Refried Elvis

The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture

ERIC ZOLOV

STUDENT STRATEGY AND TACTICS

The organizational strategy of the movement took various forms, which reflected both the centrality of student energies and the need to overcome the preponderance of government propaganda disseminated by the mass media against them. Student activists worked hard to cast the movement as fundamentally democratic in its goals, especially to counter government claims that "subversive elements" were underwriting the unrest. With institutional channels for reform—elective office, state bureaucracies, large sectors of the press—monopolized by the direct influence of the ruling party, protest politics necessarily shifted onto the terrain of the everyday and became a battle for the hearts and minds of the citizenry. This was done, for instance, by forming numerous "people-to-people brigades" that took their message directly to the bureaucrats, workers, housewives, and others they met on the streets, in marketplaces, at the entrances to factories, on public transportation, wherever they might be heard. The students handed out leaflets listing their demands and appealed to a language of constitutionality. They also collected donations; contributions helped to fund the cause and counter accusations of foreign support. With the participation of students from the Fine Arts Theater, street theater modeled on the "happenings" staged in Berkeley and elsewhere also became part of the tactical repertoire. Such students formed groups that role-modeled different sectors of the population in staged street confrontations designed to draw an unsuspecting public into a debate over student activism.[136] When the government utilized a discourse of rebeldismo in an attempt to identify student actions (such as painting graffiti and commandeering buses) with wanton violence, the movement responded with a poignant display of discipline: During the so-called Silent March on 13 September, tens of thousands of people paraded mutely down a principal avenue in the capital, many with adhesive tape over their mouths. As one placard stated: "To The People of Mexico: You can see that we're not vandals or rebels without a cause—the label that's constantly been pinned on us. Our silence proves it."[137]

A second strategy employed by the students was to "poach" on government-ritualized domains in an effort to reappropriate their meanings.[138] Such spaces included, for instance, the Angel of Independence statue and, most importantly, the Zócalo (central plaza), "the neurological point of monopolized ritual space."[139] The temporal transformation of the Zócalo from a regimented parade ground reserved for ceremonial design into a festive, declamatory, public meeting ground was profoundly symbolic in its implications. "We had to take over the Zócalo; we had to deconsecrate the Zócalo—and we did, three times," explained one student protester.[140] At the same time that "taking command of the streets" aimed to disrupt the parameters of meaning assigned to public places, students also reappropriated national heroes long incorporated into the official pantheon. This gesture of reappropriation, however, did not come instinctively. Initially, in fact, the faces of Zapata and Villa were discarded in favor of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, who served as symbols of revolutionary utopianism around the world. As one participant commented, "I never thought of Zapata as a student symbol, an emblem. Zapata has become part of the bourgeois ideology; the PRI has appropriated him. Maybe that's why we chose Che as our symbol at demonstrations from the very first. Che was our link with student movements all over the world! We never thought of Pancho Villa either. His name never even crossed our minds!"[141] But when the press used such references to international revolution as a pretext for slandering the movement (the red-and-black strike flag was raised in place of the Mexican flag in the Zócalo after one demonstration), student leaders pushed for a purging of such symbols and instead urged the adoption of Mexican symbols and heroes. New orders from the strike committee now implored: "Let's have no more vituperative slogans, no more insults, no more violence. Don't carry red flags. Don't carry placards of Che or Mao! From now on we're going to carry placards with the portraits of Hidalgo, Morelos, Zapata, to shut them up. They're our Heroes. *Viva Zapata! Viva!*"[142] This decision was profoundly significant, for it reflected a direct challenge to the PRI's monopoly of the symbolism of Mexico's revolutionary heritage. By parading images of Villa, Zapata, Juárez, and others the students implicitly questioned the government's right to speak in their name, while suggesting that they instead had the right to do so. If earlier commentators had feared the replacement of such national heroes by the likes of James Dean and Elvis Presley, this reappropriation suggested an ironic inversion of their concerns. Now the nation's revolutionary heroes were being used against the government itself.

Finally, student strategy confronted the legitimacy of the Revolutionary Family by directly mocking the president's moral authority to speak for all Mexicans. This irreverence took various forms, including the rewriting of revolutionary corridos, the biting sarcasm of lithographs that cleverly drew

on familiar public images, and the liberal use of graffiti, which often incorporated language and slogans drawn from other student movements worldwide.[143] In fact, many students openly expressed their feelings of solidarity with other such movements, as articulated in one CNH document: "We are conscious of our historical vision: to transform reality, to transform society. And in this task we are not alone. For the first time youth from around the world are identifying with one another in this common task."[144] In one example of this irreverence of taking on the old order, a poster displayed a superimposition of the president's profile (whose jutting jaw and protruding upper teeth lent themselves easily to caricature) over that of a gorilla donning a riot helmet, thus suggesting the barbarity of state force. And in a remake of a commercial ditty, the students chanted:

> Tell me, tell me, Gustavo,
> Tell me why you're a coward,
> Tell me why you've no mother,
> Tell me, Gustavo, please tell me.[145]

Still another banner read: "Free tuition for granaderos enrolling in literacy classes."[146] "Suddenly the old rules no longer applied," writes Evelyn Stevens. "I saw buses speeding down the avenues, their sides painted with the slogan 'Death to Díaz Ordaz.'"[147] But despite the seriousness of the students' cause, or perhaps because of it, protest was often characterized by a "carnivalesque spectacle,"[148] a sight common in the inversion of any hierarchical order. Observing a moment in which the police chief and a granadero were burned in effigy while others paraded around a coffin labeled "dead government," Stevens noted that "[i]n spite of the raucousness, there was no violence; the crowd was in excellent humor, in a mood to find each incident hilariously funny, as at a circus."[149]

THE MASSACRE AT TLATELOLCO

With the approaching Olympics, the stakes were raised for both sides to resolve the deepening crisis. Contrary to the government's claims that the students sought a disruption of the Olympics, the movement in fact aimed to leverage world attention to address its calls for greater democratization. Nonetheless, as the students' sense of empowerment grew, the regime feared the mounting embarrassment and disruption of public order. Then, in mid-September, the army directly occupied the main UNAM campus and, several days later, the Polytechnical Institute as well, thus once more violating the constitutional protection of university autonomy. Scores of students were rounded up and imprisoned; many others were forced to go underground.[150] At the Polytechnical Institute, pitched battles took place between the army and students. The heightened repression was taking its toll on the movement; meetings drew fewer participants, and the leadership hoped for a solution prior to the Olympics.[151] On 1 October the army withdrew from the UNAM (though remaining at the Polytechnical Institute). The next day representatives of the CNH met with government officials to discuss a resolution to the conflicts, but the meeting went nowhere and, if anything, proved to be a government tactic to divide the leadership.[152] Already there were signs of a radicalization of strategy by some members, who now carried weapons and advocated armed revolt; several of these members, it was later revealed, turned out to be government-paid provocateurs. By this point, the movement was heavily infiltrated by federal security agents. A march had been planned for that afternoon (2 October) to protest the continued occupation of the Polytechnical Institute, but at the last moment the leadership decided to cancel the march—word had spread that the army was massing its forces along the planned protest route—and to hold a meeting at the Plaza of the Three Cultures instead. The change in tactics meant that the demonstrators became sitting ducks for the military.[153]

The plaza where the scheduled meeting was to be held was set in the midst of a massive public housing project called Tlatelolco. The plaza itself acquired its name because of the juxtaposition of pre-Conquest Aztec ruins with colonial and postrevolutionary architecture. Located just north of Mexico City's center, the site was a compromise meeting ground for student participants from the various schools and universities. It was also home to scores of middle-class workers, housewives, and children, including students. The meeting that evening drew between 5,000 and 10,000 people, many of whom were simply residents of the apartment complex. But as the meeting began it became increasingly obvious to the leadership that something was wrong. Unidentified people tried to enter the balcony where the main speakers were staged. Notes were passed to the speakers that the crowd was full of judiciales posing as spectators; in fact, members of the Olympic Battalion (trained for security at the Olympics) were placed throughout the crowd. Later it was discovered that journalists, who were given privileged access to the balcony, were also infiltrated by government forces. Suddenly a helicopter began to circle overhead, and two flares were dropped. Within moments shouts rang out from the crowd as army troops filed into the plaza from the street, blocking off the only route of escape. Soldiers began to fire point-blank at the crowd, killing and wounding men, women, and children at random. To this day, the events of that evening

have remained etched in the memory of all Mexicans as the Massacre of Tlatelolco.

Accounts of the massacre itself are still largely dependent on oral histories, as the official story remains shrouded in secrecy and denial. It remains unclear, for instance, who gave the orders to send in the army, though it was widely assumed that Secretary of Interior Affairs Luis Echeverría was directly responsible. Subsequent interviews, however, have suggested that orders may actually have come from Defense Secretary General Marcelino García Barragán, who was determined to clear up the "political mess" produced under civilian watch.[154] For its part, the government maintains that student sharpshooters targeted army troops, provoking a response. In fact, armed provocateurs *had* infiltrated the movement by that point and may, indeed, have fired on either the army or the crowd. Some members of the CNH also carried weapons for defensive purposes, but at Tlatelolco the balance of forces made armed resistance folly; weapons were quickly discarded to avoid discovery by the army.[155] Foreign journalists present for the pending Olympics put the number of dead at more than 200, while official figures admitted only to 49 (including an army captain).[156] Hundreds were wounded. To prevent an accurate count, the military cordoned off hospitals and morgues, and many people were simply "disappeared." In the subsequent hours soldiers continued their offensive by conducting apartment-by-apartment searches throughout the Tlatelolco complex for people in hiding. Those who were arrested were taken first to a military base and then to the Lecumberri prison, filling its cells far beyond capacity. Those who were not captured went farther underground or into exile.[157]

The students had generated a considerable amount of support for their struggle, reaching into broad sectors of the middle and working classes in the capital.[158] For their supporters, the students acted as the moral conscience of the nation, assuming the risks of confrontation in pursuit of a goal of social justice and democracy. But in their efforts to forge a common front with unions and the peasantry they also discovered the depth of state corporatist control and the impact of official propaganda used against them. In fact, while many Mexicans supported the students many others viewed their actions with alarm and undoubtedly agreed with newspaper and television reports of agitators, communists, and, especially, wanton youth. For a broad segment of the population, the empowerment of youth had come at the expense of adults' own sense of disempowerment and humiliation. "This is about a challenge of adults' capacity for comprehension, a defiance of their imagination and of their experience at governing," one editorialist wrote on the eve of the massacre in an article appropriately titled: "Youth Power: The Parricides."[159] Indeed, while many parents (especially those from the lower middle classes) supported their children's participation, for many others the students' brazen assault on public authority only mirrored outrage at challenges to patriarchal control in the home. One public employee's comment that "It's the miniskirt that's to blame"[160] no doubt summed up the attitude of many adults. "If they ask me what the student movement of 1968 was all about," one participant wrote two decades later, "I could tell them that it was the history of how a son rebelled against his government because he could not confront his father, while a president who felt impotent against his own son's rocker lifestyle took revenge against hundreds of students."[161]

One day after the massacre the PRI-controlled Congress voted on a resolution approving the use of force to quell the students. Outside the Congress more than 500 mothers protested against the army's continued occupation of the plaza at Tlatelolco. Blame for the "disturbances" was quickly placed on communists and other foreign "agitators." The state, writes César Gilabert, "made sure there were no victims, only culprits."[162] Two weeks later the Olympic games opened, with a conservative and compliant press praising the advances of Mexico's modernization. As more arrests assured the effective dissolution of the movement, it became clear that the government would permit no further organizing against it. With no hope of continuing, on 4 December the CNH officially disbanded. But tanks and guns could not easily erase the memory of what had transpired or contain the spirit of free speech and democratic values the student movement had embodied. The regime might recapture the *places* where its institutions and public figures had been mocked and challenged, but it could not as easily contain the continued symbolic resistance to its authority. For the students' activism and the massacre that put an end to it had affected "the consciousness of a generation and [signaled] the beginnings of the demystification of the country."[163]