Showcasing the 'Land of Tomorrow': Mexico and the 1968 Olympics

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SHOWCASING THE ‘LAND OF TOMORROW’: MEXICO AND THE 1968 OLYMPICS*

A tourist arriving in Mexico City in the early summer of 1968 would have found the capital awash in color, an air of expectation and optimism everywhere palpable as the country finalized last-minute preparations for the Olympic Games, scheduled to commence that October. Yellow, blue, and pink banners framing a white dove of peace lit up major thoroughfares. Throughout the city, numerous commercial billboards had been replaced with photographs of cultural and physical activity related to the Games; in one corner, was the omnipresent peace dove. Other enormous images laced the skyline: caricatured line drawings of school children, a family portrait, anonymous faces in a crowd. “Everything is Possible in Peace,” the new billboards proclaimed in a multitude of languages—set against a background of hot pink and vibrant yellow. Along a designated “Route of Friendship” that extended across the southern part of the city, large abstract sculptures of brightly painted concrete by artists of international renown could be observed in various stages of completion. The country’s official logo for the Games—“MEXICO68”—whose evident Op Art influence was designed to evoke a moving, modernist feel, was omnipresent; so too were the hundreds of young edecanes (event hostesses), whose uniformed miniskirts and pantsuits were emblazoned with a graphic representation of the logo. The viewer could scarcely have avoided the sensation of a city, a country on the verge of something spectacular.

Today, however, the 1968 Mexican Olympics are generally remembered either for the tragic massacre of unarmed students on the eve of the Opening Ceremony or alternately, for the image of silent protest by U.S. black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at their awards ceremony five days into the

Games. Moreover, these memories tend not to overlap. For Mexicans, images of repression have overshadowed all other aspects, while for Americans the Olympics have been largely telescoped into a single representation of black-gloved defiance. Lost in this narrowing of historical memory is a sense of the exuberance as well as conflicts and challenges that marked Mexico’s staging of the Games. As the first “developing nation” to host an Olympics, Mexico faced a series of obstacles that were not only material but, above all, discursive. Nothing less than the reputation of the “Mexican Miracle” itself was at stake in the successful staging of the Games.

Despite a growing body of literature on the 1968 student movement, researchers have only recently begun to assess the significance of 1968 in Mexico from a broader historical perspective. Arguably, the historiography of this crucial period has been distorted by a near single-minded focus on the student movement itself and, in particular, the massacre of unarmed protesters at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Tlatelolco) on the eve of the Games. The tendency toward a testimonial approach, moreover, has often meant that there is much memory but little objective historical analysis of this period. This historiography is beginning to change, especially as new archival sources become available. One of the important components of this shift is a growing appreciation for the centrality of the XIX Olympiad, which ironically is often overlooked while researchers seek to unravel the politics and power plays behind the dynamic of student protest and government response.

that culminated in the massacre at Tlatelolco. A central question many historical treatments of the period dismiss, for example, is whether planning for the Olympics generated popular support within Mexico. Because of the outbreak of the student movement, the implicit assumption (generally perpetuated by treatments of the period) has been that the public viewed the Olympics as excessive and wasteful. The question of public support, however, remains one of the crucial and least understood aspects of this period; it strikes at the heart of the deeper problematic concerning the nature of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional’s (PRI) hegemony during the Mexican Miracle.

Of those who have begun to write about 1968 from a broader historical perspective, the work of Ariel Rodríguez Kuri is exemplary. Attuned to the geopolitical context of the Cold War, on one hand, and an appreciation for the local dynamics of urban planning, on the other, Rodríguez Kuri’s recent work on the politics behind the planning and execution of the 1968 Olympics marks an important contribution to the new historiography. This essay looks to build on Rodríguez Kuri’s work, in particular his discussion of the Cultural Olympiad, the year-long arts and performance program initiated in January 1968, which he argues “would warm up the city, would prepare the city for the two weeks in October” (i.e., when the sporting competitions transpired). The present analysis departs from Rodríguez Kuri, however, in one important respect: his insistence that the significance of preparations for the Games (and in particular, of the Cultural Olympiad) be interpreted strictly within the bounds of the Mexican imaginary. He writes: “With the Cultural Olympiad there is no promotional or celebratory trip, nor is this a manifestation of the desire—always hysterical, Freud dixit—to convince the others... There was something of this is what we are; but there was much more of they are, they’re coming.” For Rodríguez Kuri, in other words, the aesthetic and discursive aspects of preparation for the Olympics suggested a matured modernity, one no longer driven by the exigency of convincing the “other” (here, especially, meaning the United States) of Mexican capabilities. According to his analysis, under the able direction of Pedro Ramírez Vázquez (who became Chairman after 1966 of the Mexican Olympic Committee [MOC] and who was one of Mexico’s leading archi-

2 Volpi, La Imaginación y el poder is one of the few works to treat this important aspect of the decade.
5 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
tects of the period), the celebration of the Olympics reflected a fundamental confidence in the nation’s material accomplishments and sense of cosmopolitan belonging. Unlike the nation’s participation in past World’s Fairs or the staging of the 1910 Centennial celebrations, Rodríguez Kuri argues, planning for the 1968 Olympics was carried out in a pragmatic, moderated manner that reflected a conscious assessment of the nation’s resource limitations.6 “This moderation is notable,” he concludes in a recent article, “and offered an alternative history to the nationalist (and neurotic) obsession of convincing the others. The Mexican Olympic idea wished to be more ecumenical than nationalist, more relaxed and lucid than affirmative.”7

While I find Rodríguez Kuri’s analysis refreshing and convincing in many respects, I believe that he is too quick to downplay an intrinsic aspect of Mexican reality that impacted both planning for and, especially reception of, the 1968 Olympics: Mexico’s “underdevelopment” was (and remains) an inseparable discursive component to perceptions of the nation abroad. This was especially true during the 1960s, when Mexico held out for many the hope of fulfilling modernization theory’s expectations that third world countries would advance along the spectrum of democratic, capitalist development by allying with the United States.8 Even if, as Rodríguez Kuri wishes to argue, the aesthetic component to planning and promotion of the Olympics indeed reflected a transcendence of past insecurities, it was inevitable that Mexico would be judged on the terms of its “underdevelopment.” I wish to argue that the organizers of the 1968 Games were well aware of this fact and specifically sought to control the terms of discourse for foreign consumption. This became an explicit and intrinsic aspect of planning for the Games.

This essay focuses on the question of what may be termed Mexico’s burden of representation. What I am interested in examining is the impact that foreign assumptions and stereotypes of Mexico’s underdevelopment played in the selection, organization and promotion of the Olympics.9 What I wish to demonstrate is how the Mexican Organizing Committee, through various aspects of visual and performative culture and in public discourse,

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7 “Hacia México 68,” p. 68.
9 The question of how preparations were gauged and received by a domestic audience is crucial and will be examined here in part. However, a more thorough investigation on this point is still necessary.
assembled a coherent marketing approach that leveraged the nation’s perceived strengths while simultaneously reconfiguring (and erasing) its alleged weaknesses. In particular, I focus on the promotion of the Cultural Olympiad, the year-long organization of artistic, musical, theatrical, and other cultural events that framed the staging of the Games themselves. By examining a series of discourses associated with these events, I wish to demonstrate how the Cultural Olympiad played a central role in fomenting popular support for the staging of the Games within Mexico, while serving an eminently important function in shaping perceptions abroad regarding the “appropriateness” of Mexico to serve as host. This approach was essential given the mixed support and initial outright discontent with the selection of Mexico as host site, as expressed abroad in various guises in the years leading up to the Olympics and manifested at different moments within Mexico as well.

A unifying theme of these discourses is that they promoted the idea of Mexico as a land beyond racial and domestic conflict, a “harmonizing nation” transcendent of internal divisions. In a world increasingly characterized by political and social divisions, Mexico was marketed as an embodiment of the highest ideals of Olympic harmony. At the same time, these efforts encompassed a manifest anxiety (despite Rodríguez Kuri’s protestations to the contrary) to demonstrate that the nation was no longer a “land of mañana” but the “land of tomorrow,” one truly capable of handling its Olympic responsibilities.10

IN THE AFTERMATH OF WINNING THE OLYMPIC BID

Contrary to expectations, Mexico City was the surprise victor in the vote by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) at Baden-Baden, Germany at its October 1963 meeting.11 Although a fuller accounting of the decision-making process still awaits historians, the records left behind by Avery Brundage (President of the IOC) are extremely helpful in understanding some of the important factors that impacted the final vote. “Both Detroit and Lyon were handicapped by NATO actions barring East Germans,” Brundage


11 The meeting was originally to be held in Nairobi, Kenya but was changed at the last moment due to conflict over South Africa’s participation. Mexico won on the first round of voting, with the final tally being: Mexico (30); Detroit (14); Lyon (12); Buenos Aires (2). Press reports later suggested that Mexico received all eight votes from the Soviet Bloc, an allegation yet to be verified. For recent historical treatments see Rodríguez Kuri, “El otro 68”; Kevin Witherspoon, “Protest at the Pyramid: the 1968 Mexico City Olympics and the Politicization of the Olympic Games” (Ph.D. Diss., Florida State University, 2003).
later reflected in a series of confidential observations to himself in the wake of the decision. 12 “The peculiar United States foreign policy for the last thirty years, which has lavishly spread hundreds of millions of dollars throughout the world but has left a lack of confidence abroad in the United States, did not help Detroit,” he added. 13 Brundage’s evident resentment at the ramifications of the Cold War on sport was juxtaposed with his early and outright embrace of Mexico City as his preferred choice for the 1968 Games. This bias was revealed, for example, in a private letter following the vote to José de Jesús Clark Flores, a Mexican member of the IOC since 1952 and with whom Brundage had a close working relationship. “I may say that there are many who are still stunned . . . at the success of Mexico,” Brundage wrote, adding: “I understand that I have been criticized in certain quarters for leaning too far in the direction of Popocatepetl, but I don’t think any harm was done.” 14 In the wake of the decision, Mexicans would soon grapple with the significance of their unprecedented achievement.

Mexicans openly celebrated their win at Baden-Baden, but the euphoria of victory was short lived. For the next three years the country was increasingly wracked by political controversy related to a central question many inside and outside of Mexico were now asking: Was it realistic—both economically and politically—for a developing nation to stage an Olympics? Because of his direct association as host of the Games, it is easy to presume that President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-70) was an ardent supporter of the bid from the start. In fact, as a fiscal conservative just the opposite was the case. Terrance McGarry, a United Press International correspondent who also wrote for the English-language newspaper, The News, noted that Díaz Ordaz “felt he had been saddled with [the Olympic responsibility] by the previous administration.” 15 Winning the bid had been the obsession of former President Adolfo López Mateos (1958-64), a populist in economic and political


14 Avery Brundage to General Clark, 13 November 1963, ABC, Box 52, “Gen. José de J. Clark Flores, 1962-1965.” Popocatepetl, of course, is a reference to Mexico’s famed snow-capped volcano, once clearly visible from the capital.

matters and an avid athlete besides. For López Mateos—who successfully angled to become Chairman of the Mexican Organizing Committee shortly after he finished his term as president—Japan’s massive investment of some 2.7 billion dollars to refurbish Tokyo in preparation for the 1964 Games was a model Mexico might emulate. This brash vision of leveraging the Olympics to highlight Mexico’s developmental prowess, however, threatened to reopen latent political divisions over national development priorities.16 “Mexico is clearly not in a condition to buy prestige at such a price,” the respected left-wing newsmagazine *Siempre!* editorialized at one point, in a clear indication of mounting dissent and concern over costs.17

There was a second question which also surfaced throughout the foreign press as the debate over preparations intensified. Though generally worded in coded language, the implicit ethnocentrism was nevertheless transparent. Could Mexico, the “land of mañana,” be counted on to organize an international event of such vast proportions? This was reflected, for instance, in an editorial appearing in the *Detroit News* in early 1965 criticizing Mexico’s “failure to hustle and bustle over the blessed event,” thus barely hiding a subtext that the country’s purportedly entrenched mañana attitude remained a liability.18 Delays in construction (tied to the debate over financing and political disputes between the MOC and the Díaz Ordaz administration) also helped rekindle earlier concerns regarding the alleged dangers that Mexico City’s altitude (7,415 ft.) might have on athletes, concerns that had nearly doomed the country’s chances in 1963. “At least half a year is needed to adapt to the oxygen-poor air,” Copenhagen’s *Extra Bladet* bemoaned, suggesting how “thin air” itself had become a metonym for underdevelopment.19 As rumors circulated abroad that Mexico might bow out, Art Lentz, executive secretary of the U.S. Olympic Committee, optimistically told the press: “We could end up with the games right back here in the U.S.”20

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16 These divisions were exposed in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, when former President Lázaro Cárdenas briefly headed a reformist political movement, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN), which challenged the PRI’s capitalist-oriented development strategy. Following Cárdenas’s endorsement of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz as presidential candidate the MLN lost its political compass; nevertheless the reverberations on political culture in Mexico during the 1960s were substantial. See Carlos Maciel, *El Movimiento de Liberación Nacional: Vicisitudes y aspiraciones* (Mexico: University of Sinaloa, 1990).

17 Quoted in McGarry, “Real Nitty-Gritty.”


20 Waldmeir, “Mexico Lagging.”
What was supposed to have been a golden opportunity to showcase the “new Mexico” threatened instead to divide the body politic and embarrass the nation’s leadership precisely at its moment of developmental glory.\(^{21}\)

Two years after winning the bid, there were few material signs of advancement to quell the mounting chorus of foreign and domestic critics. At one point, according to a Mexican investigative report, by late summer 1965 President Díaz Ordaz was ready to “throw in the towel” altogether.\(^{22}\) Although Brundage himself remained optimistic, the political stalemate between the MOC and the government was affecting morale both in and outside the country. By the following summer, Mexico faced not only the pressing reality of financial restraints but the more abstract problem of credibility. If the internal squabbling was not resolved shortly, the country appeared poised to forfeit playing host altogether, thus very likely dealing a blow to the nation’s sense of purpose and its political credibility abroad.

The sought-for resolution came in an unanticipated fashion. In late June 1966, López Mateos announced that he was stepping down as Chairman of the MOC. The official explanation was an urgent health concern, though others suspected clashes with Díaz Ordaz over costs had also played a role.\(^{23}\) Shortly thereafter, on July 16th, President Díaz Ordaz announced the appointment of Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, at the time Vice President in charge of construction within the MOC, to head the Organizing Committee. Ramírez Vázquez was neither a sports enthusiast, nor did he have any direct links to the International Olympic movement. Yet, as Ariel Rodríguez Kuri writes, he was a “man of the system” whose insider-outsider status (he was arguably the nation’s most prominent architect) was precisely what Díaz Ordaz believed was necessary to shake up the Organizing Committee.\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Zolov, “Discovering a Land ‘Mysterious and Obvious,’” p. 235. A broader context for this controversy was the mounting dispute over the very nature of Mexico City’s urban planning, epitomized by the political wrangling (then heating up) over a proposed subway system. See Diane Davis, Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), chapter 5.

\(^{22}\) Horacio Quiñones, Buro de Investigación Política, 23 August 1965. Located in ABC, Box 139, “Mexico: Newspaper Clippings.” According to the informant cited by Quiñones, on learning of the estimated costs for the Olympics Díaz Ordaz reportedly stated: “Señores, si esto es lo que nos cuestan las olímpiadas, tiro el arpa.”

\(^{23}\) McGarry, “Real Nitty-Gritty.” López Mateos suffered from migraine headaches throughout his presidency. An operation in July, 1966 revealed he had seven cerebral aneurysms. Although he survived, over the next three years he gradually lost control over his body and consciousness. He died on September 22, 1969, “ignorant of the silence and pain of his country” and the outcome of the Olympic Games he had so avidly pursued. (Krauze, Biography of Power, p. 664.)

\(^{24}\) Rodríguez Kuri, “Hacia México 68,” p. 47. Ramírez Vázquez was an architect of considerable national and international renown. His résumé included the winning design for low-cost rural school buildings and numerous government commissioned projects, including the building that housed the Secretary of Labor and the acclaimed Museum of Anthropology and History. In 1962 his firm won the bid
Barely a week after the announcement, Avery Brundage sent Ramírez Vázquez a letter emphasizing the urgency of the image problem:

Unfortunately, because of the fact that all problems have not yet been settled and because of the altitude, there has been considerable unfavorable publicity. It is harmful both to Mexico and to the Olympic Movement. Journalists, as you know, are always seeking sensation and something to criticize adversely. The best answer is constructive action on the part of the Organizing Committee.25

In a press conference shortly afterward, Ramírez Vázquez announced in unequivocal terms that Mexico would stage an Olympics “that was not onerous for the country. . . . We will do nothing that cannot be fully justified in terms of its social utility in the life and development of our country.”26 Hence forward, the idea of an “Olympics on the cheap” took hold, with planning shifted away from Adolfo López Mateos’ push for expenditure, toward an emphasis on efficiency, utility and display that would build upon the nation’s inherent cultural advantages and extant infrastructure without forcing Mexico to compete with the example set by Japan.27 Brundage himself was by then advocating as much, urging the Mexicans not to view the Olympics as “a competition in spending money” and to “stage the Games in a Mexican manner.”28 Under the direction of Rámirez Vázquez, planning embraced an emphasis on pragmatism marked by recognition of the country’s—and the city’s—resources as well as limitations. The requirements of the Olympics, writes Rodríguez Kuri, were “adopted to the city and not the other way around.”29 In the end, the country’s $176 million investment amounted to a fraction of that expended by Japan on to construct a massive sports stadium funded by Emilio Azcárraga Jr., son of the media magnate; the Estadio Azteca was inaugurated in May 1966 and played a key role in Olympic sport infrastructure during the Games. For a discussion of the stadium politics see Claudia Fernández and Andrew Paxman, El tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2000).

25 Avery Brundage to Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, 24 July 1966, ABC, Box 178, “Organizing Committee, 1966.”

26 Manuel Seyde, “‘Una Olimpiada no Onerosa para el País y Ningún Gasto sin una Plena Justificación Social,’ Dijo Ramírez Vázquez en su Discurso Ayer,” Excelsiór, 4 November 1966. Located in ABC, Box 139, “Newspaper Clippings.” Two months later Mexico City’s once all-powerful mayor, Ernesto Uruchurtu, was forced to resign. While Uruchurtu’s demise was already underway by that point, his opposition to plans for a costly subway system and accelerated urban development in general had brought him into direct conflict with President Díaz Ordaz. By simultaneously designating replacements for López Mateos and Uruchurtu (Alfonso Corona del Rosal, a long-time ally of Díaz Ordaz, became the new Regent) President Díaz Ordaz was able to regain control of the debate over planning for the Olympics. (See Davis, Urban Leviathan, p. 172.)


28 Avery Brundage to Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, 1 November 1966.

the 1964 Games. Still, it was hardly an insignificant sum for a nation with pressing rural and urban development needs. By the eve of the Games, the question of expenditure and government priorities would indeed reemerge as a rallying point for the student-led protests that had erupted. For now, however, the country had the appearance of coming together and, along with the outside world, shared in a growing sense of pride and exhilaration at the prospect of a truly different Olympics experience in the making.

ORGANIZING A CULTURAL OLYMPIAD

One of Ramírez Vázquez’s first acts as Chairman was to announce that the MOC would launch an ambitious, broad-based cultural and visual arts program, which came to be known as the Cultural Olympiad. This program was integral to Ramírez Vázquez’s overall strategy designed to reenergize Mexican domestic support for the Olympics following nearly three years of divisions and doubts. As Rodríguez Kuri argues, the Cultural Olympiad would “redistribute the expectations, responsibilities, and objectives for the Olympic year.”

At the same time, this “parallel Olympics,” as it was also called, would also serve the equally important function of shifting the terms of debate abroad. The latter challenge was epitomized by the fallout from a flippant remark made by a member of the Mexican Organizing Committee in 1964 following inspection of the Tokyo Olympics: “We are not sure we can guarantee the organization of these games. But the weather will be nice.”

The remark was costly precisely because it resonated with racialized foreign stereotypes of Mexico lying in the “disorganized South,” despite the erroneousness of that assumption (Mexico City being anything but “tropical”). Brundage explicitly acknowledged this image problem in public remarks to President Díaz Ordaz at a meeting of the IOC held in the fall of 1966 in Mexico City: “[A]s you know, sometimes Mexico has had the reputation of being the land of mañana. I kept time with my watch and everything was perfectly coordinated and happened just as [you] had programmed it. We are not going to worry about the Olympic Games.” In follow-up let-
ters to Ramírez Vázquez, however, Brundage repeatedly underscored “the necessity of constructive publicity.”33 “Mexico can lose all the intangible benefits which come from staging the Olympic Games if the publicity is not favorable,”34 he wrote.

Although the importance of having a cultural component to the Games was highlighted in the Olympic Charter, Mexico was in fact the first host country to turn an emphasis on culture into an integral aspect of the Games themselves. In the end, the Cultural Olympiad program involved twenty separate spheres of activities (mirroring the twenty athletic contests) and ranged from exhibitions of modern scientific advances, to a graphic arts program, film, dance, music, poetry, and theater productions. There was also a “youth camp” and an international sculpture competition.35 Of course, the Mexican state had vast experience in organizing cultural events, dating to state sponsorship of the arts in the 1920s. Working on a tight budget, the MOC in the end coordinated a diverse array of presentations that incorporated national and international artists and performers. The final program totaled some 1,500 events (over 550 of which were dispersed throughout the republic) and involved the participation of many of the country’s leading artists and intellectuals, not to mention the hundreds of students, journalists, and state bureaucrats who came to play a role. “The goal,” explained an article in Saturday Review, was to foment a “total ‘cultural presence,’ [through a] program expressing the theme of peace in a world ‘where the old are still burying the young.’”36

There were five central discursive components to the Cultural Olympiad, which I wish to examine below. First, was the iconic use of the peace dove and other references to Mexico’s self-described role as “peacemaker” in international affairs. Second, was the elaboration and dissemination of an official logo that conveyed a cosmopolitan, “forward-looking” sensibility via an Op-Art aesthetic. Third, was the highlighted presence of women in central aspects of Olympic promotion, thus reflecting both the “pretty face” of Mexico but also its “modern” values (i.e., emphasizing women’s upward social mobility). Fourth, was the elaborate staging of folkloric performances

33 Avery Brundage to Ramírez Vázquez, 1 November 1966.
34 Avery Brundage to Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, 28 November 1966, ABC, Box 178, “Organizing Committee, 1966.”
culminating in the arrival of the Olympic flame at the pre-Hispanic site of Teotihuacan), which served to highlight Mexico’s cultural “authenticity” while underscoring the nation’s unique commitment to racial and ethnic harmony. Finally, there was the liberal use of bright colors in general, thus reinforcing a popular association with Mexico as a “festive and exotic land.” As part of a broader strategy to rally enthusiasm for the Games abroad and at home, these components became key reference points in public discourse. Together, they comprised a vision of Mexico in which the nation was perceived as a land where, on one hand, international traditions demonstrated profound tolerance of political difference while, on the other, indigenous cultural traditions were framed by and interfaced seamlessly with a forward-looking embrace of modern values. In short, these discursive components worked to reorient domestic and foreign opinion away from questioning the practicality of Mexico as host toward viewing Mexico as the ideal setting for a celebration of universal values during a moment of international discord.

The first discourse, the promotion of a direct association between Mexico and world peace, was without question the most pervasive. Mexico’s boasted “independent position with respect to the major world powers,” despite its rhetorical aspects, had played an important, if not decisive, role in the IOC’s Baden-Baden decision in 1963. In a world characterized by superpower rivalry where the “third world,” and Latin America in particular, were increasingly portrayed by the media as points of global conflagration, Mexico had managed to navigate around the major ideological fault lines of the Cold War, most notably with regard to revolutionary Cuba. Both former President López Mateos and current President Díaz Ordaz invoked this stance often; Mexico as “peace maker” readily became a leitmotif for the Games. As *Excélsior*, the nation’s leading newspaper, editorialized in reference to Ramírez Vázquez’s plans, the cultural element “will carry to all nations a true reflection of the spirit of Mexico, which aspires to the elevation, harmony, and balance of humankind, [and] projects [those aspirations] toward international understanding and collaboration, peace and justice.” One example of how this discourse was promoted internationally

was in the MOC’s commissioning of an ambitious documentary film project titled *La Paz* that would explore “peace” in its biological, anthropological, psychological, historical, and sociological dimensions. Significantly, an internal letter articulating the rationale for funding the film underscored that the subject matter was “very in line with the norms of fraternity and peace that have distinguished Mexico’s actions internationally.”

The most prominent manifestation of this discourse, however, was the universal display of the silhouetted white dove of peace, which became a central icon of the graphics arts program more broadly. Rámirez Vázquez later recounted the icon’s origins in the organization of “a contest to come up with a dove design that would symbolize peace without resembling the Holy Spirit or the one done by Picasso.” The simple yet elegant final design was meant to reflect the “fraternal coexistence among all peoples of the world.” In short time, it became featured in virtually all aspects of official promotion for the Games. As a later commemorative volume describes:

> The symbol of peace became a constant image along principal thoroughfares, as well as along wide tree-lined avenues, narrow streets, residential areas and in working-class communities. Giant plastic sheets with the white figure of the dove of peace superimposed on rose, yellow, green or blue backgrounds also graced Olympic installations. Complementing a similar campaign of billboard advertising, tens of thousands of stickers bearing the symbol of peace were placed in display windows and business establishments, in study areas and on transportation media. Mexico City was covered by symbols that accentuated both the universal desire for greater understanding among all peoples and the underlying objective that constituted the spirit of the Games.

In conjunction with this overt display was the elaboration of an official motto for the Olympics: “Todo es posible en la paz,” (Everything is Possible in Peace), which found its way onto billboards and numerous other spaces. It was a phrase that Mexicans undoubtedly identified with former President Benito Juárez’s revered statement, “El respecto al derecho ajeno es la paz” (Respect for the rights of others is peace), and which formed the basis for the nation’s celebrated non-interventionist stance. Mexico’s histor-

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41 Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda to Lic. Don Hugo B. Margain, 10 September 1966, COI, Gallery 7, Box 41, Folder 121, AGN. Among the prominent (and, interestingly, left-wing) figures that eventually collaborated were Pete Seeger and Dalton Trumbo.


A second component of official discourse was the creation and dissemination of the Olympic logo itself, a psychedelic, Op Art image meant to invoke the nation’s indigenous cultural heritage while epitomizing Mexico’s cosmopolitan aspirations. As an internal memorandum discussed in reference to the graphics arts program in general (and to the official logo in particular), images used to promote the Olympics should “spring forth from

needs and express the grave uncertainties of our epoch, based in Mexico’s origins, customs and ways of being and that maintain, at the same time, consistency and uniformity. Ostensibly rooted in Huichol indigenous design, yet at the same time clearly influenced by the avant-garde Op Art aesthetic then in vogue, the MEXICO68 logo achieved a truly unique fusion of cultural sensibilities. Even today, the image retains much of its original resonance and invokes the vibrant optimism of an earlier era. Ironically, given the significance of the image for Mexico’s self-representation, the final design of the logo was created by two foreign graphic artists: Lance Wyman, of the United States, and Peter Murdoch, his British associate. Their participation had resulted from an invitation by Eduardo Terrazas, who headed the Graphic Arts Program for the Cultural Olympics, to join in a design contest for an Olympic logo sponsored by the MOC. The fact that non-Mexicans had been invited to the design competition was a clear indication of the urgency for new perspectives that would help break through the tired stereotypes by which Mexico was traditionally labeled.

Arriving in Mexico for the first time, Wyman recalled how he and Murdoch “were given free reign” in terms of ideas. “The only thing I remember as a guideline was the sleeping man with the sombrero did not properly represent Mexico,” he later recalled. Indeed, Rámirez Vázquez justified the design program by arguing that publicity needed to go beyond the “charro and all that, because that’s typical, it’s picturesque, but it doesn’t convey confidence as far as a capacity for organization.” Clearly, the logo needed to promote the cosmopolitan, “Mexico of tomorrow” not the sleepy image of the “Mexico of mañana.” For the next eleven days Wyman and Murdoch struggled with different concepts, constantly returning to the streets, markets and, in particular, to the new Museum of Anthropology and History to garner ideas. “We wanted something that would clearly relate the Olympic games to Mexico,” Wyman explained to a reporter at the time. “One way of doing this would be to use a recognizable element such as the Aztec calendar, or typical Mexican folk art forms.” But that would have grounded the final outcome in a folkloric element at the expense of highlighting the modern connotations of hosting the Games. Wyman later recalled that they were “starting to sense panic” when suddenly the design came to him: “I hit on the idea of generating the 68 number forms from the geometry of the five Olympic rings. From there I developed the letter forms of MEXICO and the

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46 “Departamento de Ornato Urbano,” n.d., COI, Gallery 7, Box 41, Folder 27, AGN.
47 Lance Wyman, 16 October 2001 (email communication with author).
logo was born.” What emerged would be both quintessentially modern yet rooted in Mexican visual tradition:

The 5 rings to the 68 to the MEXICO’68 was a very natural progression that was preceded and influenced by many visits to the Museum of Anthropology [sic] to study Mexican pre-Columbian design and Mexican folk art, by taking in the vitality and aesthetic of the Mexican markets, and by the influence of ‘Op’ art and the powerful work of Bridget Riley and [Victor] Vasarely.

A writer would later describe the visual impact of his ideas as “Quetzalcoatl doing the Op Art twist.”

50 Lance Wyman, 16 October 2001 (email communication with author). Curiously, Ramírez Vázquez recalls the evolution of this graphic quite differently and claims that it was his insight to draw the connection between Huichol design and Op Art. See Rivera Conde, “El Diseño en la XIX Olimpiada,” p. 28.

51 Lance Wyman, 16 October 2001 (email communication with author).

Asked recently to reflect on the impact of his designs on foreigners’ perceptions of the Games, Wyman described the role of the graphic arts program in terms that directly reflected Rámirez Vázquez’s own stated objectives: “I suspect the logo and the entire design program gave a sense of being organized and dealing with the responsibilities of hosting the games despite some of the difficult things that went down during the preparations.”

At the same time, a third discursive component of the Cultural Olympiad focused precisely on the centrality of “folklore” and “cultural heritage.” In announcing the cultural program, Ramírez Vázquez had envisioned an equal celebration of “folkloric” and “modern” aesthetic sensibilities, thereby underscoring and simultaneously validating the composite nature of humanity in an era of rapid modernization. To this end, each nation would be asked to bring “jointly with their athletic delegations” two works of art: “one representative of any one of its brilliant cultural stages of the past; the other, the best of its contemporary art.” The sum total of these contributions would provide nothing less than “an overall view of universal art, and, through it, of both man himself and the footprints he has left on the sands of time.”

Arguably, however, the open celebration of traditional cultural practices served to draw attention to the modernity of Mexico by framing those practices within carefully scripted performances that largely catered to a paying audience of foreign visitors. Thus in practice the Cultural Olympics’ emphasis on display contributed to a reification of the “traditional” as something utterly distinct from the “modern,” an exotic other to be admired for its “authenticity” at a moment when the tide of capitalist modernization was transforming the planet.

An especially important component of this approach was the performance by folkloric dance troupes. In Mexico, dancers were brought to the capital to “make the entire country feel that it has a participation in the Olympic Games and . . . [to] allow us to show our visitors the full scope of our popular traditions.” Ramírez Vázquez announced that participating nations would also be invited to send their own dance groups to perform:

> These events will not only help to make all our respective traditions better known by the others, but it will also make the participants in the athletic

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54 Report by Mr. Pedro Ramírez Vázquez to the Executive Board of the IOC, Mexico City, 22 October 1966, 2, ABC, Box 82, “Meeting of Executive Board, Mexico City, October 22, 1966.”
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
events feel the warmth of their presence with their own native customs, costumes, and popular art, helping to keep their morale and their spirits high, which in turn will undoubtedly lead them to better performances on track and field.\footnote{Ibid.}

Newspaper commentary following the announcement applauded the opportunity to showcase Mexico’s folkloric traditions. “The sentiment, color, rhythm, and originality of our regional dances . . . will give an accurate projection of the immortal side of Mexico,”\footnote{Gustavo Rivera, “Cancha,” \textit{Novedades}, 4 November 1966. Located in ABC, Box 139, “Mexico: Newspaper Clippings.” The original Spanish reads: “a dar una proyección real del Mexico inmortal . . . una fiel imagen de lo nuestro.”} one paper editorialized. Mexico’s famed Ballet Folklórico—which Brundage once described as “a spectacular advertisement that could not be improved, for your country”\footnote{Avery Brundage to Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, 1 April 1967, ABC, Box 178, “Organizing Committee, 1967.” The Cultural Olympiad’s year-long schedule was inaugurated on 19 January 1968 with a performance of the specially choreographed “Ballet of the Five Continents,” directed by Amalia Hernández (founder and artistic director of Mexico’s famed “Ballet Folklórico”) and with music by Mexican composer, Carlos Chávez. For a discussion of the Ballet Folklórico’s role in Mexican promotion abroad see Zolov, “Discovering a Land ‘Mysterious and Obvious.’”}—was envisioned playing a special role through the creation of a “Ballet of the Five Continents,” to be choreographed by Amalia Hernández (Director of the Ballet Folklórico). The celebration of national “folk cultures” thus not only highlighted Mexico’s commitment to the broader theme of the Olympics as a peaceful meeting of humanity, but reinforced an image of Mexico for itself and, especially, for the world as a cosmopolitan yet culturally integrative nation-state. As a commemorative volume produced by the Mexican Organizing Committee later emphasized: “Folklore, a common heritage, implies community. It can exist only in a harmonious, stable, society, one in which life has a meaning and the world a sense of order.”\footnote{Comité Organizador, \textit{México 68}, vol. 2, p. 419.}

These stage-managed displays of “folklore” were also an implicit response to the racialized assumptions of Mexican backwardness. They afforded an opportunity to frame the nation’s “Indian” (read darker) characteristics as safely contained within the staged celebrations of “heritage,” while the “modern” (read whiter) characteristics were openly celebrated as the forward-looking embodiment of a new cosmopolitanism.

Perhaps the supreme reflection of this notion was in the symbolic reenactment of the meeting of Old and New Worlds staged through the arrival of the Olympic flame. Although organizers dismissed the fact that the Opening Ceremony fell on the “Día de la Raza” (Columbus Day) as mere coinci-
dence, the importance of the date could hardly be overlooked.\textsuperscript{61} The flame itself traversed the same route traveled by Hernándo Cortés (via the port of Veracruz), and was carefully timed to arrive the night before the Opening Ceremony (October 11th) at the ancient city of Teotihuacan, where “twenty thousand spectators watched in awe [as] three thousand dancers . . . revived the ceremony of the ‘New Fire’—a ritual performed by ancient Mexicans every 52 years.”\textsuperscript{62} The symbolism of this carefully choreographed spectacle conveyed a clear rewriting of the conquest itself: Erased was the violence of subjugation in order to highlight the nation’s “heritage,” and the birth of the mestizo as the harmonious new subject of this meeting of two distinct worlds. Thus, “race” was depoliticized and transformed into a celebration of cultural difference and syncretism. In turn, the lived presence of the nation’s indigenous was conflated into an imaginary narrative of primordial essence, erasing (at least in public discourse) the lived reality of rural impoverishment and conflict.

A fourth discursive component was delivered through images of the “liberated” Mexican woman. Many foreigners writing about Mexico still regarded the country as a \textit{machista} society, a place where middle-class women were routinely denied access to social mobility by men who “throw up invisible walls to keep [them] quietly at home, away from the dangers and achievements of the competitive world.”\textsuperscript{63} This machismo was directly associated with traditional values seen to be rooted in a “backward” Spanish culture. Such images of female second-class citizenry clearly contradicted a discourse of the modernizing nation; highlighting the new, “modern” role of women in Mexican society thus became part of the broader promotional campaign of the Olympics. One example of how this transpired was in the realm of fashion, namely the required uniforms for the 1,170 event hostesses (edecanes) recruited and specially trained to greet visitors, the majority of whom were evidently young women. The idea in designing these uniforms, as Ramírez Vázquez later explained, was to create a style that “looks good on a girl who’s chubby, or one who’s skinny, or tall . . . that will identify [her], so that all the world will recognize that, well, she is an edecan.”\textsuperscript{64} American reporters (overwhelmingly male) certainly noticed the

\textsuperscript{61} Rodríguez Kuri, “Hacia México 68.”

\textsuperscript{62} Comité Organizador, \textit{Mexico 68}, vol. 4, p. 627. The original budget estimate for costs involving the flame ceremony was 620,000.00-700,000.00 pesos. The final cost, however, was twice that amount: 1,403,834.93 pesos. (“Festival en Teotihuacan para recibir la Antorcha Olímpica,” 31 October 1967, COI, Gallery 7, Box 41, Folder 13, AGN; “Memorandum,” 25 October 1968, COI, Gallery 7, Box 41, Folder 354(1), AGN.)

\textsuperscript{63} Allen Rankin, “Born to Dance,” \textit{Reader’s Digest} (October 1963), p. 235.

\textsuperscript{64} Rivera Conde, “El Diseño en la XIX Olimpiada,” p. 35.
visible presence of these edecanes, such as the journalist who praised the “[p]retty girls in psychedelic miniskirts.”

This use of vanguard fashion suggests the ways in which women—and especially, middle and upper-class, generally lighter-skinned women—were specifically recruited to present an image of a modern Mexico, not only as a land “young,” “beautiful,” and “inviting”—here, continuing a marketing strategy dating to the 1940s—but now also as a country where traditional machismo no longer circumvented social mobility. Avery Brundage him-

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66 For a discussion of how gender was a key element of tourist marketing in the 1940s see Alex Saragoza, “The Selling of Mexico: Tourism and the State, 1929-1952” in Joseph, et. al., eds., Fragments of a Golden Age, pp. 91-115. For a discussion of gender conflicts and public discourse in Mexico during
self highlighted the “open” role of Mexican women as a sign of the nation’s modern coming of age, writing in his diary during the Olympics: “Mexican girls parade in their little cars around the [athletic] village to look for a contact with athletes they want to entertain. . . . This is something that in Spanish-speaking countries had never been done before!”

Another way in which the image of the “modern woman” was used during the Games was in the selection of the twenty-year-old Mexican hurdler, Norma Enriqueta Basilio (a light-skinned mestiza) who carried the Olympic flame to its final destination for the Opening Ceremony. The question of whom “should carry the Olympic torch arriving at the stadium” was at the top of the list of issues raised by Ramírez Vázquez shortly after he took over as Chairman of the MOC. In an internal memorandum, Ramírez Vázquez underscored that in Japan an athlete “born the same day as the explosion over Hiroshima” had been chosen as torchbearer. Clearly, he sought someone of like symbolic value. As Amy Bass writes, “As the first woman to light the Olympic flame, the young farmer’s daughter presented a beautiful, non-commercial image that spoke well to the political times, as well as the heritage of the host country and its quest for modernity.” This sentiment was reflected in a letter to Brundage a year later by a man in Ohio who wrote, “I saw her light the fire on T.V., and I will never forget that short but epochal and beautiful feat. . . . Ever since I saw her, I have had the compunction to find out who she is and let her know how I feel about her ‘First in the World’ accomplishment.”

Finally, a fifth discursive component central to the promotion of the Cultural Olympiad was the deliberate and liberal use of bright colors in all aspects associated with the Games. This was true not only in the graphics arts programming in general, which showed the evident influence of a Pop Art aesthetic heralded by people such as Peter Max and Andy Warhol, but also of the poster art emanating from Cuba. It was the case in the explicit...
transformation of the city itself. As notes from a brainstorming session concerning the recently finished Olympic Village made clear, one way to confront the “aesthetic problem” of the new building complex—which evidently projected the “aspect of a strong fort”—was “to make one forget by [using] splotches of color.” “A painted fence is no longer a fence,” the group concluded with a slight hint of irony.73 Huge expanses of pavement surrounding the Aztec and Olympic Stadiums were painted in bright pink, orange, and blue hues, emulating the MEXICO68 design and thus, in effect, transforming the stadiums into giant Op Art performance pieces.74

“The plaza in front of the Olympic Stadium is awash with magenta and orange waves,” an article in Life described, “a spectacular test of the paint

73 “Brain Storming,” 9 May 1968, COI, Gallery 7, Box 26, Folder 41, AGN.
74 For images see Comité Organizador, Mexico 68, vol. 4, pp. 306-57.
to be applied to some city streets.” 75 “Wherever the visitor looks all is color,” 76 Ruben Salázar later wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. Even the walls of the encroaching slums had been painted in “shocking pink, purple and yellow—temporarily hiding the misery.” 77

**EMBRACING THE ‘LAND OF TOMORROW’**

Although the “mañana” label remained as an entrenched benchmark against which to measure Mexican readiness, by the spring of 1968 a new tone literally set in bright, psychedelic colors recast perceptions of the Olympic organization in a more forgiving light. Soon the media latched onto the idea that Mexico was “creating an atmosphere of the ultimate fiesta,” 78 a trope Ramírez Vázquez heartily endorsed. “We Mexicans are by character ‘great fiesteros,’” he was quoted as saying in the U.S. media, “so our Olympics will be a big party for the world.” 79 Certainly the question of organization was in the forefront for at least some U.S. officials, as revealed in a February 1968 internal memorandum sent by the Legal Attaché of the FBI in Mexico City to Director J. Edgar Hoover: “There is a danger that Mexico’s ‘manana’ policy of procrastination will result in frantic efforts at the last minute to get ready.” 80 Yet while the “mañana label” no doubt remained for skeptics, in the public discourse at least there was a notable shift as the date of the Games approached. One example of this was a story that spring in *Saturday Review* in which the inevitable question, “Will Mexico, land of mañana, be ready on time?” was used as the central narrative frame. 81 (The interrogation appeared directly in the article itself and was repeated for emphasis as a photo caption.) Upon reading the story itself, however, one quickly discovered that “the question that has been asked so condescendingly ever since Mexico was awarded its first Olympic Games at Baden-Baden in 1963” was mistaken; the Olympics were, in fact, coming together on time. 82 In refuting the “mañana label,” moreover, the article

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76 Salázár, “Wonderland of Color.”

77 Ibid.


80 Legat, Mexico City (80-103) to Director, FBI, 29 February, 1968. Located in FBI file, “1968: Mexican Olympics” at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC. (Many documents may now also be accessed via their website: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB99/.)

81 Riley, “Of Poets and Pole Vaulters,” p. 57. An article in *Sports Illustrated* listed various problems facing the Games including “the stereotype of the Mexican peasant, slumped against the wall, sombrero down to shield his eyes from the work left undone.” (John Underwood, “Games in Trouble,” *Sports Illustrated*, 30 September, 1968, p. 46.)

focused almost entirely on events organized under the rubric of the Cultural Olympiad, thus indicating the success of Ramírez Vasquez’s strategy of using the Olympiad to realign the terms of discussion. In another example, a story appearing that summer in the *New Yorker* noted that “In every possible way, [the Mexicans] are using their great talent for display . . . to prove that ‘Mexico is no longer the land of mañana’ . . .”83 After describing the various events of the Cultural Olympiad, the article concluded, “It should all look splendid on color television.”84

Despite Mexico’s various efforts to transcend the negative connotations of the mañana label, the notion of staging an Olympics in a “developing country” brought with it a degree of inherent uncertainty and perhaps even mild risk. Travel writings, for example, frequently warned about drinking the water and eating food on the street. While such warnings reinforced derogatory associations of Mexicans with dirt, disease, and disorder, by situating them alongside talk of “the biggest fiesta since the Greeks got together at Olympia,”85 as another writer for *Saturday Review* proclaimed, these negative associations were in effect reduced to the level of a trivialized piece of exotica to anticipate when crossing the border. This was especially true for those who chose to drive to the Olympics, a preferred choice for many. “The drive will be an adventure,” emphasized *Sports Illustrated*; “Something different will happen each day.”86 This description was literally placed in the context of bright colors when the author described how he inadvertently had his car painted purple by street children in an apparent misunderstanding of the words “cuidar” (to watch over) and “pintar” (to paint). Another article in *Look* similarly narrated:

> Everything in this strange country is strange, to Mexican as well as to foreigner, and there is some little twist to the most ‘ordinary’ event. . . . To us, Mexico seemed not only ‘foreign’ but almost completely unpredictable. The absence of order in the European or American sense is what exasperates. It is also what delights and rejuvenates.87

To enjoy this, as the motorclub aficionado Dan Sanborn put it, one had “better be able to roll with the punches.” “Any old ladies better stay home!,” he admonished perhaps only half in jest.88

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84 Ibid., p. 86.
85 David Butwin, “The Games, the Boycott, the Problems,” *Saturday Review*, 22 June 1968, p. 39.
88 “¡Vengámos Gringos!,” p. 75.
By the spring of 1968 Americans appeared thoroughly enthused about the prospect of Mexico playing host to the Games. So, too, did most Mexicans. 89 Few would have anticipated the eruption of a massive student protest movement shortly thereafter, a movement that used as a rallying point latent concerns about the wisdom of hosting the Games. As a result of the ensuing violence, by the eve of the Opening Ceremony the discursive edifice of international peace, ethnic harmony, and cosmopolitanism so assiduously constructed by the MOC over the past two years lay largely in tatters.

**COSMOPOLITANISM AND BARBARISM**

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the student-led movement, the definitive history of which, at any rate, has yet to be written. In short, following its murky origins in a series of seemingly minor protests and scuffles with police at the end of July, by September the government found itself facing wide-scale protest by many youth in the capital. 90 While there was no explicit reference to the Olympics in the six-point platform of the student-led Comité Nacional de Huelga (CNH), the issue of financial costs and government spending priorities continued to resonate as a political issue for the Left—despite efforts by Ramírez Vázquez to put this question to rest. 91 Still, it would be a mistake to assume (as many in the U.S. media did) that the students aimed to “sabotage the Games.” 92 Indeed, numerous youth (and intellectuals) who later sympathized with the student movement also had participatory roles to play through the Cultural Olympiad; many youth no doubt took advantage of the various publicly subsidized cultural performances being offered. In short, the virulence of protesters’ attacks—largely aimed at President Díaz Ordaz—reflected more a critique of the authoritarian nature of Mexican society than an attack on the Games per se. Arguably, the Cultural Olympiad had helped to ameliorate criticism of government spending, both through a proactive marketing campaign and by the incorporation of students and intellectuals directly into the planning process.

Protesters nevertheless reappropriated graphic elements used by the Organizing Committee to convey their outrage at government hypocrisy and

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89 Volpi, *La imaginación y el poder*, pp. 23-8; Rodríguez Kuri, citing Volpi, is cautious on this point, noting “although dangerous for the historian, Volpi’s argument should be considered in order to evaluate the collective excitement of the city” (Kuri, “Hacia México 68,” p. 53).


repression. For example, the MEXICO68 image often appeared on posters next to caricatures of Mexican symbols of repression (such as the hated granaderos). One particularly effective poster integrated the Olympic rings with the image of a tank, thus inverting the government’s promotion of the Games as a mark of “civilization” by associating the staging of the Games with state barbarism. “In the end,” writes Tim Rohan, “Wyman had provided the students with a visual language for dissent that spoke volumes. The tools of the oppressors became the language of the protestors.”93 In another example, numerous peace doves silhouetted on walls throughout the capital were splattered with red paint, their message of peaceful coexistence openly subverted. As one foreign journalist expressed in the context of the recent repression, the images now suggested that of “a bleeding heart.”94

Following the massacre on October 2nd that put a definitive end to the protests, the headline for a travel article in the Washington Post warned, in an ironic twist on a familiar theme, “At Olympic Time, Mexicans Worry About Manana”: this time, it was literally the post-riot “tomorrow” and thus whether

93 Wyman was evidently unaware of this at the time and only learned of the students’ use of his images in 1985, when he gave a lecture at the National University (UNAM). See Rohan, “Games Plan,” p. 158.
the Olympics would be held at all. State Department analyses of the events stated confidence in the Mexican security forces’ ability to “control the situation,” while nevertheless capturing the essence of the problem: “What does worry Mexican officials is the image projected by the disturbances and the impact on the Olympics in which they have so heavily invested.” This theme was repeated elsewhere. “Yet if people here are relieved that the spectre of mañana has temporarily been exorcised,” wrote a reporter for Sports Illustrated, “they are still a bit shaky over ayer—yesterday.” Although Brundage quickly reassured the public that the Games would continue (along

97 Kahn, “Sporting Scene,” p. 221.
with the State Department, he remained confident in Mexico’s security apparatus to contain the protesters), the sense of wonderment and color built up over the preceding months was irrevocably clouded. “[I]t is hard to be in Mexico City now and think just of fun and games,”

98 one author wrote. On the opening day of the Olympics the New York Times ran a large, front-page photograph showing the Aztec stadium surrounded by soldiers. Neither the giant Alexander Calder sculpture commissioned by the MOC nor the psychedelic swirls that enveloped the stadium were rendered visible.

99 Hosting the 1968 Olympics was supposed to herald Mexico’s entry into the “first world” club of nations, a public relations bonanza that would mark the nation’s coming of age. Increased tourism, foreign investment, and an animated nationalist spirit were all heralded as the “intangible benefits,” as Brundage had once articulated, anticipated in return for successfully staging the events. Many, though not all, of these benefits were canceled out by the flagrant repression against student protesters and foreign questioning of Mexico’s vaunted “political harmony.” For Mexicans, the Olympics would be forever marked by that repression. While some remain firmly convinced that it was the students (or the international communist movement) who were to blame, many if not most now view the government as the clear-cut culprit. Rather than images of vibrant color, younger Mexicans are raised with a perspective of the Olympics framed by the grainy reality of black and white photos featuring student protest and response. The tremendous logistical accomplishments and artistic fervor that were a direct outgrowth of planning for the 1968 Games and the Cultural Olympiad are easily overlooked or hastily dismissed. The brightly painted sculptures along the “Ruta de la Amistad,” commissioned to stand as a testament to the nation’s forward-looking sensibility, have become silent, defaced tombstones of a modernist moment defeated.

By the same token, contemporary U.S. history texts on the 1960s inevitably include a black and white image of that famous gesture of fistfed defiance by Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The photo itself conveys a sense of solemn, principled conviction; easily masked is the fact that these athletes were booed, stripped of their medals, and forced to return home humiliated.

100 For many Americans, this image nevertheless symbolizes the dignity
of African-American struggle during the 1960s. At the same time, it also marks an important transitional moment in the Civil Rights movement when a belief in non-violent struggle (heralded by Martin Luther King, recently assassinated) would shortly be eclipsed by the influence of a more radical approach advocated by the Black Panthers. The “black power salute” by Smith and Carlos was and remains a contested image that has come to symbolize the unfulfilled promises of American justice and equality for all. The Olympics themselves, however, are subsumed in this image as mere background text; they are but a platform for the enactment of such bold protest testimony. Mexico is not “represented” anywhere in the photo and it would be easy to overlook the actual site of the Olympics as particularly relevant.

It has become a commonplace for historians to think of 1968 as a turning point in modern Mexico, which it undoubtedly was. Nevertheless, as we continue to reassess this critical decade in Mexican history, we must be careful not to address “1968” in isolation but to recognize the complex local, national, and global historical forces that gave rise to this critical juncture and later framed it. There are still many important questions that remain unanswered. One paradoxical aspect of this period, for example, is that the Cultural Olympiad directly incorporated many of the same intellectuals, artists, and even students who would later join the protest movement in denouncing the government. Should we then understand the Cultural Olympiad as evidence of the regime’s success at constructing a cultural hegemony, or a sign of that hegemony’s weakness and limitations? At the same time, in what ways were tourism, foreign investment, and general “good will” toward Mexico affected by the violence surrounding the Olympics? Was there still a “Mexico of tomorrow” in the foreign—or domestic—imaginary in the aftermath of the 1968 Games?

Throughout the 1960s Mexicans struggled on two fronts: on one hand, against the hypocrisy of a political party cum government whose practices mocked a public façade of democratic process and respect for human rights; and, on the other, to overcome a sense of marginalization and denigration that located Mexico as a nation still “developing.” Accepting the challenge of hosting the Olympics was part of a broader strategy of urban modernization dating to the 1940s. By the 1960s, this strategy had embraced important aspects such as new urban design and infrastructure, especially in Mexico City. It also included playing host to international sporting, scientific, and cultural conferences. (Even while Olympics’ planning was in full swing, Mexico was already looking forward to hosting the 1970 World Cup Soccer Tournament.) This strategy created an opportunity for the ruling regime to displace middle-class and popular sector criticisms regarding the lack of
democratic process (and widening inequalities in income distribution) toward support for the nation’s evident material advances. At the same time, a strategy to modernize the country helped recast entrenched foreign stereotypes regarding Mexican “efficiency” and “stability.” Arguably, the strategy had worked (which is not to discount more radical discontent from certain sectors of the population), as evidenced by domestic and foreign support for the Olympics as the date of the Games approached. The challenges posed by the student movement, however, changed everything. Through the protests and ensuing repression, Mexicans and foreigners alike were reminded that beneath the psychedelic, Op Art twists of MEXICO68 lurked a grittier reality of economic inequalities and political authoritarianism which discourse and spectacle alone could not make disappear.

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