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Review/Reseña

Elaine Carey. *Plaza of Sacrifices. Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico*. University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

Plaza of Sacrifices, Mexico '68

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Elaine Carey's study of the Mexican Student Movement of 1968 and the government's brutal response to it provides English-language readers with their first book-length account of arguably the most important single event of Mexico's post-Revolutionary history. As Carey convincingly demonstrates, both the massive public demonstrations, which brought hundreds of thousands of Mexican students and sympathizers to the streets and plazas of their nation's capital, and the government's shocking reaction, which culminated in the murder of hundreds and the imprisonment of at least a thousand

more on October 2 in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Plaza, transformed Mexican society and politics. The promises of progress, equality, and justice that purportedly grounded the ideology of the Revolutionary State were exposed as bankrupt if not wholly cynical. Middle-class discontent fueled dissent and helped bring new actors, notably young men and women, onto the public stage. During the years after the Tlatelolco Massacre, which effectively ended the Student Movement as such, the students' demands for justice and a more active role in politics only became more urgent. The outrage provoked by the repression drove traditional and relatively marginalized organic intellectuals, like students and rural guerrilla fighters, to question their government and the status quo publicly and insistently. Though external global political and economic factors contributed significantly to Mexico's so-called transition to democracy – exemplified in 2000 when after 71 years in power the official party lost a presidential election– the impacts of 1968 cannot be underestimated. Over the past four decades, the Student Movement and its legacy have inspired democratically minded Mexicans to keep fighting, often against overwhelming odds, for the means to shape their own political destinies.

The particular strength of *Plaza of Sacrifices* is its emphasis on how Mexican students in 1968 took it upon themselves to define and attempt to fulfill their own political goals. Drawing on its impressive array of interviews with prominent leaders of the Movement and its synthesis of a vast range of secondary materials, Carey's book instructively contextualizes the events of 1968 within a broader history of domestic political opposition, notably the teachers' and railroad-workers' strikes of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and international developments, most importantly the Cuban Revolution. *Plaza of Sacrifices* also helps its readers understand the Movement's surprising trajectory, tracing how a street fight between rival gangs in late July quickly evolved to become a cohesive movement capable of

organizing a strike that affected numerous universities and secondary schools as well as a series of popular demonstrations in August and September. Ultimately, as Carey shows, the Movement threatened the national government's legitimacy. In her description of the factors that shaped the Movement, Carey duly considers that the Olympic Games opened on October 12 in Mexico City. The first "third-world" nation to host the games, Mexico became a veritable pressure cooker in the late summer of 1968 when an authoritarian state already insecure about Mexico's place among modern nations found itself, before the world's eyes, confronting a powerful opposition movement that had gained considerable strength and momentum quite suddenly.

As its full title suggests, *Plaza of Sacrifices* aims to explain both how the Student Movement was shaped by traditional perceptions of gender roles and how it helped undermine and transform social structures and attitudes that relegated women to the private sphere, leaving politics to men. To its credit, Carey's book provides detailed accounts of individual women activists, including some, like Roberta "Tita" Avendaño, who were leaders of their respective schools' delegations to the Movement's main organizing body, the National Strike Council (Consejo Nacional de Huelga, or CNH). Carey explains how women at all levels of the Movement experienced a symptomatic mix of discrimination and grudging respect, their male counterparts often expecting them to perform domestic tasks such as cooking and preparing coffee, and then expressing surprised admiration at the women's ability to engage seriously in political debates and organize public events, such as impromptu street theater performances. *Plaza of Sacrifices* also foregrounds the government's focus on young males as its principal antagonist, demonstrating, through analyses of official rhetoric and political cartoons in state-sponsored newspapers, that the government tried to bolster its position by opposing the construction

of the clean-cut, studious, middle-class Mexican male to the long-haired, wild-eyed, foreign, revolutionary scoundrel who was allegedly corrupting Mexico's youth.

The focus on gender relations and perceptions that *Plaza of Sacrifices* ostensibly sustains is crucially important to a more complete understanding of what happened in 1968 in Mexico. Yet in the case of this particular study, that focus could have been developed more thoroughly and specifically, and from within a better established theoretical framework. On the whole, *Plaza of Sacrifices* would benefit by a more complete historical discussion of gender roles in Mexico. Many of the book's sources on feminism and traditional gender roles are about Latin America as a region, leaving insufficiently covered gender issues specific to Mexico. For example, more could be said regarding the history of explicitly women-oriented organizations that participated in the Student Movement, such as the Union of Mexican Women (Unión de Mujeres Mexicanas). The book's most complete and productive discussion of feminism is in the context of a movement founded in 1971, Women in Solidarity Action (Mujeres en Acción Solidaria, or MAS), whose ties to the Student Movement need to be more comprehensively explained. Because of the book's tendency to limit itself to describing the experiences of individual female activists in the Movement, the reader is left without a good general sense of what it was like to be a young, politically active woman contending with gender discrimination in 1960s Mexico. Finally, brief allusions to the work of Judith Butler only remind the reader how much the work could also be improved by a more sustained engagement with theories of gender. In the end, *Plaza of Sacrifices* is less a focused analysis of how issues of gender informed and were informed by the Movement than it is an exposition of the Student Movement and its fate.