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40 years ago, state massacre

# Mexico 1968: society erupts onto the political stage

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**“If a whole nation is ashamed, it is a lion which is getting ready to leap”.**  
**Octavio Paz, Delhi, October 3, 1968.**

**The student revolt of 1968 in Mexico is known to the world because of the massacre of October 2 in the Plaza of the Three Cultures at Tlatelolco in Mexico City. More than 10,000 soldiers and police officers carried out a military operation of surrounding and of shutting in planned by the Presidency of the Republic against a peaceful meeting of approximately 6,000 people, among whom there were students, professors, mothers, children, employees and workers.**

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Tlatelolco1968b.jpg>]

Helicopters, officers of the Olimpia battalion, policemen, soldiers and tanks opened fire with powerful weapons against a defenceless crowd in the course of an operation that they claimed was justified by an unexpected confrontation. But it was a state crime, [1] premeditated, organized down to the last details, with the objective of imposing a crushing final solution to a conflict which had mobilised hundreds of thousands of people, which had won over public opinion and gained the sympathy of broad social sectors throughout the country.

The repression caused innumerable dead and wounded, young people, women, children, old men, not only riddled with bullets, but also stabbed by the bayonets of the soldiers. More than 2,000 people were arrested this October 2, including activists and members of the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (CNH) - National Strike Council - who underwent in particular a long night of torture: simulations of executions and castrations, intimidation, kidnapping and violence towards family members and friends, the invention of the most improbable charges which later led to court cases based on entirely fabricated evidence.

There was generalized persecution, an undeclared state of siege, control of the means of communication, de facto suspension of constitutional guarantees, against an imagined subversion . [2] As always in Mexico, the state had acted with all its disproportionate force to liquidate and thus definitively finish off the arrogant student movement.

### **1. Provocation and violence**

On October 2, 1968 they wanted to finish by violence with a history which had begun as a response to the violence of the police on July 23 and 26. On July 23, following a dispute between students from two schools, the forces of repression invaded one of them (it was part of the National Polytechnic Institute, IPN), clubbing in a disproportionate, undifferentiated and senseless way students, professors and school personnel. On July 26, which was to become the real beginning of the student movement, the demonstration that the Polytechnic students had called in protest at this act of repression converged with the traditional demonstration of support for the Cuban Revolution, organized especially by the students of the Autonomous National University of Mexico City (UNAM) and the various left groups.

At the request of the Polytechnic students, groups of students tried to reach the Zócalo in solidarity with the students who were again being clubbed by the police. But they were pushed back violently and from then on there were many confrontations, which were prolonged and widened when the police attacked students of the preparatory classes of the UNAM as they were coming out of their classes. The police completely encircled the old university quarter in the historic centre of the city; the students who were surrounded immediately built barricades. The memory of the Parisian barricades in May was still fresh; the press had given it a lot of publicity . [3]

The first reactions of the students, completely spontaneous, were met with an escalation of repression and generalized confrontations which culminated with the intervention of the army in the night of July 29 and the violent assault and occupation of several schools of the University and the Polytechnic. This included firing bazookas, as in the well-known case of the historic building which housed the preparatory classes of the UNAM. Various establishments were trashed and occupied, places were besieged by the police, burnt-out buses were transformed into barricades, there were casualties, arrests, disappearances, it was even being said that some people had been killed, at the end of these four days during which the students had ceased to be intimidated . [4]

So it was the disproportionate violence of the state that was at the origin of the Mexican student movement of 1968 and that same violence was also the conclusion of it. We were able from the beginning to see the clearly provocative actions and behaviour on behalf of the government, which was looking for confrontation. This was shown by the acts of repression and the invasion of teaching premises by police and soldiers, but also of the confused actions of leaders of the FNET, [5] by the presence on the barricades of known members of the “porras” (bludgeons) - anti-riot groups - and especially the surprising appearance of stones in the dustbins of the city centre on July 26.

Violence was actually a constant of the so-called Regime of the Revolution in Mexico, which had been built through the obligatory incorporation of social forces in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and through an all-powerful presidency supposedly incarnating the state and the nation. The centralized regime and the imposed hierarchical order did not tolerate any dissidence, nor did it allow the development of democratic forms of participation and legitimation (elections were ritual affairs with no practical effect other than the legitimation of candidates who had been designated in advance).

Violence in all its forms, legal and non- legal, formed the essence of a closed order, reactionary and clientelist. Blinded by the economic upswing and the consolidation of the state which had followed the defeat of the workers' struggles of 1958-1959 [6], the government of Gustavo DÃ-az Ordaz – an extreme traditionalist draped in a pathological anticommunism that the regime had entirely invented in the name of the Cold War - did not notice the economic and social transformations that the “economic miracle” itself had brought: urbanization, new sections of the working class based on large-scale industrialization, growth of the tertiary sector, inequalities, agrarian crisis, rural migration and destitution, cultural processes that were new and more open to the outside world, etc. All these elements were pushing forward the maturation of society and at the same time widening the gap between this society on the one hand and on the other an intolerant state and political regime which were built on subjugation and exclusion.

In 1968 there appeared the paradox of a regime that was absolute, incontestable, sumptuary, but which contained forces and contradictions which were preparing its implosion. It was a regime that was closed with a double lock, without the slightest opening, safety valve or loophole. It was the apogee, the zenith of the so-called Regime of the Revolution of 1910 based on the miracle of stabilizing economic development, which was organising the first Olympic Games to be held in Latin America: a symbol of international recognition. Soon would come the hour of its decline. The student movement of 1968 would be the herald of the decadence of the political regime and the advent of a society that was rapidly and profoundly changing. Its demands for the respect of law, for justice and freedom, its democratic practices, the deployment of its creativity and its capacity for communication, its autonomy, its intrepidity, its rapid politicisation, were going to attack, like a corrosive acid, the despotic logic of the presidential regime.

## 2. Unexpected responses

The regime had not foreseen the unexpected response of the students, of the professors, of the vice-chancellor of the UNAM, in other words, of society. In a milieu dominated by clientelism and impunity, the arbitrary character of the government and the institutions was tolerated through fear and resignation. Those who were dissatisfied were bought off or eliminated. Individual or collective protests and complaints were discouraged by the level of repression, by the

inevitable administrative complications and by a judicial system that was corrupt and completely subjected to the government. So when we, students, started to defend ourselves from the blows of the police by violent and uncontrolled confrontations, when the student assemblies voted to strike against the abuses of power and for the release of our comrades who had been attacked, when on July 30, the vice-chancellor of the UNAM, Javier Barros Sierra, flew the national flag at half-mast in front of his offices because of the military occupation of the school buildings, thus convoking a demonstration in defence of university autonomy, nobody in the higher spheres of the regime understood what was happening.

In Mexico City occupied by the army, the demonstration on August 1, led by Vice-chancellor Barros Sierra, academics and professors, mobilised more than 80,000 participants, from the UNAM and the IPN. We had reacted overnight, thus starting an avalanche of mobilizations which grew constantly, in spite of the recurrent interventions of the police and the army, the kidnappings, the persecutions, the attacks and the paramilitary (terrorist) outrages, which were organised in the highest spheres, and not just by the lower orders of the regime. The capital of the country was full of life, transformed by the action of the masses of students and teachers. Over several weeks, we gradually took over the city as a forum for discussion, protest, free and fearless expression, taking back public spaces like the Zócalo - normally reserved for the supporters of the regime - but also schools, markets, public places, the streets, the neighbourhoods, transport, offices, companies – they all become forums for dialogue. The big demonstrations which were organized with practically no material resources and with quite a lot of improvisation, were only the indicators of a diffuse activity - which became frantic – of thousands and even tens of thousands of students, who penetrated the last recesses of the city of Valle de Mexico: on August 5, a demonstration from Zacatenco to Casco de Santo Tomás (100,000 participants); on August 13, from Casco de Santo Tomás to Zócalo (150,000); on August 27, from the Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec to the Zócalo (more than 250,000 participants); on September 13, a silent demonstration (200,000 people).

Several central meetings organized by the CNH had prepared these triumphal demonstrations, in a town of 6 million inhabitants accustomed to official parades and spectacles organised by the corporatist “acarreo” . [7]

The expression of student discontent and revolt was incomprehensible for the government; unimaginable, impossible, and obviously, in the mind of the head of state, it could only be the product of foreign forces, subversive, of a communist type, aiming to use the students to destabilize the country and sabotage the holding of the Olympic Games that were so dear to the government. When the Mexican Revolution was institutionalized, in the midst of great popular mobilizations, at the time of Lázaro Cárdenas, society was subjugated through what was going to become the PRI [8]. Combativeness, autonomy, the capacity for organization and expression of the workers and peasants were confiscated by the state. The collective forces of society were confiscated by an extremely hierarchical political regime which divided the population into different sectors (workers, peasants, popular sectors), into corporations (trade unions, trade-union confederations, different regroupments, perverted by the intervention of the state), where the subjugated collective never allowed the individuality of citizens to be expressed. Disciplined, subject to the imposed divisions and hierarchies which broke its bonds of solidarity, society was going to suffer the tearing apart and the distortion of its communitarian and associative traditions, characteristic of the ancestral peoples and of broad social groups.

Politics in Mexico was thus limited to what took place in the ranks of the PRI, which was a kind of political machine - under the aegis of the President of the Republic - charged with guaranteeing the maintenance of its rule, but also the institutional space for debates, the distribution of power between political actors belonging to what was called “the revolutionary family”. New dissidences and new political actors could emerge, but they were immediately co-opted or put out of action in one way or another. This machine was part of the mesh of the state apparatus and its policies, public or not, were dedicated to guaranteeing the existing order, the stability and even the legitimacy which was still rooted in the Mexican Revolution.

So, when the students and the professors started to rebel against the arbitrary repression, the lies and the impunity

of the state, they were breaking into the space that was reserved for politics, disturbing, invading, breaking the rules which made possible the full perpetuation of the regime and guaranteed the continuation of the prevailing economic and social order. That is why the Mexican student movement appeared from the beginning as a deliberately political movement; its demands went against authoritarianism: the release of political prisoners, the fight against the impunity of the forces of repression and for their dissolution, the refusal of abuses of power, the demand for justice and for the respect of democratic freedoms [9]. All this without forgetting that in Mexico all social movements, as soon as they appear, are invariably politicized because of the intervention of the state itself, against which they inevitably run up. It is the very nature of the political regime which dilutes the traditional differentiation between social and political and imposes the paradox of the politicisation of all social conflicts by a regime which rests on depoliticisation.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/unam2a.jpg>]

1968 veterans march with striking UNAM students, 1999

By erupting onto the national stage, the student movement won back public space, concretely transforming the entire city into a terrain of political action and communication. The places where people worked, taught and were taught, lived, had occasional encounters (like public transport), were transformed then into as many places of conviviality and dialogue, in other words into political spaces. It was surprising to see the way in which the most varied people and the most different social groups involved themselves in the movement in a thousand different ways. This movement, which had been able to win their understanding, their solidarity, their complicity, in an atmosphere where the media (at that time especially the radio, the press and very little television) had always presented totalitarian characteristics, subject to state censorship and to daily self-censorship, opportunist, at the service of the Cold War, the Catholic church and the political regime.

Without any doubt the imagination of the students, their sensitivity, their creativity and their capacity to invent modes of organization and mobilization filled with enthusiasm a society which had always been subjected to abuses of power, arbitrary judgements, corruption and the inevitable relations of clientelism. Police officers, judges, civil servants, employers, corporatist leaders, party bosses, employees: at every level and in all milieux, ordinary people suffered arbitrary power, authoritarianism, the absence of justice and democracy, and even insults or repression. That was why more and more people from different sectors and various levels of society finally listened to the demands of us students. Many parents identified with the challenge that was being made by their children, their close relations, their friends and neighbours: we who, students or professors, were opposing the paralysis that came from fear and who persisted in the struggle in spite of the blows and persecutions. The indignation of some stirred up accumulated anger, brought to the surface the rage that had been contained, encouraged at least the latent revolt of others, and led to a loss of confidence in the government and the desacralization of the president. The beginnings of a politicisation of the masses started to find its way, thanks to the action of the student movement which disconcerted society by its autonomy, its audacity and its determination.

### 3. The organization of the movement

As soon as the events of the night of Friday July 26 became known, we started to mobilize and to look for ways to coordinate. On Saturday 27 the strike started to be voted at the Polytechnic, with the creation of a coordinating committee of the IPN and a call for a general strike. At the same time, in the University halls of residence there was established a coordinating committee of the representatives of the institutes which had a tradition of organization, primarily in social sciences and human sciences. Within a few days the strike had drawn in all the institutes of the IPN, the UNAM, the National Institute of Agriculture at Chapingo, the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Teacher Training School and the National University. Many schools and universities across the country soon joined the strike, as well as private institutions like the Anahuac Ibero-American University. Although the student strike was general only in Mexico City, it was really a nation-wide strike [10]

The spontaneous organization of the students in general assemblies, brigades and action committees in each

establishment went hand in hand with efforts of coordination and centralization that led to a first unitary manifesto which carried a 6-point platform, demanding an answer from the government within 72 hours and threatening to generalize the strike if they did not receive it, and the first demonstration of the movement was called on Monday August 5. On August 8, which marked the end of the 72 hours, the creation of the National Strike Council was formalized, with the participation in the beginning of representatives of 59 assemblies or action committees. Almost at the same time the Coalition of Professors of Higher Education for Democratic Freedoms appeared, coming from 50 schools which supported the movement, and even sent representatives (with the right to speak but not to vote) to the CNH. Shortly afterwards the Parliament of Writers and Artists was created, which by multiple activities would give the movement its cultural and festive stamp.

The CNH took responsibility for the general coordination and leadership of the movement, by proposing various actions which would keep it on the offensive. This involved various unitary demonstrations, but also meetings, manifestos and initiatives such as the demand for a public dialogue with the government as the way of resolving conflicts. It established itself and was legitimised with the growth of the movement, which reached its apogee between the demonstration of August 5 and the silent demonstration of Friday September 13. During these six weeks the CNH consolidated its relations with the student assemblies and contributed to the reinforcement of the work of the brigades which, during this period, completely invaded the city and developed an anti-authoritarian and democratic discourse which was to be the identity of the movement. It maintained its challenge to the government, facing up to its stratagems, its threats and its acts of repression. Its defence of a public dialogue [11] established as an absolute principle, made it possible to maintain the cohesion and the coherence of the movement by preserving it from the traditional governmental mechanisms of co-optation, and thus reassuring the principal representatives and spokespersons. Without any doubt the objective of obtaining “the greatest popular support” and causing “the greatest isolation of the political regime” [12] which motivated the CNH, was to a large extent achieved, at least for a time and especially in the long run thanks to the conjunction of the forces mobilized throughout the movement.

The assemblies brought together a large number of students who discussed and took collective decisions. It was a real school of politicisation, collective thinking and socialization that certain intellectuals wore themselves out vilifying [13]. But the role of these assemblies was essential, even if they often became interminable and tedious, because they made it possible to maintain on a day-to-day basis the relation between the rank-and-file students and the action committees and the CNH. Information and proposals circulated between the different bodies, which favoured intense discussions and collective decisions, and led to activities that were increasingly well coordinated and centralized. By electing the action committees, the assemblies prevented them from being transformed into bodies monopolized by activists or left-wing militants who were unrepresentative. This way of functioning gave the movement its democratic character and gave it an undeniable cohesion.

The student brigades were the broadest and most effective mechanism of diffusion, mobilization and politico-social organization. Formed in general by three, five or ten students, they moved around easily to paint slogans on the walls, to distribute leaflets, to explain the reasons for the movement in impromptu meetings and discussions with people, to promote solidarity, to collect funds or goods in kind (food in the markets, paper in the offices, paint in the shops, etc). There were also more massive brigades inaugurated by the Faculty of Science of the UNAM, made up of tens and even hundreds of students who organized blockades of traffic on important avenues with the aim of holding impromptu meetings. The brigades also went round factories, industrial estates, offices, markets and building sites; they also went into neighbourhoods that were known to be rough and seemed impenetrable, and the students were always met there with interest and solidarity. The gangs, the groups of youth - feared by everyone, especially by the police – welcomed us and even joined our struggle, as was the case in certain districts close to the schools where these gangs played a fundamental role in defence against the attacks of the police, in particular in Casco de Santo Tomas and Tlatelolco. Many brigades even arrived in an organized way at the big demonstrations, bringing organization and security to them, then they set out again to continue their work during the long night of the city.

The emergence and the extensive work of hundreds of brigades, the demonstrations and the meetings as well as the



presence of the CNH, provided the form and the meaning of the discourse of the movement of 1968. The challenge was above all to confront the manipulative disinformation of the press and television, to contradict the calumnies of the government and its spokespersons, something which was gradually achieved, as was seen from the demonstrations which were increasingly followed from the windows of apartments and from the pavements by hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of spectators who became participants.

Much propaganda was improvised by the brigades themselves, although its production was centralized initially by the action committees of each school and then by the CNH, which increased its capacity to print massive quantities of leaflets. Our comrade artists of the San Carlos School frantically produced the posters and the stickers which could be seen all over the city. At the School of Political Science there was produced very imaginative and original propaganda, with the innumerable posters drawn in ink by Jaime Goded, which nobody apparently took the trouble to photograph or film.

The role of the brigades was decisive for the conquest of public opinion, in informing and arousing the sympathy and even the solidarity of very diverse social groups. The extension of the movement throughout the country was to a large extent the work of the brigades and their members. Even the media, in particular the press and the radio, from time to time showed signs of opening up, pressured by the journalists themselves who were following the efforts we were making, we students, to make ourselves understood and to achieve our goals, but also because of the obvious impact of a movement which unceasingly put forward its demands.

However, by the very nature and the dispersion of the brigades, by their autonomy and their authentic self-organization, a centralized organization was not possible, although it was tried through a kind of General Coordination of the Brigades (CCGB), which was created on the initiative of the School of Political Science and which in spite of the approval of the CNH was considered by some people as an ultra-left attempt to contest the leadership role of the CNH [14]. In reality this coordination was used to plan and rationalize the activity of these rank-and-file structures, preventing them from going to the same places as each other and expending too much energy. On Sunday September 1 - at the time of the fourth report by the President - we made, without much success, an attempt at a clandestine operation [15]. The military occupation of the UNAM on September 18 did not make it possible for the project to mature, even though many autonomous brigades had continued to function.

All this organisational and participative frenzy did not come from nowhere, and was not completely new. It was in fact the expression of a long process of social and political recomposition of student organizations like the Federation of Peasant Socialist Students, or failed attempts like the National Confederation of Democratic Students (CNED), of struggles for material or clearly political demands, on the regional or even wider level, of which students were the centre or one of the participants, in states like Chihuahua, Michoacán, Guerrero, Puebla, Sinaloa, Sonora, Nuevo León and Tabasco, as well as in the capital itself, at the UNAM, the IPN, and in the Teacher Training Schools [16].

In many of these experiences there were precedents not only of repression and military intervention, of the stubbornness and intransigence of the state, but also of resistance and forms of organization like assemblies, brigades and various coordinating committees. In particular in the UNAM of the 1960s, the activism of the most radicalized students - of which we formed part - finally defeated and dismantled, before the explosion of the year of the Olympics, the kind of integrated student unionism (the University Federation of Student Societies, FUSA, with its student societies, its executive committees and its action groups which were known as "porras"), subject to the PRI, which dominated the campuses; at the IPN in 1968 we saw the death-knell of the powerful FNET. The student movement of 1968 concentrated this complex process, enriched it and reinforced its best experiences.

#### 4. Apprenticeship in legality

What characterized the student movement of 1968 in Mexico was above all its peaceful character, its demand for legality, justice and democracy. It was above all a struggle against impunity, lies, the pigheadedness not only of President Gustavo DÃ-az Ordaz, but also of official institutions which were unrepresentative and especially lacked legality, which were subject to corruption and arbitrary power. The six points of the platform had something to do with the violation of rights, with a punitive legality which was superimposed on freedoms, on the guarantees contained in the Constitution, with the demand and the desire for the restoration of the legality that was being violated by those who were responsible for guaranteeing it, by those which had created it and who used it according to their whims.

For the students, especially for the most politicized ones, the apprenticeship in legality was something difficult; it went against the stream in a country that was extremely legalist, but without being attached to laws, subject to arbitrary government and the inexistence of the rule of law. The constitutional order was itself contradictory, the product of situations of compromise of a revolution which had triumphed by crushing its main driving forces, the popular sector of its participants. Presidential absolutism, consecrated, had become a political regime without checks, balances or controls, where simulation was a dominant feature. The three arms (executive, legislative, judicial) were absorbed by a single all-powerful presidential authority. Government and judges lacked authority, were accustomed to arbitrary rule, to put forward ridiculous accusations and to conduct trials based on lies and murky underhand manoeuvres, especially where politics was involved. In fact, one of the demands of 1968 included the release of trade union leaders kept in prison without a real legal trial, such as Demetrio Vallejo, ValentÃ-n Campa, VÃ-ctor Rico GalÃ-n and others.

The everyday nature of governmental violations of the law was astounding. The effective absence of rights contained in a Constitution that resembled just a sheet of paper without any consequence, led to the very real existence of a despotic, omnipotent and intolerant regime, without any kind of democratic mediations. Students, like all those who engaged in political activity, had to operate in a kind of semi-clandestinity and any activity outside the campus was an adventure heavy with threats. Only some ritual demonstrations were tolerated. "Institutional violence" was supplemented by paramilitary violence. During the movement, the government from time to time called up frightening actions like the machine-gunning of schools, beatings-up, kidnappings, bombings, a dirty war which preceded October 2 and which would become uncontrollable in the 1970s.

Consequently, the apprenticeship in legality came to us gradually and not without reservations. Not because of what certain leaders of the CNH regarded as the refusal of democracy or the "extremist and doctrinaire leftism" of the radical wings of the students [17], but because it was a situation difficult to come to terms with. Faced with abusive repression, with the illegal intervention of the army, the violation of university autonomy, the executions and endless persecutions, the students nevertheless began to speak and understand the language of legality which, to a certain extent, protected us, which legitimised us, which highlighted the cynicism and the incongruity of the regime. The attitude of the vice-chancellor Javier Barros Sierra and the demonstration on August 1 which took his name were positive steps.

The fact of demonstrating without submitting to the regulation which imposed a request for authorization from the police gave us confidence. The brigades, the daily meetings, with or without police attacks, finally led us to hold up rights that were legally established, which had always been made conditional and cancelled by the government. Little by little it was understood and accepted that legality, that the Constitution, could also be the refuge for rights, for freedoms that had been undermined, for a protest against the impunity and the illegality of the regime. The movement thus acquired a legalist aspect, of a demand for the respect of the Constitution and of the law that had been trampled underfoot by the regime which had instituted them. Thus, the student movement was also the precursor of the fight for human rights in Mexico and of the battle for democracy.

### 5. Massive politicisation



Until the Night of Tlatelolco, where the entire nation felt covered in shame - as Octavio Paz remarked - because of the governmental massacre, the almost ten weeks during which the student movement developed were intense and long days of mass politicisation. This was above all the politicisation of students and professors who had escaped from inertia and from the shackles which subjected them to apathy, conformism, the reproduction of hierarchical relations, to lack of communication and isolation.

The movement was a breath of egalitarianism which created relations of solidarity, co-operation and conviviality. It swept away not only the residues of the official student and professional groupings, but also the old rancours and rivalries fostered by the functionaries of the education system, such as those which persisted between the National University and the Polytechnic and whose origin lay in sporting competitions. The debates in the assemblies, the conquest of the streets, the apprenticeship in freedoms, the vital encounters with people of all social and cultural environments, the recognition of the city in all its diversity, the deployment of unsuspected capacities of communication and especially the collective deciphering of daily events which confronted us with the government, its apparatuses, its handling of the media, the capacity to respond that the movement built, all that signified a process of politicisation, of developing an awareness, of an irreversible cultural change for a whole generation.

But the people (as we said in those days), in other words society with its differentiations and its inequalities, became aware, discovered the demonstrations and the political practices, the opinions and criticisms of the regime which brought countless social groups closer not only to the students but also to politics. That is also why the movement appeared as a possibility of giving politics back its dignity [18], the politics that had been degraded and confiscated by what still called itself the regime of the Mexican revolution. If the movement succeeded in being regarded as a student and popular movement, it was because the inhabitants of Mexico City - particularly, but not only - in their turn, surged onto the political stage. Professors, artists, small shopkeepers, mothers, whole families of the middle-classes and of even better-off sectors, employees, workers, etc., demonstrated - sometimes in a diffuse way and at other times in an open way - in favour of the movement, during the demonstrations and the meetings, but especially at the time of the daily encounters with the students. In the assemblies of the CNH, more and more groups of all sorts came to express their solidarity or to call on others to do so.

This process caused a change in the frame of mind of the population, of which the most significant moment, the one that revealed the change in public opinion in favour of the students, was not, as many think, on August 27, the day of the demonstration which took the movement to its highest point with, according to some estimates, 400,000 people taking part. It was on the following day, Wednesday 28, with the failure of the so-called homage to the national flag, when civil servants, obliged to take part in an official meeting, rebelled and the government had to resort to the tanks of the army to disperse the meeting. The battle of public opinion had been won; the cracks in institutional control symbolized a decisive change which certainly influenced the government's decision to resort to military force to bring the conflict to an end.

### 6. The student leadership

Naturally, many students became politicized in the various bodies of the movement, they cut their teeth there and then entered the world of politics. But many participants in the movement were coming from other struggles, from experiences which had trained us in debate and in political practices that were more or less social and open, more or less clandestine or semi-clandestine. The majority of the most prominent leaders of the CNH were or had been in the recent past militants of left organizations, just like many members of the action committees and the organizers of the assemblies and brigades, especially at the UNAM, but also in other schools both in Mexico City and in the rest of the country. In a certain sense, we represented the memory, the continuity of a theoretical and political heritage which had managed to survive and had modelled itself against the stream of the crushing regime which resulted from the first revolution of the 20th century, based on popular and nationalist myths.

The years which had preceded the movement of 1968 were years of recomposition, of reorganization and to a certain extent of reinforcement of the Mexican Left. This process of crisis, ruptures and the emergence of innovative groups and currents of the Left, was in fact the contradictory outcome of the great independent trade-union struggles which were brought to an end in 1959 with a military defeat [19]. The crisis of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), in the context of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the Sino-Soviet conflict, led to the emergence of critical currents of a Marxist type (defining themselves as revolutionaries or radicals) which opened the range of options on the left, hitherto limited primarily to pro-Soviet Communism and to Lombardism, which was a kind of nationalism, populist in a Stalinist style [20]. Spartakism, created by the writer Jose Revueltas, was the most diversified and extensive current, but there was also the growth of Trotskyism, Maoism and Guevarism. The subsequent social and generational change on the left, with the involvement of many more young people - primarily students and intellectuals who were escaping from the institutionalized networks -, would mature under the influence of the tumultuous winds which made up the international atmosphere [21]. All these left currents led to the National Strike Council (CNH), even though the movement drew them in, disorganized them, and the transformations and the outcome of the movement ended up by flattening them. After 1968, the collapse was followed at different rhythms and levels by a new configuration of the left. But during the movement the CNH had been enriched by debates and contributions, often polarized, which did not please everyone, but which collectively favoured the construction in the heat of the events of a strategy which in the initial period organized the movement, projected it into society and succeeded in isolating the PRI government and showing it in its true colours.

Decisive questions like the public dialogue and the silent demonstration; the construction of the identity of the movement through its own distinctive discourse; the response of the movement at critical moments, as with the calumnies and the threats of the fourth presidential report; the military occupation of the UNAM on September 18 and the tension at the time of the student battles in response to the takeover of the buildings of the IPN, with more than 1,500 arrests; the offensive of the regime against vice-chancellor Barros Sierra - all that involved big debates and decisions which revealed the cohesion and the collective capacity of the CNH. There were debates on whether it was better to organize united demonstrations in the centre of the city area or a lot of decentralized demonstrations in the industrial zones, which were obviously concluded by taking the most effective decision. The relations with the government that the question of the public dialogue implied was however a question which the CNH was not able not solve in time to impose a negotiated way out.

In spite of the diversity of its composition, or perhaps because of it, the CNH had established itself as the incontestable leadership of the movement, fully legitimised as a collective body, independently of the real weight of certain comrades like Raúl Alvarez Garçon or Gilberto Guevara Niebla [22]. There were errors due to indulgence with respect to some who played an opaque role, like Socrates Campos Lemus, whose proposal to wait at the Zocalo for the moment of the public dialogue facilitated the return of repression after the crushing triumph of August 27, and who after October 2 was the voice of the government in the movement.

Most important was the inability of the CNH to perceive the change in the political situation after September 13, with the military redeployment and the dirty war. The possibility of a tactical retreat was not even taken into a consideration, although all the signs pointed to the coming disastrous outcome. At the Institute of Political Science, one of the schools considered as the most radical and even extremist, we had discussed it and we had even written a document of analysis in which we formulated the thesis of a victorious movement. Trapped by inertia, like the metaphor of the train which is racing at full speed towards the precipice and in which nobody is able to pull the communication cord, the assembly of the CNH account did not take of this document. In other schools, they made the same proposal and Pablo Gonzalez Casanova also published his reflexions on this subject [23]. Obviously, nobody wanted to take the risk of proposing to the rank and file of the movement the need to stop a movement which had achieved great and irreversible political and cultural gains. It was the final test for the CNH to be considered as the accomplished leadership of the most important politico-social movement in Mexico of the second half of the 20th century [24]. The massacre of October 2, with the arrest of the principal leaders of the CNH and the persecution which did not cease even during the Olympic Games, made the leadership of the movement disappear, with the result that the movement lost its capacity for initiative and its lucidity.

The PCM, which had rather been the scapegoat of the government, without obtaining an important presence in the movement, suddenly found itself hegemonic in the CNH. With the assistance of some students who had come onto to the CNH without any responsibilities, Marcelino Perelló set himself up as the principal leader, with the approval of the press, catapulted thanks to his unofficial relations with personalities in the government, which he maintained without informing the CNH (with the agreement of the leadership of his party). Without taking account of events or seeking alternatives which would make possible a way out for the movement in these new circumstances, the new CNH hurriedly tried to end the strike. Later, when the students decided to put an end to the strike on December 4, the CNH presented a "Manifiesto to the Nation, dated October 2", where in an ignominious way it referred only to the massacre of the Night of Tlatelolco, presented as a question of the "intransigence" and "intolerance" of the government, without taking up the defence of our imprisoned comrades, tortured and subjected to the most absurd accusations, forgetting even that the persecutions were continuing. On December 6, 1968, when the CNH decided its own dissolution, it already no longer existed.

### 7. The breath of the Cold War

The student movement started with a provocation of the government which initially seemed a kind of preventive repression – a common thing during the Cold War - to get some awkward characters (communists, critics, dissidents) out of the way in order to guarantee peace during the 19th Olympic Games. That is what the clampdown on July 26 against members of the Mexican Communist Party and its youth organization, the JCM, highlighted, by occupying their offices and those of their newspaper La Voz de Mexico, while the first confrontations between the students and the police in the centre of the city were not even finished. The press campaign which was immediately unleashed was part of the offensive. And after the intervention of the army at dawn on Tuesday July 30 the functionaries of the government (the regent Alfonso Corona del Rosal, the procurator-general of the Republic Julio Sanchez Vargas and Luis Echeverria) denounced a "perfectly organised plan of agitation and subversion". In any event what was clear was that the government of DÃ-az Ordaz had made a serious error; the conflict got out of his control and in spite of the signs of political crisis and the evolution of events, nobody at the top of the regime understood what was happening.

The student movement revealed the weaknesses of the corporatist presidential regime when it was at its apogee, and at the same time it discovered freedoms; it showed the possibility of experiencing politics in a different way, in a democratic, egalitarian way, without forcing people to play a subordinate role. The student movement was crushed militarily, in a brutal, disproportionate, unjustifiable way. It was a crime of state which must still be judged now that those responsible have been identified. It was not crushed politically. The entire nation was covered with shame by the contemptible nature of the genocide of the Night of Tlatelolco. Crouching like a lion, it leapt, rebelled, humiliated those responsible, and it released forces which have not ceased to produce changes and generate alternatives. In the long run, from a historical point of view, the popular student movement of 1968 has triumphed in a striking way.

Forty years later, the legacy of 1968 is still there, and proud.

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[1] Julio Scherer GarcÃ-a, Carlos MonsivÃ-ais, Parte de guerra. Tlatelolco 1968. documentos of General Marcelino GarcÃ-a BarragÃ-an. Los hechos y la historia, Mexico City, Nuevo Siglo Aguilar, 1999 and the enlarged edition: Parte de guerra II. Los rostros del 68, UNAM/Nuevo Siglo Aguilar, Mexico City 2002.

[2] RaÃ-Ã-Ã- lvarez GarcÃ-a, La estela de Tlatelolco. Una reconstrucciÃ-Ã- histÃ-Ã-rica del Movimiento estudiantil del 68, Grijalbo, Mexico City 1998. This is the best book on 1968 in Mexico, written by its principal leader. In addition to presenting a chronicle and reflexions on the movement, it develops a meticulous analysis of the military intervention in 1968.

## Mexico 1968: society erupts onto the political stage

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[3] Curiously, it was the tabloid evening press that provided the widest and most impressive reporting of the May events.

[4] According to the Secretary of National Defence, "Three battalions of an infantry brigade infantry, in addition to a battalion of paratroopers", that is, about 2,500 soldiers, were dispatched as reinforcements to the 10,000 police who had not succeeded in controlling the students (quoted by Raúl Jardón, 1968. *El fuego de la esperanza*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico City 1968, p. 34).

[5] The National Federation of Technical Students (FNET) was a corporatist organism of students of the IPN and other technological schools, dependent on the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which held power.

[6] A number of trade-union struggles of metalworkers, oil workers and other sectors, which took place then, had been stimulated and articulated by the big strikes of the freight transport union, directed by members of left parties (the Mexican Communist Party, PCM, and the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Mexico, POCM). These struggles finally challenged the corporatist regime and demanded the independence of the trade unions.

On March 28, 1959 military repression led to the arrest of approximately 10,000 workers, who were put on government blacklists and so could not obtain any work contract. Finally, the principal leaders, Demetrio Vallejo and Valentine Campa, were condemned for the offence of social dissolution, an offence invented in the 1940s, during the world war.

[7] "Acarreo" is the name given to the forced mobilization of people in support of the actions of the government, taken charge of by the corporatist organizations of the PRI.

[8] I developed this subject in my book *El Estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (Era, Mexico City, 1975). The employers and the big agricultural landowners were also obviously organized in corporatist associations, but these were not subordinated to the PRI and benefited from a special status in their relations with the state.

[9] The six points of the petition were: 1. Freedom for political prisoners; 2. Dismissal of the generals who acted like police chiefs; 3. Dissolution of the corps of grenadiers, a direct instrument in repression, without it being replaced by a similar body; 4. Suppression of the offence of social dissolution, a legal instrument of repression; 5. Compensation for the families of the victims of the aggressions of police officers and soldiers; 6. Judgement of the functionaries responsible for acts of vandalism and repression.

[10] . In mid-August many demonstrations had taken place in various cities and 70 establishments were on strike in the states of Vera Cruz, Guanajuato, Michoacan, Queretaro, Hidalgo, Chiapas, Durango, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Sonora, Baja California, Nayarit, Morelos, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Sinaloa and Puebla (Raúl Jardón, op cit. p. 42).

[11] . "The public dialogue was a real challenge to the regime of corporatist control; for the government, to accept such a dialogue amounted to recognizing the existence of another power, of an independent social actor not subject to control, which demanded radical changes, and this possibility was denied" (Álvarez Garzón, op cit., p. 183). The possibility of public dialogue undermined the logic of the closed and antidemocratic government system. It was this demand which was most strongly rejected by the government.

[12] Álvarez Garzón, *La estela...*, op cit., p. 77.

[13] See for example the essay by Monsiváis in the work mentioned above, *Parte de guerra...*

[14] For example, the fury of Gilberto Guevara Niebla (see, for example, note 17) and the more serene vision of Raúl Álvarez Garzón have become part of history.

[15] This question is very little dealt with in the bibliography dealing with 1968 in Mexico. We can find some elements in Jose Rene Rivas Ontiveros, *La izquierda estudiantil en la UNAM. Organizaciones, movilizaciones y liderazgos (1958-1972)*, UNAM/Porrúa, Mexico City 2007, pp. 624-625.

[16] Enrique de la Garza, León Tomás Ejea, Luis Fernando Macías, *El otro movimiento estudiantil, Extemporáneos*, Mexico City 1986, chap. I.

[17] It is surprising to see how Gilberto Guevara Niebla ridicules and angrily condemns those whom he calls “the radical students of the Humanities sector of the UNAM”, to whom he does not recognise the slightest contribution and whom he accuses of having been an obstacle for the movement and of having “sown hatred and adversity among the delegations of the CNH”. He also exaggerates the impact of the organizations of the “extremist left”, such as the Espartaco Communist League, which hardly survived the events. His entire book exudes scorn and hatred against those who, naturally, put forward on various occasions opinions and proposals different from his. He even reproduces many of the terms used by the press and the government in connection with divisions within the CNH and among the students, the very ones who contributed to forging the movement (La libertad nunca se olvida. Memoria del 68, Ediciones Cal y Arena, Mexico City 2004).

[18] “One of the great virtues of 1968 was the assertion that politics was something necessary and respectable”, which could be “conducted with procedures different from those of the PRI”, and “as politics of confrontation with the regime”. (Álvarez, La estela..., op. cit., p. 147.)

[19] The POCM disappeared after this movement, whereas the PCM, in spite of its recurrent crises, had existed since 1919 and was still the strongest left organization.

[20] The Socialist People’s Party represented a well-entrenched current incarnated by Vicente Lombardo Toledano, self-proclaimed Marxist intellectual, who played a fundamental role in the formation of the corporatist regime in the 1930s, becoming practically indispensable to Lázaro Cárdenas. Promoter of class collaboration, of a subordinate “alliance” with the regime of the Mexican revolution, he inaugurated what was known in Mexico as “the parties of muddle heads”, the institutionalized false opposition. Until his death, after the movement of 1968, to which he was opposed, he was a key political figure in Mexico. The revolutionary nationalist current, incarnated by the former president Lázaro Cárdenas, although it flirted with the left, was in reality invariably subjected to the regime which it helped to build. In the face of the imperialist threats against the Cuban Revolution, Cárdenas promoted mobilizations which led to the Movement of National Liberation, a kind of broad front, which gave rise to many hopes, but which was de facto dissolved when Cárdenas gave his support to the presidential candidacy of Gustavo DÁz Ordaz, who took over the government in 1964.

[21] . The Cuban Revolution and the American aggressions against it, the Vietnam War, the American invasion of the Dominican Republic, the Black rebellion and the Black Panthers, the revolt of the Third World against colonialism, the bloodbath in Indonesia, the Six Day War and the Palestinian Revolution, the symbol of Che Guevara, etc.

[22] In fact, the alliance of these comrades, who had been militants of the youth organization of the PCM while maintaining a critical attitude towards its direction, structured a very wide bloc of representatives of schools which regrouped particularly, in a unitary way, the Polytechnic and the technical sectors of the UNAM.

[23] . “Decisiones y riesgo” published in La Gaceta. BoletÁn informativo del Consejo nacional of Huelga nÁº 7 of September 13, 1968, reproduced by Gilberto Guevara Niebla, La libertad..., op. cit., pp. 261-268. The document mentioned, which I wrote a little before September 18, was distributed under the signature of the Karl Marx Brigade of the Action Committee of Political Science.

[24] See the opinions of Raúl Álvarez (op cit., pp 179-180) and Gilberto Guevara (op. cit., p. 267), who after having spoken in praise of the reflexions of González Casanova, ask themselves, with regard to the idea of going back to classes: “How was it possible to deal with a response of this type in an assembly as turbulent as that of the Council and in front of all the student media?”