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Revolution or Bust? The Long Sixties in Mexico

Until recently, many considered the middle decades of the twentieth century in Mexico to be a time of relative peace and prosperity that ended abruptly on October 2, 1968, with the massacre of students in Mexico City. Now, as historians focus their attention on the "Long" Sixties—from about 1958 through the early 1970s—a more nuanced and paradoxical picture emerges. Was this truly a time of economic "miracles?" If so, for whom? Was this a time of PRIísta peace marred only by the bloody crackdown at Tlatelolco? Or was the crackdown less of an aberration than we had once thought?

Mexico at Midcentury

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. On the one hand, Mexico was in the midst of its so-called economic miracle. Using protectionism and investment policies to stimulate domestic industry, the federal government oversaw a period of remarkable, sustained economic growth. The economy grew at an average annual rate of 6.4 percent from 1940 to 1970, which allowed the Mexican government to make major investments in education, public health, and social security. As modern health care services extended into the countryside,

Mexico's Unscripted Revolutions: Political and Social Change since 1958,
First Edition. Stephen E. Lewis.

life expectancy increased dramatically. Literacy rates also increased during this period, from 44 percent in 1940 to 66 percent in 1970. The federal government had also begun investing in public housing projects, including the Tlatelolco complex in Mexico City, just north of the historic downtown. Mexicans were living longer and better, especially in urban, industrial areas and in the northern and central regions of the country.

Figure 1.1 Mexico's National Indigenist Institute (INI) built coordinating centers in Indigenous regions in the 1950s and early 1960s and launched controversial development and assimilation programs. These boys from Chamula, Chiapas, had just been vaccinated by INI nurses. Photographer unknown. Fototeca Nacho López, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. Circa 1955.

The ruling PRI-government presided over all of this. One of the keys to its success was corporatism, the incorporation of various political and economic actors, like the Confederation of Mexican Workers (*Confederación de Trabajadores de México*, or CTM) and the National Peasant Confederation (*Confederación Nacional Campesina*, or CNC). Another key was clientelism, the deeply rooted patron–client relationships that permeate Mexican life. The PRI-government combined near-absolute control with the outward appearance of democratic participation. It was, as Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa stated on Mexican television in 1990, "the perfect dictatorship."

Some historians have embraced the term "*dictablanda*"—"soft" dictatorship—to describe Mexico at midcentury.[1] They argue that the PRI-government was a hybrid regime that combined elements of authoritarianism and democracy. It ruled through tactical negotiation and the deft application of co-optation and repression. Perhaps the strength of the government was its weakness; perhaps the need to negotiate its rule required flexibility and pragmatism that, in turn, allowed it to remain hegemonic for so long. The PRI-government could not hold onto power through brute force. The Mexican army was small, at about two soldiers per thousand citizens, and its share of the budget actually declined over the period.[2] Nor could the PRI dominate the country through largesse; Mexico's tax structure was heavily regressive, meaning that those who had the most paid the least relative to their income. Tax evasion was easy. This "limited the state's capacity for authoritarianism, corporatism, or even cultural hegemony," writes Benjamin Smith.[3]

Co-optation and repression were at the heart of PRI rule. Nobody mastered these tactics better than Fidel Velázquez, who dominated and tamed organized labor in Mexico from 1941 until his death in 1997. In the 1920s, Velázquez worked at a milk factory in Mexico City, making deliveries by mule. He became the union representative of the Union of Dairy Industry Workers. He joined the CTM in 1936. When the CTM's founder fell out of favor with the revolutionary elite, Velázquez became secretary general, a position he would hold for all but three of the next 56 years.

Pragmatism allowed Velázquez to survive at the pinnacle of organized labor in Mexico for so long. He was committed to realizing the Revolution's egalitarian goals, within reason. He was careful never to threaten the established order. His ideology—a mix of anticommunism and conservative nationalism—fit perfectly in Cold War Mexico. He also delivered the goods to his co-opted clients. CTM members had seats at the table in the PRI and in the Mexican Congress. Pliant union bosses, known as *charros*, often enjoyed lavish lifestyles so long as they kept the rank and file in line. They helped Velázquez preside over most of the country's labor unions even at times when workers' wages failed to keep pace with the cost of living.[4]

Co-optation offered material advantages to those who temporarily or permanently shelved their grievances. Michael Snodgrass argues that Mexico's much-maligned *charros* "delivered considerable benefits to rank-and-file workers" from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. By the 1960s, some industrial workers could purchase modern appliances and cars and enjoyed "greater job security and material progress than any generation of Mexican workers experienced before or since."[5] Co-optation also worked in rural Mexico, where *campesinos* produced cheap food for the industrializing cities. In the restive state of Morelos—home to legendary Emiliano Zapata and his steadfast disciple, Rubén Jaramillo—most sugar growers chose to remain loyal to the PRI. One historian chalks it up to "a combination of co-option, divide and rule among popular groups, the narrowing of protest channels, and the strategic deployment of repression."[6] In any case, the cost of continued resistance was high. Jaramillo ran for governor twice and took up arms three times to protest electoral fraud and repression. In 1961, he finally won approval for an agrarian community that combined Zapatista and Cardenista principles. But the PRI-government grew tired of trying to co-opt the irrepressible agrarian leader. In May 1962, the federal army kidnapped and assassinated Jaramillo, his wife, and three sons. Their bloody demise, writes Tanalís Padilla, "demonstrates the extent to which state terror undergirded Mexico's 'perfect dictatorship.'"[7]

A *Pax PRIísta*?

The fate of Rubén Jamarillo notwithstanding, PRI apologists spoke glowingly of a *Pax PRIísta* (PRIísta peace) during these years. Militaries elsewhere in Latin America cycled in and out of office during the Cold War, typically toppling governments deemed to be "communist." Mexico, by contrast, seemed remarkably calm. Apart from some meddling in the 1952 presidential election, the military had gained a reputation for political neutrality. It stayed out of national politics; instead, ambitious generals focused on getting rich. They won lucrative construction contracts, grafted from the army budget, owned gambling dens and cantinas, and smuggled liquor and sometimes drugs. Given Mexico's rowdy past, the country at midcentury seemed exceptionally stable. But the fact that the Mexican military was small and maintained a low profile does not mean that it was not used. Unable to defend the national territory in the event of a U.S. invasion, the Mexican armed forces were used to police Mexicans.

For all of the talk of a Pax PRIísta, there was trouble brewing. In 1958, three massive strikes signaled the limits of PRI corporatism. Teachers and telegraph and railroad workers struck for better pay and more democratic union representation. Students defended their institutions of higher learning. And in the early 1960s, a cross-class coalition of citizens in Guerrero pushed the authorities to live up to the promises enshrined in the Constitution of 1917.

The most militant working-class organization in postrevolutionary Mexico was the railroad workers' union. Members worked for the government-owned Railroads of Mexico (*Ferrocarriles de México*, or FNM). In 1947, the federal government imprisoned the leadership of this powerful union and called an election for secretary general. The winner was an electrician named Jesús Díaz de León, the original *charro*. This nickname was a nod to his enthusiasm for *charrería* (Mexican equestrian) and his fondness for wearing cowboy attire. (The derisive term "charro" has been applied to pliant union leaders ever since.) After the union rank-and-file voted him out, El Charro—with

support from President Miguel Alemán—led a violent takeover of union headquarters. For the next ten years, charro leadership in the railroad workers' union froze wages to keep freight rates low for agribusiness and strategic industries like mining and textiles. Mexico's railroad workers (*rieleros*) saw a steep decline in their real wages. Inflation, a peso devaluation, and rising prices eroded their modest purchasing power.

In 1958, Demetrio Vallejo led two strikes to sidestep the union's charro leadership. The first strike ended with a face-to-face meeting with outgoing Mexican president Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, who granted a generous wage increase. Two months later, rieleros went on strike again to democratize their union. The government-owned railroad company agreed to a new election for secretary general, which Vallejo won in a landslide.

The twin victories of summer 1958 encouraged the rank-and-file to push for another wage hike plus housing and medical subsidies for family members. Federal authorities declared the resulting February 1959 strike illegal, meaning that strikers could be arrested. At this critical moment, however, the new president, Adolfo López Mateos, intervened and agreed to the workers' demands. The union had won its third major victory in less than a year.

The 100,000-plus railroad workers' union had become the vanguard of a movement to democratize Mexico's most powerful unions. This threatened CTM boss Fidel Velázquez. Were the movement to grow unchecked, it could weaken the PRI's control of organized labor and potentially destabilize the regime. In March 1959, when railroad workers at four *private* rail companies demanded the same wage hikes and benefits granted to the workers at the national railway, rieleros at the national railroad supported them in solidarity. Perhaps the union had overplayed its hand. Fidel Castro's takeover of Cuba in January and growing expressions of radical politics in Mexico compelled the López Mateos government to act swiftly against the rieleros. Soldiers occupied union buildings, took over railroad operations, and led thousands of union members to military camps and then prisons. Vallejo himself was indicted under Article 145 of the Federal Penal

Code, the so-called social dissolution (sedition) law. The Mexican Congress initially approved this law during World War Two to fight internal subversion. But President Alemán had expanded Article 145 to include acts that weakened the general economy or paralyzed basic industrial or public services. Vallejo and fellow rielero Valentín Campa were sentenced to over eleven years in prison.[8]

The PRI-government had beaten down a formidable challenger, but others rose in its place to further test the regime's co-optive capabilities. Students in Mexico City declared strikes and took radical action to democratize their campuses in the late 1950s. The "Mexican Miracle" was experienced differently at the schools of the working-class Polytechnic Institute (IPN) and those of the middle-class National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The economic boom favored the middle class, but inequalities emerged and real wages began to decline for workers and peasants. In 1956, IPN students had called for the resignation of their director, seen as being too close to the government and the United States, and demanded more say in how their campus was governed. To call public attention to their demands, they devised strategies that became ubiquitous in the better-known student movement a dozen years later, in 1968, seizing buses and occupying classrooms, dormitories, and administrative offices. The authorities sent in a hated riot squad known as the *granaderos*, paid professional thugs to intimidate students, and arrested strike leaders under the social dissolution law. Later, the Army occupied the schools of the IPN. UNAM students (*universitarios*) remained on the sidelines.

Two years later, however, universitarios initiated a short-lived movement to protest inadequate public transportation, the fading economic miracle, and *charrismo* in the bus union. Mexican students began to see themselves as a collective that transcended class differences. Their mobilization would trigger authoritarian responses from a regime no longer able or willing to co-opt its opposition.[9]

Middle-class disappointment was also on display during the 1964–1965 doctors' strike in Mexico City. Young residents and interns who had graduated from the UNAM, the IPN, and other institutions

endured low pay, underemployment, and unsanitary living quarters at public hospitals. They went on strike to protest the suspension of their Christmas bonuses. For ten months, they staged protests at hospitals and clinics and even marched in their white surgical gowns through the streets of Mexico City. Mexican president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz denounced the "homicidal actions" of the striking doctors, and the media depicted the young residents as greedy, privileged, and lazy. Hundreds were fired, blacklisted, or lost their licenses to practice medicine.[10]

In rural Mexico, PRI authoritarianism was exercised more bluntly. The PRI's economic model required the countryside to provide the industrializing cities with cheap and abundant food. This would allow industrialists to hold down urban wages. The PRI also favored agribusiness through its massive irrigation projects, tax breaks, and other policies that indirectly undermined small farmers. In short, the so-called "Mexican Miracle" witnessed a massive transfer of wealth and resources from the countryside to the city, and from the mostly rural South to the industrializing cities of central and northern Mexico. Agricultural production trebled during this time, but rural wages fell by 40 percent.[11] Keeping a lid on rural unrest became a priority for the regime. Historian Alexander Aviña writes that "What seemed mild authoritarianism in Mexico City appeared as state terror in the highlands of Sonora, Guerrero, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua, where army units brutally attacked rural communities throughout the 1960s and 1970s."[12]

Guerrero, a mountainous state south of Mexico City, and home to Mexico's first modern beach resort, Acapulco, produced two of the most important insurgent leaders and organizations in the Long Sixties. Both leaders were educators and organic intellectuals who pursued peaceful change before being forced to take up arms and head for the hills. Genaro Vázquez, son of a peasant leader, joined a multiclass civic movement called the Guerrerense Civic Association (ACG) to protest the abuses of the governor of Guerrero, General Raúl Caballero Aburto. The general was known for his corruption and nepotism, his regressive tax policies, and his constant violations of municipal autonomy. The general's gunmen also forcibly removed and even

killed peasants who lived on land southeast of Acapulco to make way for private beaches and luxury homes.

Vázquez was a teacher and a gifted, pragmatic organizer. In October 1960, he organized a multi-class sit-in strike in Guerrero's state capital, Chilpancingo, to press for Aburto's removal. Small business owners, peasants, Zapatista veterans, homemakers, teachers, students, and even municipal governments joined the civic movement, which then called a city-wide general strike and tax strike. But the Mexican government was in no mood to negotiate with or co-opt this opposition. On December 30, 1960, the army attacked the civilians, leaving at least 23 dead and 40 wounded and ending more than two months of peaceful civic demonstrations. Soldiers also stormed the University of Guerrero in Chilpancingo, assaulting the striking students. Five days after the massacre, the Mexican Senate voted to depose Governor Aburto.[13]

Vázquez then helped turn the ACG into an opposition political party and campaigned ahead of the 1962 state elections with the help of Lucio Cabañas, a national student leader who headed the ACG's Youth Action Committee. Aviña notes that "state repression had not yet fully exhausted the widely held belief among the majority of progressives and leftists that the postrevolutionary state and the 1917 Constitution still represented the vehicle by which to achieve a more just and equitable society."[14] But the ACG's efforts in the 1962 elections were met with large-scale electoral fraud. Voters were harassed and intimidated, newborns and the deceased cast votes for the PRI, and ACG votes were simply changed to PRI votes. Later that year, when Vázquez organized an event in Iguala to commemorate the 1960 massacre in Chilpancingo, shots rang out and seven were killed (including a police officer) and 23 injured. Accused of murdering the officer, Vázquez fled, eluding the authorities for several years. Realizing that the PRI would not accept peaceful protest, he came to embrace more radical action.

Lucio Cabañas, for his part, hailed from a family of Zapatistas who participated actively in the Cardenista land reform of the 1930s. He was a charismatic student and later teacher at the rural teacher training

school in Ayotzinapa, shaped by the Mexican Communist Party and inspired by the Cuban Revolution. After state police forces carried out two separate massacres of peasants in 1967, Cabañas traveled through the mountains of the Costa Grande region of Guerrero, moving like a "fish in water" among impoverished peasant farmers, migrant agricultural laborers, rural schoolteachers and their students, trying to convince them of the need for guerrilla warfare.

By 1967, both Vázquez and Cabañas had made the decision to take up arms. State terror had radicalized what began as a relatively innocuous, democratic civic movement. Vázquez founded the National Revolutionary Civic Association (*Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria*, ACNR), with teachers constituting the guerrilla core. Cabañas founded the Party of the Poor (*Partido de los Pobres*, PDLP), with a military wing called the Peasant Brigade of *Ajusticiamiento* that meted out peasant justice on abusive rural bosses known as *caciques*. Self-defense militias morphed into revolutionary movements that fought to establish alternative forms of state power into the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Youth Culture in the Long Sixties

Of all the trends that we can document in Mexico during the Long Sixties, nothing changed as dramatically as youth culture. At midcentury, family life was hierarchical and patriarchal. The idealized family was led by a stern father, a maternal mother, and obedient, well-groomed children. Gender roles were strictly prescribed for boys and girls, men and women, and the Catholic Church loomed large. This began to change in the late 1950s when a perceived crisis in the family coincided with the strikes that erupted across the country. The 1960s became a "cumulative crisis of patriarchal values," writes Eric Zolov. The slang word *desmadre*, or "unmothering," came to connote social chaos. Mexican youth embraced rock and roll—both foreign and Mexican—because of its "unmothering" tendencies. Rock and roll also led to more individualistic dance styles in which males no longer

had to lead. "Thus even the fundamental structure of dance was disappearing, in which girls no longer had to wait for a boy's invitation and individualism prevailed over partnership."[15]

By 1966, student dissent was a global phenomenon, and it cut across class differences just as it transcended national boundaries. In Mexico, a full-fledged, rebellious countercultural movement known as *La Onda* was manifesting itself in music, literature, language, and fashion, especially on high school and college campuses. Young men started to wear their hair long, while many young women wore pants or miniskirts. A "filthy language revolution" spread across Mexican campuses, as words like *cabrón* and *chingar*, along with *desmadre*, infected students' argot. This kind of speech was anathema to traditional polite society, which of course made it all the more attractive to rebellious youth.

Many students across Latin America were inspired by the idealized image of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine doctor who joined Fidel Castro's successful bid to overthrow the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship in Cuba. Both Guevara and Castro were university-educated, middle-class revolutionaries, and they seemed to provide a blueprint for students who wanted to launch revolutions and topple corrupt, authoritarian regimes. Guevara was killed in October 1967 in Bolivia, and his martyrdom further inspired idealistic youth. Many students were drawn to alternative philosophies and religions and began to question the centrality of marriage. This threatened to destabilize the pillars of traditional Mexican society. But "the overwhelming majority of leftist students did not want to overthrow the government or implement a socialist regime in Mexico," writes historian Jaime Pensado. Rather, their calls for revolutionary change "were overwhelmingly 'moderate' and 'cultural' in nature."[16] They wanted "*una revolución, pero sin fusil*"—a revolution, but without rifles.

Rural schoolteachers, on the other hand, were more inclined to take up arms against the regime. Mexico's rural teacher training schools, known as *escuelas normales rurales*, had been established in the 1920s and 1930s when the federal government supported agrarianism and saw teachers as agents of state consolidation. *Normalistas*

in the 1960s were inspired by the Cuban Revolution and radicalized by the precarious conditions at their boarding schools. Their training taught them to be at the vanguard of agrarian struggles that the PRI-government no longer supported. In 1964, *normalistas* in Chihuahua led scores of land invasions and, one year later, led peasants in a suicidal attack on the military barracks in Ciudad Madera that bore similarities with Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks in Cuba in 1953. "The very schools the revolutionary government had once designed to create a loyal citizenry were now producing its most militant foes."[17]

But not all young Mexicans embraced La Onda. Some, in fact, actively and even violently opposed it. Conservative students on high school and university campuses were mobilized by the spirit of the times. Rightist student groups opposed foreign influences, specifically the Cuban Revolution, the changes associated with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), and the liberal cultural influences of the United States. They especially rejected alternative religions, feminism, psychoanalysis, and international cinema. They targeted Judaism, communism, and hippies. Several right-wing student organizations espoused violence and deployed nationalist homophobic rhetoric to tout their virility and condemn their adversaries as "women," *malinchistas* (traitors), or "degenerate homosexuals." The most important of these groups, the militant Catholic organization MURO, joined Mexican president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970) in condemning leftist authorities at Mexico's flagship university, the UNAM.[18]

The Student Movement of '68

Viewed in its proper context, then, the 1968 student movement in Mexico City did not happen in a vacuum. Important sectors of the Mexican population had been disaffected if not openly rebellious for years, and now the urban middle class (and its children) was involved

in the upheaval. Important, irreversible cultural transformations added fuel to the fire. Mexican president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz seemed to epitomize the stern father figure of an earlier age. He lacked the "charm, rhetorical skills, and cosmopolitan spirit" of his predecessor, López Mateos. "Irony, contempt, and antipatriarchal cultural rebellion were rapidly whittling away at the symbolic infrastructure of the PRI's hegemony," writes Zolov.[19]

The 1968 student movement had relatively innocuous origins. On July 22, a street brawl broke out between rival groups of students. Neighborhood gangs and government-sponsored provocateurs joined in. The next day, as the clashes continued, the authorities sent in the hated *granaderos* to restore order. They swung their clubs indiscriminately at students, teachers, and other school employees. Days later, students participated in two rival demonstrations. *Politécnicos* mobilized to protest police brutality, while leftist *universitarios* marched to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada army barracks. Both marches had been declared legal by city authorities, but police, army infantry, and government-sponsored student agitators attacked them anyway. After one week of disturbances, countless students and granaderos had been injured, hundreds had been sent to prison, and at least one young man had died.

As more young people mobilized to protest police brutality, the authorities sent tanks and armored vehicles to clear out all the secondary schools that had been taken over by students. On July 28–29, *universitarios* and *politécnicos* joined forces at the IPN to combat the police and the army. Paratroopers fired an explosive bazooka round to break down the baroque wooden door at the UNAM-affiliated San Ildefonso High School, where students had taken refuge. Some undoubtedly died. This invasion violated the school's autonomy and prompted the UNAM's president, Javier Barros Sierra, to lead a peaceful march of at least 80,000 students and faculty.

Why had the government overreacted? Why this disproportionate use of force? It is important to note that Mexico would host the 1968

Summer Olympics in October. It would be the first Latin American country to host the Games and the first from the developing world. The PRI planned to use the Olympics to showcase the "Mexican Miracle," and it was not about to be embarrassed by rebellious students. This raised the stakes for both the students and the government as October drew closer and international media began to turn their attention to Mexico.

In early August, *politécnicos* and *universitarios* declared themselves on strike. Faculty and administrators supported them. On August 8, students formed a National Strike Committee, representing more than 150 public and private high schools, colleges, vocational schools, and universities. Members were elected democratically by their respective schools. The Strike Committee had a rotating directorship to prevent both the co-optation and repression of its leadership. It articulated six rather modest demands:

1. Liberty for all political prisoners;
2. Abolition of the granaderos;
3. Dismissal of Mexico City's chiefs of police;
4. Elimination of Article 145 (the sedition law) from the Penal Code;
5. Indemnification for the victims of repression; and
6. Justice against those responsible for the acts of repression.[20]

None of these demands was explicitly political. The students did not call for Díaz Ordaz's resignation, the cancellation of the Olympic Games, or even clean, truly democratic elections. Instead, they echoed familiar demands made during the Long Sixties. They also called for direct, public dialogue with the president, implying that there was no path forward with the rubber-stamp Mexican Congress. So, while their demands were not *explicitly* political, *implicitly* they were because they called out a self-proclaimed revolutionary government for its authoritarianism.

The National Strike Committee organized two massive marches in August to the Zócalo, the historic center of Mexico City. The first drew roughly 200,000 participants and the second about 400,000. The atmosphere at these marches was "jovial, multitudinous, and, at times, violent," writes Pensado. "A festive attitude of '*desmadre*'—in the form of offensive *corridos* (revolutionary folk songs) insulting government authorities … spontaneous street plays mimicking the granaderos, and the commandeering of transportation buses—offered students opportunities for the direct exercise of freedom and solidarity."[21] At the August 27 march and demonstration, some students entered the National Cathedral, rang the bells, and placed an image of Che Guevara on one of the altars, while others ran up the anarchists' red and black flag in front of the adjacent National Palace. This helped feed the government's narrative that the entire movement was the work of outside agitators.

In his annual address to the nation on September 1, President Díaz Ordaz demanded the students' submission. He warned of dire consequences if the unrest continued. In defiance, students organized the Great Silent March on September 13. They marched through the heart of downtown Mexico City with their mouths taped shut. They also changed out their placards of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong with iconic posters of Villa, Zapata, Jaramillo, and Vallejo. "This decision was profoundly significant, for it reflected a direct challenge to the PRI's monopoly of the symbolism of Mexico's revolutionary heritage," writes Zolov. "The nation's revolutionary heroes were being used against the government itself."[22]

By the middle of September, the battle lines had hardened as the Olympic Games drew near. Díaz Ordaz remained aloof, seemingly incapable of meeting this new kind of challenge. Attempts to start a dialogue with Interior Minister Luis Echeverría had run into roadblocks and had probably run out of time. As public support for the students waned, Díaz Ordaz ordered the military occupation of the UNAM and the schools of the IPN. Hundreds of arrests were made at the UNAM; at the IPN, students fought pitched battles and resisted for ten hours.

Figure 1.2 Students are escorted by soldiers after being arrested during a demonstration on September 23, 1968, in Mexico City. Photographer unknown. AFP/Getty Images

Figure 1.3 Mexican soldiers just outside the Tlatelolco housing complex one day before the October 1968 massacre. The spire of Santiago Tlatelolco church is seen in the background. Mario De Biasi; Sergio Del Grande/Mondadori/Getty Images

On October 2, the National Strike Committee met at the Plaza of the Three Cultures at the Tlatelolco public housing project to plot its next move. A march had been planned that day to protest the continued occupation of the IPN, but it was cancelled at the last minute after organizers learned that the army had massed its forces along the planned protest route. Government repression was taking its toll. After the meeting started, a helicopter flew overhead and dropped flares into the crowd. Moments later, government-sponsored snipers perched on rooftops began firing indiscriminately into the crowd. Soldiers and granaderos who had been sent to arrest the main leaders of the National Strike Committee returned fire. After roughly an hour of mayhem, at least two hundred people had been killed, thousands injured, and hundreds more had been taken to prison. The army then cordoned off hospitals and morgues to prevent an accurate body count.[23] The Olympic Games opened ten days later without a hitch.

After Tlatelolco

Luis Echeverría, probable architect of the Tlatelolco massacre, was tapped by Díaz Ordaz to become the PRI's candidate in the 1970 presidential election. The PRI was losing its grip on the country, and Echeverría knew it. After his candidacy was announced, he embarked on a vigorous, exhausting campaign and sought to distance himself from the unpopular president. The outcome of the election was, of course, never in doubt, but Echeverría campaigned as if it were. His mission was not simply to win the election but to redeem the Mexican Revolution, to restore legitimacy to the one-party state. On election day, he beat his closest rival by a margin of six to one. But only 42 percent of Mexicans bothered to vote, a historically low turnout. The high rate of abstention in states like Guerrero was deeply troubling to Echeverría. He had won the election in a landslide, yes, but he had yet to restore revolutionary luster to the PRI.[24]

Despite his likely role in the bloody events of October 1968, Echeverría had *bona fide* leftist credentials. He had married into

a historically progressive family from Guadalajara; his wife, María Esther Zuno Arce, was daughter of the founder of the Universidad de Guadalajara, José Guadalupe Zuno. The presidential couple apparently first met at the home of leftist artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, with whom María Esther was friendly. Echeverría promised a "democratic opening" and deployed a leftist, nationalist rhetoric to win back disaffected sectors of the Mexican population. As president-elect, he helped procure the early release of rieleros Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa; as president, he released hundreds of other political prisoners, including former leaders of the 1968 student movement. Echeverría invited leftist intellectuals into his government and warmly embraced Chile's socialist president, Salvador Allende. To win back Mexican youth, he lowered the voting age to 18 and invested heavily in higher education.

But the Corpus Christi massacre on June 10, 1971 complicated his relationship with the young. On that day, students in Mexico City marched to the Monument of the Revolution demanding university autonomy, democratic unions, and the release of political prisoners. They were attacked by the *Halcones* (Hawks), a paramilitary group trained at the Police Academy since 1968 to suppress riots. Dozens of students died and hundreds were wounded and imprisoned, but this time the repressors did not wear military uniforms. Echeverría claimed to know nothing of the Halcones, but most evidence suggests that he ordered the attack.[25]

Meanwhile, peasants in Guerrero experienced more state terror. Echeverría launched a charm offensive, sending 300 doctors, dentists, barbers, social workers, veterinarians, and others into Guerrero's Costa Grande region. But he also sent many more troops. In a series of interviews, ACNR leader Genaro Vázquez warned leftists that Echeverría's "democratic opening" was a bluff. Months later, Vázquez was killed in a car accident.

Lucio Cabañas remained in the field. His PDLP-BCA attacked state police and executed local caciques from 1969–1972, then ambushed Mexican military forces from 1972–1974. Dozens of soldiers were killed and the guerrillas captured high-powered

weapons and ammunition. This triggered another round of brutal counterinsurgency. The military limited the transport of food and medicine into Guerrero's Costa Grande region to "starve out" the guerrilla fighters and punish their civilian supporters. "Torture, rape, disappearance, death flights, strategic hamlets, the rationing of food and medicine, and the razing of villages turned coastal Guerrero into a counterinsurgent war zone," writes Aviña.[26] The PDLP-BCA was never a serious military threat; it failed to export its movement to other states and, in fact, failed to break out of Guerrero's Costa Grande. But it was a public relations nightmare for Echeverría and for the PRI, which still claimed the legacy of Zapata as its own.

In May 1974, the PDLP-BCA kidnapped a wealthy federal senator (and candidate for governor), Rubén Figueroa. The guerrillas demanded the removal of the military from four Costa Grande municipalities and a ransom payment of 50,000 pesos. The Mexican

Figure 1.4 A self-defense militia group in Temalacatzingo, Guerrero commemorates the 47th anniversary of Lucio Cabañas's murder in 2021. NurPhoto/Getty Images

military managed to free Figueroa and finally caught up with Cabañas in December. Whether he was killed in combat or committed suicide is a matter of speculation. Nearly 600 inhabitants of the Costa Grande region remain "disappeared," most likely tortured and executed at military camps or thrown out of airplanes stationed near the port of Acapulco. Fishing communities north of the port reported that the sea "vomited" human remains, clothes, and sandals from the end of 1973 to 1975.[27]

The Echeverría presidency failed to resurrect the PRI, and the Long Sixties in Mexico ended on an unsettled note. The Mexican Miracle was over, and the countryside was increasingly impoverished and restless. Twenty-nine guerilla organizations operated in Mexico in the 1970s; most were based in the countryside and counted rural *normalista* teachers and graduates among their leaders, militants, and support networks.[28] Despite its pro-worker rhetoric, the Echeverría administration actually approved fewer strikes than the Díaz Ordaz administration. Northern industrialists were angry, university campuses were infiltrated and under strict surveillance, and students remained highly dubious of Echeverría and the PRI.

Conclusion: Remembering the Long Sixties in Mexico

During the Long Sixties, things were not as they once seemed. The PRI-government trumpeted its rule as a time of consensus, peace, and prosperity, but the reality is much more complicated. Consensus was often produced by the selective use of co-optation and repression; peace was relative; and prosperity was increasingly limited to skilled workers and the middle classes residing in the cities of central and northern Mexico. The regime's development policy squeezed the countryside, and its management of labor relied on *charros*. Peasants in Guerrero and working-class laborers and students in the cities tested the limits of the PRI's negotiating capacity. Historians will continue to debate whether the PRI-government during this time was more *dictablanda* than *dictadura*. But Padilla cautions that this debate

"sets up a false dichotomy for a regime that was both staunchly repressive *and* remarkably flexible."[29]

Until recently, it was common to read that the massacre at Tlatelolco was a watershed moment that signaled the end of the Mexican Revolution and "unmasked" the authoritarianism of the one-party state. This chapter proposes that the regime was unmasked well before 1968. The 1968 student movement was important, but it never achieved a truly popular dimension, as did the more radical student uprisings in Europe and the United States. It failed in its outreach to other sectors of society, and the six points articulated by the strike committee were not particularly novel. The movement was mostly confined to Mexico City. Elsewhere in Mexico, "1968" had already happened in 1961 (San Luis Potosí), 1964 (Puebla), and 1965 (Chihuahua).[30] In the end, the Olympic Games went forward, and Luis Echeverría received a promotion. The hegemonic PRI retained control of all three branches of the federal government for another 29 years, belying the casual, oft-repeated claim that the student movement marked the start of Mexico's transition to democracy. The massacre at Tlatelolco was a terrible, scarring event that left its mark on a generation of urban youth, but it did not change much in concrete terms. Rather than the *parteaguas* (watershed) that many have claimed, perhaps it was not much more than a *partemadres* (skull-breaker).[31]

Misperceptions about the history of the '68 student movement can be traced back to its authors, the middle-class, male protagonists of the movement. "This group of elite leftists has not only been in charge of cultural production in Mexico for the last fifty years but also has published most of the history of student activism," writes Pensado.[32] Working-class students at the IPN, high school students, progressive PRIístas and Catholics, granaderos, conservatives, and those who refused to join the movement have been quite literally written out of this history.

So, too, have female students. Women participated as cooks and *brigadistas*, addressing passengers on public buses, handing out flyers and collecting money. Deemed apolitical and nonthreatening, they

easily slipped in and out of occupied universities in full view, delivering messages and safely transporting leaders. They called spontaneous meetings in the markets and on street corners, pitching the cause to other women and men. One group of women *brigadistas* from the National School of Anthropology distributed flyers in cantinas, where women were not allowed. "They would enter very quickly and distribute flyers while the waiters or the boss told them 'Get out, get out, you can't be here!' And the drunks would yell, 'Let them stay!'"[33] (The prohibition on women in cantinas was finally lifted in 1981.)

Leslie Jo Frazier and Deborah Cohen write that the male leadership's prison experience in the months and years following the massacre shaped the way that the events of summer and early fall of 1968 have been remembered—and forgotten. Their memoirs and histories celebrated traits of middle-class masculinity. Female participants mostly dropped out of view. Frazier and Cohen conducted interviews in 1989 with former female participants who felt that their participation did not warrant historical study because they were not leaders. But they claimed that their relationships with men changed that summer. One participant, named Rosa, said, "We shared the risks… The guys had to change. And they did change their attitude toward us. Before, they were conquerors. After, they talked about relationships based on friendship, companionship, and solidarity."[34] These young women began to see themselves as activists. It led many of them to defy patriarchal control at home and participate in feminist movements in the coming years, as we will explore in Chapter 5.

Notes

1 *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico* eds. Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). The scholarly anthology *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression during the Global Sixties and the Subversive Seventies* eds. Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique Ochoa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018) may be read as a rebuttal to *Dictablanda*'s main argument.

2 Paul Gillingham, *Unrevolutionary Mexico: The Birth of a Strange Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 245–247; and Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 170.

3 Benjamin T. Smith, "Building a State on the Cheap: Taxation, Social Movements, and Politics," in *Dictablanda*, 256.

4 Joseph U. Lenti, *Redeeming the Revolution: The State and Organized Labor in Post-Tlatelolco Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 35–40.

5 Michael Snodgrass, "The Golden Age of Charrismo: Workers, Braceros, and the Political Machinery of Postrevolutionary Mexico," in *Dictablanda,* 186.

6 Gladys McCormick, "The Forgotten Jaramillo: Building a Social Base of Support for Authoritarianism in Rural Mexico," in *Dictablanda*, 211.

7 Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

8 Robert F. Alegre, *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); and Eric Zolov, *The Last Good Neighbor: Mexico in the Global Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 2-3.

9 Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 132.

10 Gabriela Soto Laveaga, "Médicos, hospitales y servicios de inteligencia: el movimiento médico mexicano de 1964–1965," *Salud Colectiva* 7:1 (January–April 2011); and Louise Walker, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Classes after 1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 13.

11 Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Revolution," in *Dictablanda*, 2; and John W. Sherman, "The Mexican Miracle and its Collapse," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, 2nd ed., eds. William H. Beezley and Michael C. Meyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010 [2000]), 552–554.

12 Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13.

13 Aviña, 59–66.

14 Aviña, 78.

15 Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 105.
16 Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 151.
17 Tanalís Padilla, "Rural Education, Political Radicalism, and *Normalista* Identity in Mexico after 1940," in *Dictablanda*, 356.
18 Jaime M. Pensado, "'To Assault with the Truth': The Revitalization of Conservative Militancy in Mexico During the Global Sixties," *The Americas* 70:3 (January 2014): 489-521.
19 Zolov, *The Last Good Neighbor*, 281–283, 288.
20 Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 206.
21 Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 207.
22 Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 127.
23 Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de historia oral* (México D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1971).
24 Lenti, 72, 79.
25 Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 236.
26 Aviña, 174.
27 Alexander Aviña, "A War against Poor People," in *México Beyond 1968*, 146.
28 Tanalís Padilla, *Unintended Lessons of Revolution: Student Teachers and Political Radicalism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 224–228.
29 Padilla, *Unintended Lessons*, 14–15.
30 Aviña, *Specters of Revolution*, 109.
31 Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*, 232, citing Barry Carr.
32 Pensado in *Dictablanda*, 362.
33 Marta Lamas, "Del 68 a hoy: la movilización política de las mujeres," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 63:234 (septiembre-diciembre de 2018): 273.
34 Lessie Jo Frazier and Deborah Cohen, "Mexico '68: Defining the Space of the Movement, Heroic Masculinity in the Prison, and 'Women' in the Streets," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 83:4 (November 2003), 653.