

Rethinking Mexico's 1968 in 2018

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As a remembering species, we have turned to 1968 with the twin drives of nostalgia and reassessment: we long for some of its leaps of collective enthusiasm, and we also want to measure both its long-lasting effects and our own interpretive efforts. The 50 years that separate us from 1968 invite us to remember, commemorate, assess, interpret, and reinterpret—all practices that we scholars are keen to embrace. Hannah Arendt anticipated this urge to remember '68 by claiming that “the next century will once learn about 1968 the way we learned about 1848” (Arendt 1968). While we cannot claim that '68 engendered a work of the significance of the *Communist Manifesto*, it does occupy a central place in the revolutionary archive, filled as it was with the inevitable contradictions of a youth movement that sought to reach out to the working class even as it tried to integrate culture, eros, and politics.

In the North, the current bustle of commemoration has flourished in a variety of contexts and with a sense of its global reach. Even *Vanity Fair*, with its predilection for glossy culture, *faits divers*, and fashion, deemed it necessary to publish an article about April 1968 at Columbia University (Bingham 2018). The *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, and other mainstream publications have taken stock of the anniversary in the same spirit. Daniel Cohn-Bendit has shed his latest professional identity as a lobbyist and member of the European Parliament to return to his youth revolt days in numerous interviews in which he claims far-reaching consequences for 1968—from the birth of multiculturalism to deep changes in French society, the rise of powerful social movements, significant benefits for trade unions, and the questioning of global capitalism. There is a play that premiered in May in Toulon about the confrontation with De Gaulle: “De Gaulle 68: La Révérence” (Chuyen and Lenzini 2018); a novel, *Les 99 jours de Cohn-Bendit* (Quivy 2018), in which he rules for those

99 days, and, of course, all sorts of articles in the press. Scholars have organized lectures and film series: we are all delving into the spirit of '68, trying to recover it and discern its legacy, as if we were unearthing the genealogy of the present, which gets proleptically formulated in the events that took place 50 years ago.

It is in this context of commemoration and assessment that I turn to Mexico. In 1968, the Mexican difference is centered mostly on the hundreds that died at the massacre in Tlatelolco on October 2. I have written elsewhere about this, focusing on the writing of intellectuals that did not merely critique the events themselves, but seriously scrutinized the concepts of culpability, sacrifice, violence, and the legality of the state (Sorensen 2007, 54–105). Writing and denouncing came on the heels of violence: Mexican intellectuals held on to the power of the word in the most varied registers—novels, poems, testimonies, essays, personal memoirs. My focus back in 2007 was the relationship between justice, violence, and aesthetics as it obtained in works by Elena Poniatowska (1971) and Octavio Paz (1993). Today, I will briefly revisit the thinking of 1968 in light of some recently opened archives and scholarship, to close with a reflection on the present. It will therefore be a historiographical operation, as well as a tentative speculation on the present, shuttling back and forth between 1968 and 2018, trying to detect its afterlives and transformations as well as its disappearance.

I will begin with the opening of the archives, not only in Mexico, but in the United States as well. Accessing what has been withheld has the effect of a revelation, or, to use the Greek word that Heidegger favored, *aletheia*. First, a few comments on the opening of State Department Archives, which offer an external analysis filtered by US interests. Reading the dispatches sent by

the American Embassy in Mexico to the State Department in 1968 is like entering a particular interpretive consciousness: the disclosure that is produced makes intelligible for us now the parameters of understanding with which that moment was observed from the outside: the Mexican youth movement was read in the context of the broader concerns elicited by the neighbor to the south. Entitled the “current situation of youth in Mexico,” a dispatch of July 1968 notes, “First salient point is that vast majority of Mexican population can be classified as youth, since 71.7 percent, according to latest estimates, are under 35. . . . However, only small minority is politically active. Agrarian youth is largely inert despite participation in occasional rural incidents” (NSA 1998 [1968]).

And what about perceptions of the United States as discerned by the embassy employee writing the dispatch? Here is a telling example: “Ethos of the Mexican Revolution remains principal ideological guide for majority of Mexican youth. At same time, vague kind of Marxism, strong sense of nationalism . . . involving generalized opposition to “imperialism.” All of these tend to generate anti-US orientation among these groups. . . . While the left constantly seeks to link students with labor and agrarian agitation, there has been no such linkage of any significance” (NSA 1998 [1968]).

Clearly, for the American Embassy the Mexican summer of '68 does not augur the traumatic events that would unfold in September and October: the archive tells the tale of watchful eyes that keep track of the prevalence of youth, of their vague Marxist and their anti-imperialist inclinations. If anything, they give short shrift to the potential political consequences of the youth movement, adding to a generalized sense that the events of October 2 were unexpected. The US Archives read like a panoptical vision seeking to distantly understand and anticipate trouble.

And what about the Mexican archives, opened with great fanfare between 1998 and 2003? They have been the subject of multiple interventions, deletions, debates, and rewritings. Held in Galleries I and II of the National Archive (AGN) in Lecumberri (as we all know, the very prison that held those arrested after Tlatelolco), they contain

massive numbers of documents: reports on student activities, profiles of individuals, summaries made for authorities that were monitoring the course of events, photographs, posters picked up at rallies, statements made by those who were arrested, and more. They have been the subject of a number of studies; the one I have found most helpful and thorough is by Pablo Tasso (2016), who does what I would call a close reading of some of the documents to show not only the work of constructing an official story, but also the extent to which the numerous documents contain narrative inconsistencies and contradictions. One key question that remains unresolved, for example, is how the shooting started, by whom, and from where. Reading the discrepancies in the multiple documents is tantamount to discovering the errors in a narrative script designed to blame others, be they “agitators,” the army, or the office of the president. Some documents are clearly planned distortions that seek to confirm the version sanctioned by the intended reader in the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS); others emerge from the sheer classificatory chaos of the bureaucratic archival practice itself, and from the questionable status of what could be deemed to be a “proof.” The photographic archives contained in the AGN also bear the mark of the unsteady drive to construct the official version: some of the photographs commissioned by the DFS suggest that the eye behind the lens was torn between recording the mass gatherings for those that were policing them, and a rendering of the almost heroic nature of the crowds advancing with their banners and their festive air.

Even a work with claims to objectivity by journalist Julio Scherer García and respected critic Carlos Monsiváis, *Parte de guerra, Tlatelolco 1968: Documentos del general Marcelino Barragán: Los hechos y la historia*, published in 1999 after the celebrated opening of the archives, reveals the contradictions that emerge from the documents themselves. The very title of the book, with the epistemological optimism rooted in “hechos” and “historia” is belied by the barely concealed attempt to remove any possible blame from the army in the shooting that began around 6 p.m. on October 2. What is opened up with these documents is a debate that is internal to the power of the state:

if García Barragán did not order the shooting (as the documents focused on him claim), it may well have come from the Estado Mayor Presidencial and its chief, Julio Gutiérrez Oropesa, who, of course, reported to President Díaz Ordaz. A few years earlier, in 1996, Gutiérrez Oropesa himself had published his own exoneration, with its own claims to veracity: *La realidad de los acontecimientos de 1968*. The recurring theme of contested narrative versions seems to be endless: in a speech given in 2001 at the funeral of Florencio López Osuna, one of the student leaders of 1968, his close friend Alfredo Revilla reflects on the aftermath of Tlatelolco and the need to add to the testimonial archive: “A todos ellos hay que entrevistarlos, hay que hacer que cuenten lo que les sucedió, que se sepa de una buena vez. Este es el momento, no tengo duda, pero le tengo miedo a las filtraciones y a las manipulaciones del gobierno” (quoted in Monsiváis 2008, 244). As murky as the debates continue to be in and out of the archive, undermining the attempted consistency of the official version, there is no doubt that the official story is still being written and rewritten.

Some rewritings, however, bear the unquestionable traces of blatant falsification, even though they first appeared as written by members of the student movement, and only recently have they been unmasked as apocryphal. Let me focus on *El móndrigo: Bitácora del Consejo Nacional de Huelga*, which was distributed for free shortly after the events of October 2, and which has appeared in a number of different editions. By the 1980s the book was understood to be apocryphal, but for this literary scholar it is actually quite fascinating to see how fictional devices are deployed to invent a character that will allow the DFS to alarm collective opinion and denounce the student movement. So we have novelistic form designed to make historical claims that are themselves manufactured for the sake of clearing the government of responsibility for the massacre. To begin with, the book presents itself as the printed version of a typewritten collection of papers carried under the belt by a dead student: the authors commissioned by the government knew the literary presentation strategies dear to the realist novel,

which introduces its inventions as if they were found documents with claims to truth. Here is the introductory material:

A pocas horas del combate en la Plaza de las Tres Culturas y edificios circundantes en Tlatelolco la trágica noche del 2 de octubre de 1968, después que los ambulantes casi habían acabado de levantar muertos y heridos, y que la policía había capturado a reales y supuestos franco tiradores, unos vecinos descubrieron semi agazapado el cadáver de un joven en el pasillo del tercer piso del edificio “Chihuahua.” En busca de identificación le hallaron bajo la cintura y fuertemente sujeto con el cintillo, un pequeño portafolios mal cerrado que contenía un legajo manchado de sangre fresca . . .

Resultó ser el “diario íntimo” en que anotaba meticulosa y ampliamente los sucesos más salientes del Movimiento Estudiantil, del que debió ser uno de sus líderes. Estaba escrito a máquina, salvo la última hoja, con anotaciones a mano, en desorden, segundos antes de iniciarse la batalla. (6)

It is revealing to see the coincidences between the documents in the DFS and the text of *El móndrigo*; now we can ascertain its sources and its political remit: to affirm that the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (CNH) and the students in the movement were heavily armed by outside Communist forces whose goal was to bring down the government and usher in a socialist revolution. Clearly, the text avers, the students themselves had begun the shooting. This, as we know, is the long-established official view that has not been dispelled and that was voiced right after October 2 in many letters written to President Díaz Ordaz and by the president himself. But I wish to stress that the historiographical operation remains deeply problematic because the archive itself is contested to this day. I was struck by an anecdote shared by Jaime Pensado, author of a fine 2013 book on student unrest during the long sixties. As a young researcher from the University of Chicago seeking to access the archives at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN, where major student clashes took place in 1968), he found himself chastised by the director, who assured him he was wasting his

time in the archive: “Frankly, I am not sure why a historian at an American university would be interested in such a fictional topic” (Pensado 2013, 2). The debate continues to be articulated through the tension between fiction and the “real”: a 1996 book by General Gutiérrez Oropesa, from the president’s office, bears the title *La realidad de los acontecimientos de 1968*. His use of the archival footage not only attacks student “agitators”; it also participates in the debate internal to the Díaz Ordaz regime about the contested role of the army and the presidential forces—and in which *Parte de guerra*, mentioned above, favors the opposing version of General García Barragán.

Much could be said about “real” fiction written in Mexico about 1968: ranging from an early novel by Luis Spotta, *La plaza* (1971), or Jose Revueltas’s *El apando* (1969), to the more recent 2003 novel by Jorge Volpi, *El fin de la locura*, lucidly analyzed by Samuel Steinberg in his 2016 *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco* (Steinberg 2016, 146 ff.). For Steinberg, Volpi’s novel “integrates the memory of the sixties into a long history of decline” (p. 153). The temporal distance that separates us from 1968 (the very year of Volpi’s birth) enables the work of memory and of evaluation to coalesce. The result is the very disenchantment and sense of exhaustion that we perceive in our understanding of the present.

Lest that sense of exhaustion entirely color my evaluation of the work of memory and analysis, I want to make mention of important recent contributions to our understanding of 1968. The first has to do with work on gender and the hitherto ignored role of women in the student movement. Aside from the writings of Rosario Castellanos and María Azevedo, we must take note of an organization founded in 1972, *Mujeres en Acción Solidaria*, MAS, headed by 1968 activist Marta Lamas, and aiming to promote the political voices of women in labor and in the public sphere. Elaine Carey’s 2005 book brings gender to the study of Tlatelolco, showing how the turmoil of the sixties began to undermine the patriarchal figure of the president. And, in terms of public commemoration, a crucial institution founded in 2007 is the Museo Memorial del 68, located in the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco and affiliated with the UNAM. Recognizing that the student

movement of 1968 is one of the most significant social events of Mexico’s contemporary history, its mission statement proclaims its potential for transformation and renewal. The memorial is set up as a multimedia archive that engages the viewer as if she were offered the chance to explore the traces of ’68, watching, reading, listening.

As we consider the unstable memory of ’68 in Mexico, we must recognize that it is more than the result of trouble in the archive. The wounds of Tlatelolco were reopened before healing could begin. There was a veritable dirty war of disappearances both *before* Tlatelolco and after it. In the ’70s, there were incidents such as the Corpus Christi Massacre of June 1971 and the violent repression of urban and rural movements. Even the spirit of commemoration was crushed, as was the case in the 2014 Iguala mass kidnapping, when 43 students on their way to commemorate Tlatelolco were “disappeared.” The point to be underscored is that repetition has operated as a reenactment that deepens the traumatic wound.

In closing, a few thoughts on one of the questions I opened with: Does 1968 live on in the present? “Que reste-t-il” seems to drive a lot of the commemorative writing in the press and in academic circles, in large part because of the formative and transformative effect of the events on a generation that is looking back on the meaning of their own lives (see Weber 1998). In the North, the mood of disenchantment is prevalent, especially in the face of the Trump administration and its values. To think about Mexico I want to first turn to an article published in 1989 in *El Colegio de México’s* journal *Foro Internacional*, significantly entitled “México 1968: Los orígenes de la transición.” Thirty years ago, Soledad Loeza could claim that ’68 marked the beginning of the dismantling of authoritarian forms, that it was the first great defeat of the authoritarian postrevolutionary state as it eroded an alliance begun in 1910 between middle-class leaders and the working and rural classes. The pact lost ground as demands for change remained unmet and public discourse incorporated a new language of emancipation. And indeed, it was after Tlatelolco that the formidable power machine of the PRI began to break down, as marked by the election of Vicente Fox in July 2000. My question

for today is, Can we claim that the dismantling of authoritarian forms announced by Loeza in 1989 have opened up equivalent forms of civic engagement, with access to a participatory politics that is transformative in terms that would be consistent with the goals of 1968? Loeza's article appeared just as political life in Mexico took a turn toward the state of ungovernability that it is mired in today, ravaged by the drug war, corruption, and kidnappings. A sense of fear that makes the notion of public space unsafe and precarious has caused a retreat to the private sphere. The utopian longings of '68, so clearly captured by Elena Poniatowska's masterful *La noche de Tlatelolco*, would at best be perceived as naïve in the current political mood. The recent presidential election (July 1, 2018) dealt a major blow to the PRI, and to the very alliance that '68 began to erode.

Meanwhile in the academy we continue the important work of memory, critique, and commemoration that this dossier is engaging in. UNAM is devoting the entire year to 1968; the museum at Tlatelolco compels us to return to the events, to study, critique, reevaluate the materials in this vast and dissonant archive. It is important to do this, to bolster the civic engagement that such work presupposes. But I confess that in moments of discouragement I think of the final lines of Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in which, as the world disintegrates around him, the narrator merely continues to revise a translation of Browne's *Urn Burial*. Can our commemorative work amount to more than that? I certainly hope so.

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