



MASSACRE IN MEXICO

Elena Poniatowska

TRANSLATED FROM THE
SPANISH BY HELEN R. LANE
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E.P.

Introduction

The Student Movement of 1968 and the brutal government repression that brought it to an abrupt end deeply disturbed the Mexican people. A political, social, and moral crisis ensued that has not yet been resolved. Elena Poniatowska's book *Massacre in Mexico* is not an interpretation of these events. It is something that far surpasses a theory or a hypothesis: an extraordinary piece of reporting, or, as she calls it, a "collage" of "voices bearing historical witness." A historical chronicle—but one that shows us history before it has congealed and before the spoken word has become a written text. For the chronicler of an era, knowing how to listen is even more important than knowing how to write. Or better: the art of writing implies previous mastery of the art of listening. A subtle and difficult art, for it requires not only sharp ears but also great moral sensitivity: recognizing, accepting the existence of others. There are two breeds of writers: the poet, who hearkens to an inner voice, his own; and the novelist, the journalist, and the historian, who hearken to many voices in the world round about them, the voices of others. Elena Poniatowska first made a name for herself as one of Mexico's finest journalists, and shortly thereafter she was widely hailed as the author of starkly dramatic short stories and highly original novels, worlds governed by an offbeat brand of humor and fantasy in which the boundaries separating ordinary everyday reality from the eerie and unexpected become fuzzy and blurred. In both her writings as a journalist and her works of fiction, her language is closer to oral tradition than to classic literary Spanish. In *Massacre in Mexico* she uses her admirable ability to listen and to reproduce what others have to say to serve the cause of history. Her

book is a historical account and at the same time a most imaginative linguistic tour de force.

✓ *Massacre in Mexico* is a passionate testimony, but not a biased one. It is a passionate book because cold objectivity in the face of injustice is a form of complicity. The passion that suffuses all her pages, from first to last, is a passion for justice, the same burning ideal that inspired the students' demonstrations and protests. Like the Student Movement itself, *Massacre in Mexico* upholds no particular thesis and puts forward no hard and fast ideological line; on the contrary, it is a book whose underlying rhythm, at times luminous and lyrical and at others somber and tragic, is the rhythm of life itself. The mood at the beginning is one of joyous enthusiasm and euphoria: on taking to the streets, the students discover the meaning of collective action, direct democracy, and fraternity. Armed with these weapons alone, they fight repression and in a very short time win the support and the loyalties of the people. Up until this point, Elena Poniatowska's account is the story of the civic awakening of an entire generation of young people. This story of buoyant collective fervor soon takes on darker overtones, however: the wave of hope and generous idealism represented by these youngsters breaks against the wall of sheer power, and the government unleashes its murderous forces of violence; the story ends in a bloodbath. The students were seeking a public dialogue with those in power, and these powers responded with the sort of violence that silences every last voice raised in protest. Why? What were the reasons behind this massacre? Mexicans have been asking themselves this question since October 1968. Only when it is answered will the country recover its confidence in its leaders and in its institutions. And only then will it recover its self-confidence.

✗ As with all historical events, the story of what took place in 1968 in Mexico is a tangled web of ambiguous facts and enigmatic meanings. These events really happened, but their reality does not have the same texture as everyday reality. Nor does it have the fantastic self-consistency of an imaginary reality such as we find in works of fiction. What these events represent is the contradictory reality of history—the most puzzling and the most elusive reality of all. The attitude of the student leaders and that of the government, for instance—to cite just two examples. From the very beginning the students demonstrated a remarkable talent for political action. Their immediate discovery of direct democracy as a method of bringing new life to the

movement while at the same time keeping it in close touch with its primordial source, the Mexican people as a whole; their insistence on holding a public dialogue with the government, in a country accustomed to wheeling and dealing between various power-figures behind the scenes and secret string-pulling by corrupt, conniving leaders in high government circles; the modest and moderate nature of the students' demands, which might be summed up in the word democratization, a heartfelt aspiration of the Mexican people ever since 1910—all of this was evidence both of the students' maturity and of their instinctive political wisdom. But while these virtues and talents were quite obvious on the tactical level, they seem to evaporate from the moment that we hear the students begin to ponder the perspectives that lie ahead for the Movement, its goals, and its import within the twofold context of the history of Mexico and the current world situation. In place of tactical and strategic realism, what we find at this juncture are empty formulas, rigid programs, dogmatic oversimplifications, vacuous high-flown phrases and slogans. Almost all these young people thought that they were participating in a movement that in reality was quite different from the one that they were actually participating in. It was as though the Mexico of 1968 were a metaphor of the Paris Commune or the attack on the Winter Palace: Mexico was Mexico, and yet also another time and another place—another reality. The theatrical drama that they were writing in the pages of history was not the same one that they were reading. Their acts were real; their interpretations were imaginary. A number of them were persuaded that there was a direct connection between the railway workers' movement in 1958 and their own movement ten years later; but they thereby failed to see the difference in objectives and tactics and above all the different class structures involved in the two movements, and hence did not appreciate the entirely different significance of these two episodes. Others were quite certain that the middle-class Student Movement would be followed by worker and peasant movements: history as a relay race. But the Mexican working class failed to snatch up the torch held out to them; it proved as indifferent as the working classes in the countries of the West and in the United States to similar appeals and similar hopes of changing the system.

The attitude of the Mexican government was even more disconcerting—and even less forgivable. It proved to be unbelievably

blind and deaf. But both its blindness and its deafness stemmed from its inability to face up to what was happening. It was not that our government officials were blind and deaf; it was simply that they refused to see or to listen. In their eyes, acknowledging the mere existence of the Student Movement would have been tantamount to self-betrayal. The Mexican political system is founded on a single implicit, immutable belief: the President of the Mexican Republic and the official government Party are the incarnation of the *whole* of Mexico. Accustomed as they are to delivering only monologues, intoxicated by a lofty rhetoric that envelops them like a cloud, our presidents and leaders find it well-nigh impossible to believe that aspirations and opinions that are different from their own even exist. It is they who are the past, the present, and the future of Mexico. The Institutional Revolutionary Party is not a majority political party: it is Unanimity itself. The President is not only the highest political authority: he is the incarnation of all of Mexican history, Power itself in the form of a magic substance passed on from generation to generation in unbroken succession, from the first *Tlatoani* down through the Spanish viceroys to each president as he takes office. Unlike the Hispanic and Latin American pattern of dictatorship by *caudillos*, Mexican authoritarianism is legalistic, and the roots of this legalism are religious in nature. This is the real explanation of the terrible violence visited upon the students. The military attack on them was not only a political act; it also assumed the quasi-religious form of *chastisement from on high*. Divine vengeance. Exemplary punishment. The morality of a wrathful God the Father Almighty. This attitude has profound historical roots; its origins lie in the country's Aztec and colonial past. It can be traced back to a kind of petrification of the public image of the head of the nation, who ceases to be a mere man and becomes an idol to be worshiped. It is yet another expression of the *machismo*, and above all of the pre-eminence of the *father* in the Mexican family and in Mexican society. . . . In a word, in the Mexico of 1968, men once again made history with their eyes blindfolded.

I have always considered it necessary to look back to our colonial history in order to have even a partial understanding of the Mexico of today. By so doing, we will not, of course, find the answer to all our questions. But since the world of New Spain is the immediate antecedent of the world we live in today, our colonial past enables us

to establish certain parallels with our present. In the case of the events of 1968, how can we help but be reminded of the so-called "disturbances of 1692"? The similarities between these two chapters in our history are, as we shall see, no less significant than their differences.

The end of the seventeenth century was a relatively felicitous era in our country's history. While Spain was falling into a more and more profound political and social torpor that was to last for nearly two centuries, New Spain was prospering. For the most part, peace reigned throughout this immense territory, with only sporadic disturbances in the provinces and occasional uprisings by brave Indians in the far north of the country, which was still not completely under the control of the authorities in the capital. Thanks to the remarkable development of agriculture, and even more particularly of mining, a class of wealthy "creoles" (that is to say, descendents of Spaniards who had been born in Mexico) had come into being and was flourishing. An ambitious, enterprising, devoutly religious class eager to flaunt its prosperity: thanks to its generous contributions, splendid civic and religious buildings were erected, lining the streets of every city in the country. This colonial culture reached its apogee in the second half of the seventeenth century, and among the many remarkable talents it produced were two outstanding figures: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a poetess whose genius is recognized the world over, and the historian and mathematician Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. It is not surprising that the inhabitants of New Spain should regard Mexico City as "the head and capital of the American continent," as Sigüenza y Góngora himself described it, and call it, out of a sense of pride not unlike that of Bostonians a century and a half later, "the new Rome." Foreigners were equally impressed by the city, and even as late as the dawn of the nineteenth century Baron Alexander von Humboldt wrote, ". . . no city on the New Continent, including those in the United States, possesses scientific centers as large as those in Mexico . . . or as many beautiful buildings, which would not look at all out of place in the most elegant streets of Paris, Berlin, or Saint Petersburg." Creole society saw its own splendor and solidity reflected in its churches and palaces: gold altars and gilded salons, heavy cement foundations and walls of stone. This society nonetheless turned out to be more fragile than the monuments it erected.

In 1692 a shortage of corn caused an uprising among the common people—Indians, mestizos, and even impoverished creoles—and for

the first time in its colonial history Mexico City was the scene of serious disturbances as the poorer classes rioted in the streets. This act of bold defiance took the government by surprise, for it was not accustomed to seeing its authority challenged. The people raided the storehouses, poured into the main square of the city, burned the official archives, and threatened to set fire to the very seat of Spanish colonial power, the Viceroy's palace. The rioting had turned into something more than a protest against the scarcity of corn and taken on subversive political overtones. Once the authorities had recovered from their initial shock, they unleashed pitiless forces of repression that cast a dark shadow over the waning years of the seventeenth century in Mexico. The golden dream of the Viceroyalty ended in a sudden blaze of fire; in its glaring light colonial society discovered its other half, its hidden face: an Indian, mestizo face, an angry, blood-spattered face. Heretofore, civil disturbances had been limited to local rebellions in the provinces, and the uprisings in the north were seditious acts by tribes not yet subjugated, not yet evangelized and converted to Christianity. The riots in Mexico City, however, revealed a rift that ran through the very heart of Mexican society. The testimony of Singuenza y Góngora, who witnessed these disturbances, is as impressive as Elena Poniatowska's: "Hordes of men came rushing down that street where I was standing (and down all the others that led into the public squares). The Spaniards had unsheathed their swords, but they stopped in their tracks for the same reason that kept me standing there as though rooted to the spot: because the blacks, the mulattos, and all the raggle-taggle plebes were shouting: 'Death to the Viceroy and all his henchmen!' And the Indians: 'Death to the Spaniards who are eating up our corn!' And exhorting each other to bravely enter the fray, since there was no Cortez on the scene this time to conquer them, they stormed into the plaza to join the others and throw rocks. 'Hey, you sisters!' the Indian women shouted to each other in their own tongue, 'let's join in this battle with happy hearts, and God willing, we'll be rid of the Spaniards, so it doesn't matter at all if we die without making a last confession. This is our country, isn't it? So what are these Spaniards doing here anyway?'"

Almost all historians regard these riots of the year 1692 as a forerunner of the battles for Independence a hundred years later. I do not know, however, whether anyone has noted one thing which to me

is the most characteristic feature of this entire chapter in our history. The uprising of 1692 was a rebellion against the power of the Viceroy and Spanish domination; this revolt, however, was not really a revolutionary act, but an instinctive explosion. Its negation contained no element of affirmation. It would be fruitless to study this revolt in depth in the hope of discovering any sort of idea on the part of these rebels as to what Mexican society should be like once the power of the Viceroyalty had been done away with. A return to the world antedating the Spanish Conquest was impossible: it had been completely destroyed, along with its princes and its priests, its gods and its pyramids. Another world had been built upon its ruins: those rebelling against the Viceroy shouted their protests in Spanish, and worshiped the same God as their oppressors. None of the principles, neither of the two universalisms—the Spanish Empire and Roman Catholicism—that had served as the cornerstone of colonial society could serve as a principle of reform. Colonial society suddenly found itself trapped in a blind alley: there was no solution available within the religious, philosophical, and political constructs that served as its foundation. There was an irreconcilable contradiction between the Catholic-monarchic universalism and the particularism of the Indians and mestizos who had risen up in rebellion. Or to put it more precisely: the solution lay not *within* but *without* the ideology of New Spain. Yet another century was to go by before Mexicans would begin a slow, hesitant, timid search for the principles of another sort of universalism and attempt to apply these principles to our reality—with very little success, moreover.* These principles borrowed from

* The difficulty that the Hispanic and Lusitanian countries have experienced and are continuing to experience in their effort to adopt democratic principles and adapt them to their own situation ought to be the central concern of historical and social studies in Latin America, Spain, and Portugal. But this has not been the case at all, and however incredible it may seem, we still do not know why democratic institutions have not proved viable in the majority of our countries. There is a great deal of talk about our economic underdevelopment, and in recent years this underdevelopment and our dependence have been used as convenient excuses for all our failings and shortcomings. I do not deny that underdevelopment and dependence do indeed exist in our countries, but I also note that very few people have troubled to ponder the question as to whether or not there is any relation between this underdevelopment and our political life. The modernity of a country cannot be measured solely, or even primarily, in terms of the number of factories and machines it possesses. The most essential criterion is the degree of development of intellectual and political criticism. Doubtless the poverty of our scientific and philosophical tradition has the same origin as our shallow democratic tradition. Our history is as rife with *caudillos* as the waters of the Gulf of Mexico are infested with sharks.

abroad were those of the Enlightenment as they had taken shape in the two revolutions that served as a model for the independence movements in Spanish America: the French and American Revolutions.

There are unquestionably certain similarities between the disturbances in Mexico in 1968 and those in 1692. In both cases there was a sudden awakening from a dream, from the illusion of genuine prosperity and social harmony. Around 1950 the groups holding the reins of power in the economic and political sphere—including the majority of technicians and many intellectuals—began to feel a certain sense of self-satisfaction at the progress that had been made since the consolidation of the post-Revolutionary regime (1930): political stability; uninterrupted economic development despite a high rate of population growth; impressive completed public-works projects; the birth of a sizable middle class; the increased number of jobholders and the rise in the standard of living of the working class; and finally, as in the seventeenth century, an over-all atmosphere of peace and calm, as though each and every sector of the population were in perfect agreement, from labor leaders to bankers and members of the higher echelons of the institutionalized Revolution to the proconsuls of the big international corporations. In 1690, creole society saw itself reflected in its baroque palaces and its convents and its private schools; in 1960, the post-Revolutionary society saw its image in its factories, its ranches, its Hollywood-style mansions, and its colossal monuments commemorating glorious Revolutionary victories and Revolutionary heroes. It would be unfair, however, to compare the baroque art of the seventeenth century, which even in its most deliriously extravagant flights of fancy was an exquisite art, with the megalomaniacal style of post-Revolutionary Mexico, conceived and executed in the very best tradition of Stalinist art. There was no lack of praise of our country on the part of foreigners. The most resounding tribute paid us was that by President Kennedy, who unhesitatingly proclaimed that the Mexican regime was a model for all of Latin America. The heirs of our revolutionaries had at last received Washington's benediction. But it represented a posthumous triumph for the Mexican Revolution. In reality, our poor Revolution had long since been the victim of a twofold takeover: it had been co-opted politically by the official government Party, a bureaucracy that is similar in more than one respect to the Communist bureaucracies of Eastern Europe, and it had been co-opted economically and socially

by a financial oligarchy that had intimate ties to huge American corporations.

In 1968 this apparent consensus fell to pieces, and the other face of Mexico was suddenly revealed: a generation of angry young men and women and a middle class which bitterly opposed the political system that had ruled the country for forty years. The disturbances of 1968 suddenly brought to light the deep split within that area of Mexican society that might be described as the developed sector, within that predominantly urban sector, that is to say, which includes almost half the population of the country and which in the last few decades has undergone a more and more rapid progress of modernization. But the crisis within the Mexico that is modern and developed assumed even more dramatic and crucial proportions when the Student Movement bared what lay concealed behind it: the other Mexico, the Mexico in rags and tatters, the millions of desperately poor peasants and the masses of the underemployed who emigrate to the cities and become the new nomads of our day—nomads wandering about the urban desert.

As in 1692, the 1968 movement lacked any sort of precisely defined ideology. Unlike the uprising in 1692, it was not a movement of the lower classes but of students, the middle class, and intellectual groups. As in 1692, though for different reasons, it was a direct expression of the general dissatisfaction of the country as a whole. A deep dissatisfaction in the face of the paralysis of the political system that had taken root after the violent phase of the Mexican Revolution had come to an end (the PRI was founded in 1929); and a deep dissatisfaction as well at the turn taken by the social program of the revolutionaries, which had degenerated into a policy of "development" that had benefited only a small minority. This is why the summons to "democratize" the country immediately gained the support of the majority of the population belonging to the urban sector. As in 1692—though again for very different reasons—it was political demands that became the prime concern. But it is that very fact which betrays the major difference between the disturbances of 1692 and those of 1968: whereas the principles on which colonial society was based could provide no answer to the crisis of 1692, the principles on which present-day Mexican society is founded are capable of providing, if not a solution, at least the beginning of a solution, to our problems. "Democratization" is far from being the

final solution, naturally, but it is the right path to follow in order to examine our problems in public, discuss them, propose solutions to them, and organize ourselves politically so as to ensure that these solutions are effectively implemented. Those who are impatient must be reminded what development in the form of a sort of forced march imposed on a people by bureaucratic socialism has meant in the past and continues to mean today: such artificially speeded-up development has been achieved only at the cost of immeasurable physical suffering and moral degradation. The creation of a democratic tradition in Mexico is just as important and just as urgent a problem as economic development and the struggle to achieve genuine equality.

In 1968 the Mexican political system was plunged into crisis. Seven years have since gone by, and we still have not succeeded in creating an independent democratic movement that can offer any real solutions for the enormous problems confronting our country. The spontaneous and healthy negation of 1968 has not been followed by any kind of affirmation. We have proved incapable of drawing up a coherent and viable program of reforms and of creating a national organization. The truth of the matter is that the primary beneficiary of the events of 1968, and very nearly the only beneficiary, has been the regime itself, which in the last few years has embarked upon a program of reforms aimed at liberalizing it. It would be morally wrong to ignore these reforms or minimize their importance; but at the same time it would be an untruth to maintain that they are all that is required. No, the real remedy is not to be found in a reform from the top downward, but rather from the bottom upward, a reform strongly backed by an *independent* popular movement. What must be done is to create an alternative altogether different from the PRI, something that thus far the traditional opposition parties in our country have been unable to accomplish. An intellectual paralysis has overtaken the Mexican left, at present the prisoner of simplistic formulas and an authoritarian ideology that is even more pernicious than the bureaucratic sclerosis of the PRI and the system that concentrates political power in the hands of a president who is a mere party appointee. As for the right: for a long time now the Mexican bourgeoisie has had no ideas—only self-interests. For all these reasons, the “democratization” that the students were seeking in 1968 continues to be a legitimate demand and a pressing

task. It is absolutely essential for any attempt at genuine reform in Mexico. Democracy may be roughly defined as that free arena in which criticism takes place. But criticism of others must be accompanied by self-criticism. To communicate with others, we must first learn to communicate with ourselves. Those groups that are eager for change in Mexico should begin by taking steps in the direction of their own democratization, that is to say, making free criticism and debate the practice within their own organizations. And what is more: they should examine their own consciences and criticize their own attitudes and ideologies. There are hosts of arrogant theologians and stubborn fanatics among us: their dogmas are as resistant to change as stone. The intellectual regeneration of the left will be possible only if it sets aside many of its ironclad formulas and humbly *listens* to what Mexico is really saying—what our past history and our present are saying. If it does so, it will regain its political imagination. If not, will our country be obliged to wait, as in 1992, for yet another century?

—Octavio Paz