

1968

And the Quest for Democracy

*Enrique Sevilla**

Many accounts exist of the 1968 events, but 30 years down the road we are still lacking an analytical, complete and truthful vision, to understand what happened and why. The '68 events have become a myth. Those supposedly guilty of the October 2 massacre have been named, but thus far no one has been put on trial.

Why insist on analyzing what happened in '68? Simply to avoid its repetition, even when events such as Acteal and Aguas Blancas¹ show that our ability to learn is limited.

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"October 2 is not forgotten," the slogan that reminds us every year of the Tlatelolco massacre, is not enough. We must insist that similar repression does not occur again, and the only way of doing that is to have a true memory of the past, with the maturity to discern the good from the bad, since all events have their shining moments and their dark sides.

If I had to draw a retrospective account of what happened in '68, I would begin by recalling that 30 years ago we wanted, above all, to free a few political prisoners. We had also made a commitment to struggle for a more democratic and less corrupt country. I think that in the 1960s everything was being ques-



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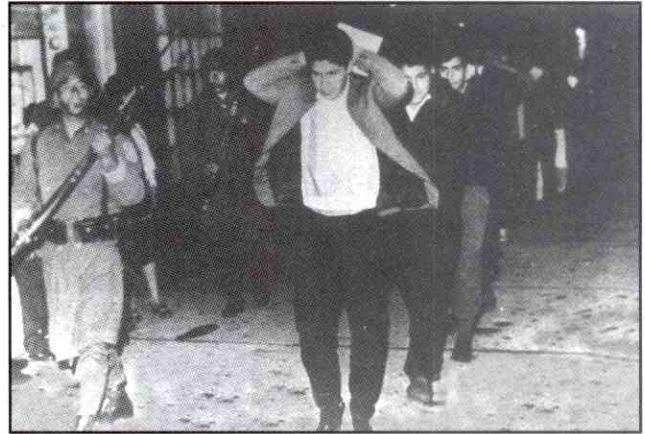
In the middle, Enrique Sevilla and José Revueltas.

tioned. When we entered the university, besides studying a major, we were also supposed to change the world. Looking back clearly, this second activity was a titanic endeavor of major dimensions. Most of those involved in this effort were from the left, although they were not the only ones. Most of the proposals were aimed at a better future, so that it was difficult for any student not to become involved and participate. It was a period when it was impossible to remain on the sidelines.

One way of communicating and socializing ideas was through organizing political groups, even when differences existed and some confrontations took place. Groups like MURO² had members who verbally and physically attacked their opponents and expressed positions different from most of the left-wing groups. Within the latter, there were theoretical discrepancies, but, at the same time, acceptance of the value of others' positions. There was the intention of helping out and some projects crystallized, for example, to help some graduates of the school of Philosophy and Letters find employment. At the same time, some very interesting cultural projects emerged. There was hope that culture would become a central part of university life. Cinema allowed us access to different worlds, to learn others' ways of life, to be more critical and more reflexive. Protest singers and other performers chose songs with meaningful content and profound truths, putting the words of poets like Antonio Machado and Miguel Hernández³ to music. This led to the idea of publishing magazines; there was much to be said and few adequate means available. Among the most widely read books were *The One Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse, which analyzes the role of the twentieth century working class from a perspective different from that used by Marx for the nineteenth century.

In the 1960s, the great majority of established beliefs were scrutinized, for example, the role of religion in society. New theories were sought out, such as psychoanalysis, to strengthen youthful yearnings for freedom. These were also the years in which liberation theology was conceived and a new understanding of the role of women in society developed.

There was great hope for the future, despite the atomic bomb; people were amazed at technological advances, like the ones that led to man walking on the moon for the first time. The same thing was true of the victory of the Cuban revolution: the real possibility of a future with equality for all members of society had an extraordinary impact.



During the night of October 2.

This was the climate that surrounded the leaders and students who on October 2 were crushed by government forces.

Slightly before the student leadership body, the National Strike Council, decided to use mass demonstrations to express its demands, conflicting views emerged inside it. The climate was one of deep concern because the events were taking on such enormous dimensions that it was increasingly difficult to control them, both from within and outside the movement. The situation led a less radical sector to propose avoiding confrontations and to seek alternative forms of organization. Unfortunately, this position lost the vote and it was the radical tendency that won out. We all know the results.

What was it that led some leaders of '68 to suppose that calling a mass demonstration would not have consequences? An infatuation with ideas. The prevailing theories proclaimed the construction of a better future and, as a result, everything envisioned would be better: a democratic country without social differences, with education, culture and food for all. Who could oppose such marvelous goals? No one. And this was, in part, the error. In believing that right was on their side, the participants did not understand that the movement's protagonists and its antagonists were neither on the same level of discourse nor on the same level of reality. The students' strength had grown, but the state was a colossus. And even more seriously, an irrational colossus. To suppose that with truth and justice on our side, nothing bad could happen was a serious miscalculation, since the colossus believed in another truth and was not willing to allow anyone to discuss it.

The blow was overwhelming, aimed at eliminating and uprooting all attempts at change different from those proposed

by the Mexican state. What happened at Tlatelolco was dramatic, and with the absurd death of the students a good part of the possibilities for a better future also died. Of course, few doubted that the state bore complete responsibility for this genocide. It was ridiculous to think that a few students defending ideas with only words could attack soldiers, and, yet, this was the “official” version. In any event, the soldiers did have arms and they did open fire. After it was over, the government was inflexible. It used all means at its disposal to subjugate the survivors. Many leaders were to spend time in jail, others were discredited and persecuted. The blow was physical and moral. The result: an almost total inability to resume activity. Proof of this is that to date no student organization of the same depth and scope has been formed. After October 2, despair spread among members of the National Strike Council resulting in a great internal rift between those jailed and those on the outside. The prisoners expected those for whom they had fought to defend them. The workers did not take a stand, nor did the socialist countries.

The experience was devastating, but not everything was. Although in '68 the entire country received the official version of the events from the media, in which they especially held “exotic and foreign ideologies” responsible for what had happened, some people knew there was another “truth.” Meanwhile, the government washed the blood away, made the bodies disappear and attempted as much as possible to hide the magnitude of what had happened. It also sought to throw the blame on outside elements, given its own inability to recognize itself as the aggressor.

The student struggle against the authoritarian regime after 1968 would incorporate new methods and sectors. Some students chose clandestine activities, including guerrilla violence. Others joined workers' movements that tried to free labor organizations from the tutelage of the state, and community movements like those of Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl, the Rubén Jaramillo neighborhood and the Committee for Popular Defense of Chihuahua. Still others formed small political organizations or continued their ties with educational institutions, keeping the flame of rebellion alive.⁴

All this prevented the government from regaining the acceptance it had previously enjoyed among the dominant groups in society. It also prevented the state from restoring social calm, especially due to the violent activities of the underground groups, which created a climate that especially affected the security of

high-level public officials and large capitalists and their families, who were forced to live under guard.

But the heaviest blows to the authoritarian regime were dealt by the very policies —erratic and irrational— devotedly put into practice by the successive administrations after Díaz Ordaz left office.

In our contemporary history, the “December error”⁵ and the economic crisis it unleashed eliminated any possibility of a return to presidential power in the old style and began a process of transforming authoritarianism: democratizing the electoral institutions, consolidation of the opposition parties, recovering the balance of powers. For the first time, measures were taken to grant autonomy to the central bank and remove it from the ups and downs of politics. And more recently, President Zedillo himself proposed that a government policy be designed to avoid a new crisis in the not unlikely event that a party different from the PRI would win the elections in the year 2000.

Thus, three decades after the youth rebellion raised the need to adjust the political system to the new society, its aims are beginning to be fulfilled. The process has been long and costly, but also basically peaceful. During this process, several political elites have matured who can democratically lead the country to new levels of democratic development, even though authoritarian temptations will probably never fully disappear from the scene. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The author is referring to two recent massacres in Mexico. The Aguas Blancas killings were carried out by police in the southern state of Guerrero in 1996; the death count was 17. The Acteal massacre was committed by private armies or “white guards” in December 1997 in Chiapas; 45 indigenous men, women and children were killed. [Editor's Note.]

² The University Movement for Renewal Orientation (MURO) was an extreme right-wing student group that used fascist methods to obtain their demands. [Editor's Note.]

³ Two of the most important Spanish poets of the Civil War generation, who were known for their support for the Spanish Republic and their active opposition to Francoism. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ For an analysis of the political and social movements of the time see Mario Huacuja R. and José Woldenberg, *Estado y lucha política en México* (Mexico City: Ediciones El Caballito, 1976).

⁵ The “December error” in 1994 turned out to be the starkest economic crisis that the country has ever experienced, to the degree that President Clinton had to convince the U.S. Congress to grant a financial aid package to Mexico for more than 40 billion dollars. [Editor's Note.]