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Ricardo Pozas Horcasitas*

Mexico in the 1960s

The 1968 movement of middle and high school and college students in Mexico condensed a process of structural, systemic changes that began in the late 1950s. Despite the fact that the processes are a continuum in social time, they always end by being marked by dates, weighty years and months: these are condensed times that break up the centuries into years, into months, about which myths are created.

Like all over the world, in Mexico, the 1960s were a period of intense transformation of society as a result of constant economic, demographic, and urban growth. That growth produced increased diversity in social organization and gave birth to innovation in the intellectual, aesthetic, and political cultures. These changes were the fruit of the economic and social policies of the regime that emerged

from the Mexican Revolution, combined with the worldwide welfare state trend. They came up against their political limit at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, depending on the national conditions in each country.

The social change that occurred in the 1960s was the result of growth with macroeconomic stability, low inflation, and a stable exchange rate. This began under the administration of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-1958) and was consolidated under that of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964), a term in which average annual GDP growth was 6.73 percent and average inflation was 2.28 percent. These conditions continued under the administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), in which GDP grew 6.84 percent, the highest rate in the country's history, with inflation at only 2.76 percent and a nominal exchange rate of 12.50 pesos per dollar, which would be maintained for 12 years.¹ This is known as the "stabilizing development" period, and it was the first time an economic policy tran-

* Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Social Studies; pozashr@yahoo.com.mx.

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scended a single administration without differentiating economic policy design from one presidential term to the next. This period of economic history is mythically linked to Minister of Finance Antonio Ortiz Mena, who would give it its name and implement it in the 1960s.² The period seems to be the economic technocracy's most successful in Mexico's history, and the minister of finance would be considered the founder of a long line of ministers that will cover second half of the twentieth century and on into the next.

The Mexican model of development between 1958 and 1970 was implemented by a strong, intervening, protectionist, highly regulatory state, with policies of investing in infrastructure and capital goods. Between 1959 and 1970, federal spending to promote industry and trade grew 158 percent, and expenditures in communications and transportation rose by 100 percent.³ Over those 12 years, several sectors of the economy grew significantly: electricity showed real growth of 12.83 percent; commerce, transportation, and communications, 6.03 percent; manufacturing, 9.11 percent, due to the import substitution model and growth of the domestic market; services, 6.65 percent; construction, 8.48 percent; mining, 6.81 percent; and agriculture, with the lowest rate of all the sectors, only 3.28 percent.⁴

The centralized industrialization model that intensified in the post-wwii era, began in Mexico under the administration of Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952) and concentrated in three main urban-industrial areas. It subordinated the agricultural sector to industry and commerce, decreasing investment and increasing poverty. The latter, added to population growth, made the agrarian distribution program inefficient in broad swathes of the countryside. This growing precariousness could be seen in the intense migration during the decade and the appearance of political violence, which gave rise to the first rural guerrilla organizations of the post-revolutionary era.

Urban-industrial growth was stimulated by the rise in foreign demand, which raised production in already exist-

ing industry and fostered the creation of new companies. This began in the late 1930s due to World War II, and continued in the 1950s, due to the Korean War (1950-1953).

Economic and social change could be seen in the transition from an essentially agricultural world to one that tended to be urban, the result of rapid population growth due to the transformation in the quality of living standards. The latter was due to improved diet, the introduction of potable drinking water, better sanitation infrastructure, health services, vaccination campaigns, and more extensive basic education. The effects of this were a dropping infant mortality rate and higher life expectancy.

In 1950, men lived on average to the age of 48, and women, to the age of 63. By 1970, life expectancy for both had increased significantly: males, 63 years, and women 75 years.⁵ Together with lower infant mortality, this had a direct impact on national population growth, associated with accelerated internal migration toward the expanding industrial centers surrounding the country's most important cities. The main development hub was the Valley of Mexico Metropolitan Area, which included Mexico City and municipalities of the State of Mexico and Hidalgo. This strengthening of the capital reinforced the economic, political, and cultural centralism that had historically existed in the country.

Mexico's population grew rapidly: in 1950, it had 27 791 017 inhabitants; ten years later, the number had grown to 34 923 129; and, by 1970, it had swollen to 48 225 238, almost double that of 1950.⁶ The rate of growth was 3.2 percent between 1950 and 1960, rising to 3.4 percent in the following decade, making it the highest in the country's history.

Economic and demographic growth kept the population essentially young, huge, and urban. In 1950, the mean age was 23.7 years; in 1960, it was 22.9; and by 1970, it stabilized at 22.3. The economic and political weight of Mexico City in the country explains why it became the space for the emergence of new social movements, led mainly by young people.

Urban Middle Sectors on the Scene and The Expansion of Middle and Higher Education

One of the social results of economic growth was the broadening out of urban middle sectors (55 percent of those with intermediate incomes in 1960 and 63 percent of the same in 1970). Their living standards rose, and their new purchasing power spurred the service sector, including greater and diversified demand for educational services and cultural goods associated with the quality of life in cities.

The increase of the so-called “middle classes” created a growing demand for their children’s middle and higher education. After the Great Depression (1929-1934) and the economic expansion of World War II, these classes stabilized and consolidated their social mobility, which they translated into the “legitimate aspiration” that their children have a university degree. Between 1950 and 1970, university and technical school enrollment expansion was surprising: while in 1950, the total was 32 143 students, in 1960 it had more than doubled to 75 434; and by the end of the decade, it had risen to 208 944 students in institutions of higher education.⁷

The quest for status produced selective migration made up of young people from urban middle classes, who had gone to middle school in cities outside the capital and wanted to continue their academic and intellectual education. Many of them would maintain the impetus and creative enthusiasm of the cultural immigrants, and, from the mid-1950s, would be the foundation of Mexico’s new political, economic, and cultural elites.⁸

Mexico City became the strongest pole of attraction for young people from the small and medium-sized cities who felt drowned by the weight of traditional Catholic values and the lack of cultural institutions and spaces (cinemas, theaters, publishing houses, bookstores, and art galleries).

Throughout the 1960s, expanded enrollment in middle and higher education transformed students’ traditional collective identities. This began with the identities relat-

ed to the institutions where they studied, with three central among them: the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and the Normal Teachers’ School. Being part of these offered different forms of solidarity and group cohesion.

The simple traditional identities began with the forms of organization of the student groups, from their classrooms to the student associations in each of the schools. Added to this form of student self-identification were those derived from belonging to football teams, their cheer squads, and other forms of association and competition among students from high schools and universities. Before the 1968 movement, you were a “puma,” from the UNAM, or a “white burro,” from the Polytechnic Institute.

In the medium-sized and large cities, the values and beliefs constructed to give meaning to their new lifestyle clashed with the myths and beliefs of their parents’ and grandparents’ tradition, which, thanks to economic stability, they wanted to preserve and hand down: belonging to the “middle classes” where they had managed to arrive. “Those who arrived” experienced the collective phenomenon of social mobility as the fruit of their generational and personal efforts.

Young people, the new inhabitants of the urban world, possessed the conviction of an increasingly strong individuality that was less indulgent of the past, a past constantly re-written by the social institutions in charge of watching over and preserving the traditions: the Catholic Church, schools, and the family. These traditions were preserved by their central figures: priests, teachers, and the father of the nuclear or often extended family, who reiterated their moral, patriarchal, authoritarian monologue.

Young people began to rebel against the guardians of order and their certainties and convictions. They confronted the faith that their elders had in the universe of values and beliefs sustained in dogmatic duty and that their children experienced as old-fashioned. This included versions of the world that justified the father’s violent and authoritarian power to rule, versions that had stopped

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In the mid-twentieth century, the existing institutions were limited and incapable of producing legitimate responses in the face of the new demands presented by the masses of young people who were entering the public space in national societies.⁹ The authorities, socialized in the third and fourth decades of the century, were incapable of making the forms of political and social organization flexible, thus exposing the coercive nature of the institutions.

This accelerated change produced a gap between the new, modernizing social subjects and the maintenance of a political regime with dense, heavy, presidentialist, authoritarian, corporatist political-culture traditions. The governments of the Mexican Revolution had built that regime over the first half of the twentieth century and designed it to represent and dominate the majority of a mainly rural society.

The intense change that transformed Mexico throughout the 1960s blossomed into the '68 movement that politically represented the most important social and cul-

tural change of the mid-century and converted social subjects to political actors. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Antonio Ortiz Mena, *El desarrollo estabilizador: reflexiones sobre una época, México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica / El Colegio de México, 2000), p. 50.
- 2 Ortiz Mena coined the term “stabilizing development,” saying, “I used this term for the first time in a study I presented about Mexico’s economic development at the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington in September 1969.” The study was later published by El Colegio de México. Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 173.
- 4 Ibid., p. 55.
- 5 INEGI (1950-2000), *Censo General de Población y Vivienda* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 *Anuario Estadístico de la ANUIES*, www.anuies.mx/anuario-estadistico-de-educacion-superior.
- 8 Ricardo Pozas Horcasitas, *Los límites del presidencialismo en las sociedades complejas: México en la década de los sesenta* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2014.)
- 9 Alfred Sauvy, *La montée des jeunes. Questions d’actualité* (Paris: Persée, 1960), p. 264.



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