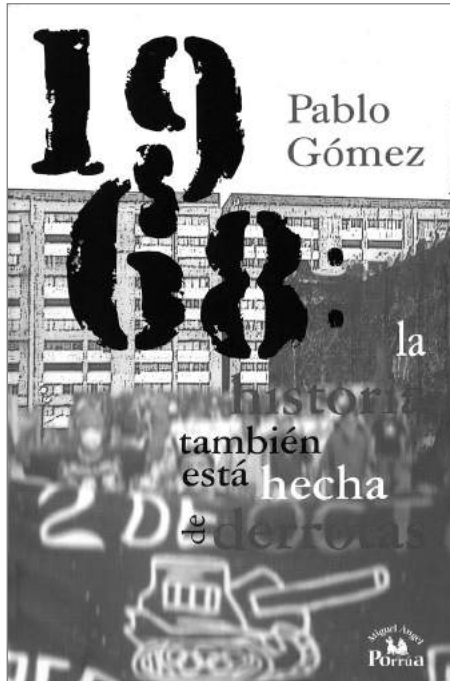
I will focus above all on personal accounts written by the leaders, activists, and eye witnesses of the movement years—decades, rather—later, a half century later. The time lapsed has offered them the possibility of rendering a dispassionate, critical—and also self-critical—vision. Some enter into open discussion and sometimes—it must be said—in open opposition to the most iconic texts produced in the wake of the events, such as *La noche de Tlatelolco* (The Night of Tlatelolco), by Elena Poniatowska; some of the chronicles of *Días de guardar* (Days for Staying Home to Think), by Carlos Monsiváis; *México, una democracia utópica: el movimiento estudiantil de 1968* (Mexico, a Utopian Democracy: The 1968 Student Movement), by Sergio Zermeño; *El movimiento estudiantil en México* (The Student Movement in Mexico), by Ramón Ramírez; or *Los días y los años* (The Days and the Years), by Luis González de Alba, among many others.

Fifty years after the Tlatelolco massacre, different versions, even by eye witnesses, are still circulating about what really happened. No single, definitive historic truth, accepted by everyone, exists, but there have been diverse official and extra-official histories. Five decades later, some think that knowing is no longer important, but that is not the case. It is not the case because undoubtedly the 1968 student movement was a watershed in the history of Mexico. Many later events and many changes in Mexico's political culture can be explained using it as a starting point. Above all, the process of transition to democracy can be understood, leading, in the last analysis, among other things, to the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute, under whose aegis alternation in office became a reality after almost a century of absolute domination by a single hegemonic political current.

For Pablo Gómez Álvarez, the UNAM School of Economics representative in the 1968 National Strike Council, the movement opened up two roads for the authentic Mexican left (although it also led the way to co-opting its leaders for a certain time). One way forward was the armed struggle, which culminated in the so-called "Dirty War" of the 1970s; and the other was the institutional, electoral road. The latter involved the foundation and consolidation of political parties and impacted the first great electoral reform in 1978. That reform introduced for the first time the election of federal deputies by proportional vote and culminated in the unrecognized victory of the National Democratic Front in 1988, led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.

In his work *1968, la historia también está hecha de derrotas* (1968: History Is Also Made Up of Defeats), Pablo Gómez

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Pablo Gómez, 1968: *la historia también está hecha de derrotas* (Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2008), 453 pp.

sought to write a detailed chronicle of the events from the point of view of the student assemblies and the CNH, with a very effective direct narration reflecting the climate of tension and terror of repression. But, above all, he intended to render a critical, *a posteriori* reflection of the causes and errors of the movement itself that were also factors—naturally not the sole or perhaps even the most determining ones—that led to the October 2 massacre. This is probably the book’s greatest merit. Of course, it will be said that it is easy to be self-critical *post-factum*. However, it is extremely necessary, since it is also true that later student movements took on board this lesson—although not always, as 1999 shows.¹ For this author/participant, the ’68 student leadership did not correctly interpret the government’s intentions when it first occupied University City and National Polytechnic Institute installations, and then withdrew a few days before October 2, or when it accepted the beginning of negotiations with two government representatives that same day in the morning. A huge act of repression was being prepared and they did not realize it until it was too late. Pablo Gómez’s book has another important merit:

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using the narrative technique of counterpoint, it presents the opposing positions about almost every one of the events between July 23 and 26 and until December 1968, when the movement was officially dissolved and the strike was lifted in the last school. The last chapter, “30 tesis sobre el ’68” (30 Theses on ’68) serves as an epilogue and is very useful. The author ventures a few hypotheses about its causes, consequences, and development, some of which are frankly unorthodox *vis-à-vis* the best-known mainstream visions.

Luis González de Alba, who represented the School of Philosophy and Letters, was one of the CNH’s most lucid leaders. He is also a symbol of the ability to be self-critical and to evolve his thinking about the historical transcendence of the student movement and its derivations. One of the most prolific writers about the topic, he is the author of *Los días y los años* (The Days and the Years), written while his memory was still fresh and the wounds were still open from the defeat, written from Lecumberri Jail, where he spent almost three years as a political prisoner. Almost 50 years later, he wrote *Tlatelolco, aquella tarde* (Tlatelolco, That Afternoon), where he changes several of his reflections and points made in his first book. And he also combats several of the visions that he thinks have twisted the facts and not been faithful to the truth. Above all, he criticizes *La noche de Tlatelolco* (The Night of Tlatelolco), by Poniatowska, for its lack of journalistic rigor and the innumerable instances of using poetic license to the detriment of precision, which in this case was a moral imperative, and which even compromised the honor of some of the leaders. Beyond this anecdote, what is important is that González de Alba also postulates that there has been a certain idealization of the ’68 movement as well as its leaders and sympathizers, turning them somehow into irreproachable, mythical individual and collective heroes, very much in the manner of the frequently encountered official Mexican “bronze” historiography.²

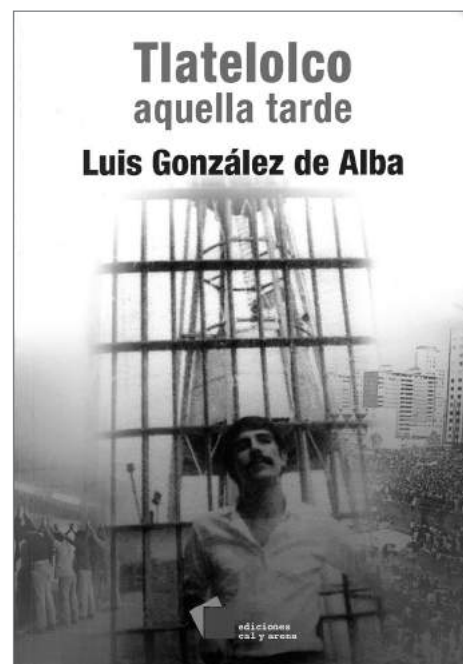
This might be unimportant, but this idealization often does not take into account the true significance of the '68 student movement: its contribution to the process of the country's democratization, to the transition from an authoritarian, repressive, dictatorial regime to one with clear democratic rules and practices and a more anti-establishment, pluralist political culture. Naturally, many social scientists would not accept that Mexican democracy is now a consolidated regime. Nevertheless, some consensus seems to exist among the leading figures in the '68 movement in Mexico who have written about it: the six-point list of demands was to a certain extent the first great programmatic document to demand a democratic transformation of the nation.³ The most representative CNH leaders, such as Luis González de Alba, Pablo Gómez, Raúl Álvarez Garín, Gilberto Guevara Niebla, Marcelino Perelló, or Gerardo Estrada, just to mention some of those who have written books or articles about the events, agree on these points. Other eye witnesses and non-student activists also agree, like the members of the Professors Coalition or the Alliance of Intellectuals, Writers, and Artists, who always supported the CNH. Among many others were Heberto Castillo, Eli de Gortari, Fausto Trejo, Carlos Monsiváis, and José Revueltas.

One acute observer of the movement's day-by-day development, though neither a leader nor a participant in the assemblies, but rather a sympathizer, was Sergio Aguayo Quezada, then a student at the University of Guadalajara. He experienced the events as a rank-and-file student and a citizen in Mexico City. He later became one of academia's most important specialists in the phenomenon of violence in Mexico, including political violence and specifically that exercised by the state. In his recent book *El 68, los estudiantes, el presidente y la CIA* (1968: The Students, the President, and the CIA), Sergio makes two essential contributions to the analysis of Tlatelolco. On the one hand, he attempts to demonstrate the very important

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U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) influence in logistical, informational, and intelligence support for the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz administration in its fight against the movement. It did this through infiltrations, co-optations, and other hidden war strategies, and also through the creation of a discourse to justify the repression, a discourse that was clearly false and full of what today we would call "fake news." This discourse labeled the student movement an international conspiracy by Communist forces acting in the context of the Cold War to bring down the legitimate government. This worldwide strategy, not limited to Mexico, used students as the cohesive social vehicle that could make communism advance on a planetary scale. Naturally, this mythology resonated in practically all the communications media in the Mexico of the time who were accomplices of and subordinate to the regime. All of this was framed in the Mexican state's concern with showing the world a tranquil, peaceful face during the rapidly-approaching Olympic Games, which demanded a swift, radical solution to the student conflict. That solution came on October 2 in the Three Cultures Plaza.

Aguayo's book also uses documents and eye-witness reports to attempt to explain what really happened that

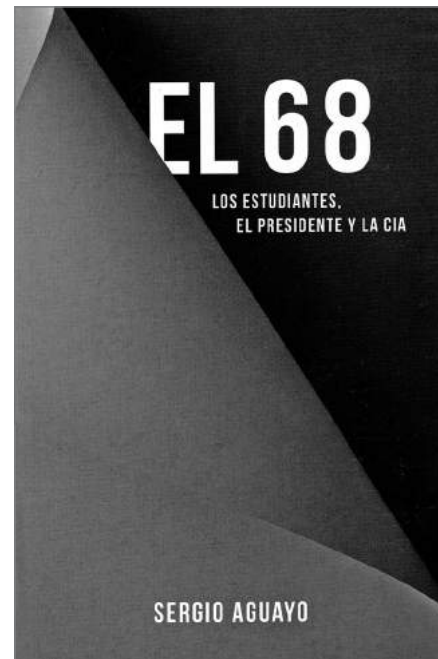


Luis González de Alba, *Tlatelolco, aquella tarde* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2016), 130 pp.

October 2 afternoon. In the face of the absence of a definitive official investigation, Aguayo maintains that the Díaz Ordaz administration deliberately encouraged a climate of chaos that degenerated into that day's massacre. He did this by deliberately making the different police forces and army units clash with each other and then blaming the demonstrators, specifically the student leaders, of beginning the shooting. Aguayo's hypothesis is that the operation was not headed up by a single command, but that one part of the police and military forces was ordered to attack and shoot at their own comrades in order to provoke chaos and a disproportionate response by the army, the police, and the elite detachment that had been instructed to detain the greatest number of CNH members possible, the Olympia Battalion. According to the author, this mission was carried out by about 40 carefully selected snipers who belonged to the Chiefs of Staff Presidential Guards, the most highly trained group in the armed forces. Neither González de Alba nor Gómez Álvarez accepts this explanation in their respective books. The latter goes even further and openly opposes it, maintaining that the massacre was a deliberate action led by a single command, Minister of Defense Marcelino García Barragán, with a clear objective: striking hard and, as far as possible, dismantling the student movement 10 days before the October 12 inauguration of the Olympics.

I will only mention one other book, which has become a classic and has been published in several editions, each time adding information, criticism, self-criticism, and new thinking: *Pensar el 68* (Thinking About '68), originally compiled by Herman Bellinghausen and Hugo Hiriart. This volume contains articles not only by the CNH leaders, but also by rank-and-file student participants in assemblies, as well as writers and intellectuals who supported the movement, journalists who witnessed the events, and experts in social movements and social scientists who contribute new, diverse perspectives.

All the reflection and analysis produced over the last 50 years seem to have produced three main consensuses. Everyone agrees about the dignified, ethical, and simultaneously cautious and moderate actions of Javier Barros Sierra, engineer and then-rector of the UNAM. He always maintained unconditional support for the students without ever renouncing his convictions and expressing his differences with some of the movement's decisions when necessary. The second consensus is that the student



Sergio Aguayo, *El 68, los estudiantes, el presidente y la CIA*, Ideas y Palabras Collection (Mexico City: Proceso, 2018), 148 pp.

leadership's political analysis and response were mistaken when it continued to call for the October 2 rally in the Three Cultures Plaza: they interpreted the military withdrawal from University City and the initiation of informal conversations between government representatives and the National Strike Council as encouraging signs. The third and most important consensus is that the student movement was a watershed in Mexico's political history, which undoubtedly produced a radical transformation in the population's political culture and contributed to accelerating the transition to democracy—which for many has yet to conclude. What is absolutely certain is that, without '68, it would be impossible to understand Mexico's current multiparty system, which has already made alternation in office possible on three occasions. Nevertheless, it also cannot be denied that much is still

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left to be done and that there have even been involutions and setbacks on Mexico's road to democracy. This can be seen both in the climate and very high rates of all kinds of violence (repressive, criminal, systemic, and institutional) prevalent throughout the country, including the repeated human rights violations—Ayotzinapa is the symbolic high point of this reality—by the state and other social actors. Among the latter, decidedly and unfortunately, are the forces of organized crime, which in the last two presidential periods has gained unanticipated and frankly terrifying strength.

This is why it is important to preserve the memory of '68 and its libertarian spirit, with its huge dose of imagination and idealism that from time to time returns to the streets and classrooms of Mexico. The undeniable dem-

onstrations of solidarity and civic organization of the general populace and young people in particular during the earthquakes that devastated Mexico City and other regions of the country on September 19 of both 1985 and 2017 are examples of this. Other examples are the many civic organizations fighting against violence and for the respect for human rights that have emerged in the last 20 years. Among them are the groups of victims' relatives and those looking for the disappeared; also, the different student movements since then, including the exciting, inspiring recent mobilization of students from the UNAM and other institutions of higher learning that bravely began a struggle against violence and so-called *porrismo* on university campuses.⁴ Whether they use other methods or recycle the best traditions of the historic struggles, Mexico's young people—outstanding among them, the students—are still and will continue to be a conscience for social transformation, a moral reserve of society, generous and brave, willing to carry the banner of and be a vanguard, to play the role that German philosopher Herbert Marcuse assigned them as social agents for change, to contribute to pointing out and resolving the new major national problems, regardless of who is in office. Together with singer-songwriter Daniel Viglietti, we sing, “Long live the students!” **MM**

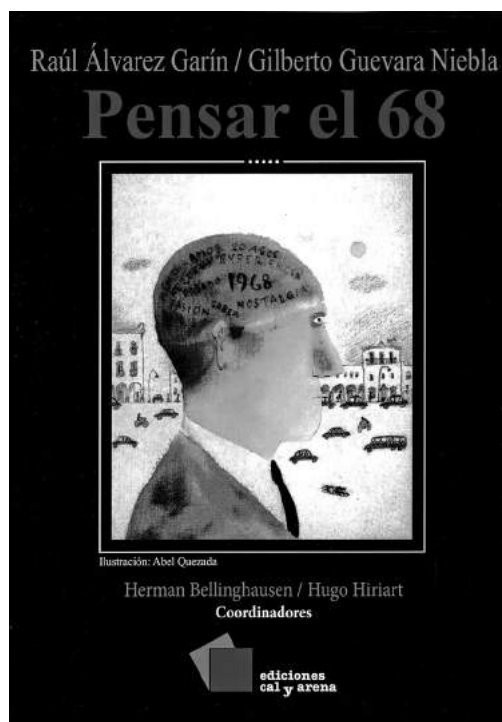
Notes

1 In 1999, UNAM students went on strike, closing down the university from April 1999 to February 2000, to oppose a proposed tuition hike. [Editor's Note.]

2 The “bronze historiography” refers to the practice of turning social actors into good and bad icons or static bronze statues; this kind of history is often used by governments to create “the official story” to justify the dominant power structure. [Editor's Note.]

3 The six points were 1) Release of all political prisoners, including those incarcerated before the student movement; 2) The disbanding of the riot police; 3) An end to repression of movement members and compensation for victims up until that date; 4) The repeal of Articles 145 and 145a of the Federal Criminal Code describing the crime of “social disturbance”; 5) Dismissal of police chief General Luis Cueto Ramírez and his assistant, General Raúl Mendiola, who had directed the repression; and 6) Determination of which authorities were responsible for government acts of violence against students and a public dialogue between the authorities and the CNH to negotiate the demands.

4 “*Porrismo*” is the practice by certain university authorities and other interest groups of organizing groups of students or pseudo-students to threaten real student associations organized to defend their rights and to offer solidarity to other social movements. It is a form of political control on university campuses. [Editor's Note.]



Herman Bellinghausen and Hugo Hiriart, comps., *Pensar el 68* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2018), 273 pp.