

VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE CASES OF MEXICO AND CURAÇAO

MASSACRE IN MEXICO. By ELENA PONIATOWSKA. Translated by HELEN R. LANE. (New York: Viking Press, 1975. Pp. 333. \$12.50.)

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, VIOLENCE, AND CHANGE: THE MAY MOVEMENT IN CURAÇAO. By WILLIAM A. ANDERSON and RUSSEL R. DYNES. (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1975. Pp. 175. \$12.50.)

While differing considerably in approach and in their level of political commitment, these studies of Mexico in 1968 and Curaçao in 1969 both illustrate a process in which social protest leads, not to mass revolution, but to limited violence, governmental repression, and eventual accommodation of some of the protestors' interests. *Massacre in Mexico*, first published in Spanish in 1971, provides striking photographs and 320 pages of eyewitness accounts of the military "massacre" of student demonstrators at the Plaza de Tlatelolco in Mexico City in October 1968. *Social Movements, Violence, and Change* deals with rioting and looting in May 1969 in Curaçao, which in effect criticized labor and racial policies of the government, led to two deaths and 322 arrests, and ultimately produced three legislative seats for a newly formed political party, the Liberation Front. Whereas Poniatowska's work is humanistic and politically committed, Anderson and Dynes concentrate on academic analysis, on what they call "the sociology of the human response to crisis" (p. ix). Contrasting in perspective, each well written and often engrossing, the volumes command attention because of the interest inherent in their subject matter. More importantly, however, they document processes in which revolutions did *not* occur, raising the central question of how repression and accommodation interact in differing contexts to limit the further escalation of violence.

Deftly, and with spare and Spartan prose, Anderson and Dynes deal with the issues of why the May Movement arose and what it produced. It occurred in the era of mass media, and its activists were certainly aware of events in Castro's Cuba and of the black power controversy in the United States. The three parliamentary representatives elected from the Liberation Front even wore the khaki dress associated with *fidelistas* revolutionaries in the 1960s. The North American sociologists making this study do not see major causation for the May Movement coming from these sources, however; neither communications media nor Communism can take the credit. Rather, like Father Hidalgo's revolt in Mexico, the May Movement was to aid nationals rather than foreigners, the less privileged rather than the more, people of color rather than the white elite.

Causation for the movement is traced to the overall and immediate historical context, to unfulfilled expectations, and to the influence of intellectuals. An intriguing background chapter neatly encapsulates the history of Curaçao, concentrating on ethnicity, the Shell refinery, and relations with the Nether-

lands, recounting such episodes as the early rise of what was the largest Jewish community in the Western Hemisphere and how oil tankers returning from Europe brought Thames and Seine river water to be used on the island's gardens. An unemployment rate of 20 percent in 1966 and a continuing bringing in of skilled workers and managers from outside the island rather than upgrading the situation of untrained black workers from Curaçao itself lay a foundation of grievances from which violent dissatisfactions flared. The case of Curaçao tends to confirm the role of high and unfulfilled expectations in sparking violence, as the dominant Democratic party of Curaçao had repeatedly made electoral promises to labor, raising the hopes of workers so high that frustration resulted when the promises continually failed to produce concrete results. Another spark to violence proved to be *Vitò*, a periodical reminiscent of *Iskra*, that consistently interpreted events so as to arouse collective action from the workers. Radical intellectuals once again stirred a process that they could only partially lead, a process with the eventual outcomes of which they would only partially agree; though far more limited in their effects on restructuring society, the role of the *Vitò* intellectuals calls to mind the early activity of Lenin or Mao.

The conclusions of Anderson and Dynes on the results of the May Movement demonstrate considerable balance in their perspectives. They see the movement as ultimately creating an "innovative political role" for labor, with the actions of radical leaders being crucial in this process (p. 92). After the May Movement, unions were able to negotiate better wage levels, the government created a new department of labor, and some of the social barriers against people of color fell away. In this context, violence is seen as a regular part of many processes of social change; even when dissidents do not win control of government, their demands may gain wider recognition and support from established parties and institutions. Paradoxically, the representatives from the Liberation Front even initially joined a coalition led by the Democratic party, the policies of which they had criticized so bitterly. Commenting on the initial, violent phases behind such events, governmental authorities and their intellectual spokesmen, like Thomas Hobbes, often have asserted that violence never succeeds, that it destroys life and property without achieving its perpetrators' objectives. But, leaving aside the more intricate and specific question of whether a particular set of historical outcomes is morally justified by a particular level of violence and destruction, it is clear that the May Movement, like urban rioting in the United States, called forth societal responses in some ways favorable to those who rioted.

It is a sign of the distinctiveness of Mexican politics that this general process operates there to a lesser extent. Governmental responses to student protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the Tlatelolco shootings and the depredations of the *halcones*, a setting loose of lower-class toughs on the sons and daughters of the more privileged. Luis Echeverría, the internal security minister in 1968 and president from 1970 to 1976, dialogued with students and cajoled them extensively, yet once again the impact of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was more rhetorical than substantive. Looking backward, and comparing elements of the *porfiriato* with the Mexico of the PRI, one is led

not only to reject propagandistic assertions of the vast changes coming from the Revolution of 1910, but even to wonder whether the massive violence after 1910 had any truly decisive impact.¹ Could it be that Mexican politics defy the “violence produces change” hypothesis, in part because the weight of the Indian and colonial past is so heavy or because external dependence on the United States has helped to establish a cohesive, adaptable but strictly limited form of pluralism in domestic affairs? In a context where the Mexican president still commands, where co-optation into his circle is still the way to power, official violence to “defend” the system has been the historical response of authorities to demands like those of the students for a wider sharing of power. Immediate, brutal suppression of potentially violent dissent, when coupled with an intricate, widely proclaimed defense of the existing order and with a rate of economic growth that allows many potential dissidents to be bought off, is enough to create a system in which modern Hobbesians have long taken pride.

Against the background of these underlying considerations, *Massacre in Mexico* presents a profoundly human and humanistic documentary. It creates sympathy for the student victims of the Tlatelolco massacre by almost casual references to a young woman with one ear shot off, or the horn that kept blowing in a red Datsun when another wounded girl collapsed over its steering wheel. It does so by reference to the father who died of a heart attack shortly after his only son was killed, or the six-year-old boy who went back to shake a fallen chum, dying himself before realizing that his friend was dead so that “the two tiny bodies were left lying on the pavement there, one on top of the other” (p. 238). Small vignettes capture the sardonic essence of events, as when bright red blood splattered on a woman’s blouse gradually turns to the color of coffee, or when a mother who witnessed the events at Tlatelolco compares them to the *Gunsmoke* episodes that she had seen on Mexican television.

Despite this essential humanism, and despite a lively style and the sensitive use of English in the translation, readers who want more analysis—who expect the book to be other than it is—will be disappointed. There is no overt unity in the welter of eyewitness reports, although continuity of a sort does arise in repeated references to corpses or to the bloody, mud-drenched, ownerless shoes that the participants found strewn throughout the Plaza of Tlatelolco. Much of the book contains the stuff of which emotional propaganda is made: the girl with her fingers shot off, the allegation that General Hernández Toledo was shot by his own men, the charge that most victims were shot in the back while running away. One exaggerated claim portrays the attack as “genocide” and the soldiers’ weapons as “so red-hot they could no longer hold them” (p. 216).

Massacre in Mexico strongly supports the student position, sometimes to the point of distortion. In the introduction, for example, Octavio Paz writes, with the lyricism one expects of a poet, that “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” (p. viii). Whereas a “fraternity” may have developed among the students similar to that inspiring the early insurrectionists of the French Revolution, a contemporary survey showed

that there was very little generalized support for the student strategy of confrontation. There was no general association by "the people" with the students of the kind that has retrospectively enshrined the revolutions of 1789 and 1910 in national halos. A survey conducted by Mexican political scientists between July and September 1968 showed that, while Mexican respondents believed that students did have an obligation to help the people as well as to study, this obligation had to be fulfilled without resort to violence. The survey indicated that a primary objective of the student movement of 1968, to "politicize" the mass of Mexican people, had not been fulfilled.² While sympathy was natural for the students killed in 1968 and in later confrontations, the subsequent absence of mass adherence to the student movement suggests that such sympathy did not come to extend to the confrontational strategy itself.

In Mexico, as in Curaçao, the position of unionized labor proved to be vital in the process of social change. While the caption for one of the striking photographs in *Massacre in Mexico* notes that a number of wealthy female students carted around leaflets and handbills in their fathers' cars, another caption claims that "the workers supported the Student Movement and demanded that their imprisoned leaders be freed." Notwithstanding this assertion, as a group, Mexican workers remained loyal to the government and the PRI. Like United States hard hats who reacted against the student militancy of the late 1960s, Mexican workers felt an underlying jealousy for the privileged status and the future earning power of the university elite. Neither the Mexican nor the United States cases exclude the possibility under other circumstances of the vaunted "worker-student alliance." It existed and had considerable impact, for instance, in the University Reform movement in Córdoba, Argentina in 1918.³ But the more recent position of workers does suggest that, where workers and intellectuals differ in their perceived status, class, and political interests, this separation tends to prevent social restructuring.

Because of a contrast in the context of events, the experience of the May Movement does not contradict this assumption. Skilled workers had been brought to Curaçao from the outside, and these foreign whites differed considerably from the indigenous blacks who served as stevedores and construction workers. It proved possible, therefore, for nationalist intellectuals to join with the native workers when the May Movement erupted over a wage dispute with a subsidiary of the Royal Dutch Shell Company. Workers and students were able to join together against apparently foreign elements of a different race and culture, but the alliance became less cohesive as the wage dispute was settled and the foreign menace seemed less acute.

Unlike Poniatowska, Anderson and Dynes go on to ask the essential Hobbesian questions: "Did some bloodshed and intimidation at this point in history prevent more later on? Did repression effectively stop a process that might have led to revolution?"⁴ The situation discussed in both volumes implicitly raises the feasibility of the old Roman maxim of eliminating the possibility of violent rebellion at the lowest possible level, a strategy then dependent upon the effective dispersal of troops and a fine road system to let legionnaires crush insurrection before it spread. For the May Movement, repression as well as

accommodation proved necessary. Anderson and Dynes conclude that “the inability of the under-manned police to enforce their authority facilitated the escalation of the violence,” that the failure to have sufficient force on hand initially encouraged “major looting and arson that would not abate until increased force was applied” (p. 79). The Tlatelolco encounter involved a far greater use of force, and killing, but it may also have ended a process of escalating protest that would have led to far greater violence if overwhelming governmental force had not been demonstrated at this point. In both Mexico and Curaçao, the long-term manner of dealing with dissidents was to absorb, to co-opt them and their demands in the ongoing political system, and in the structure of political parties, but in each case governmental force stopped the further escalation of violence and threats. Rather than producing revolution, romantic historiography, or even enduring heroes, the events in Mexico and Curaçao illustrate once again a familiar, but highly significant alternation of repression and accommodation in governmental responses to newly articulated demands.

FREDERICK C. TURNER
University of Connecticut

NOTES

1. See Lorenzo Meyer, “Desarrollo político y dependencia externa: México en el siglo XX,” in William P. Glade and Stanley R. Ross, eds., *Criticas constructivas del sistema político mexicano* (Austin, Texas: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1973). Meyer finds great continuity in Mexican politics, not only in external dependence on the United States but also in terms of Juan Linz’s model of authoritarianism as “the institutionalization of a limited pluralism” (p. 13).
2. A report of the survey can be found in Juan Manuel Cañibe, “El movimiento estudiantil y la opinión pública,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencia Política*, Año 16, Núm. 59 (enero-marzo 1970).
3. Richard J. Walter, *Student Politics in Argentina: The University Reform and Its Effects, 1918–1964* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 56–57.
4. After the enthronement of Charles II, whose tutor he had been, Hobbes looked back on the execution of Charles I and wrote, “Our late King, the best King perhaps that ever was, you know, was murdered, having been first persecuted by war, at the incitement of Presbyterian ministers; who are therefore guilty of the death of all that fell in that war; which were, I believe, in England, Scotland, and Ireland, near 100,000 persons. Had it not been much better that those seditious ministers, which were not perhaps 1000, had been all killed before they had preached?” Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth, or the Long Parliament*, ed. by Ferdinand Tönnies (2d ed., New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 95.