



It could be and could have been otherwise: For a non-Euclidean Engagement with Mexico City's '68

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Abstract

This article proposes a research design and understanding of context appropriate to a non-Euclidean engagement with a famous massacre in the Mexico City neighborhood Tlatelolco on 2 October 1968. Mexico City's experience of 1968 is lesser-known than those of many other cities (e.g., Paris). But the predominant narrative of Mexico City's experience tends to be similar in structure to those of better-known '68s insofar as Mexico City's '68 has been invested with an essential content from which deviations are repelled. Accordingly, Mexico City's '68 is regularly treated as if synonymous with 'Tlatelolco' – a shorthand both for where and when '68 took place, and also for an ongoing conflict (alternately a 'sacrifice,' or repression by the state), which it is taken to exemplify. This spatial-temporal circumscription and projection of certitude onto the past forecloses '68's contemporary political relevance and poses Tlatelolco as its container. But how and to what effect might one restore contingency to Tlatelolco? This article primarily draws from Foucault and Rancière to suggest that non-Euclidean engagement can denaturalize inherited exclusions from 'the field,' establish overlooked connections to its ostensible outsides, and thereby make politics possible.



Tlatelolco, Monsiváis, and historiographic closure in 2010²

In October 2010, I was in Mexico City for preliminary dissertation fieldwork about the famous Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968. Forty-two years before, on 2 October in the colonia Tlatelolco, soldiers and police controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) fired on thousands of activists and their supporters who had gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas – amidst a middle-class housing development – for what is now regarded as the final meeting of that year’s ‘student movement.’ Hundreds of meeting attendees and bystanders were wounded, and up to 300 were killed. The name ‘Tlatelolco’ is now shorthand both for where and when the massacre occurred and also for an ongoing conflict that the massacre is understood to exemplify – a conflict between ‘heroic’ students and a ‘repressive’ state, which can be traced through Mexico’s Dirty War of the late 1960s and ’70s to the present day (see Serna Moreno, 2010; Zavala, 2012; Zolov, 2004, 160). The spaces of politics now understood to exemplify ‘Tlatelolco’ are the context for my research on that designation’s emergence, and on the practices and forms through which the designation now inhabits the present.

During 2010 fieldwork, I visited the Museo del Estanquillo in the city’s historic center, where the exhibit *México: a través de las causas* (“Mexico: through the causes”) was then on display. It is no coincidence that, amid commemorative fanfare for the 1910 revolution and the nation’s bicentennial of independence from Spain in 1810, the museum would host an exhibit that traced Mexico through select formative struggles. Most clearly related to my project, the curators registered “La causa del 68” among the struggles and drew much of the exhibit from the private archive of recently deceased writer Carlos Monsiváis, an iconic figure who experienced Mexico City’s ’68, and whose writings give shape to its ongoing interpretation. A selective quote from one of his books reflecting on the year and its significance (Monsiváis, 2005, 14-15; cf. Monsiváis 2008) appeared prominently on a wall of the exhibit:

In 1968 there emerged in Mexico City, a large (in fact, mass) student protest against the government of Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964-1970). ... Everything that constitutes the 68 epic and the tragic event of 2 October in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas leads to the unmistakable conclusion: 68 is the most important political fact in the second half of Mexico’s twentieth century, because there came together a will to resist, the brilliance of the crowds who marched, and a spirit that supported their heroism...³

Research in the months after my visit to the museum clarified that the selected quote epitomized the oft-repeated abstraction of a student movement with

² All translations from Spanish are mine.

³ For brevity’s sake, I provide a shortened quote that maintains the meaning of that which appeared on the wall of the exhibit.

broad based support, which found its opposite only in the state, and met its end in Tlatelolco. Yet interestingly, Monsiváis typically complicated the inherited narrative. For instance, in his writing on 1999's student strike at the National University of Mexico (UNAM), or on the emergence of self-management among the urban poor and neglected earthquake victims in 1985, Monsiváis (1999; 2005) looked back to '68 and mobilized its hopes, feelings, and aspirations for contemporary circulation. The events of '99 and '85 appear haunted by the political unrest that erupted in '68 and also before – in, for instance, a 1958 student mobilization that assembled in the city's central plaza (the Zócalo) and lent energy to railway workers who moved to strike in 1959. By forging connections between '68 and other moments of disorder before and after, Monsiváis' writings suggest that '68's significance exceeds its 365 days, not to mention the day (2 October) for which it is almost exclusively remembered.

It is therefore curious that Monsiváis was called upon to maintain a consensus on Mexico City's '68. Foucault (1991, 59) provokes me to wonder if the quote featured in the bicentennial exhibit was chosen for display precisely because it delivered on a set of expressions proper to a historical discourse that sets limits on what is knowable, sayable, and doable in relation to '68 since the massacre. Foucault's best-known historical work (1995) showed clearly how a consensus around norms is maintained through discourse. But, far from intending to 'perfect' space and making it an instrument of domination (de Certeau, 1986), Foucault claimed, in a 1978 interview (2000a, 240), that his histories of the present can be critical instruments by which to exact a change in possibilities for thought and action (cf. Foucault, 2007; Haraway, 1988). Maintaining consensus on '68 is antithetical to this intent. For Foucault's contemporary Rancière, maintaining a consensus would be depoliticizing; it would configure the perceptible world in such a way as to discourage politics (Rancière, 2010). With Rancière, this paper takes politics to be the fleeting but permanently possible denaturalization of a sociospatial order that has all things "in their proper place" and is therefore perfectly governable (Dikeç, 2005, 172 *passim*). A disruption of order or an interruption of the given (i.e., politics) may at some point cede to another basis for government, but this moment is uncertain (see Ardit, 2007, 105). I argue that, amidst this indeterminacy, a non-Euclidean engagement with the past and present of Tlatelolco could repoliticize '68 because it could denaturalize inherited exclusions from 'the field' and thereby make possible other ways of knowing, speaking, and doing.

Together Foucault's and Rancière's distinct ontological assumptions allow me to see the Monsiváis quote in the bicentennial exhibit as a form that imposed certitude on a contested past and naturalized a regime of representation (i.e., Tlatelolco) that politics would disrupt.⁴ My research questions follow from the assumptions that made visible this historiographic closure. Through what practices

⁴ My use of Foucault *with* Rancière is unusual but not unprecedented (see Simons and Masschelein, 2010).

did it (the closure) arise? How is it now propagated and circulated? What ways of knowing, speaking, and doing in relation to the past does it naturalize? Which does it exclude? How do other ways of knowing, speaking, and doing become possible? And finally, how might my research contribute to making these alternatives possible?

For a non-Euclidean engagement with Tlatelolco

Although topological, non-Euclidean thinking is not new for human geography or its cognate disciplines (Coleman, 2011), twentieth century field researchers nonetheless tended toward developing coherent understandings of regional particularities, and largely obeyed the apparent truism that one can best make sense of such particularities by placing them ‘in context’ (Dilley, 1999). The existence and availability of a context into which regional particularities could be placed was often taken as an unproblematic given. Many geographers accordingly presumed that problems can and, for analytical purposes, should be placed in bounded geographic units that can themselves be taken as actors (as agents, for instance, of ‘competition’ or ‘learning’). Today, some scholars *still* understand context as a given “spatial frame” in which one accesses the phenomena or processes to be examined (Paasi, 2010, 2297). Whether out of a desire for generalizable findings, or, as in the 1970s, to follow a then-dominant structuralism, one takes a Euclidean orientation to field research when one treats a bounded case as this or that effect of a transcendent organizing principle (see Graham, 1990; Saldanha, 2008; cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 108-110). But bordering practices of fieldwork are not innocent; they are performative. By drawing borders that make ‘context’ visible and, in that way, facilitating particular modes of analysis, field researchers not only enact certain realities but hinder the emergence of others, making them less real (see Law, 2004, 148-149).

While research context has in the past tended to be understood as simply where and when a problem exists to be accessed by someone with the proper techniques of data collection and analysis, a non-Euclidean orientation to field research now prevails among scholars who accept a global sense of place, a politicized definition of the field, and an account of power as exercised rather than possessed (Allen, 2003; Massey, 1994; Nast, 1994). These ‘relational’ geographers conceive of and work in a context that exceeds spatial-temporal circumscription, and “that produces and is produced by an interrelated set of practices [i.e., a regime of practices] that has evolved over time and across space” (Ettlinger, 2011, 542). This is to say that, while the regime of practices being examined is located, it is not limited to a particular site, and is – in principle – open to change. From this perspective, an existing consensus on Mexico City’s ’68 would constrain and guide but not foreclose transformation of the regime of practices (i.e., the context) into which the field researcher is drawn. Field research would be a productive encounter

with the “set of rules” by which its context is governed and in relation to which its practitioner’s intervention may take its form (cf. Foucault, 1991, 58).⁵

The research questions with which I ended my introduction direct attention to the conditions of possibility and uncertain legacy of Tlatelolco. One would lose sight of this contingency before and after the massacre if one began by assuming Tlatelolco is the effect of an organizing principle or expresses a timeless certitude (Foucault, 1977, 142). Octavio Paz, for instance, wrote compellingly of Tlatelolco as a ‘sacrifice’ with origins in ‘Aztec’ violence. But in order to define Tlatelolco this way, Paz excluded deviations in its emergence and persistence that would have frustrated his aspirations for coherence; Paz hemmed Tlatelolco in from other regimes of practice, in articulation with which I would claim it came to exist.⁶ One finds a similar move in Alain Badiou’s (2008) recent treatment of France’s May ’68, an event Badiou invests with essential content that is purportedly visible in the communism of today. In contrast, I propose *not* to pursue the essence of a given historical-geographical unit, but to make things “more fragile,” and to show “why and how things were able to establish themselves as such” (Foucault, 2007, 138-139). In short, through attention to often-excluded contingencies, I propose to show that the legacy of ’68 could be or could have been otherwise. The resulting fragility will certainly frustrate deductive-predictive analyses, but is amenable to the non-Euclidean engagement advocated here. I turn now to the thorny problem of research design amidst this indeterminate fragility or ‘mess’ (cf. Law, 2004).

Restoring contingency to Tlatelolco: a research design

Later in the 2010 fieldwork with which I began this article, I participated in and observed an annual march on 2 October. By noon that day, several hundred people had converged in or near Tlatelolco’s Plaza de las Tres Culturas where, 42 years before, the meeting of participants in what has since been defined as ‘the student movement’ was assaulted by gunfire. As in marches of years past, in 2010, participants had presumably convened to remember the “fallen comrades” invoked on a monolith installed in the plaza for Tlatelolco’s 25th anniversary in 1993. Within sight of the monolith, spray-painted murals on an apartment building contiguous to the plaza situated the fallen comrades within the narrative then found in the aforementioned Museo del Estanquillo. One mural featured a young man in an IPN t-shirt (therefore a student in the National Polytechnic Institute) who sprays “freedom of expression” on a wall while a hawkish soldier in the foreground fires a pistol. A second mural offered a silhouetted, triumphant mass framed by young faces on the right and left and by helmeted soldiers, confronting the crowd, below; painted across the soldiers in a graffiti style was “1968-2008,” a visual element

⁵ For Foucault (1991), a discursive formation constrains possible thought, speech, and action, but also enables their modification.

⁶ See passages in Paz’s 1969 lecture, published as *Posdata*, e.g., “between the old society and the new Hispanic order lay an invisible thread: the thread of domination. This thread is not broken: the Spanish viceroys and Mexican Presidents are successors of the Aztec chieftains” (1970, 123).

boldly marking this confrontation's continuity. Together the murals and the memorial monolith reinscribed a narrative of '68's significance as a year of "state repression and student protest" (Zolov, 2004, 160), the year of the heroic student movement that came to its violent end on 2 October.

Ethnographic and archival research suggests that this narrative's predominance was not inevitable, is fragile, and is a constraint in relation to which practices take shape today. To say the narrative is fragile is *not* to say it is trivial, only that it emerged upon specific conditions without which it could have been otherwise. Archival work suggests that these conditions of possibility were established before '68, for example in widely circulated pronouncements of a new 'student politics' by authors who anticipated the magnetism of the designation in years to come (e.g., Sánchez Andracka, 1967). Texts that pre-date '68, as well as some revisionist work to address its precedents, indicate that the conventional fixation on violent repression of students by the state depended in part upon *post*-'68 practices (e.g., in public education, journalistic commemoration, and so on) that bracketed other figures from consideration and reduced the wider political geographies that Tlatelolco represents to a simple binary of oppositional conflict. At issue are organizational practices like those at a location (in Coyoacán) of the used bookstore *El Tomo Suelto* in which an early 1968 pamphlet (Castillo, 1968) from the broadly Left activism of the Movement for National Liberation (MLN) is catalogued on shelves designated specifically for "The Student Movement." Texts that gesture to the ostensible outsides of Tlatelolco, like Castillo's pamphlet or interviews for a film-in-progress on "the women of '68",⁷ indicate that there existed unrest in other sectors (e.g., women, and workers) that are obscured by narratives of '68 as the year of the student movement (e.g., Frazier and Cohen, 2003).

My engagement with '68 through representations of Tlatelolco's 'outsides' will establish typically overlooked connections, and not so much represent existing collective identities as open them to revision (Kurtz, 2002). Archival research will therefore signal the co-presence of multiple accounts, and, by opening the field to what tends to be excluded from historical discourse, will denaturalize the unified trajectory within which practitioners are often presumed to operate (Fraser and Weninger, 2008). Appreciation for the materiality of the archive is crucial here (Griffin and Evans, 2008). While scholars of the past's distortion by inherited categories have tended to work only with historical texts (e.g., Ross 2002)⁸, I propose to examine not only representations of '68 but also the everyday organizational practices through which archives are given shape and political and historiographic closures may arise (Ashmore *et al.*, 2012; Kurtz, 2001). It might be said that I am looking beyond archives to include the ethnographic present. But

⁷ The documentary (*Mariposas en un mundo de palabras*) is explicitly meant to remember forgotten figures and correct "a historical debt to the women of '68." In 2011, I met the filmmakers and observed their work.

⁸ Note that, for Ross (2002, 17), avoiding ethnography was no oversight. Ross only used texts because she believed interviews with already visible spokespeople for May '68 would be unhelpful for repoliticization.

more precisely, I am combining archival and ethnographic research, pursuing them relationally to provide an account of Tlatelolco's past and present which would not only be missed but obscured by exclusive attention to archival representations. Accordingly, I highlight different dimensions of my problem and add depth to my presentation of the case (cf. Ettlinger, 2009). Foucault's 1978 reflections on histories of the present (2000a) suggest that my approach can create conditions for politics insofar as it may open up and exact changes in possibilities for thought and action (cf. Haraway, 1988). By revealing uncertain linkages through which existing social-political formations emerged (and thereby calling their durability into question), such research carries with it a potential for their disruption and the correlative emergence of alternatives (Foucault, 2007, 138-139).

Preliminary research suggests that certain ethnographic techniques are necessary for this project because they provide otherwise unobtainable insight into contemporary processes through which the regime of representation, Tlatelolco, has arisen and through which unruly remnants of Mexico City's '68 nonetheless endure. My participation in 2010's march for *dos de octubre* provided examples of how Tlatelolco's significance not only persists but is also being transformed. The massacre-fixated narrative of 1968 *as* Tlatelolco clearly provided what, after Foucault (1991), I described above as the 'set of rules' by which one's research context is governed and in relation to which one's intervention may take its form. A huge range of people converged for the march: parents and children, academics, punks, radical activists, union representatives, and of course students – some from Mexico City and others from elsewhere, some who survived the massacre and others whose parents even were not yet born when it happened. In all, more than 15,000 people converged to commemorate 2 October 1968 (Olivares and Camacho, 2010). Their presence confirmed the continued pertinence of the day. But practices during the march frustrated neat delimitation of 'the field.'

In 2010, and also in 2011, participants in the march used Tlatelolco not only to look back to the past but also to speak to contemporary struggles. While marching from Tlatelolco's Plaza de las Tres Culturas to Mexico City's Zócalo, they chanted, sprayed graffiti, and distributed propaganda, which drew the commemoration of Tlatelolco into contact with distinct but nonetheless related sets of practices (e.g., agitation for demilitarization and against the ongoing drug war, commemorations of more recent state and paramilitary repression in Acteal and Atenco, or, in 2011, the ongoing mobilizations in Chile for free public education). So, although the march is widely represented as commemorative for specifically the massacre on 2 October, my participation allowed me to note that people use Tlatelolco to do more than simply look back to what happened on that day (cf. Featherstone, 2005). Indeed, by virtue of being there, I was able to take note of practices which suggested that Tlatelolco remains a regime of representation in relation to which political interventions take their form. Just as the march in 2011 became a venue for expressions of solidarity with the post-neoliberal aspirations of Chilean students (see McSherry and Molina Mejía, 2011), as this article was being

written, the ‘repression’ of students by police in the Mexican states of Guerrero (Ocampo, 2011) and Michoacán (Martínez, 2012) as well as the activism of #YoSoy132 and others against the *imposición* of PRI presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto (Petrich, 2012), appear likely to inform how the legacy of ’68 gets taken up at the 2 October march in 2012.⁹

For taking note of what apparently falls outside categories around which archives and historical texts are organized, ‘being there’ has been and will continue to be vital (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009; Rapport, 1991). But, in this case, I must be ‘there’ not only in the obviously-relevant space of the march but also in other spaces of more everyday practices through which the legacy of ’68 is given shape (e.g., the Museo del Estanquillo, used bookstores, etc.).¹⁰ ‘There’ is not a point in absolute space that can “be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point” (Harvey, 2006, p. 274).

This non-Euclidean sense of being there has implications both for participant observation and also for interviewing. For example, it informs my recruitment strategy; ‘snowball sampling’ is accordingly guided by a concern to interview people who demonstrably contribute to or contest the regime of representation, Tlatelolco, not only, nor even especially, people who would provide access to the ‘empirical facts’ of what happened in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on 2 October 1968. Participants are therefore diverse in terms of their relationships to ’68; they include former and current activists, artists, curators, shopkeepers, students, educators, dropouts, and journalists – some who propagate the abstraction to which ’68 has been reduced, and others who actively put that abstraction under pressure. All interviews have been and will be semi-structured to allow for the postulation of linkages between events, people, places, and practices that are typically excluded from circumscriptive accounts of ’68 (cf. Secor, 2010). In this way, interviews can facilitate spontaneity, admit changing relationships to the past, and (as with archival research and participant observation) resist tendencies to reinscribe the closures exemplified in accounts of 1968 *as* Tlatelolco.

Conclusion

This article has sketched a non-Euclidean engagement with Mexico City’s ’68. While a Euclidean engagement would lead me to treat ’68 as a bounded case, and as this or that effect of an “essential secret” (Foucault, 1977, 142), my non-Euclidean approach attends to the interplay of apparently external conditions that

⁹ As is clear in this passage, I finalized this paper in early 2012, sketching a direction for field research that I have since pursued through several trips to Mexico City. Writing this footnote in late 2013, I can now clarify that the activism of #YoSoy132 did indeed give shape to the 2 October 2012 march. The 2012 commemorative march also featured frequent references to protests and occupations at the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México (UACM).

¹⁰ In an issue of *ACME* on Chicago’s Haymarket Square Riot, Hague (2008) treats his Chicago classroom as a space of practice wherein the event’s legacy is given shape. I also advocate attention to such quotidian spaces as an antidote to tendencies in work on places of memory to focus exclusively on monumental sites.

establish, maintain, and may fleetingly disrupt the consensus by which the contemporary significance of '68 has been hemmed in. Against projections of certitude on a contested past, and against the imperative to reveal the essence of a bounded historical-geographical unit, my approach allows that Tlatelolco was *not* the inevitable expression of a pre-given essence (as, for example, it was for Octavio Paz). Indeed the proposed research design carries with it a suggestion that the political significance of '68 cannot be realized through deductive-predictive analysis of a circumscribed where and when. To the contrary, one must open '68 (heretofore stifled by Tlatelolco) to other regimes of practice, in articulation with which its legacy could be or could have been otherwise. At issue here is how the legacy of '68 is managed, and how this management functions both to delimit political possibilities and provide a set of rules in relation to which interventions may take form. In the face of consensus that too often reduces Mexico City's '68 to a violent repression of students by the state, I suggest that restoring contingency to Tlatelolco is tantamount to '68's repoliticization. Opening '68 to its ostensible outsides would destabilize the limits of what can be known, said, and done in relation to the year, and by whom.

After Rancière, for whom politics is a disruption of governable sociospatial order, I have pointed to how archival and ethnographic fieldwork can denaturalize boundaries around one's research context and thereby function to repoliticize the regime of practices under investigation. But while, for Rancière (1995), politics occurs specifically through the postulation of a space in which the wronged maintain a dispute and claim to speak for and redefine 'the whole,' I conceive of politics in less oppositional terms, and still without identifying politics with state institutions or governmental practice. I understand as *politicizing* a researcher's attention to disparate conditions of possibility that may have been excluded from inherited discursive patterns in the interest of consensus, because they are contrary to an apparent obviousness. By reading Rancière (2010) with Foucault (2000b, 227), I propose an interruptive "multiplication or pluralization of causes" which could instantiate politics by troubling the distribution of the perceptible, calling the durability of existing social-political formations into question, and facilitating rather than foreclosing everyday practices of meaning making.

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