

# Mexico '68/Beijing '08

## A Tribute to the Student Movement

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ISSUE/AHUNAM/Colectión Manuel Gutiérrez Paredes

Mexico, 1968: the year of the repression.

At first glance, there seems to be no similarity between the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games and the 2008 China games. However, a closer look reveals a certain resemblance: both games *seemed* to be in danger of not taking place. I underline the word “seemed” with relief. If the 1968 Olympic Games had not taken place, several of the 1968 student leaders might not be alive to tell the tale, though apparently President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz never gave up his

intention of doing away with them completely. “I would shoot them, Constitution in hand,” was the way a well-known intellectual, a permanent sympathizer of the student movement, and one of Mexico’s best pens conveyed it to me —and perhaps to others.

But I say that Díaz Ordaz never gave up his intentions because he ordered an even worse atrocity, if that is how the massacre of October 2 can be described.

Not-very-well-thought-out decisions led sex symbols Sharon Stone and Richard Gere to call for the boycott of the Chinese Olympics; and the French Foreign Affairs Minister seconded them after the unjustifiable repression of the

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Tibetan monks —although to be objective about it, the Chinese government had broadcast videos of bludgeon-wielding, obviously furious monks destroying establishments owned by Chinese residents in Tibet. But if the Olympic Games had not been held in China, can anyone imagine what the fate of Chinese dissidents, already acting in the most difficult of circumstances, would have been? China's enormous territory would have been even more closed off than ever, and it is not hard to suppose that the internal dissidents would have paid the piper.

In Mexico, the 1968 student movement began in late July, so from our perspective, the Olympics were so far off that they weren't even part of our calculations.

The only one who did talk about one "tendency" in the student movement aiming to "perhaps prevent" the holding of the Olympic Games was Gustavo Díaz Ordaz himself in his fourth annual report to the nation, where he dedicated several paragraphs to the games. It is worth reprinting one of them here:

During the recent conflicts in Mexico City, various main tendencies could be discerned amidst the confusion: the one made up of those who wanted to pressure the government to grant certain petitions; that of those who tried to take advantage of the moment for ideological and political ends; and that of those who aimed to spread disorder, confusion and hatred to prevent dealing with and solving the problems, in order to damage Mexico's reputation, taking advantage of the broad publicity surrounding these athletic events and perhaps even preventing the Olympic Games from being held.

Here, I think it pertinent to make a brief digression: one of the three tendencies that Díaz Ordaz points to in his brief "sociological" analysis, only the last one, the one that supposedly wanted to prevent the Olympic Games from being held, by going from "perhaps" to actions, could be alleged to be committing a crime. The activities of the other two are not mentioned in any criminal code.

But we did deal with the issue of the sporting event; we couldn't not deal with it, given that, as time went on, the Olympic Games became more and more visible on the horizon.

Perhaps an anecdote would be more illustrative. In all sincerity, I don't remember if Díaz Ordaz's fourth report to the nation had already been published or not, but the fact is that in a meeting of the National Strike Council, three or four of us delegates were given the task of writing a doc-

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ument. It wasn't about the Olympics, but the issue was so present in so many discussions and documents that we included a short paragraph that said, more or less, "If the Olympics are not held, it will be the fault of the government, not of the students."

When Raúl Álvarez, who everyone recognizes as the strategist of the student movement, heard those words, his reaction was unequivocal. He said that those few words carried with them a grave risk: that we were admitting the possibility that the Olympics might not take place. So, he said that not only should we not mention that possibility in our documents or public statements, but that we should say nothing at all about the Olympics. And that was what we did from there on in.

I would like to point out that, at least in the nation's capital, the last movement that had been repressed was the 1965 doctors movement. So, until the first acts of violence in 1968, nothing had disturbed the peace and tranquility of the Díaz Ordaz administration for three years. That is why the president said in his report to the nation, "When we competed for and won the right to hold the Olympic Games here, there had been no demonstrations, and there were none in the following years. It was only a few months ago that we discovered that the aim existed of disturbing the games."

Seemingly, even under severely authoritarian regimes like the Díaz Ordaz administration, certain periods are required without the noise of repression —hard power, according to Joseph S. Nye's classification, about which I will return later— and dead calm is needed to wield soft power, showing the smiling, self-legitimizing face of the government, organizing Olympic Games, for example, here and in China.

The fact is that nobody, as far as I know, not the National Strike Council nor anybody outside it, requested a boycott of the Olympic Games as happened in China. For that reason, I think that now it is easier to understand why we should be happy that the games took place in such a paradoxical country. An example of just how paradoxical it is is



Tanks occupying the center of the city in August 1968.

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The two Olympic Games have something in common: repressive regimes. In the case of Mexico, with no provocation whatsoever from the students, the government opted for the worst path anyway: it committed a collective crime.

arrest until his very recent death. An unknown number of students also died around the square, where they were heading, and eight movement leaders were sentenced to death, a sentence that was carried out before the stunned eyes of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, neither Tiananmen nor the Three Cultures Plaza have been forgotten. They remain tragic symbols of what unfettered power is capable of when it decides to sacrifice its citizens, even under-aged citizens. In the case of Mexico, 40 years after the 1968 student movement, I see renewed interest in the events of those days, which continue to be remembered, as the slogan “October 2 will never be forgotten” demonstrates. Fortunately, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s talents as an oracle expressed in his report to the nation failed him: “In a few weeks or months, the events will take on their true dimension with the perspective given them by time, and they will not be remembered as heroic episodes, but as an absurd struggle with dark origins and unspeakable aims.”

In the case of China, let’s look at something as apparently alien to totalitarian violence as architecture. It also helps remind us of what we should remember. The quote is quite long, but not a word is wasted:

Formal experimentation and technological feats in architecture have appeared with complete freedom: Beijing’s Olympic stadium by Herzon & De Meuron; Beijing’s airport, by Norman Foster; the Water Cube by PTW; the National Theater, by Paul Andreu; the World Financial Center of Shanghai, by KPF, etc. All these are works that could not exist in another country with a different system of production. They reflect the grandeur of their time. However, in the whole whirlwind, a certain blindness can be perceived, something of the Chinese mirage. Ian Buruma is very precise: “It is hard to imagine in the 1970s a famous European architect designing a television station for the Pinochet regime without losing all credibility. Why, then, is it alright to do it today in China? It’s true. Is this how cynical we have become? Does anyone remember Tiananmen? Does anyone care? The new East looks

the fact that about a year ago, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China allowed itself to thank the Chinese business community for its contribution to growth and development, at the same time that slave labor and other extreme forms of super-exploitation still exist in that country.

China carried off the Olympic Games brilliantly once the issue of the boycott was forgotten, but at the same time, it could not avoid demonstrations of discontent, which, of course, people had a right to express, although it was able to prevent them from being disseminated. Joseph Nye explains where the failure of the rulers lay, and it is no small thing: the Chinese government has not achieved all its Olympic aims. It did not fulfill its promise of allowing peaceful demonstrations and free Internet access, with the consequent reduction of its soft power successes.<sup>1</sup>

According to Nye, the Russians wielded such abusive hard power in Georgia that even the Chinese refused to support them, when they had been their allies on many other occasions. Meanwhile, the valiant Chinese opposition continued fighting in less unbearable conditions than if the boycott had been carried out to open up more room for freedom and democracy.

We must never forget that in 1989, when the student movement gained strength in China and the world’s attention focused on Tiananmen Square, the only Chinese leader who argued for dialogue with the students was Zhao Zijiang, who was removed from office and was kept under house

like the Old West: everyone has come to try their luck in a lawless land; they have to know how to maneuver amidst speculation and corruption, to take advantage of opportunities, to bet everything and be very aware that the house always wins.”<sup>3</sup>

To recapitulate, the two Olympic Games have something in common: regimes that are already repressive should not be provoked because the consequences can be terrible. We have to admit, however, that in the case of Mexico, the government, with no provocation whatsoever from the students, opted for the worst path anyway: just 12 days before the Olympics were inaugurated, it committed a collective crime in the Three Cultures Plaza at Tlatelolco, leaving men, women, senior citizens and children dead. Perhaps it did it so the games could be held in peace, something it achieved despite the enormous international discredit it faced down.

No one knows what will happen to the opposition in China, but fortunately, in the globalized world, not every-

thing turns out unfavorably for the people: there is increasing awareness of the need to respect human rights and favor liberalism and democracy. So, China may not be able to continue invoking its exceptional status and special way of understanding these matters. Regardless of anything else, the Olympics it held brought it into the spotlight in the eyes of the world, and we all know that there are horrors there that must be stopped as soon as possible. ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nye, “Los cañones y el oro de agosto,” *El País*, September 10, 2008, pp. 23-24, at [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/canones/oro/agosto/elpepiopi/20080910elpepiopi\\_4/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/canones/oro/agosto/elpepiopi/20080910elpepiopi_4/Tes).

<sup>2</sup> “The Tiananmen Papers,” introduced by Andrew J. Nathan, *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2002), pp. 1-48.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Carlos Cano, “La velocidad de la arquitectura china,” *Letras Libres* no. 116, August 2008, pp. 90-92.