

# October 2 is Not Forgotten! The History, Collective Memory and Transgenerational Perseverance of Mexican '68

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**Abstract:** The Mexican '68 Movement is especially known for the Tlatelolco massacre, which took place on the 2nd of October, 1968. Since then, on each anniversary, students fill the streets of Mexico and chant the slogan: "October 2nd is not forgotten!". This paper is about such a slogan, the historical plot in which the Mexican '68 Movement was inserted, its history, its consequences, its collective memory and its symbolic form of transgenerational perseverance until now.

**Keywords:** Mexico; Tlatelolco; 1968; students; collective memory.

### **The students of '68 and the current validity of their revolutionary impetus**

The spirit of '68 had one of its centers in Mexico. In this country, as in France or the United States, 1968 was a year of broad and intense mobilizations characterized by their relative spontaneity, by their naturalness and freshness, by their novel and subversive aspect, by their great expressiveness and overflowing imagination, by their liberating eagerness and by the massive participation of students. They were young people who studied in high schools and universities in Mexico City, Morelia, Puebla, Guadalajara, Monterrey and other cities. They were generally very different from their parents. They saw society and history in a different way. They wanted to change everything around them. They were vigorous and impetuous. And many, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, flooded the public space.

The Mexican student wave rose to levels never seen before and threatened to disturb and change everything. The social and political structures trembled under the impulse of the '68 Movement. The students of those times almost revolutionized the country in which they lived, but they did not or, rather, as I will try to show now, they have not done so yet.

We do not know everything that can still happen in the future in Mexico thanks to what happened in 1968. We only know what happened in that year and its effects in the years that have passed since then. And we know all this only in part. What we know is a part, a trace of what happened, which now allows us to think about '68.

### **Mexican '68 Movement: Unique and like any other**

Whether we were alive in 1968 or not, our thoughts about that year are based only on a fraction of what happened: what we remember, what we have read, what we have been told. This is merely a tiny fraction of the whole. However, this fraction can become something enormous, a cluster composed of innumerable reminiscences, information, images, words and impressions. Let us recall a few of them, starting with those that are not distinctive of the Mexican '68 Movement, those in which the Mexican '68 Movement is analogous to that of other Western countries because of a

profound generational consonance among young people of that time.

Mexican '68 students proceeded like the Europeans and the Americans in their main actions and methods: assemblies, strikes, street protests, silent marches, blockades, sit-ins, rallies in public places, banners, posters, leaflets, pamphlets and so on. They overwhelmed institutional policy, they opposed the establishment, they had a progressive and leftist orientation, they questioned the authorities, they protested against the government, they clashed with the police and threw stones at policemen. Mexican '68 actions also coincided with those of other countries in denouncing the hypocrisy of their time. This denunciation, in the precise case of Mexico, tended to focus on the authoritarian and highly repressive regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which hypocritically presented itself as democratic, tolerant and respectful of freedom of expression.

Behind the external image of tolerance, freedom and democracy, Mexican society suffered a despotic oppression and the ruthless persecution of all kinds of political opponents dating from the 1940s. This oppressive and persecutory climate was a determining factor in why Mexico's '68 was so different from the '68 actions in other countries and ended with a bloodbath, the slaughter of Tlatelolco, on October 2, 1968. Such an outcome could almost have been predicted in examining the history of Mexico in the 20th century. Let us remember this history to understand why the Mexican '68 Movement was so particular. Its particularity owes in large part to the historical plot in which the movement was inserted.

### **The history that led to the Mexican '68 Movement**

Since colonial times, Mexico has been a country torn by socioeconomic inequalities. These inequalities did not decrease with the independence of the country at the beginning of the 19th century. On the contrary, they tended to increase, prevented true democratization and became unsustainable during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This partly explains the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The revolutionary movement was for democracy, land and freedom, but also, fundamentally, for what is often forgotten: justice and equality.

After the Mexican Revolution, it was necessary to wait until the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas, between 1934 and 1940, so that the revolutionary ideals could materialize partially through nationalist and egalitarian measures, such as the expropriation of large estates, the distribution of 18 million hectares to peasants, the nationalization of railroads and the oil industry, the strengthening of trade unions, an ambitious plan for literacy and public education, the popular dissemination of culture, and insubordination in the face of interference by the United States. These measures caused great discomfort among

the privileged and conservative sectors of Mexican society, which, after the conclusion of the Cárdenas presidency, endeavored to reverse the revolutionary transformation of the country.

The pressure of the ruling classes caused Cárdenas' achievements to be attenuated, curtailed or simply annulled in the following decades. From the 1940s forward, the history of Mexico has been characterized by an incessant dismantling of Cardenism and its revolutionary heritage. This has led us to a situation very similar to that which existed during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, with a vertiginous growth of inequality, the increasing exploitation and marginalization of the poorest citizens, the abandonment of education, the greater concentration of wealth and land in the hands of the privileged, the privatization of what had been nationalized, the unstoppable plundering of national resources by foreign companies, the erosion of sovereignty and the growing interference of the United States in internal affairs.

The anti-Cardenista reaction, the turn to right-wing policies and the return to the pre-revolutionary past has triggered from the beginning, since the 1940s, a wave of collective mobilizations to defend the revolutionary legacy of Cardenism. These mobilizations provoked, in turn, the violent reaction of the PRI regime, which, from then until now, has shown an authoritarian and highly repressive side that manifested itself in the aggressions enacted against the student movement of 1968 and especially in the carnage of October 2 in Tlatelolco.

The Tlatelolco massacre was not the first of its kind. Between the 1940s and 1968, there was a series of killings perpetrated for political reasons and executed by soldiers and police against civilians and opponents of the regime, including: in 1942, in downtown Mexico City, the murder of six students of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN); in 1952, also in Mexico City, more than 200 left-wing opponents, followers of Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, killed in the Alameda; in 1958, in the Zócalo of the same city, several victims participating in the teachers' movement; between 1960 and 1962, in Guerrero, 50 murdered in the repression of the Guerrero Civic Association; in 1963 and 1966, in Morelia, 3 students killed; in 1967, in Guerrero, 5 deaths among teachers and parents in Atoyac, and between 40 and 80 deaths and disappearances in the repression conducted against the coprero peasants near Acapulco. These massacres did not prevent, during the same period, large protest movements in which the heritage of the revolution and Cardenism was defended: in 1952, the movement of the henriquistas for the restoration of the Cardenista project; in 1958, the Revolutionary Movement of Teachers led by Othón Salazar, as well as the railroad strike led by Valentín Campa and Demetrio Vallejo; in 1964, the strikes and demonstrations of doctors; and between 1963 and 1967, the student mobilizations in Puebla, in Sonora, in Tabasco and especially in the Michoacán University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia.

## From the March of Freedom to the meetings of the National Center of Democratic Students

Just as government violence was unable to stop the great social mobilizations of 1952 to 1968, so it was unable to prevent the great student movement of '68. This movement made its way through despite ruthless repression, as we shall see now in a brief journey in which I will only sketch some general outlines of what has already been recorded, reported and analyzed thoroughly and exhaustively by authors such as Edmundo Jardón Arzate<sup>1</sup>, Elena Poniatowska<sup>2</sup>, Sergio Zermeno<sup>3</sup>, Paco Ignacio Taibo II<sup>4</sup>, Daniel Cazés<sup>5</sup>, Sergio Aguayo<sup>6</sup>, Jorge Volpi<sup>7</sup>, Julio Scherer y Carlos Monsiváis<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps the only distinctive feature of my historical account is what happened outside of Mexico City, especially between January and July 1968, which, significantly, is often forgotten or underestimated.

The year 1968 begins with the organization and realization of a great March for Freedom organized by the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED). The marchers intend to travel 200 kilometers, from the town of Dolores Hidalgo to the city of Morelia, to demand the release of political prisoners, including Rafael Aguilar Talamantes, Efrén Capiz and Sebastián Dimas Quiroz, leaders of the student movement of 1966 at the Universidad Michoacana. After advancing 120 kilometers and reaching Valle de Santiago, the march was dissolved with violence enacted by the military. This provoked a wave of student protests in Mexico City, Morelia, Culiacán, Mazatlán, Monterrey, Villahermosa, Veracruz, Chihuahua and Puebla.

In February 1968, in various parts of Mexico, 11,000 students from 29 normal rural schools went on strike. In the following months, the arrests of student activists and members of the Mexican Communist Party and other organizations multiplied. At the same time, there were numerous demonstrations for the release of political prisoners. One of the most charismatic prisoners, the famous railroad leader Demetrio Vallejo, goes on a hunger strike in prison. Several student leaders of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) stand in solidarity with him

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1 Jardón Arzate 1969.

2 Poniatowska 1971.

3 Zermeno 1978.

4 Taibo II 1991.

5 Cazés 1993.

6 Aguayo Quezada 1998.

7 Volpi 2006.

8 Scherer and Monsiváis 1999.

and also declare a hunger strike.

The Mexican National Conference of Solidarity with the People of Vietnam is held between March 16 and 17. Then, between March and May, tens of thousands of people, including many students, express their support of the Vietnamese and their repudiation of US intervention in several cities of the country. There are demonstrations held successively in Guadalajara (March 25), Chilpancingo, Torreón and Los Mochis (April 21), Mexico City and Culiacán (April 25), Zacatecas (April 27), Fresnillo (April 27 and 29), Mexicali (May 24) and Morelia (July 26 and 28).

In May in Mexico City and in July in Morelia, there are two meetings of the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED). Representatives from all over the country resolve to continue fighting for peace in Vietnam, for the democratization of education and for the liberation of student political prisoners. The General Constitution of this student broad organization, approved on May 10, not only marks the goal of emancipation from "Yankee imperialism", but also considers "an active political, ideological and practical struggle against the restrictionist and technicalist planning of education and against the pragmatic, scientificist and developmentalist orientation, bases of the current educational system".<sup>9</sup>

On July 11, at a student demonstration in Puebla, a student is killed by a university group closely linked to the government. This murder provokes protests and aggravates a long and violent conflict between governmental and anti-government sectors at the Autonomous University of Puebla. The same murder is also a reason for the public declaration of condemnation made by the National Center of Democratic Students in Morelia.

### The epicenter of the movement in Mexico City

From the end of July, the '68 Movement has its epicenter in Mexico City. It is here where, on July 22, a week after the aforementioned student meeting in Morelia, there is the unleashing of a series of events that will unfortunately lead to the massacre of Tlatelolco. Everything begins with street confrontations between senior high school students. The police intervene, detain several students and raid a vocational high school of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN). On July 26, students demonstrate to protest against the police actions. These students are, in turn, attacked by the police. As a result of the attack, the protesters retreat and end up meeting another demonstration that has been convened at the same time by the Communist Youth, the National Democratic Student Center (CNED) and student societies of the National Polytechnic Institute and the UNAM to celebrate the Cuban Revolution and commemorate the assault on the Moncada Barracks. The participants of both

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9 In Peláez Ramos 2018.

demonstrations march together and are harshly repressed by the police. There are more than 500 injured and dozens of detainees. In the following days, police and military will enter several schools, occupy the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and stop some members of the party as well as members of the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED).

On July 31, protesting against police and military actions, all the faculties, institutes and schools of the UNAM and the IPN went on strike. The next day, August 1, there was a demonstration of 80,000 university students led by Javier Barros, the UNAM rector, who demanded respect for university autonomy and freedom for imprisoned students. On August 2, a National Strike Council (CNH) was formed. It was composed of the main leaders of the movement.

During the months of August and September, the demonstrations multiply in Mexico City. The movement no longer only has a student character. There are also all kinds of workers: electricians, railroad employees, telephone operators, primary teachers and workers at the Euzkadi tire factory. All these people protest against the repressive reactions of the regime, against its oppressive and undemocratic character, but also against capitalism and US imperialism. Starting August 20, after the intervention in Czechoslovakia, there are also protests against the USSR. Even the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party condemns the Soviet intervention. Unlike other communists in the world, Mexicans tend to show close proximity, affinity and sensitivity to the 1968 movement, which, in turn, tends to sympathize with communists and externalize anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist positions. Portraits of Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh appear in the demonstrations along with those of the railroad leader Demetrio Vallejo. There are also portraits of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, the consequent revolutionaries par excellence, who did not give in and did not let themselves be corrupted and perverted like those in the regime.

The most popular protests were held on August 5, with 100,000 demonstrators; on August 13, with 150,000 people; and on August 27, with 300,000 protesters. In this last demonstration, which lasted until the next day, students raised the red and black flag in the Zócalo of Mexico City. They received the solidarity of government employees, but they were also severely repressed by police and military, as well as by snipers who, for the first time, shot at the demonstrators from the surrounding buildings. Government thus answered again and again with repression against demonstrations against repression. But the mobilizations continued. Meetings were held in Texcoco, Tlalnepantla and other industrial areas to approach the workers and seek their support. On September 13, there was a great silent march in Mexico City. Many protesters appeared gagged or with adhesive cloth in their mouths. They made the "V" sign with their fingers. There were banners and posters that read: "silence is repudiation

of repression", "honest leader equal to political prisoner" and "freedom to the truth: dialogue!"<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, throughout the country, there were signs of solidarity with the students at the capital. Between August 8 and 9, strikes broke out in the National School of Teachers, the Technological School of Ciudad Madero, the Training Center of Uruapan and the universities of Puebla, Oaxaca, Morelos, Yucatan, Sinaloa, Sonora Tabasco, Campeche, Baja California, Chihuahua, Veracruz and Guerrero. The most important Jesuit educational institution in Mexico, the Universidad Iberoamericana, goes on strike on August 13. There are student demonstrations throughout the country: July 30 in Puebla, August 1 in Monterrey, August 5, 10 and 16 in Torreón, August 13 in Xalapa, August 25 and August 31 in Morelia, August 26 and 27 in Oaxaca, August 27 in Culiacán and Monterrey, September 4 in Puebla, September 9 in Culiacán again, and September 28 in Orizaba and Xalapa, where there is a violent response from police and military.

### Reaction and repression

The violent reactions in Orizaba and Xalapa were not isolated events. Recall that on August 27, the military had attacked the demonstrators in Mexico City. In September, the military surrounded educational centers in Oaxaca and Chilpancingo. They also occupied a high school in Cuernavaca, where the Strike Council of the Autonomous University of Morelos was meeting. There was also an important military deployment around the buildings of the Autonomous University of Puebla.

In an isolated incident, on September 14, five workers from the Autonomous University of Puebla were lynched in the small town of San Miguel Canoa. The inhabitants of the place used machetes to kill three of them and the owner of the house in which they were staying. The main instigator was a priest who accused the university students of being communists and of wanting to raise a red and black flag in the church.

The anti-Communist campaign constantly surrounded the '68 Movement. From the beginning, the same in the capital as in the province, all Sixty-Eighters were considered Communists by government officials and by several journalists working in radio, television and newspapers. Many imagined a communist-Soviet maneuver to destabilize the country, overthrow the government and prevent the Olympics that would be held in Mexico between October 12 and 27 of that same year of 1968.

The animosity against the movement of 1968 was predominant in the highest levels of government and in the most conservative and right-wing sectors of Mexican society. The students suffered violence from far-right movements, pro-government youth gangs and military and paramilitary groups whose members dressed as civilians and used firearms. These

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<sup>10</sup> Cazés 1993, p. 166.

kind of groups constantly attacked the '68 Movement and showed their power by conducting a series of coordinated aggressions on high schools on August 31 and September 7. That is how they set the stage for the final actions of the military.

On September 18, the Mexican Army occupied the University City and arrested more than 500 professors and students. Four days later, on September 23, the military occupied the main educational centers of the National Polytechnic Institute. Finally, on October 2, a rally of 15,000 people in Tlatelolco was attacked by the military and paramilitaries of the Olimpia Battalion, who murdered more than 200 people—perhaps 300, perhaps more than 300. There were also more than 3,000 detainees added to the hundreds who were previously detained. Many of them were tortured. Some disappeared forever. Today we know that these crimes were decided, engineered, authorized, ordered and directed by the highest officials of the Mexican government of the time, including the President, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the Secretary of Defense, Marcelino García Barragán, and the Secretary of Governance and future President Luis Echeverría Álvarez.

The government brutality achieved the purpose of temporarily stifling the movement. As we read in an account by Arturo Taracena, “finally, with the ebb produced by the massacre of Tlatelolco and the capture of the main leaders of the student movement, the spirit of '68 was suspended for a moment, overshadowed by the lavish inauguration of the Olympic Games”.<sup>11</sup> However, between the months of October and December, the repression continued. On November 16, the Marxist writer and thinker José Revueltas was imprisoned. There were more arrests, more student murders, as well as expulsions of foreigners linked to the movement. On December 1, at a meeting of the National Center of Democratic Students from which several murdered and imprisoned were missing, an eloquent diagnosis was made, a diagnosis that continues to be valid until now: “The governing forces need their traditional repressive and antidemocratic methods, as they are not able to stay in power in a free game of political forces”.<sup>12</sup>

### **October 2 is not forgotten!**

The Mexican Sixty-Eighters managed to unmask the traditional repressive and anti-democratic methods of the PRI regime. And they did this in 1968, when the eyes of the world turned towards Mexico, where the Olympic Games were going to take place. These circumstances were decisive to reach the bloody end of 1968 in Mexico. The massacre occurred on October 2, only ten days before the Olympics began. Before

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<sup>11</sup> Taracena Arriola 2008, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> In Peláez Ramos 2018.

the imminent arrival of an avalanche of tourists and journalists, the Mexican government resorted to its usual method, repression, to solve the problem of student mobilization quickly and effectively.

The main purpose of the student mobilization, as I pointed out before, was to unmask the Mexican PRI government, take away its hypocritical democratic mask and show its true face: its authoritarian, violent and repressive face. But it was the same government that betrayed itself, in the slaughter of Tlatelolco, so as not to be denounced and exposed by the students. Indeed, to ensure the student movement did not unmask it, the government hastened to unmask itself.

The best-known event of the anti-repressive '68 Movement was paradoxically the bloody government repression. It is because of this repression that we remember 1968 every year in Mexico on October 2. On that day, year after year, for half a century now, tens of thousands of students take to the streets of Mexico to honor their fallen '68 comrades. It is a way of memorializing them and keeping them alive in memory. It is also an expression of what Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory” to designate “the memory in which we participate as members of a group”<sup>13</sup> and in which we collectively remember “an event that is part of the existence of the group and that we perceive from the point of view of the same group”.<sup>14</sup> Here the group is the Mexican student body that remembers, feels and conceives what happened in 1968 as part of its existence. It is, in a way, the same group that was mobilized in 1968 and that was attacked in Tlatelolco. It is the group that continues to mobilize each time October 2 arrives to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre. Its collective memory becomes explicit in the slogan repeated again and again by the students: “October 2 is not forgotten! October 2 is not forgotten! October 2 is not forgotten!”.

That October 2 is not forgotten is confirmed by the students who fill the streets to repeat “October 2 is not forgotten!”. Their slogan says the same thing they convey when they massively deploy their presence. They show, by demonstrating each October 2, that October 2 is not forgotten, that October 2 is remembered collectively by demonstrating, marching, attending rallies, painting the walls. These actions externalize a collective memory that differs from simple past history, as Halbwachs correctly points out, because “it only retains from the past what is still alive and capable of living in the consciousness of the group that sustains it”.<sup>15</sup>

Students from Mexico keep October 2 alive. They distinguish it from a simple dead historical date by making it live in what they feel and think, but also in what they say and what they do. All this is the consciousness

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<sup>13</sup> Halbwachs 1942, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Halbwachs 1944, pp. 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

of the student body. All this is also its collective memory. It is as external as it is internal. It lies not only in the significance of the gestures, but in the gestures themselves, among them chanting that October 2 is not forgotten.

The enunciation itself, the act of chanting the slogan, corroborates the statement that “October 2 is not forgotten”.<sup>16</sup> Enunciating this every year, as well as demonstrating this every year, is a way of not forgetting October 2, not forgetting it even if the years go by, 1969, 1970, 1971, the rest of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and then the 2000s. The years go by and the students continue to go out on the street every October 2, showing us again and again, every year, that October 2 is not forgotten, that its memory insists and resists, that the collective memory perseveres and manages to cross generations: those before me, then us, in the middle, and those who come later, including my students at the university, who continue to march every October 2, as I did, chanting what we chanted between 1994 and 1997.

We have, then, a transgenerational perseverance of the Mexican '68 Movement. This perseverance is a symbolic form of subsistence of the student body that was mobilized in 1968 and that was attacked in Tlatelolco because the subsistence of the group, as Halbwachs suggests, is correlative of the permanence of its memory, a memory that is neither more nor less than “the group seen from the inside”, a memory whose “limits” coincide with those of the same group.<sup>17</sup>

After their “first death”, their death in the real world, the students of 1968 remain symbolically alive through those who remember them in the commemorative demonstrations on October 2.<sup>18</sup> The collective memory is a triumph against Díaz Ordaz, against the members of the Olimpia Battalion and against the other executioners of Tlatelolco. Although the murderers have killed young people full of life, they will not have terminated an important part of their life: the spirit of '68. Such a spirit will remain alive until its extinction, its disappearance in the symbolic realm, the “second death”.<sup>19</sup> It will live as long as there are new bodies in which it can be incarnated. And to embody it, to prolong its life, it is enough to remember and act accordingly. All we need is the “fidelity” that “attaches us” to the event of 1968.<sup>20</sup>

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16 See Lacan 1959.

17 Halbwachs 1944, pp. 131, 140.

18 See Lacan 1960, pp. 289-298.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Badiou 1988, p. 258.

### What is forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten

It is true that many students, although they protest on October 2, do not have a very clear idea of what happened that day. It is also true that most of the demonstrators on October 2 ignore almost everything about the 1968 movement in Mexico. There is a great amnesia in the collective memory. October 2 is not forgotten only to forget everything else.

We cannot deny that much is forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten. Nor can we avoid the most diverse suspicions regarding this oblivion. The collective memory is suspiciously selective. Why does it retain what it retains and discard what it discards? What is its selection criteria? How can we not suspect it? Some of our suspicions, by the way, are not very important and can even be fun.

For example, when we think of the widespread amnesia with respect to the origin of the '68 Movement, the March of Freedom and everything else that happened outside Mexico City, how can we not glimpse a perfect example here of what I will humorously call “*Chilangocentrism*” to designate the prejudiced belief that Mexico City is the center of the country, that everything revolves around it, that it precedes and governs everything that happens in the province, that the provincial cities follow the rhythm of the capital and that nothing truly original and decisive happens outside of Mexico City? This prejudice finds an interesting refutation in the '68 Movement, which, although it ended up having its epicenter in Mexico City, originated clearly outside the city and buried its roots in student movements in Sonora and especially in Morelia. However, given the importance of what happened in 1968, it seems ridiculous to dwell on these minor details. What does it matter to forget what happened in the province when hundreds of protesters were murdered in the capital?

### Forget the hopeful and remember the hopeless

The exclusive evocation of October 2 contains oversights that we can forget without consequences, but there are also other suspicious oversights that we should not forget. There are two to which I wish to refer. I mentioned the first: by remembering October 2 and only October 2 again and again, we forgot all the other days, all the other events, all of 1968, everything that happened that year. The '68 Movement disappears behind the terrible slaughter of Tlatelolco. October 2 ends up being synonymous with 1968, replacing the whole year, condensing it into a single day, as if October 2 would have been the only day of the year, as if there were no longer 364 days, as if repression was the only thing that happened in the '68 Movement.

Paco Ignacio Taibo II expresses this sentiment in a brilliant way: “the black magic of the cult of defeat and of the dead has reduced '68 to Tlatelolco alone”, in such a way that October 2 “remains alone”

and “replaces in the memory the 100 days of strike”.<sup>21</sup> There is, indeed, a disturbing necrophiliac defeatism. We forget the wonderful social movement and we do not forget the appalling government repression. We remember the killing that scares us and discourages us, but we forget what is killed, what inspires us and encourages us. We lose the hopeful, the '68 movement, and we are left with the hopeless, with October 2, with the violence of the government. We keep alive the terror and not the illusion of '68. We forget what we should not forget and we do not forget what maybe, in the end, it would be better to forget.

The insistent memory of the Tlatelolco massacre could be fulfilling a crucial function in the repressive and antidemocratic PRI regime: to inflict a traumatic blow that would nullify any confidence in mobilization and that would plunge people into discouragement, fear and terror in the face of governmental violence. The “October 2 is not forgotten!” slogan also means: *Do not forget that the PRI regime represses protestors, that it kills those who protest, that the protests end in bloodbaths, they have no happy endings, and that's why it is better not to protest, as is taught to us by October 2, and that is perhaps also why we should not forget it.*

In the 1990s, when I was young and participated in demonstrations in commemoration of October 2, I remember that my mother, to dissuade me from demonstrating, told me that it was dangerous, that I should not forget October 2. She told me then exactly the same thing that I was going to shout in the streets: October 2 is not forgotten. What made me go to the streets to express my rage against the murderous government was the same thing that made her think that it was a bad idea to go out and express that anger. Her fear was provoked by the same thing that ignited my anger: the belief that is summarized in the slogan “October 2 is not forgotten!”. The collective memory could justify both anger and fear, both courage and discouragement, both passivity and activity. The effects were contradictory, but the collective memory was the same. Remembering October 2 not only made me and my comrades go to the streets to protest against the regime, but it also meant that many others, perhaps many more than us, did not go to the streets to express their disagreement.

There is, then, good reason to suspect that the reduction of the '68 movement to October 2 has disheartening, dissuasive, demobilizing effects. It is the same thing that happens with the reduction of the Sixty-Eighters to the ones who gave up their convictions, who ended up embodying the opposite of the spirit of '68, who betrayed their comrades and sold themselves to the regime in exchange for scholarships or government posts. There are, of course, cases like those of the renegade Gilberto Guevara Niebla, the informer Socrates Campos Lemus and the incongruous Marcelino Perelló Valls, but they are proportionally a minority. In addition to this, as Luis González de Alba has shown, they are

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<sup>21</sup> Taibo II 1991, p. 101.

debatable cases and none corresponds to the profile of someone who is “objectively a traitor”.<sup>22</sup> However, by thinking that they are objective cases of treason and that they are the majority or typical or even universal, one is left with the impression that the spirit of '68 was a simple form of immaturity, a typically adolescent rebellion, something that should be overcome when maturing. This is how we ended up simplistically reducing the '68 Movement to the caprice of a few miserable, despicable characters, spoiled youngsters and inconsequential adults. This simplistic reductionism can fulfil the same functions as the one that reduces 1968 to October 2: disappointing, demoralizing and deflating those who are tempted to continue what Sixty-Eighters began.

### Forget the present

The specter of '68 is conjured with the invocations of slaughter and betrayal. When thinking about Tlatelolco and Campos Lemus, who would have the courage to pick up the torch of the '68 Movement? This is how the '68 Movement can be confined to the year 1968. What is sought is that it is over. This leads us to the second reductionism to which I wish to refer: a reductionism that not only equates the year 1968 to Wednesday, October 2nd, but reduces the half century that has already passed since 1968 to the single year of 1968, which then is reduced to a single day. I will explain.

Contrary to what we are led to believe, the '68 Movement was not stopped by the Tlatelolco massacre. It was not defeated by the bazookas and machine guns of the military. Nor is it something that can be relegated to the year 1968, something that has begun and ended in that year, something that responds only to the conjuncture and the planetary environment of 1968. Mexican '68, rather, expresses a movement that comes from 1940 and that still endures in 2018: a movement for freedom and for democracy, for equality and for justice, for the legacy of Cardenism and the revolution, and against the PRI regime with its counterrevolutionary, corrupt, unjust, repressive and undemocratic tendencies. This movement that has not ended is also the '68 Movement, which, therefore, is not an event of the past, but still an evolving force. Remembering it is continuing it. Keeping its memory alive requires us to keep the movement alive.

Collective memory, as conceived by Halbwachs, is distinguished by keeping alive what is remembered and not just the memory. It is not just that the '68 Movement is not forgotten, but that it does not end, that it goes on, which, moreover, is also what happens when the students go out to the streets to chant “October 2 is not forgotten!”. Current students do not forget October 2 because they are still fighting for what students were fighting on October 2, 1968. And they keep fighting for the same thing because they have not succeeded, because everything is the same as in

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<sup>22</sup> González de Alba, 2016.

1968, because the movement has not yet managed to revolutionize the country, but it may do so in the future. This is also what is often forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten. What is forgotten is that there is nothing that can simply be forgotten, left behind, as if it were only past, as if it had already happened, as if it did not continue to happen.

The massacre of Tlatelolco was repeated on June 10, 1971, in Mexico City; then on December 22, 1997, in Acteal; and on September 26, 2014, in Iguala. The repressive government did not stop killing the opponents. The repression continued—oppression and authoritarianism, too. The democratic deficit is still valid in Mexico. Injustice and inequality are suffered daily by most Mexicans.

Capitalism continues to devastate the world and now threatens the subsistence of the human race. US imperialism does not stop bombing innocent peoples, impoverishing underdeveloped countries and being an obstacle to democratization in Latin America. The Vietnam War moved to Central America and then to the Middle East, to Iraq, Syria and Palestine.

The causes of the 1968 movement are as valid now as they were in 1968. And it is because of all this that one cannot stop fighting, and that the '68 Movement continues after 1968, just as it had begun earlier. It is a continuous struggle against repression, against oppression, against exploitation, against destruction. There are only two possibilities here. Either we fight and maybe we succeed, or we give up and we surely lose. As José Revueltas wrote in 1968, we are facing a “unique unavoidable and resounding dilemma: victory or death”, because while “victory, for our country, will be a free, democratic, healthy Mexico, where you can breathe, think, create, study, love”, the defeat will be death, “the night of the soul, the endless tortures, the padlock on the lips, the misery of the body and the spirit”.<sup>23</sup> It is to avoid this misery that people fought in 1968, but also before, after, even today and surely tomorrow.

### History of struggle

We have already seen how the Mexican '68 Movement is inserted into a history of struggle that dates back to the 1940s. José Revueltas conjectured that this history, after the repression of the railroad strike in 1958, found a way to “take revenge” by “moving under the events” until it emerged in the student movement of 1968, which, therefore, was not “historically isolated”.<sup>24</sup> As Pablo Gómez pointed out, coinciding with Revueltas, '68 was part of a historical framework in which different protests and other collective actions, far from being “isolated from one another”, were woven into a single “process” of struggle in which 1968

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23 Revueltas 1970, p. 91.

24 Sevilla 1976, pp. 13-14.

appeared as a “climax”.<sup>25</sup> This year only made the existing process acquire a certain intensity, amplitude and coloration, and to continue forward as it came from behind. The process, then, should not be confined to 1968. Of course, that year is decisive, though not to inaugurate, much less to consummate, complete and finish the history of struggle, but simply to continue and lead it through new channels.

The climax was also a turning point. Everything changed in crossing the spirit of '68 with its marked youthful factor, its questioning of generalized hypocrisy and its other characteristic elements. For example, as Soledad Loaeza, Ilán Semo and others have shown, the democratizing action of the movement and its social and institutional impact were decisive factors that have conditioned and determined the endless transition to democracy in Mexico.<sup>26</sup> As for the government repression and specifically the massacre of Tlatelolco, by betraying the closure of the Mexican government to any legal and peaceful strategy, it could have favored the proliferation of the guerrillas in the 1970s. The sure thing is that 1968 came to transform the country.

Everything changed with the event of 1968, no doubt, but to move forward. In Mexico, from 1968 until now, social movements have not stopped in their effort to defend and preserve the revolutionary legacy. There have been millions of Mexicans who struggled for the same thing as in 1968: for freedom and democracy, but also for equality and justice. As we remember the '68 Movement, we also remember the most important national mobilizations of the following years: those offering support to the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, when he was the presidential candidate in the electoral fraud of 1988; the wave of solidarity with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation since it took up arms, from 1994 to now; the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) in 2006; and the movement led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador in recent years.

The insistent remembrance of the great struggles should not make us forget the innumerable social movements that have unceasingly agitated Mexican society in the last 50 years, including several student mobilizations in various institutions throughout the country: in the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon in 1971, in the Autonomous University of Sinaloa in 1972, in the UNAM in 1986 and 1999, in the Colleges of Sciences and Humanities in 1995, in the Autonomous Metropolitan University in 1996, and so on. At the same time, each new October 2, the students have gone out to the streets to chant “October 2 is not forgotten!”. In recent years, there have also been two major movements that united students from all over Mexico who insistently

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25 Poniatowska 1971, p. 18.

26 Loaeza 1989. Semo 1993.



remembered the Tlatelolco massacre: in 2012, the #yosoy132 movement for democracy, for freedom of expression and against the return of the PRI regime; and in 2014, the movement caused by the disappearance of 43 students from the Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa, who, significantly, were attacked by the police when they gathered funds to go to Mexico City and participate in the commemorative demonstration of October 2.

### Half a century of repression

Just as the mobilization continued during the last 50 years, so did the repression, leaving thousands of victims throughout the country, among them some who were murdered collectively in the massacres of the regime that came after Tlatelolco, for example: in 1971, in Mexico City, 50 students killed in the Corpus Christi massacre; in 1982, in La Trinidad, Guerrero, 9 murdered peasants; in 1995, in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero, 17 peasants who were killed; in 1997, in Acteal, Chiapas, 45 indigenous people who were murdered; in 1998, in El Charco, Guerrero, 11 young people who were killed; in 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero, 8 people murdered and 43 students went missing; in 2016, in Nochixtlán, 10 murdered; and in 2017, in Arantepacua, 4 indigenous people who were killed. All these people annoyed the regime and were eliminated by police, military and paramilitaries. Their elimination is enough to confirm that the Mexican political system was not a democracy, not even an imperfect democracy, but simply a dictatorship, a “perfect dictatorship”, as Mario Vargas Llosa called it.<sup>27</sup>

As we considered earlier, government repression of peaceful movements, before and after 1968, might lead many opponents to take up arms and join the guerrillas. Since the 1960s, there have been many important guerrilla groups in Mexico, including those of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez between the 1960s and the early 1970s, the Revolutionary Action Movement and the September 23 Communist League in the 1970s, the Revolutionary Party of Workers and Peasants Union of the People (PROCUP) in the 1980s, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Popular Revolutionary Army in the 1990s. In the face of the eruption of the guerrillas, repression tended to intensify. Thousands of people were arrested, tortured and killed under the persecution of the guerrillas. It was in the context of this persecution that many of the previously mentioned massacres took place.

In any case, in all the previously mentioned massacres and in the thousands of political assassinations perpetrated by the PRI regime after 1968, the victims were mostly opponents of the regime eliminated by the military, paramilitaries and police working for the regime. It is true that the dead people fought for different causes, but always, as the last resort, they also fought for the same thing as the young people who

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<sup>27</sup> Vargas Llosa 1990.

died in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968: for freedom and democracy, for justice and equality. We can say, then, that it is a struggle that has not ceased in Mexico since the 1940s. This struggle, which has now lasted almost 80 years, is the one that was externalized in the '68 Movement, which, therefore, should not be confined to the year 1968, should not be abstracted from the great struggle in which '68 is only one link, a decisive link that is different from any other, but a link that only makes sense because of the past and the future that come together in it. And the future of 1968, we must not forget, is our present, that is, the present of those, like me, who still believe in the same values as the students of '68: freedom, democracy, equality, justice.

### Happy ending?

If we believe in the same thing as the Sixty-Eighters, then we can only manifest it by continuing what they started. We must see their struggle as a pending task. We must continue to fight against repression and oppression, against injustice and inequality, against capitalist exploitation, and against the imperialism of the United States and other world powers.

Why not fight? We still suffer the same as the Sixty-Eighters. We still feel and think the same as them, we desire the same, we are the same. It is true that we are also many other things that they were not yet. And of course they were also many other things that we are no longer. But there is something that they already were and that persists through what we are. There is the subject caused by the event of 1968. There is our fidelity to this event, our commitment to the truth that has been disclosed, our sustaining of the consequences of 1968.<sup>28</sup>

As we pledge ourselves to keep up the struggle of the Sixty-Eighters, our “we” is also theirs. They are also part of who we are. There is something that we can only be with them. Leaving them behind would be nothing more than leaving ourselves behind.

In order not to be lost, we must continue protesting as the Sixty-Eighters did, denouncing what they denounced, exposing us to the bullets that killed them. We must keep talking about them as the only way to continue talking about us. And we must not stop chanting the slogans with which we remember ourselves by remembering them loudly every new October 2. Otherwise, as the astronomer Guillermo Haro said when recalling '68, we will fall into “that magnificent and selfish silence with which we protect ourselves and forget ourselves”.<sup>29</sup>

To keep ourselves alive in memory, we must let ourselves be possessed by what Jorge Volpi called the “spirit of Tlatelolco”. We

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<sup>28</sup> Badiou 1988.

<sup>29</sup> In Poniatowska 1971, p. 145.

have to be the spirit of '68 that is not extinguished: the fighting spirit of the Sixty-Eighters. We must keep alive not only their memory, but also them, those who apparently died in Tlatelolco. Only then can we defeat those who believed they were killed. And, by doing so, we will defeat other murderers of life and hope, among them those who murdered and disappeared the students of Ayotzinapa in 2014, while preparing to honor the students of Tlatelolco.

Maybe in the end, with the support of the students from Ayotzinapa and all the others, we will get Mexican '68 to have a happy ending, distinct from October 2. Let me insist that October 2 was not the end of the movement. The end remains to be seen.<sup>30</sup> And surely there is a long time to see it because the Sixty-Eighters, as José Revueltas pointed out, are “making history”, they are “its flesh and blood”, and that is precisely why they can only “win at the end”.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Badiou 1988.

31 Revueltas 1970, p. 25.

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