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AFTER THE HISTORICAL YEAR OF 1968

A series of events that happen in that year are of great importance. Some appear as a result of a certain historical accumulation, others are significant because of the series of consequences that they will bring, others show to be an expression and symptom of the contradictions waves that cross the century. Several of the keys of the century appear concentrated in the conjuncture that represents 1968.

Many of the events that occur in 1968 are more a result of national or regional processes. As globalization and interdependence advance, it will probably be valid for all humanity to exercise in the future as protagonist and subject of a single universal historical process. In such a way that conjunctures such as that of 1968 appear as a direct consequence of maturation of a unique process that is determining them.

The scenarios move around the American continent, through Europe and Asia. On the other hand, there is no relevant African protagonism in the historical year of 1968. It is accidental, but it is symptomatic. Africa, the continent excluded by excellence in modern times of globalization, will not appear in our synthesis-year either. Reflection of an entire century, 1968 unfolds rich in suggestions.

Also, we will see what happened in our country during that year.



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The spring of Prague and its crushing

Parallel to the events of the French May, which galvanized the dissatisfaction of the youth strata in Western Europe, on the other side of “the iron curtain” (according to the expression of Churchill), in the countries of Eastern Europe, the expectations were raised around the socialism reform experiment undertaken by the Czechoslovak authorities. Following the slogan enunciated by the sociologist Radovan Richta to generate “a socialism with a human face”, the own General Secretary of the Communist Party and head of the Czech government Alexander Dubcek launched a bold plan of reforms to democratize the system. It included modalities of mixed economy, promoting private companies on par with the state ones.

What was most striking about the Program of Action promulgated in April was the proclaimed intention to “humanize” socialism. The initiative of the authorities quickly gained the enthusiastic support of a large part of the population and especially of young Czechs. They felt part of Europe, a feeling stimulated by the openness to Western tourism, student exchanges and freedom of information and culture, policies that for years had been driving the communist government of Czechoslovakia.

The country, with an industrial development superior to the rest of the socialist camp, also had a vigorous intellectual climate. There was an atmosphere of debate and mental openness incomparable with the rest of Eastern Europe. The society was influenced by the critical work of filmmakers such as Milos Forman and Jiri Menzel, writers of stature such as Milan Kundera or important philosophers of heterodox Marxism such as the Hungarian Georg Lukács. The intellectual renovation preceded and in some way prepared the social conditions so that in Czechoslovakia the great hope that represented the so-called “Prague Spring” in 1968 would appear and flourish.



The Czech regime defended its right to promote its own project, in the search of its national identity and from its feeling of belonging to Europe, but with the necessary prudence in front of the Soviet superpower, by not questioning its adherence to socialism nor its belonging to the military alliance of the Warsaw Pact. The repression in 1956 of the attempt to separate Hungary made clear the limits that could not be transferred. Neither Dubcek, a graduate of the Higher School of Paintings of the Moscow Party, intended to do so. What he and his team are leading is an attempt to promote a “perestroika” in the socialist camp, but almost twenty years before Gorbachev’s rise to power, testing the scope and sincerity of the de-Stalinization that Khrushchev had started and seemed to consolidate with Brezhnev. Initially Kremlin allowed to do, not without remaining attentive to ideological and political evolution of the Czech experiment. But this one raised the alarm of his neighbors. Both the authorities of German Democratic Republic and those of Poland feared that soon a popular current would arise in their countries that would claim to imitate the model of socialism that was beginning to be promoted in Czechoslovakia.

Finally, Brezhnev took a stand and decided to cut the Czech reformist whims. Between 20 and 21 August, half a million soldiers and 7,000 tanks of the Warsaw Pact joint forces invaded Czechoslovakia to overthrow the government and take the main leaders prisoner.

The population responded with a broad campaign of passive resistance. They argued with the soldiers, Russians the majority, fraternized with them and, in an image that would be repeated later in Portugal after the coup that in 1974 brought down the military dictatorship in that country, placed carnations in the mouths of their rifles. It was useless in the face of the inflexibility of the Soviet orders. The good sense of the Czech people prevented a bloodbath from taking place. There was one death: a student who immolated himself in Prague months later in protest against the military occupation of the country and the crushing of his self-determination and independence.

The feeling of helplessness allowed the stability of the country that, however, never resigned

itself to the renunciation of its own transforming project. In fact, Alexander Dubcek would return to politics when communism collapsed two decades later, respected as the reformer who was not allowed to democratize socialism.

Brezhnev, who had proclaimed at the time “peaceful coexistence” with the capitalist world, would declare after the crushing of the spring of Prague the new doctrine with respect to the countries of the socialist camp under its sphere of influence: “limited sovereignty”. The supreme interests of the Soviet Union and of socialism, according to such political doctrine, should prevail over the effective independence of the countries of Eastern Europe. It was thus made official the submission of the same to the decisions of Moscow, which imposed its own imperialist policy where it could do so. The West accepted the criterion of respecting the “areas of influence” of each of the superpowers and didn’t intervene in any way in defense of the Czech people and government. It exploited with great efficiency the image of lack of liberties and brutality of the Soviet bloc, feeding its propaganda apparatus.

The Communist parties of Western Europe reacted with great disgust to the Soviet military intervention and three of the most important, those of Italy, France and Spain, criticized it openly, distanced themselves from Moscow and renewed their thinking and proposals: the so-called “Eurocommunism”. He would take his own journey according to the “spirit of Prague”.



Photo: From the book *Invasion 68. Prague*, by Josef Koudelka

Rise and failure of the Chinese cultural revolution

1968 will be a decisive year for the future of China: on the one hand, Lin Biao will be able to declare, at the beginning of the following year, that “the cultural revolution has triumphed”, while, on the other, its defeat is marked by the extermination or absorption in the army of most of the “red guards” who were his engine and executor arm. In fact, the 9th Chinese Communist Party Congress in early 1969 set itself the goal of “the reconstruction of the Party” after the anarchy and chaos generated by the Maoist cultural revolution. But its top leaders were integrated into the Political Bureau. Ending the experiment would still cost several years of intense factional fighting. But the initiative that Mao Tse Tung would raise wouldn’t be able to recover and would go down in history as another failure of the “great helmsman”.

It all started in the autumn of 1965 when Mao got the authorization from the Party to launch a propaganda campaign to “destroy the ancient world.” Displaced from real power after economic failure of “The Great Leap Forward”, launched on his initiative, experienced leader was to start a bold maneuver to regain his leadership in the party and in the country. Unhappy with reformist pragmatism of other comrades, who prioritized economic growth and efficiency, Mao would seek to lean on the masses to confront bureaucratic apparatus of the Party and try to win it back. He would accuse the state leadership of becoming “the new bourgeoisie”, attacking technicians and engineers alike, intellectuals and party officials alike. The class struggle had not ended with triumph of the socialist revolution and Mao continued to trust the peasant masses as the main class, against the urban sectors that in his opinion tended to gentrify. It will defend the Chinese youth as the social group that was not corrupted and will rely on the students to launch a revolution within the revolution. The Cultural Revolution Group led by Mao’s wife organized a structure parallel to that of the Party, the “red guards”, recruited mostly among university students under



In May 1967, a million red guards from all over the country gathered in front of the Heavenly Peace Gate in Beijing to listen to the “great helmsman”: “Destroy the old, build the new!”. The cultural revolution was set in motion throughout the country, under the guidance of the “thought of Mao Tsé Tung”. The edition of “Quotations by President Mao”, better known as the “Red Book”, was reproduced by hundreds of millions and was translated into almost all known languages. Maoism gained notoriety in the world, as a form of Leninism to the Chinese, provoking debates and in some cases splits in the Marxist parties and the founding of pro-Chinese or Maoist organizations. The option for armed struggle and in the Third World was revitalized everywhere by guerilla movements that took root among the peasantry.

Imperialism, according to Mao’s definition, was “a paper tiger”. Criticisms of the Soviet Union, described as “social-imperialism”, were also assumed. The ideological struggle and the “proletarianization” of militancy were placed in the foreground. The Chinese cultural revolution was mythologized in many places and its echoes would continue to resonate even long after it had been killed and buried in Communist China itself.

In 1967 the Red Guards were imposed in most provinces, local committees of the party were dismissed, leaders were imprisoned, there were cases of lynchings. Many national leaders were purged, including Den Xiao Ping, the brain of economic reforms, and sent to rural communes to “reeducate.” Chu In Lai, the president of the Council of Ministers and companion of Mao since the Long March of the revolutionary war, could remain in the position, but deprived of real power.

There were resistances and in some cities there were real battles between fractions. Universities remained closed, industrial production declined and agricultural production also declined dramatically and chaos reigned throughout China. Mao himself began to distance himself from the fanaticism and irrationality with which groups of Red Guards acted. They began to emerge rivalries between them. Mao then relied on the army to restore order and reorganize production. A campaign to denounce ultra-leftism will begin and an attempt will be made to disarm the Red Guards starting in 1968. They resist and will

end up being decimated by the army. He retakes control, but refuses to keep the country militarized. The Party must assume the leadership again.

Thus, at the beginning of 1969 almost half of the new Central Committee comes from the ranks of the ELP. The leaders purged by the cultural revolution are rehabilitated little by little. It is a difficult balance of forces, where the Maoists will still try in 1973, with a campaign supposedly aimed at criticizing the thinking of Confucius, to weaken the newly reinforced position of Chu En Lai. This one managed to prevail and in 1975 put Deng Xiao Ping, who launched the line of “the four modernizations”, back on the front of economic management.

The Chinese economic miracle and its take-off to becoming a world economic power began to lay its foundations, after ten years of anarchy and virtual civil war. President Mao, nevertheless, maintained to end of his days the respect and support of the masses, fed with an exaggerated cult of personality, and nobody in the Party dared to challenge his power. But after her death in 1976, a few months later her widow, Jiang Qing, was arrested, accused of conspiring and being part of “the gang of four” that would have provoked the nightmare of the cultural revolution years. Lin Piao, head of the The army that agreed to the cultural revolution and the hegemony of Mao, had died in 1971, the victim of a strange plane crash, when he secretly flew to Moscow.

China was turning a page into a complicated period in its contemporary history, of ideological extremism that led to permanent revolution and civil war, but also of rectification towards stability, moderation and modernization, as it has shown over the next quarter of a century.





The French May

For more than a month university students of Paris and other French cities had in check right-wing government of the hard General de Gaulle. The revolt, initiated in assemblies in university precincts and moved quickly to streets, raised barricades and isolated from the rest of the city, the downtown Latin Quarter, inhabited mainly by students and foreigners.

The police were unable to repress the movement without causing unacceptable killing. After all, behind the barricades there were no humble workers developing a class struggle, but children of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie, the generation to which after passing through the university classrooms it would correspond in the future to assume the reins of the nation.

But government lacked alternatives to the repressive police response. Negotiating an exit was impracticable, since the movement of radicalized youth didn't have a defined leadership with whom to sit at a negotiating table and presented rather anarchist ideological contours. Nor did it raise specific and plausible requests to which it could be assigned or be bargained for

It was the whole of bourgeois society, its values and way of life, that was questioned. The politics of system was fiercely criticized, but also aspects of daily life, such as consumerism or double sexual and family morality. The movement had more overtones of a generational malaise, profound and unnoticed until then, than of a revolution in Marxist or classist sense of term.

Some of the pints on the walls reflected the spirit of this youthful rebellion: "Imagination to power"; "Forbidden to forbid"; "Scare the bourgeois!"; "Assault the headquarters!" The society reacted bewildered and scared. The gap between the generations, the ignorance of the feelings and thoughts of the young, suddenly appeared as an abyss that divided the Nation in two. Young workers promoted factory assemblies, outside union organizations, and in some cases managed to force strikes to join the student revolt. The largest French company in number of workers, the state-owned automobile manufacturer Renault, went on strike despite opposition from the communist union. The leaders of the PCF, the French Communist Party, offered themselves as mediators and were rejected. The PCF was also accused of "being part of the system".

When the movement gave way, exhausted by the police harassment and the lack of alternatives that their own anarchic positions caused, a book was published with photos of a large amount of "graffiti" (phrases painted on the walls). A well representative says: "I take my wishes for realities because I believe in the reality of my desires." But perhaps the most revealing slogan of the scope and at the same time the limitations of movement of the French May is what proclaimed: "Let's be realistic: let's demand the impossible!". After the play on words and the patent utopian content of the phrase, there was no naivete, but a political and philosophical stance.

The theoretical radicalism of the French May didn't prove fruitful in France, where it didn't leave major political sequels after the storm of 68. On the other hand, it did have consequences in a neighboring country, Germany. In fact, a similar, although less spectacular, movement had started there a year earlier, in 1967. The same was the redhead Cohn-Bendit, who over the years would become a deputy for the party of the greens. The emergence of the very massive ecologist, feminist and pacifist movement in the following years has historical roots in the German student rebellion of 1967.

Computer networks and the conquest of the moon

Historians have pointed to 1968 as the year in which the interconnection of networked computers began to operate. Initially it was a secret Pentagon project. Connecting the computers of the different military units in the territory of the United States would allow the most secure and practically instantaneous communication between them.

What was decisive for military interests, however, was in the very concept of a network: it lacks a defined center and communication can be established without it. In the cold war environment, this characteristic was essential: in the event of an attack, the armed forces would have the capacity to coordinate and respond even if the headquarters of the high command were destroyed in the first blow. As has happened at other times in the modern history of science and technology, it was research with military objectives that achieved advances that would be of great importance for civilian uses. The high budgets for research and experimentation available to the Ministries of Defense often make a difference.

Some time later, the Pentagon agreed to transfer this technology to a group of universities, which allowed the interconnection of university libraries, as well as the development of some academic research projects. It was only a matter of time the design of the language “html” and the emergence of the global network of networks or “www”, better known as the internet.

Soon there would be millions of computers in the world connected to each other, exchanging all kinds of information. It would mean a world revolution not only because of communication between private individuals, but above all because of the possibilities that were opened up for companies. It was verifying what a Japanese baptized in the sixties as “the information society”. The



big companies will use the computer revolution to fragment their production in different countries, coordinating the set of operations from a virtual center, which can be anywhere in the world.

Electronic transfers will allow instant mobility of capital, for investment or for speculation, which is one of the bases of the current process of capitalist globalization. The start of this intensification of the globalization of the economy, called globalization, which has changed life in the world, must be placed in these first experiences of networks between computers.

Internet technology is closely linked to another technological advance; that of communication satellites. Parallel and in connection with the development of computer science was the exploration of space another military priority, this time through NASA. The two superpowers also competed in that area, in what was called “the space race.” The Soviets had an advantage: they had been the first to put a satellite in Earth orbit (the Sputnik), also to send a living being into space and make it return (the little dog Laika) as well as the first human being, back and forth (the astronaut Gagarin). Now the Americans compensated for their backwardness with a dramatic effect: to be the first to place a man on the moon! The Russians would try to downplay the fact and focused on getting the first to place a permanent station in space, with long periods of permanence for the astronauts. But they couldn't avoid the propaganda impact achieved by the United States, which broadcast on television the images of astronaut Armstrong when descending the ladder of his ship and put his foot on the moon.

The fact has been doubted and it has been speculated if it was a montage produced by the film industry. Even the famous phrase pronounced by Armstrong “is a small step for a man, but a great leap for humanity” seemed more like a Hollywood script: too perfect to be real. Even the odd skeptic has pointed out that in the images you can see the American flag flying, which was impossible on the moon because the satellite lacks

atmosphere. Independent of this controversy, the certain thing is that, if the United States had not obtained it in that date, was very next to do it and in the following years it would obtain other even more important successes for the space race.

The conquest of the moon had become for the collective imaginary a symbol of unlimited human capacity and expanded a great optimism in the power of scientific knowledge and technology.

In the following decades, the US superpower would clearly surpass its Soviet rival in the space race, not so much in terms of space exploration, but in its capacity to develop new weapons systems, offensive and defensive, as a protective shield.

The American advantage wasn't so much in a better level of its scientists and engineers, as in its ability to finance the astronomical amounts of such a project. The Soviet Union was ruined in its efforts to follow in the footsteps of its rival in this double race: the arms race and the space race. The conquest of the moon by the United States was a small step, in fact, in comparison with the great jump that would mean the project of anti-missile shield or “star wars” that launched the Reagan administration and that precipitated the Soviet ruin. First steps in 1968 to constitute the United States in the only undisputed military hyperpower on the planet, as it has become today.





Student slaughter of Tlatelolco in Mexico

October 2, 1968. Chihuahua Building, Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico. The terrible photos that a few years ago went around the world because of their atrocity show students beaten, helpless, some naked, surrounded by soldiers of the Mexican army.

The year 1968 was a relevant year then and still has a very important political and social burden today. In that year the Soviet tanks entered the Czech capital; in Paris, the students had risen (the well-known May of the 68 French), the racism in South Africa reached its apogee, and Mexico lived a strong internal instability product of the bad economic conditions that crossed. On August 27 of that year, more than 200,000 students marched through the center of Mexico City and settled in the Zócalo, a central square of the Federal District. The next day, the local police repressed the revolt.

Mexico was the ideal city to become the stage

where to show the disagreements with the internal politics of the federal government and the world instability, for its upcoming organization of the Olympic Games. But Mexico and its Government weren't willing to become a focus of revolts, precisely on such a marked dates.

The revolts followed one another, and in September the government sent the army to occupy the University Campus, producing dozens of wounded among the students. Then it was already mentioned that there had been dozens of deaths and that the police had incinerated them to hide the evidence from the World. Even so, the protests continued at an increasing rate, while participants from all the countries of the world were arriving to the capital.

The White Brigade was established in 1966 by the Federal Security Directorate to combat urban guerrilla warfare, more specifically to investigate and locate the Communist League on September 23. This League emerged as a result of the union of the Revolutionary Student Front, the Sick of Sinaloa, the Lacan-

done Command, the Guajiros and members of the MAR.

This Brigade was composed, according to documents, by “members of Mexican Army, Federal Security Directorate, Attorney General of the Republic, Federal District Attorney’s Office, General Directorate of Police and Traffic of Federal District Department, Attorney General of State of Mexico”.

According to the data, this brigade had 55 vehicles and 253 weapons, with monthly compensation of three thousand pesos plus general expenses. In addition, they had a large gas budget to carry out all the activities for which they had been trained.

They counted on specialized training in the Communist League to be able to intercede and analyze the information, as well as a training in hand-to-hand combat and handling of different types of artifacts.

On October 2, 1968, almost 50,000 students gathered in the Plaza de Tlatelolco or the Three Cultures. But they did nothing but fall into an ambush, for from all the converging streets, the army forces appeared, surrounding the plaza. A flare was fired... and the killing began.

The soldiers began to shoot indiscriminately against those present, while the students fled in terror. Almost 400 students died that day, and more than a thousand were seriously injured.

A large part of the corpses were burned and the wounded were taken to military hospitals to hide the Truth. At night, the firemen and the police were in charge of washing all traces of the assassination in that square with jets of water under pressure, leaving it untouched for the next morning.

So many years later, we still do not know where the orders came from. The Mexican president of those times, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, apparently requested the military presence in the plaza, but it was the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces who ordered the fire. All the documents of that slaughter burned or don’t appear. The Mexican president, Díaz Ordaz, has already died; his successor, Echevarría, says he doesn’t know anything. Only certain documents of the CIA, the FBI, the White House and the Pentagon seem to shed some light on the matter.





The 1968 coup in Panama

On October 11, 1968, there was a military coup against newly installed President Arnulfo Arias Madrid, beginning the period known as the Panamanian dictatorship which lasted 21 years.

Dr. Arias takes possession of the First Magistracy of the Country on October 1, 1968., as he had promised in his election campaign the first days of government is committed to straighten and morally restore the State Institutions. He manages to indict the National Guard forcing him to submit to the orders of the President of the Republic as the Institution's Chief Commander and takes other measures of control that affect the interests of the oligarchy displaced from political power.

On October 8, a resolution was issued by the Ministry of Government and Justice, which ordered transfer of ten elders and three captains. Among the first mentioned Florencio Flores, Federico Boyd, Amado Sanjur, Boris Martinez, Juan José H. Ramos, Juan B. Bernal, Víctor Mata, Carlos Martínez, Bolívar Rodríguez. On the 10th it was officially announced retirement of Bolivar Vallarino, commander of the National Guard, and José María Pinilla. The President of the Republic appoints Bolívar Urrutia commander in chief and Aristides Hassan second commander, Major Camilo Saavedra was appointed lieutenant colonel with functions of Executive Secretary of the Comandancia.

Lieutenant Colonel Omar Torrijos Herrera, until then General Secretary of the Comandancia, was appointed as a military attaché before the

governments of El Salvador and Guatemala, and an observer for Panama before Central American Defense Council (CONDECA). The Presidential Guard was left from that moment under command of Lieutenant Colonel Luís Carlos Díaz. As a result of these changes during the night of Friday, October 11, 1968, the National Guard commanders, seeing their interests and their hegemonic power in danger, and promoted by the displaced oligarchy, overthrew Dr. Arias through a coup d'état. and establish a Provisional Government Junta presided over by Lieutenant Colonel José M. Pinilla S. Dr. Arias, after learning that he had been overthrown, is transferred to a military base in the former Canal Zone. Then, Arias Madrid spoke to a radio station to ask for support and popular resistance, but in 45 minutes the coup leaders, led by Major Boris Néstor Martínez and Omar Torrijos, dominated the situation by seizing government facilities. The military also takes the facilities of Radio Soberana, located near Avenida Balboa. The residence and properties of Dr. Arias in Boquete were set on fire.

Later a moralizing campaign led by Martinez began, but came to an end on Monday, February 24, 1969, when he was sent by Torrijos to the United States, aboard a plane together with Colonels Federico Boyd and José Ramos and Major Humberto. Jiménez. Omar Torrijos took the reins of the “revolutionary process”, until he was killed on Friday, July 31, 1981, in an act of sabotage in the plane in which he was traveling on Cerro Marta, in the district of La Pintada, province of Coclé, according to testimony of the American John Perkins, who in those years worked for the CIA. The end date of the colony enclave was defined: Friday, December 31, 1999. Although these contributions are undeniable by the government that led, General Omar Torrijos Herrera gave way to certain social advances in the Central American

country, it can't be denied either that under his command many Panamanians suffered political persecution, exile, imprisonment, torture, repression until the homicide, as the leftist university leader Floyd Britton and disappearances as the Colombian Catholic priest Hector Gallego, although the names of the perpetrators are still unknown direct The revolutionary process of General Omar Torrijos Herrera ended with his death. When the General took steps towards the democratic opening in the country, his thought was to leave, together with the military forces, the political scene, and simply monitor and ensure that in Panama they would not commit the same irresponsible acts and corruption that still today they continue.

The participation of the military in Panamanian politics after 1968 must be divided into three very different parts: the Torrijos era of the revolutionary process, the democratic summer of Rubén Darío Paredes and the Noriegian era of the military dictatorship. The latter was characterized by collective abuse. The capricious imposition of Manuel Antonio Noriega and his associates would come to an end on Wednesday, December 20, 1989, the day of the 1989 US invasion of Panama.

