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The Tail of the ’68 Comet

Only 10 days after the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz put a bloody end to the intense 1968 student movement, he inaugurated the nineteenth Olympic Games in the University City stadium, occupied by the army just a few weeks before. The movement was a joyful, naïve uprising against a regime boastful of its economic successes, with its authoritarian rites of fake unanimity that reacted clumsily and bloodily against the young people who were merely demonstrating against police brutality and the repression of protest.

The government intended to bury the blood spilled by the students and hide the huge number of political prisoners that its paranoid repression had produced. A government that boasted about its social successes was the same one that had repressed striking doctors a couple of years before. From the very beginning of the decade, when Díaz Ordaz’s predecessor, Adolfo López Mateos, was in office, the regime had faced social disturbances emanating above all from dissidents in its monolithic, corporatist unions, the basis for its control over workers’ demands. However, despite having used the military to put down the 1960 railroad workers movement and beating back teachers fighting for a democratic union, the massacre in Tlatelolco, with its dozens of dead, marked a turning point in the legitimacy of the Institutional Revolutionary Party regime. It would never recover its mythical aura of being the product of a revolution that had fought for justice; in any case, that revolution had already been buried two decades before due to its sale of protection to the businessmen who would thrive at the expense of low wages for industrial workers and the poverty of the peasantry.

For me, a nine-year-old boy who lived in an extremely politicized family, the ’68 movement had been like a turbulent nightmare from which I awakened to dive com-

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pletely into the Olympic fiesta. I was at the university stadium both for the inauguration and the closing ceremony. This was thanks to the fact that, to avoid any demonstration against the Lord of Great Power who had ordered raining down blood and fire on the student protest to end it, all the tickets were distributed among the regime's loyal supporters and their families. My father was a journalist, loyally critical —*ma non troppo*— from the left, and he was given some tickets due to that privilege; so we went to the two celebrations with my grandparents. The fiesta seemed to have left behind the tragedy.

However, the spell didn't last long. 1969 was an asphyxiating year despite the president's triumphal tours to inaugurate large public works. One was the Mexico City subway system that launched its first two lines that year, initiating a grand transformation of the face of the city. Those were years when the population explosion began to be felt in all its severity as the city became massive. The local baby boomers were arriving en masse to the universities or demanding jobs in an economy that began to show signs of reaching its limits, with real wages that had only just recently recovered the level of 1939, the end of the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas.

It was then that the aftereffects of the repression of the student movement began to show. The kernels of rebellion subsisted in many public universities, where struggle committees and radical groups abounded. Guerrilla movements began forming clandestinely and would reveal themselves in the months and years to follow: groups of young students who saw violence as the only way to face up to the regime's authoritarianism and refusal to deal with them. They were never massive groups, but only small cells of bewildered young people with a thirst for justice, intoxicated by the ideology and heroic halo of the Cuban Revolution and its derivations in the rest of Latin America.

The government of Díaz Ordaz came to an end with a country under its control, though at the margins of society, the tragedy of the political violence that would break out shortly after his successor, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, took office was gestating. Despite having been the minister of the interior during the events of 1968, Echeverría attempted to present himself as someone who was reactivating the reformism of the Mexican Revolution and was seeking to reconcile with the aggrieved university youth using the regime's traditional method inherited from the times of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz: offering to include them in the public budget. Some former leaders of '68 accepted being coopted. But the overtures were rejected by the majority of those who began being released from jail in the first months of the administration. Any possibility of healing the deep wound inflicted on the students, separating them from the regime, evaporated when, on June 10, 1971, the university community was once again brutally repressed by paramilitary groups.

On September 27, 1971, an urban guerrilla group struck for the first time in the country with the kidnapping of Julio Hirschfeld Almada, then director of Airports and Auxiliary Services. He was an important official for the new administration and the Urban Zapatista Front took credit for it. Later, it would be known that this group was made up of former militants of the Spartacus Communist League, led by Francisca Calvo Zapata, a relative of outstanding members of the regime. The children of sustained development and revolutionary "social justice" were rebelling against oppression and authoritarian asphyxia. Later, different groups gestating in public universities around the country would burst upon the scene. An alphabet soup of acronyms, with ideological visions extracted from manuals and irreconcilable among themselves, condemned from the start to defeat, these groups showed up the asphyxiating political climate of PRI unanimity.

Urban guerrilla groups — the September 23 Communist League, which stood out among them for its harshness, would assassinate Eugenio Garza Sada, the patriarch of the Monterrey business community— were not the only expression of political violence in that era. Rural guerrilla groups also emerged, acting mainly in the state of Guerrero, led by teachers who graduated from what is now the sadly notorious Isidro Burgos Rural Normal School in Ayotzinapa. But the causes that gave rise to them were different, fundamentally the continuing domination by

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local strongmen in great swathes of land in Mexico's countryside. The groups that opted for violence in the cities, in contrast, had become politicized in the universities and their radicalization fed on the perception that peaceful change was impossible in the face of a repressive, authoritarian state.

Mexico's '68 had been nourished by the intellectual inputs of the 1960s worldwide rebellion and counterculture and drank deep from their causes. Another relevant aftereffect of the movement was women's growing demand for equality and inclusion. To a great extent, Mexican feminism also grew out of the student movement, even though it had been overwhelmingly been led by males. In the 1970s, however, Mexican feminism flowered and began to have a presence in the debates of the time. The Echeverría administration also attempted to ingratiate itself with women's struggles and promoted Mexico as the host country for the 1975 UN World Conference on Women.

These were years of great population growth and the demand for higher education was growing. The Echeverría administration reacted by creating new universities all over the country, several of which immediately became radicalized. A large portion of the professors of these new universities were from the '68 generation, and the students still maintained the rebellious spirit of their predecessors. In different public universities, unions began to be formed, often led by former movement participants. The arrival of exiles from South American dictatorships to Mexico also contributed to a left turn in higher education. Marxism, then, became the predominant ideology in public universities, not always to the benefit of academic quality and the richness of intellectual discussion.

From its beginnings, the Echeverría administration had declared the "democratic opening," with the intention of reversing the de-legitimation that the movement had caused. The democratic opening was supposedly a process of liberalizing the narrow protectionist electoral system that impeded the participation of any force not approved by the regime, that represented a split in the practically single party system, or that could represent any kind of threat to its political monopoly. The announcement of this opening sparked expectations that, at the end of the day, were not met. However, a new kind of political organization did take place in those years.

The '68 prisoners began to be released from jail in the first months of 1971. Some went into exile, but others, like Heberto Castillo, a leader of the professors who had supported the movement, or Eduardo Valle, immediately began to organize politically into something that would lead to the creation of parties. The National Committee for Inquiry and Coordination (CNAO) was formed in 1972, attracting different groups and intellectuals, outstanding among whom were Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Luis Villoro. A little while later, this group, minus its best-known figures, became the Mexican Workers' Party (PMT), headed by Heberto Castillo and Demetrio Vallejo. The latter had been the leader of the railroad workers strike repressed in 1960 and, together with Valentín Campa, had been the political prisoner who served the longest sentence in the classical period of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime. A CNAO split-off also created the Socialist Workers Party (PST).

The Mexican Communist Party, which from the beginning of the 1960s had begun a process of reform that would distance it from Soviet orthodoxy, had been particularly harshly dealt with by the repression of '68, and a large part of its leadership ended up in jail. In addition, the radicalization of the leadership of the Communist Youth led it to be dissolved, with part of its cadre entering guerrilla groups. Forbidden since 1948 to participate in elections, in 1970, it called for "active" abstention in protest of the persecution. However, the release of several of its leaders from jail and new militants in its ranks sped up its internal reform. Therefore, even though it maintained certain ambiguity about Lucio Cabañas's guerrilla movement in the mountains of Guerrero state, it did not support the urban guerrillas and instead decided to have an impact on the democratization process.

One of the intentions of Echeverría's "democratic opening" was to incorporate the Communist Party (PCM) into electoral struggles, to channel left dissidence through them, and offer it limited parliamentary representation. However,

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the PCM decided not to accept the government's terms, because they included making the names of their members public and putting them in the hands of a government they considered to be a repressor. This meant that the reform attempt would fail. Six years had to go by before the authentic left could legally participate in elections However, in 1976, the PCM did run Valentín Campa for president; he had been a political prisoner for 11 years as a result of the repression of the 1958-1960 railway workers movement. The only candidate officially on the ballot was the PRI's José López Portillo. This was because the National Action Party, the domesticated, right-wing opposition that, since 1958, had been the only party to officially register a presidential candidate aside from those of the PRI, was completely wrapped up in an internal dispute that made it incapable of fielding a candidate.

The student movement's impact was felt in other spheres of Mexican society. Former students headed popular movements of all kinds. Exponential urban growth, a product of both population growth and migration from the countryside to the cities due to industrialization, created a demand for housing that neither the government nor private business could satisfy. Mexico's property rights set-up was in disarray: ownership of collective farm *ejido* land impeded the existence of a flexible land market that could lend itself to urbanizing old agricultural lands. This meant that the demand for housing fostered what was then known as the urban-popular movement, which staged land takeovers and noteworthy mobilizations during the entire 1970s. This movement's slogans and discourses clearly showed the impact of the radicalized students who headed it or had influenced its leaders.

In the years after the '68 movement, the attempts to build independent unionism to break the corporatist chains of the labor movement also multiplied. The ideas of the different strands of Marxism that spread among radicalized students led many of them to approach workers' causes. It was among electricity workers where the demand for respect for union democracy achieved its greatest strength, with vigorous mobilizations. Several young people who had been schooled in the university and participated in the student movement joined in support of the leaders of the Democratic Tendency of the recently founded Unified Union of Electrical Workers of the Mexican Republic (SUTERM), contributing ideas, work, and efforts.

The climate of political tension, of youth radicalization, and of guerrilla violence that had characterized the Echeverría administration, together with the fact that José López Portillo, the official candidate, had no one to officially run against in the 1976 elections, led to the new government initiating a process of political liberalization. In the long run, this would lead to democratization and the dissolution of the regime. In 1977, after a process of dialogue and negotiation with different political forces until then excluded, an important constitutional and regulatory reform was carried out. This would lead to amnesty for all the political prisoners who had not committed crimes involving bloodshed and the normalization of electoral participation of the left through the Mexican Communist Party and, to a lesser extent, the Socialist Worker's Party. The Communist Party caucus elected to Congress in 1979 included three former '68 political prisoners (Pablo Gómez, Gerardo Unzueta, and Gilberto Rincón Gallardo), plus Valentín Campa and other leaders who had been the targets of the PRI regime's repression. By 1985, a large part of those who had mobilized against authoritarianism in the student movement had opted for the electoral road to influence political transformation.

Eleven years after the brutal repression of 1968, the regime began its process of dissolution. This would be slow and torturous, lasting more than two decades, including a deep economic recession and huge mobilizations against electoral fraud in the 1980s. In 1988, many of the movement's old leaders and activists gathered around the candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and they would be the protagonists of the democratizing process of the years to follow.

The ripple effect with its epicenter in the 1968 days of fiesta and tragedy ended by tearing to pieces the foundations of the regime born of the Mexican Revolution and contributing crucially to its dismantling. VM