“A massacre turns a place into a garbage can.” This quotation by the writer Juan García Ponce refers to the state crime that ended the Mexican student movement on October 2, 1968, resulting in a still unknown and controversial number of deaths. The movement, which began on July 23, 1968, consisted of a series of episodes that demonstrate just how great the demand for basic civil liberties had grown among a large sector of Mexican society, how mobilized that sector had become, and the intransigence of a government repelled by criticism, unfamiliar with the negotiations inherent to a democratic society. Indeed, the events of this student movement unveil Mexico as a nation whose democratic tradition was conceived as a mere technical formality that could be fulfilled by means of appearances when the Olympic Games brought it into the international spotlight.

The Mexican 1968 disclosed a grim state of affairs in a country where politics was a matter of caste. The students had a long list of demands: the release of political prisoners, the repeal of sections 145 and 145b of the Penal Code (which gave the government the power to imprison people meeting in groups of three or more if it believed they threatened public order), the decommissioning of the body of grenadiers, the punishment of the police chiefs responsible for acts of repression, and compensation for the families of those killed and injured in government violence. These demands represented a desire to truly dismantle the Mexican state’s legal instruments and other means of oppression. “A massacre turns a place into a garbage can.” Forty years ago, the Mexican government led us into the garbage can of history.

As with all totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, the Mexican governments that followed the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 were driven by the desire to systematize the mastery of memory, to control it by any possible means and make it selective and abstract. The management of memory became part of the governmental program, and controlling the flow of information that was not for public use became routine and methodical. First, one had to silence all testimonials and experiences that broke out of the ideological cages of the post-revolutionary period; then one created a sort of vacuum around historical facts and played down all troubling circumstances.
until they were merely banal. Finally, one just had to wait until the remains of any particular testimonials or memories had grown so old and mute that they acquired the opacity that the dust of time spreads along its paths. In this way, the facts came to be diffuse and unprovable, as well as unrecognizable. After this “vaporizing” treatment, all that remained for history was a wink for the initiated, a vague reference in a chronology, nonexistence. Amid this political trickery, the press buried its head in the sand and reached out its hand.

**A movement banished from history**

Whoever scans the textbooks on Mexican history that are designed for Mexican schoolchildren will see that the student movement of 1968 is practically nonexistent. In the best case, it will appear in one or the other book as a spectral reference in a paragraph as confusing as it is short. For most Mexicans, this will be the only source of information on one of the most important chapters of twentieth-century Mexican history. In spite of all the political changes that have occurred in Mexican society since the 1980s—and especially since the transition to a new government in 2000—this indifferent attitude has persisted up to today. All the state education policies have shared the aim of transforming 1968 into something distant, into an event that grows ever further from the concrete reality in which we move.

It is possible to discern some of the reasons for this secrecy. The most obvious are political and ideological motives relating to the deep-rooted ties between the successive governments of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] that were in power from the 1920s to 2000. In the later part of this period, the history of the 1968 movement was repeatedly veiled, or the government expressed regret about the tragic outcome that was as simple as it was insincere. This was all part of a rhetorical strategy—a mere formula employed according to the state of things—for elections, publicity campaigns, appearances in congress, etc. None of it constituted any sort of real self-criticism that justly represented the facts of the massacre and dealt with those responsible for it. The country moved gradually from a state of induced amnesia to simulation, from simple guilt to culpable complicity.

**Justice as a dead-end street**

The administrations of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN [Party of National Action]), which relieved the PRI of power in 2000 and was
re-elected in 2006, have displayed an ambivalent attitude about the events of 1968. On the one hand, they have engaged in discussions about seeking justice in relation to them, and, on the other, they have seemed irritated by them. As for seeking justice, the government merely drafted a strategy for investigating the events that is no different, really, from any previous strategies. And now, even after several years, this has hardly progressed at all (that is, it has not been successful in prosecuting those responsible for the deaths). As for their irritation, the PAN—clearly a part of the “Mexican Right”—has no historical or ideological ties to 1968 that would enable it to identify with or exhibit interest in this student movement from over forty years ago. Thus, the party cannot move beyond an utterly unconvincing formal stance. Moreover, some economic and judicial powers are involved that have no interest in pursuing investigations.

In short, even the current government, which is trying hard to be politically correct (an apparent sign of the times) has not been able to legally clarify who was responsible for the murder of civilians by paramilitary forces in 1968, and especially for the mass murder at a rally on October 2 that year in Tlatloco, north of Mexico City, and bring them to justice.

**1968 as a key point of reference**

The Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) construction of the “Memorial of 1968,” which was opened in October 2007, marks an attempt to counteract the refusal to acknowledge these events and the apathy toward this topic that the government has exhibited over the years. The UNAM is interested in portraying 1968 as a key point of reference for understanding the last forty years of Mexican history. In this, the UNAM, which played a central role in the movement, is making use of its autonomy and academic authority. It has followed an ethical commitment to create...
a space that recalls the days of the student movement and promotes reflection on its legacy for the country’s recent history.

The construction of this memorial brought up a fundamental problem that had nothing to do with the attitudes, fears, and interests of the incumbent powers. Rather, it concerned a political and conceptual question that the memorial team had to address. As the events were so recent, in historical terms, the team had to be sure that its view was not clouded, that it did not create an exhibition, without a critical perspective, that would only convince those who were already convinced.

**Confronting memory**

Conmemorating the past cannot be done in a forced manner; it should not represent a voluntary revival of a dying ideology, nor should it be done as a sterile act to clear the country’s conscience. It should render the events neither sacred nor banal. It should not succumb to nostalgia nor water down what happened in the sea of time and forgetfulness into which so many other events have disappeared. The UNAM’s memorial attempts to confront its spectators with the peculiar power of memory while retaining the necessary distance from the dullness of predetermined value judgments. Aimed primarily at human nature, including its contradictions, it construes this power of memory as a creative experience.

The memorial and the museum do not merely echo another era but lay a path that turns the visitor to a description of and reflection on a world recalled by its eyewitnesses. This mixes reportage with mythology, as well as the individual and collective dimensions of history. In it, we find the phenomena that characterized this indelible moment: the leading role of the masses, the counterculture, the complaints against systematic political persecution, the impunity of those in power and the forces of repression, the tireless struggle for the rights of the minorities and, above all, the critical attitude that prompted a large part of society to put despotism in its place.

**A source for political imagination**

A basic principle in developing the project was to free the memorial from its necrological burden and transform it into something else: an exercise in memory. A great chorus that recalls the stations of the student movement attests to its internal political diversity but also reveals that it was inscribed in an ever more interdependent
world, a world in which Prague, Paris, and many cities in the United States and Latin America appear to be part of a broad pattern of youth rebellions that shook the whole planet. They were processes of profound resistance that were repressed with the same fury in both capitalist and socialist regimes.

From a historiographic perspective, this documentation is the decisive center from which everything else emerges: cinema, oral history, literature, media, photography, and sociology are the stages for the theater of the world and of an unmanageable history that has long since begun to point in more than one direction. The commemoration of the student movement of 1968 in Mexico, therefore, must position itself beyond any uncritical triumphalism or fatalistic defeat. The critical importance of 1968 will not be found on the altars of official history, nor in screaming radicalism, nor in the silence of the graves. Rather, it is in the era’s shaking off of fear, in its disturbingly direct and nonconformist language, that one can find sources to feed one’s imagination—especially one’s political imagination.

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