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México '68

Power to the Imagination!

by

Michael Soldatenko

As my cousin Jesús Gutiérrez walked me around the Tlatelolco housing project in 1969, he recalled how, when the shooting started on October 2, 1968, he had just moved closer to the stairs of the Chihuahua building on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, with its modern, colonial, and indigenous structures. As he spoke about the terror, anger, and frustration he felt that night, I observed the pockmarked façade of the Chihuahua and the bullet dents on the elevator doors. The burnt-out apartments on the third, or fourth, floor (I am no longer sure), created by heavy fire from the light tanks and a possible gas fire, were still visible—a gaping scar on this 45-meter-tall building. Of course, the blood and human remains had been cleansed that October night, but the marks of the massacre were still visible. Though the shooting was over, the terror continued. A year after the massacre, security forces continued to patrol the area. No attempt to recall October 2 would be permitted.

In 1968, Jesús became a political being. As a student in the Escuela Superior de Ingeniería Mecánica y Eléctrica my cousin, like most Mexicans of the mid- and late 1960s, shared a political culture that envisioned a Mexico undergoing economic transformation with limited political accessibility. He was aware of corruption, authoritarianism, repression, and economic and social injustice, but to him these were not necessarily fundamental or insoluble problems: “Como México no hay dos.” When he joined the first student protests in late July 1968, his anger was directed against particular officials, administrators, organizations, and procedures that had resulted in student abuse. Moreover, these were not new issues. For most early participants, the problem was not institutional. In fact, Jesús felt uneasy with those who blamed the Mexican state.

However, as the student movement evolved, he came to believe that the problem was an authoritarian system that denied its citizens their political

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voice and rights. *Libertad democrática* became his concern as he grew increasingly active in his strike committee. After October 2 and his arrest, he came to see the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party–PRI) state as an institution that had to be replaced for there to be any possibility of liberty and justice in Mexico. By 1969 he believed that the only solution was a socialist revolution. The student movement of 1968 mirrored my cousin's metamorphosis from a naive nonactor in Mexican political life into an activist who labored for the creation of a new Mexico.

In 1968, many thousands of people like Jesús created a utopian world in which the omnipotence of the PRI state faded and many things became possible. Jesús recalled that utopian time and place. Yet at the same time, his memory had begun to organize and explain that utopia. As we spoke, the events of 1968 were being linked into a chain of events that made up modern Mexico. People were conceiving those events from their own intellectual and political perspectives. For Jesús, '68 was the student-popular movement that was now part of the revolutionary struggle for the socialist transformation of Mexico.

Therefore we can speak of at least two distinct experiences of those events. The experience that transformed my cousin I call "utopian." I draw attention to this personal experience because I think it altered its participants, no matter how they may have read things later. Their participation imagined a new and unknown Mexico, but as this utopian realm was beaten down it was converted into history. Interpretation organizes (creates a hierarchy of key events and individuals) the chaotic world of utopia, radically altering it to produce a second experience. The new narrative is the one we encounter in an ocean of analyses, interviews, recollections, explications, and translations from conservative, progressive, reactionary, governmental, and Marxist perspectives. This is the one that we are best acquainted with, since we use it to create our own renditions of the student movement. I believe that these two experiences are incommensurable.

Many contemporary studies perceive '68 as a line of demarcation in Mexico's historical evolution (Hellman, 1978; Stevens, 1974; Cohen and Frazier, 1993; Santiago, 1987). Most writings on contemporary Mexican political discourse, political culture, popular culture, and socioeconomic structures commence with some understanding of the events of that time. Some writers suggest that those events deconstructed the grand narrative of Mexican statehood, *mexicanidad*, and the revolution (Paz, 1970) and go on to argue that Mexican intellectuals have lost their sense of how their world is constituted (Foweraker, 1990). It follows that the emergence of interpretive models such as the replacement of developmentalism or clientelism with corporatism or authoritarianism parallels endeavors to comprehend '68 and the character of post-'68 Mexico. Depending on one's understanding of '68, one either

defends traditional models of postrevolutionary Mexico or develops new approaches.

A few thinkers view '68 as the beginning of a transition period (1968–1988) that encapsulates the transformation (if not decline) of traditional Mexican politics (Pérez Arce, 1990: 105; Foweraker, 1990; Loaeza, 1993). These writers point to the rise of a new critical journalism, the formation of new political parties, the creation of alternative social organizations, increased independent unionization, various political reforms, etc., as products of the activism of that period. Moreover, future scholars may well link post-1988 Mexico (greater austerity, bureaucratic conflicts, increasing ungovernability, the rise of “narcodemocracy,” the appearance of the Zapatista and other rebellions, the emergence of real democracy) to the events of that year (Harvey, 1993; Valle, 1995; Rodríguez Araujo, 1996; Morris, 1995). All of this is simply to say that our thinking on contemporary Mexico commences with our interpretation of México '68.

These interpretive efforts also work backwards. Depending on one's political and theoretical position, one interprets the student movement in the light of earlier social and political movements. Some may link it to earlier labor struggles, in particular the railroad workers' strike of 1958–1959, the multiple student protests at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Autonomous National University of Mexico—UNAM), the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (National Polytechnic Institute—IPN), and other academic institutions, middle-class anxieties and concerns (economic and political), popular discontent, and the like. In this way, the student movement of 1968 is typically reduced to a component (sometimes central, sometimes minor) of a longer historical trajectory.

My problem with these interpretations is that they obscure the political moment that was created by popular action from July to October 1968. The uniqueness of the movement is lost. For this reason, rather than reading it as part of the struggle for socialism or Mexican democratization, I would like to consider it a momentary rupture of the legitimacy and power of the PRI state. While I recognize that one cannot escape interpretation, I simply wish to give more attention to the experiences that made living so meaningful and revolutionary. Paco Ignacio Taibo II (1991: 9) is correct when he observes that the movement of '68 has become another of the phantasms that constantly appear and disappear like so many ghosts of Juan Rulfo. Our constant interpretation and reinterpretation of the student movement turns it into mythology, a form of social amnesia, and the experience of it is fading into oblivion. We forget the universe created by people's actions. Therefore we need to imagine how self-determination and participatory democracy created a new though temporary political space. People's choices fabricated both a crisis of

legitimacy for the system and the possibility of a solution to problems that once seemed insoluble. This essay is about this utopia (Gilabert, 1993; Berman, 1996).

UTOPIA

From early Greek and Judeo-Christian thought to current concerns with dystopia, the concept of utopia has been used in myriad ways (Manuel and Manuel, 1979: 4). Its long intellectual history has burdened it with a variety of often conflicting meanings and interpretations. As Manuel and Manuel (1979: 5) suggest, we need to accept its “fluid” identity. Therefore I follow Jacoby (1999: 105) in using it to refer “not only to a vision of a future society, but a vision pure and simple, an ability, perhaps willingness, to use expansive concepts to see reality and its possibility.”

Utopia is about a time when individual actions create a new collective. Their behavior subverts the day-to-day practices that sustain “normal” social and political operations. When normal practices are disrupted, new and different choices become possible. Hope for a better world enters the picture, fertilized by freedoms that permit unfettered dialogue, debate, and activity among alienated people (Berman, 1996: 18–19): “The old hope of reorganizing the world on a drastically new and infinitely more democratic basis, the universal project, the grand aspiration for the poor and the downtrodden, *that* hope, the forbidden utopian dream, once again seemed, in its newly liberal and anti-grandiose version—well, thinkable.” This hope is unique, unreplicable, and momentary.

My initial understanding of utopia and the student movement comes from two recent projects: Gilabert’s (1993) *El hábito de la utopia* and Berman’s (1996) *A Tale of Two Utopias*. Gilabert (1993: 9–10) begins by recognizing that societies create imaginary relations in order to comprehend real conditions: “To maintain the conditions necessary for its reproduction, society constructs sets of images, representations, symbols, and signs that individuals then use to communicate, define their goals and possibilities, values, and hopes; it can almost be said that this production of imagination, in the final analysis, corresponds to what has been called the structure or base of society.” These imaginary forms are reinforced by an activist state in defense of its economic, political, social, and ideological structures. This “institutional imaginary” (Castoriadis, 1987) is challenged by alternative imaginaries, but these alternatives typically remain unrealistic. What made the student movement of 1968 so vibrant was the possibility of turning these alternatives into a viable option and therefore delegitimizing the institutional imaginary. The

institutional imaginary of the PRI state, sustained by the rhetoric of the revolution, *mexicanidad*, progress, and modernity, dissolved in the practices of daily protest. This was not a situation in which “reality” had finally broken the 50-year-old mythology of the PRI state. Rather, the cultural ether, challenged by protest, revealed emancipatory qualities that allowed a new imaginary to emerge (Gilabert, 1993; Castoriadis, 1987: 62). Berman extends Gilabert’s conceptualization by stressing that this ideal imaginary of self-governing communities flows from the practice of direct democracy.¹

The possibility of transforming the institutional imaginary arises from what Ernst Bloch terms “not yet”—a hope based on possible futures rooted in the remnants of the past (Giroux and McLaren, 1997: 146). Utopia is therefore not an illusion but possibilities repressed in and by reality. This takes place because “reality” is not only what is but what may become. (Of course, in our day-to-day practices we reproduce and acknowledge only a given static, objective world.) For Bloch the world is not a finished product but something in a constant state of becoming (Levitas, 1997: 70). This propensity-to-something results not from multifarious reality alone but from the anticipatory subjectivity of hope. More than just an emotion, hope is a cognitive act (Levitas, 1997: 66). “Reality, in this view, is engaged as both a subjective and objective experience, and due to its unfinished nature it is seen as something that is always in a state of becoming” (Giroux and McLaren, 1997: 146). Human activity chooses which possible futures may become actual (Levitas, 1997).²

Utopia is therefore not wishful thinking about the future. Rather, hope brings out the unrealized dreams, lost possibilities, and abortive hopes buried in reality (Kellner, 1997). Thus different futures depend on tapping this repository of possibilities: “The future is thus no mechanical elaboration of the present; nor does it emerge from a series of ‘steps’ or ‘stages’ deriving in linear fashion from the past” (Bronner, 1997: 168). This depends, Bloch emphasizes, on the degree of consciousness generated in the present. Utopia flows from consciousness (coming from hope), capable of breaking reality’s mystification, and allows one to recognize future possibilities (Giroux and McLaren, 1997: 149).

The student actions therefore revealed a different future from the one permitted by the institutional imaginary. Their hope was not simply a projection of an “abstract utopia” born of wishful thinking but a willful expression of what could be possible. “Reality holds within itself the anticipation of a possible future” (Levy, 1997: 177). The student rallies, marches, and demonstrations manifested the hope and recognition of possibilities that led to an alternative future. Self-determination and participatory democracy were the path to this possible future.

However, we should not underestimate the power of the institutional imaginary in clouding our understanding and belief in possible change. McLaren's research on schooling can help us visualize how the institutional imaginary obfuscates reality. Reality is about particular approved patterns or "ritual rhythms" that manage our normal practices as well as articulate who we are: "We are ontogenetically constituted by ritual and cosmologically informed by it as well. All of us are under ritual's sway; absolutely none of us stands outside of ritual's symbolic jurisdiction. In fact, humanity has no option against ritual" (McLaren, 1986: 34). Marcuse provides another way to understand the burden of ritual when he argues that in contemporary capitalist society "tolerance toward what is radically evil now appears as good because it serves the coherence of the whole on the road to affluence or more affluence" (1969b: 83). We come to accept things as they are as the only way they can be. In the imaginary, "the idea of the available alternatives evaporates into an utterly utopian dimension in which it is at home, for a free society is indeed unrealistically and undefinably different from the existing ones" (1969b: 93). In another essay Marcuse adds that once a specific morality is firmly established as a norm of social behavior, like McLaren's "ritual rhythm" it becomes second nature, managing our "voluntary servitude" (1969a: 13).

The institutional imaginary denies hope and utopia. The second nature that comes from capitalism and the authoritarian state burdens us with its inescapable regulations and rituals. In the process utopia is maligned because no one really can or wants to visualize possibilities (Horkheimer, 1973: 18). Hope is brushed aside and replaced by continuous discussions about the necessary or proper conditions for change. For Horkheimer the only real possible choice, recalling Bloch's "not yet," is to accept that the time for utopia is always now. "Present talk of inadequate conditions is a cover for the tolerance of oppression. For the revolutionary, conditions have always been ripe" (1973: 11).³ The first step in resistance is "to keep oneself from being deceived any longer" (1973: 19). Utopia is the time/place at which self-deceit is recognized and laughed away.

In "remembering the future" we can open the space for real and universal tolerance. The ability to determine one's own life, together with the capability of being free with others, creates "the society in which man is no longer enslaved by institutions which vitiate self-determination from the beginning" (Marcuse, 1969b: 87). This radical change must reach into people's "biological dimension" to bring out a new sensibility.⁴ Here the imagination, drawing on "not yet," becomes the driving force in the reconstitution of reality: "The awareness of the transcendent possibilities of freedom must become a driving force in the consciousness and the imagination which

prepare the soul for this revolution” (1969b: 23). Only then can second nature, with its self-perpetuating majority, be recognized for what it is—rationalization of the status quo.

The time of hope is what José Revueltas calls “self-management” (*autogestión*). During this period, one encounters the creation of a real and direct democracy—a “qualitative democracy” as opposed to the mere arithmetic democracy, based on polls and election results, typical of capitalist democracies. Next is the presence of a clear and unequivocal collective consciousness. Self-management, Revueltas points out, comes into play when a collective critical consciousness leads to a qualitative democracy. For this reason the brigades⁵ were central to the practice of democracy in '68 and at the center of self-management: “Thousands of students—tens of thousands—participated in the brigades: they campaigned in markets, in buses, in streets, in neighborhoods; they improvised polemical conversations and street theater. Imagination and a spirit of creativity were unleashed in every direction without limits” (Revueltas, 1978: 181). Last and most important is the free play of ideas, currents, and ideological tendencies (Revueltas, 1978: 96). For Revueltas, democracy resides in the ability to question, contest, debate, confront, refute, and subvert (1978: 39, 124). In this setting possibilities occur that the institutional imaginary would have repressed and forgotten.

Bakhtin’s discussion of the carnival completes my understanding of utopia. He allows us to see the construction of a second world and second life outside officialdom (1968: 6). This oppositional world supplants official institutional rituals by bringing change, freedom, and disorder. At carnival, for instance, popular behavior overthrows normal social operations: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, everyone participates because its very life embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (1968: 7). From these endeavors emerge new forms of speech and new meanings for old forms. Profanities and sexual and bodily innuendo become part of political discourse. As Bakhtin points out, there is a transfer to the material level (1968: 19). This freedom, of course, is possible “only in [a] completely fearless world” (1968: 47). Only then is laughter positive, regenerative, and creative. “Laughter create[s] no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it [does] not convey fear but a feeling of strength” (1968: 95).⁶ Student political action parallels carnival.

Bakhtin’s analysis allows us to understand that according to official political culture everything is stable, unchanging, and perennial. Seriousness and authoritarianism are co-established with liberty. Castoriadis (1987: 71) suggests that politics becomes technique and bureaucratic manipulation. In the

second world, in contrast, politics is “carnivalized” (Bakhtin, 1968: 273) and democracy appears. “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (1968: 10). Here participants suspend hierarchy, rank, privilege, norms, and prohibition. In this politics-as-carnival, becoming, change, renewal manifest the merging of utopia and the real (Huizinga, 1955: 47). In this freedom, reckless laughter disrupts official seriousness and fear. In the fearless world of utopia, laughter purifies and completes seriousness (Bakhtin, 1968: 123). “It is a temporary transfer to the utopian world” (1968: 276). The movement of ’68 was an instance of this second world.

Today the barriers of institutions blind us to the possibility of fundamental change. Instead, we accept public policy and statistical surveys as the form of popular voice guiding change. Choice becomes the practice of legitimating the system. In 1968 this controlled and static world was briefly torn asunder. In that utopian moment, people engaged in exchange and disputation that transformed daily life and vice versa, questioned conditions that had appeared permanent, and created solutions that had seemed unrealizable. Mexican student activism created democratic possibilities that erased the institutional imaginary. In less than a month the legitimacy of the PRI state and the Mexican government vanished. The vacuum was filled by a spontaneous and anarchic constellation of democratic practices that took the form of play, farce, and fiesta. A new world was on the horizon; one had only to grasp it.

MÉXICO ’68

México ’68 began as an insignificant fight among youths in the Ciudadela, near downtown Mexico City, on July 22.⁷ When the *granaderos*, the riot police, arrived, they applied a heavy hand to those judged to be the culprits. This included many high-school students in the area who had had nothing to do with the initial fight. Many students fled into their schools to avoid the repression; the *granaderos* followed them onto their campuses. This repression ignited the student protest. As in many student protests in the 1960s, institutional violence served as a catalyst to radicalize the students.⁸

To protest the state violence, the IPN students decided to hold a demonstration on July 26 through the Federación Nacional de Estudiantes Técnicos (National Federation of Technical Students—FNET), the IPN’s corrupt student organization. The authorities granted permission for a march. That same day the Mexican Communist Party and friends were celebrating their annual rally for the Cuban Revolution. When the FNET demonstration ended, many

participants, still angry at the events of the preceding days, decided to take their concerns to the Zócalo. The granaderos, who were waiting in the side streets, moved to stop this new march, and conflict erupted between them and the students. Buses were commandeered and used as barricades against the police, who were armed with tear gas and batons. Students and others caught in the crossfire fled toward the central plaza. In the melee, the granaderos' repression also engulfed the *prepa* students⁹ who were leaving the area and the Communist Party marchers. By early morning a good part of downtown Mexico City was sealed off, and a few hundred students were locked in the old Viceroyalty buildings housing the downtown *preparatoria*.¹⁰

In the following days, students began to organize. While the UNAM had its traditional organizational structures, the IPN students rejected the FNET and began organizing a new body. The new leadership arose from newly organized strike committees. Each department or program within the IPN system had its committee. This brought to the fore many new activists, for many of whom this was their first political experience. The students quickly developed a simple set of demands. Meanwhile, students remained barricaded in the downtown schools.

The state seemed uninterested in negotiation. On the morning of July 30, which became enshrined in student folklore as *el día del bazukazo*, General José Hernández Toledo organized an assault on the various campuses. At the Prepa Uno San Ildefonso the army used a bazooka to blow away an old colonial door that blocked the entrance to the school. Simultaneously, military units occupied other schools and set up positions near the UNAM and the IPN. This marked the beginning of one of the most violent repressions of the time. The employment of violence disrupted the mythology of the PRI state. The explanation that the army had acted in response to a strategy of agitation and subversion did not protect the institutional imaginary.

The government's use of repression unified the students. Rector Javier Barros Sierra of the UNAM led 100,000 to protest the assaults. Four days later, the newly created IPN Coordinating Strike Committee led 100,000 protesters in a march that was different from the earlier university protest. A participant in the August 5 march termed it "a 'hot' gathering" (González de Alba, 1971: 57). The students were angry, indignant, and aggressive. The famous *pliego petitorio* (petition flyer) they circulated asked for the release of political prisoners, abolition of the granaderos, dismissal of Chief of Police General Cueto and his assistant General Mendiola, indemnification, repeal of Articles 145 and 145A, and punishment of the guilty. These issues were to be resolved through a public dialogue with the authorities, a crucial point since it was a mechanism to avoid co-optation.

Ironically, repression created a political vacuum. In this situation student activism began the construction of an oppositional imaginary. While the students' demands were specific, at their core was the call for liberty and democracy. Moreover, getting their concerns out to the public transformed these demands into a concrete political agenda that was acceptable to a population frustrated by limited democratic options. The students had taken their cause to the streets. The use of brigades engaged in *mítines relámpagos* (lightning rallies) altered civil society (Cazés, 1993: 22–23). These mini-rallies brought people together. Choices that had been nonexistent became legitimate options; multiple forms of expression exploded on the scene.¹¹

The brigades were connected with particular strike committees that together made up the Consejo Nacional de Helga (National Strike Council—CNH), which had replaced the IPN's earlier Coordinating Strike Committee.¹² The CNH tried to manage the hundreds of brigades through a coordinating committee for brigades, which canvassed the city painting walls, telephone poles, and buses, passing out flyers, singing on buses and street corners, asking for donations, and talking to people on the street (Cohen and Frazier, 1993: 84):¹³

Every brigade produced its own flyers. The movement of '68 was extraordinary in its graphic presentation of the movement's demands. We explained the demands in city buses. The regular media were closed to us, so it was vital for the movement itself to make sure that the people knew what we were doing and why we were struggling and about the repression that we students were experiencing. We got our propaganda out in such a way that people would hear the truth, so that they could understand that the government was not presenting the issues truthfully and also so that they themselves could become involved in the movement.

It was the combined work of the brigades and the strike committees¹⁴ that nurtured the growth of democratic practices in Mexico City and brought in the voices of those excluded by the institutional imaginary. The movement “familiarized broad sectors of the population . . . with the democratic language” (Loeza, 1993: 24). All these endeavors corresponded to the utopian moment (Gilabert, 1993: 195). As Guevara Niebla (1988a: 60) has put it,

The events after that March (August 13) shook Mexico City as never before; taking advantage of the fact that there were no police after us, the brigades went into the movie theaters and organized meetings in neighborhood plazas and markets, as well as in expensive restaurants like El Ambassadeur. Groups of students went to speak extemporaneously and pass out flyers in middle-class areas like the Zona Rosa, Narvarte, and Roma. We even improved our “lightning rallies” with electronic megaphones, which became so popular after the demonstration that the stores sold out of them.

This participatory democracy erased 50 years of the PRI state's vision of Mexican politics.¹⁵ Alvarez Garín (1988: 107) argues: "The '68 movement offered a new way to do politics. It revived politics, in a way, because it made it a thing of the masses, to be lived collectively, clarifying the matters in dispute and establishing in sharp, raw terms our answer to the threats of Díaz Ordaz." Democracy was achieved, as Guevara Niebla (1988a: 60) points out, without requiring social transformation.

The brigades went far beyond the aims and policies of the CNH. Each brigade made up its flyers explaining student concerns and analyzing what had occurred. "The leaders [of the student movement] were unable to pull together all the points of view expressed in the flyers and mimeographed sheets, which were actually the best kind of democratic expression. Each actor, each publicity brigade, went and printed whatever it wanted, down to the spelling error" (Revueltas, 1978: 22). The key was not the leaders or organizations but the actions of thousands of students that educated and incorporated increasing numbers of Mexicans.¹⁶

The political actions of the brigades, moreover, created a revolution that went beyond critiques of the political system: "The struggle was not just against government authoritarianism but was undertaken from a perspective opposed to all kinds of authoritarianism, to that suffocating way of responding to expressions of freedom in any direction at all" (Escudero, quoted in Jardón, 1998: 195). The movement reconstituted social interaction. Central to this transformation was the participation of women as activists. Not only had the movement altered women (Gutiérrez, cited in Jardón, 1998: 241) but their participation radicalized it.

Women have been erased from most interpretations of '68. Cohen and Frazier's research, in contrast, indicates that the brigades' democratic character was the result of the joint activism by men and women, which subverted patriarchal attributes and reconstituted gender interactions. Cohen and Frazier (1993: 83) quote "Susana": "Yes, [preparing food] was our job, and we did it well. But we also put an end to that role for women! We stepped out of our places and convoked spontaneous meetings in markets and on the street corners of different colonias." And Jardón (1998: 160) quotes Huerta: "The men in the movement wanted to send us to the kitchen, but we women threw ourselves into passing out flyers and doing all the same things they did." Women quickly overcame their assigned traditional roles. While gender divisions did not disappear, they were clearly redefined. At the same time, men were forced to reconsider their actions: "The boys had to change, and finally they did change their attitude to us. Before that, they were the conquistadors, but afterwards they talked about relationships based on friendship,

mutual support, and solidarity” (quoted in Cohen and Frazier, 1993: 97). The personal was politicized.

Cohen and Frazier register the transformation of many women into what Revueltas (1978: 96) terms *oradores brigadistas*: “Our movement brought to the surface of the revolutionary struggle a new kind of orator: the *orador brigadista*, the speaker who addressed the people in plazas, on street corners, in buses and trolleys, in the poor neighborhoods and the middle-class.” Revueltas clearly saw this individual as a male, but Cohen and Frazier (1993: 84) note that often women could express the movement’s views better than many of the men, who used excessive jargon and ideological code words: “We talked with the people, with women in the market, with people on buses, [and] the people understood us. . . . We began to realize that often we women were better than the men at talking to people and organizing them.” The participation of women, in other words, radicalized utopia by redefining politics. By upsetting Mexican social values and mores, these women activists opened the road for a movement that dealt with an authoritarian social system that restricted women’s possibilities (1993: 95).

Moreover, women brought politics home. At one level, they shared their political views and experiences with their families. Marcia Gutiérrez reports that she earned her parents’ support by engaging them: “I used to come home and tell them everything that had happened and what I did and didn’t do” (quoted in Jardón, 1998: 242). Cohen and Frazier (1993: 100) quote an anonymous respondent: “When we had political literature, we took it home. We wanted our parents to read it and understand so that they would support us and participate themselves. . . . [Whenever] we had a meeting, or a march, we invited our parents, and our friends, and our parent’s friends.” Marisela Castillos y Luna recalls that her father initially opposed her and her sister’s participation in the movement but with time came to accept the struggle because of their actions (Jardón, 1998: 159). At another level, women’s behavior at home (coming in late, refusing traditional roles, etc.) challenged the traditional family’s stranglehold on women (Corona, quoted in Jardón, 1998: 254).

The combination of the brigades’ work and a series of marches to the Zócalo marked the triumph of utopia. The period between the marches of August 13 and August 27 was “the Golden Age of the movement” (Poniatowska, 1971: 33). Between 150,000 and 300,000 participated in the August 13 march to the Zócalo that manifested the new oppositional imaginary built by the brigades. The PRI state had made the Zócalo a “sacred precinct” in which it organized its festivals and celebrations of the institutional imaginary. The various student demonstrations displaced the institutional imaginary in favor of utopia. Now student fiestas reconsecrated the Zócalo. It

no longer symbolized the PRI and its revolution. Rather, it represented utopia and carnival.

The march of August 27, the largest of the protest period, drawing over 500,000, reflected the optimism of utopia. It was a great carnival, and its joyous and festive spirit accentuated utopia. For many, not only students now, society and politics were soon to be altered for the good of all. Most believed that the PRI state and President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz would respond favorably to the request for democratization and public dialogue over the issues. How could they ignore over half a million Mexicans' joy?¹⁷

The rupture of official political discourse paralleled the rise of a new language intermixed with vulgarities and double entendre. As in the carnival described by Bakhtin, liberty from officialdom expressed itself in parody, billingsgate, and laughter. Abusive ditties about Díaz Ordaz, the PRI, prominent politicians, and U.S. personalities and policies were heard at all political events (Braun, 1988: 179; Poniatowska, 1971: 34, 97; Jardón, 1998: 44):

Muera el chango Díaz Ordaz!
 Sal al balcón, hocicon!
 Sal al balcón, pinche hocicon!
 Chango cabrón, al paredón!
 Bocón, sal al balcón!
 Díaz Ordaz, buey!

Often these were captured in songs that students sang on buses, on street corners, and at school assemblies.¹⁸ Songs by Judith Reyes, Oscar Chávez, Margarita Bauche, and José de Molina became popular, and less well-known songwriters and musicians proliferated. Performances by drama groups such as Los Mascarones intensified political dialogue and, together with lengthy (eight-to-ten-hour) political meetings on school campuses, transformed political discourse. The stilted and absolutist language of Mexican politics was gone; the seriousness of politics was reconstituted through laughter and song.

The PRI state's response, unfortunately, was violence. In his annual address to the nation on September 1, President Díaz Ordaz rejected the notion that Mexico had any major problems; the protests were simply illegitimate, organized by antinational saboteurs: "It is evident that nonstudents had a hand in the recent disturbances; but it is also evident that, whether intentionally or just by going along, a good number of students took part" (Díaz Ordaz, 1968: vii). Instead of dialogue, he promised to unleash an unprecedented level of violence to restore order:¹⁹ "The other road is open. We would not like to see ourselves forced to take measures against our will, but if it is

necessary we will do so; whatever is our duty, we will do; just as far as we are forced to go, we will go" (Díaz Ordaz, 1968: xii). The institutional imaginary was to be reestablished at all costs.

The response of the state threw the CNH and probably much of the population in Mexico City into crisis in the first half of September. What were they to do with a government that would not negotiate? At the same time, the brigades and strike committees continued their political work. Given the lack of access to the press, their work was pivotal to the survival of the movement (Poniatowska, 1971: 66). In fact, participatory democracy augmented as the students maintained a high level of public debate, often with contradictory messages and perspectives. Mexico City became an enormous beehive of political dialogue: "For the first time on such a massive scale, the principal problems of the nation were being discussed in the street, on the buses, in the factories, and in the assembly halls" (Valle, 1984: 36). Perspectives and choices abounded; disagreement and positions flourished. The crisis initiated by the president's speech, the increase in tension because of police action, and the unease of the CNH became unimportant as the brigades took politics to a new level. The silent march of September 13, the fair at UNAM on September 15, and the military takeover of the UNAM on September 18 intensified the struggle over utopia. Although the CNH almost ceased to exist in the days after the army took over the university, the brigades and the committees redoubled their efforts: "The next day [after the army took over] a surprising thing began to happen: on every corner of the route to the CU [Ciudad Universitaria, the UNAM campus] there were students distributing homemade flyers explaining that the army had seized the campus" (Guevara Niebla, 1988a: 65).

Increasing conflict between state forces and the brigades—at Tlatelolco, Zacatenco, and the Cásco de Santo Tomás—marked the end of September; the Olympics were slated to commence on October 12. The PRI state was resolved to restore order through repression. Utopia was to be cast out and sent back to the realm of impossibility. The battle over the Cásco de Santo Tomás on September 23 reflected this resolution (Ramírez, 1969, 1: 355). The massacre at Tlatelolco on October 2, of course, was merely the final step in this repressive endeavor (Fallaci, 1968; Flores Zavala, 1972; de Mora, 1973; Glanville, 1969).²⁰ "Frustrated, angry, irrational men decided to end the movement quickly" (Mabry, 1982: 266).

After Tlatelolco, utopia was buried in unmarked graves. The arrests, the repression, and especially the massacre now allowed the rise of antidemocratic tendencies within the student movement. While some local brigades and committees continued to function, often pursued by the security forces, the optimism and joy were gone; fear and anger replaced the democratic

spirit. Politics became the “serious” business of organizing a long-term political response.²¹

A political split arose between the rump CNH, much of the leadership of which had been arrested at Tlatelolco, and the various student assemblies and committees. In the vacuum, the organizational issue—how to continue the struggle—replaced the democratic anarchism and spontaneity of the preceding months. In early December the rump CNH declared itself dissolved and stated that the strike committees would become combat committees prepared for a protracted struggle. The end of the student protest, Jardón Arzate (1969: 262) argues, was only a change in tactics: “The strike indeed ended without abandoning the short- and long-term goals of the movement and preserved the unity of the base and its leadership.” This was the position of the Mexican Communist Party. Interestingly, while there were important differences between the Communist Party and other Mexican Leninist organizations, they all accepted a teleological reading in which México '68 was merely a stage in the political battle for socialism (Balam, 1969).²² From prison some of the members of the CNH criticized this interpretation (Valle, 1984: 131–138). They argued that their success had been due to the activism of the student assemblies and not to the various ideological tendencies that came to dominate the rump CNH. People’s autonomous actions had created a momentary period of self-determination and democracy. The turn to a tactic of protracted struggle was a move away from mass politics.

In contrast to Gilabert and Berman and in agreement with Guevara Niebla, I believe that state violence drove the students to this tactical change. The shift toward vanguard politics, armed struggle, and party formation reflected changed strategic goals. These tactics moved away from the earlier mass actions toward smaller, tighter, and often clandestine organizations. In the context of fear and repression, they fostered the political agenda of long-term struggle for a socialist revolution based on organization and institution building. State authoritarianism amplified the influence of factions critical of the movement’s anarchy and playfulness; for them, mass action did not lend itself to the struggle for socialism. The new tactics often led to a contradictory politics of intransigence and conciliation at the expense of popular action. For this reason Guevara Niebla concludes: “I believe that the repression had a lot to do with the triumph of authoritarianism within the left; authoritarianism begets authoritarianism” (1988b: 151–152). Bellingeri adds (1993: 62): “The bloody defeat of October 1968 achieved its principal objective—to dismantle the mass student movement—but led to the development of a new radical political culture of opposition.” I would add that the increased fetishism of party organization—whether in the form of a Leninist vanguard political organization or of more traditional political parties—was another by-product

of state violence. The move away from mass action driven by state authoritarianism often resulted in undemocratic practices within the opposition.

CONCLUSION

There is no satisfying way to bring this discussion to a conclusion. On one level, the struggle for liberty and democracy continued after Tlatelolco. Many of the movement's activists, for instance, remained active.²³ Some participated in traditional political parties, while others worked in new organizations or joined guerrilla movements such as the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre (Medina Peña, 1994: 225).²⁴ Many activists participated in the development of a more critical journalism that is apparent in *Punto Crítico*, *Procesos*, *La Jornada*, *Unomasuno*, and others. A few helped establish the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in 1974, the Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades in 1973, and the Colegio de Bachilleres in 1973, and many more went to teach at various levels in existing institutions.²⁵ Some went into exile. As Pérez Arce (1990) notes, that generation of student leaders has participated in all the major popular movements of the past two decades and every attempt to build a new party or political organization. It has transformed Mexico's political culture.

But what about utopia? In some demonstrations and rallies one can hear the faint echo of the utopian world of '68 (Escudero, quoted in Jardón, 1998: 195). Politics as carnival is rarely to be found. My cousin Jesús still remembers the fiesta that he lived, but he too succumbed to the need for new tactics; he participated in the building of a vanguard revolutionary organization. His practice and that of everyone else were guided by the logic of politics-as-present. Though utopia is currently buried, I believe that it remains in the memories of these participants. For this reason, the institutional imaginary could not recover and eventually died a slow death. Perhaps as Mexicans forget their fear, we will see the return of the utopian world as a necessary challenge to the new global order brought about by Vicente Fox and his cadres.

As Horkheimer reminds us, utopia is always present/possible. Its form and shape will be different from what was experienced in '68, but politics as carnival will return. Perhaps next time Mexicans (and others), giving space to the experience of rupture that utopia creates, can disrupt the institutional imaginary for good and produce a permanent transformation.

NOTES

1. Utopia was about self-determination and participatory democracy: "the reorganization and reorientation of society by means of autonomous action of individuals" (Castoriadis, 1987: 77).

2. "For Bloch, reality is essentially unfinished and concrete utopia is important precisely because it is a possible future (or a range of possible futures) located within the real" (Levitas, 1997: 72).

3. "The future is a deceitful time that always says to us, 'Not Yet,' and thus denies us. The future is not the time of love: what man truly wants he wants *now*. Whoever build a house for future happiness builds a prison for the present" (Paz, 1972: 68).

4. Here we can follow Marcuse's reading of Freud or Bloch's critique of Freud and Bloch's own theory of subjectivity rooted in human and bodily needs (Kellner, 1997: 88).

5. Zermeño (1978: 19) notes about the brigades: "It was a parallel form of struggle like the demonstration, meetings, etc., and accomplished the double task of providing information about the student issues (given the silence and false interpretation of the national press) and to foment unity among the student base by engaging in concrete tasks."

6. The institutional imaginary constantly regulates carnival. In our time, carnival, from Rio to New Orleans, is about management. Even the most "diversionary" and commercial of cultural expressions can, however, have oppositional qualities if consciously drawn out by participants. Unfortunately, the institutional imaginary does a good job of limiting carnival-like expressions to nonpolitical expressions of diversion.

7. My sources for the student movement are *Excelsior*, Womack (1968), Ramírez (1969), Jardón Arzate (1969), González de Alba (1971), Ocampo (1969), Balam (1969), Carrión, Arguedas, and Carmona (1969), Poniatowska (1971), Stevens (1974), Jardón (1998), and Hernández (1971). For a counterreading see Campos Lemus (1998).

8. Links to earlier student and popular protest movements have been pointed out (Guevara Niebla, 1983), but I prefer to emphasize the uniqueness of these events. Raúl Alvarez Garín (1988: 30), a student leader, considers the events of México '68 "qualitatively different" from earlier student movements.

9. *Preparatorias* and *vocacionales* are equivalent to U.S. high schools. *Prepa* students typically matriculate to the UNAM when they graduate, while *voca* students go to the IPN.

10. Following traditional patterns, the police and security forces raided the offices of the Communist Party, arresting everyone they could find and closing down its press. The state interpreted the events as part of an international conspiracy. General Alfonso Corona del Rosal, mayor of the Federal District, spoke of the existence of professional saboteurs, and years later he still believed in them: "Many facts demonstrate that the KGB and the CIA, along with the secret police of other countries, intervened in the movement of 1968" (1995: 239–240). *Excelsior* accused the party of taking advantage of student discontent to attack the security forces. General Luis Cueto, chief of police, classified the conflict "as a subversive movement that tended to create an environment of hostility against our government and country on the eve of the XIX Olympic Games" (*Excelsior*, July 27–28; Ramírez, 1969, 1: 15; 2: 67). A few writers have argued that the student protest was Russian- or Communist-inspired if not directed (Mahoney and Mahoney, 1997; Barron, 1974; de Anda, 1975; Borrego, 1972; Cabrera Parra, 1968), and this account still has adherents. Finally, a few saw it as the result of internal PRI politics (Campos Lemus, 1973; Cabrera Parra, 1968; *El Mónico!*, n.d.).

11. The PRI state has traditionally been strengthened by abstention from politics. As Loaeza (1993: 21) points out: "In '68 Mexican students effectively stripped a naturalized authoritarianism, until then covered by economic growth and conformism, by mobilizing to dismantle a central feature of the regime: the lack of participation."

12. The CNH was composed of approximately 230 delegates representing some 75 schools and 600 strike committees representing more than 150,000 striking students. Because of turnover and arrests, possibly between 300 and 350 participated in the CNH (Jardón, 1998: 46).

13. Hernández Zárate (García Reyes, Hernández Zárate, and Vega, 1988: 87–88) recalls how one brigade entered the Teatro Blanquita while Pérez Prado was playing. Not only did he allow the students time to present their case but he added a few words and then dedicated to them the mambo of the Politécnico.

14. The student assemblies and their committees made the final decisions. The CNH only presented possible actions.

15. The freedom of these brigades underscores the spontaneous character of the movement (Guevara Niebla, 1988c: 45). For a slightly different view see Zermeño (1978).

16. While he is correct to depict the strategic tension between the anarchistic spirit of brigade work and the pyramidal hierarchical discipline exerted by the CNH and the committees, I believe that Zermeño (1978: 167–174) treats the brigade experience as too calculating and organized.

17. Traditionally the PRI state organized counterdemonstrations to undercut antigovernment protests. On August 28 the government organized a rally in the Zócalo to protest the "student insult" to the Cathedral, the flag, and the Zócalo, but the rally turned into a disaster; the state had lost its support among state bureaucrats. As the flag was hoisted up the flagpole, a *Nation* reporter wrote: "No spectator cheered. Then from another direction, I heard the chant of the students, the 'Huellum! Huellum!' of the university yell, as 500 of them came marching around the square, right into the midst of police, government workers and supporters, and poised tanks. The spectators cheered them, out of support either for their principles or for their courage. They marched to the front of the Presidential Palace, still shouting" (*The Nation*, September 30, 1968). At this point everyone was ordered to disperse. This was followed by gunfire that cleared the Zócalo (Poniatowska, 1971: 53).

18. "It was real original political propaganda. It was based on popular songs, jokes, or comic strips. [Our propaganda] was short stories, and people would read and enjoy them. In particular, our well-prepared propaganda made fun of the image of the president, with many details using popular myths and Mexican sayings" (quoted in Cohen and Frazier, 1993: 85).

19. The combination of the character of Díaz Ordaz and the nature of the Mexican presidency was an unstable one. Philip (1992: 56) argues that under conditions of stress, an already authoritarian president became more so.

20. The repression of October 2 went beyond anything done up to that point. Octavio Paz, citing the Manchester *Guardian*, put the dead at about 325 (Paz, 1970: 38). The wounded probably were three times the number of killed, and there were 1,000 arrests (Flores, 1972: 195; Jardón, 1998: 99) out of a possible 15,000 demonstrators.

21. At the same time the state utilized the Olympics to manage popular restlessness (Estrada, quoted in Jardón, 1998: 226).

22. Medina Peña argues that "the disaster of '68 made many acknowledge the position of the leadership that it was necessary to evolve from direct action, based on assembly-directed engagement, to organized action" (1994: 221).

23. Of course, many others have taken on the mantle of '68er—recall Nilda Patricia Velasco and Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León.

24. Guevara Niebla recalls how, after Tlatelolco, many felt that the only possibility for change was armed struggle. From prison, he continues, a group of students even called for insur-

rection, a political action that was “entirely inordinate, out of proportion, unreal” (1988b: 153). For this reason, he concludes that the urban guerrillas are a product of the repression of '68 (as, of course, was the “dirty war” waged against them by the state through the 1970s).

25. It would be interesting to trace the different positions taken by current faculty members who participated in the events of 1968 with regard to the recent UNAM protest.

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