

Vol. 5, No. 2, Winter 2008, 47-73

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Expanding our Conceptual Horizons: The Shift from an Old to a New Left in Latin America¹

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In a recent autobiographical essay, Mexican anthropologist and cultural critic Roger Bartra draws a vibrant picture of the heady days of anti-imperialism following the U.S.-sponsored invasion of Cuba, describing how for many middle-class youth the question of supporting armed revolution and exploring the bohemian values of the counterculture were seamlessly intertwined. “Marijuana was linked with Marxism, unconventional forms of eroticism went along with [support for the] guerrillas. In my house, beatniks and aspiring revolutionaries would get together; those searching for artificial paradises along with those who

¹ Franklin & Marshall College provided necessary travel funding to support the research and writing that lead to this essay. I wish to thank Van Gosse, Jaime Pensado, and Elisa Servín for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Two anonymous readers also provided important constructive criticism for which I am thankful. Terri Gordon generously read and commented on different versions of this essay, from its earliest stages to the final version, all amidst juggling an infant son. Unless indicated by the citation, all translations from the Spanish are my own.

wanted to destroy systems of oppression.”² Tellingly, Bartra later joined the Mexican Communist Party, which, he claims, “saved [me] from a sterile form of rebellion—immature and dangerous.”³ Bartra’s reflections and in particular his emphasis on the fluidity of cultural practices and ideology (“marijuana was linked with Marxism”), coupled with his subsequent decision to suppress his bohemianism in the name of leading a (reluctant, as it turned out) proletariat to revolutionary action, encapsulate an essential yet largely overlooked dimension of Latin American history in the era of the Cuban revolution.

For too long, the historiography on Latin America for this period has focused on questions of revolutionary insurgency and counter-insurgency, relegating cultural politics to the background.⁴ This focus is beginning to change, however, as new studies emerge that take sexuality, communal living, fashion, music and other consumptive practices as entry points for new interpretative histories of “the long 1960s.”⁵ What these studies collectively reveal is that “the Left” in Latin America was more socially diverse, ideologically complex, and engaged in countercultural

² Roger Bartra, “Memorias de la contracultura,” *Letras Libres* (November 2007), 35. I wish to thank Carlos Aguirre for alerting me to Bartra’s essay. See also the important memoir by Alberto Ulloa Bornemann, *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War: A Political Prisoner’s Memoir*, translated and edited by Arthur Schmidt and Aurora Camacho de Schmidt (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ Two prominent texts are Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (Praeger, 1991).

⁵ The term “long 1960s” has come into greater usage, although the periodization often varies. As Sorensen notes, “the sixties’ [does] not mean a strict chronological category—the 1960-70 decade—but a heuristic one.” (Diana Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered: Scenes from the Latin American Sixties* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007], 215, fn. 2.) Gosse defines “the long 1960s” as 1955-1975, a periodization which he notes other historians of the United States have adopted. (Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* [New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005], 6.) For Latin America, the question of periodization is still open and may depend upon an individual country. For instance, Jaime Pensado would start the 1960s in Mexico with the 1956 student movement at the Polytechnical Institute (Personal Communication). I would argue the “long 1960s” in Latin America should date from 1958—Vice President Nixon’s ill-fated “Good Will” tour, which provoked a change in U.S.-Latin American policy and perceptions—to the fall of Salvador Allende in 1973.

politics than an earlier historiography was interested in or capable of discerning.⁶

To capture such richness, this essay proposes a reinterpretation of the term “New Left” to describe the social movements of the 1960s in Latin America, as a way both to clarify the content and scope of those movements and simultaneously to underscore the transnational dimension of social and cultural protest during this period. Indeed, for the United States there has been renewed academic discussion in recent years about how best to define the concept of a New Left—a term that readily gained currency in the 1960s and is commonly used to describe the social mobilizations of the era. One of the central academics in this discussion is Van Gosse, who has argued in favor of viewing the New Left as a “movement of movements,” “a ‘polycentric’ left encompassing a series of overlapping, contingent social movements, each with its own centers of power, that related to each other through a series of strategic arrangements.”⁷ Such a definitional approach links together practices as seemingly disparate as the push for civil rights beginning in the mid 1950s with the rise of black and Chicano nationalism and movements for gay and feminist liberation in the early 1970s. In order to broach the question of the New Left in the context of Latin America, this paper considers the case of Mexico in the 1950s, locating in the parallel travels of Ernesto Guevara and the Beats the intertwined theme of discipline and indiscipline that was a central dynamic of a New Left politics in the 1960s.

Redefining the New Left

In its application for Latin Americanists, the term New Left lacks the definitional breadth with which it is used in the United States. Indeed, the reemergence in recent years of “New Left” to refer to the contemporary

⁶ Two recent panels on the 1960s at the 2008 Conference on Latin American History (CLAH) in Washington, D.C. suggest the new research underway. Of particular note is the work by Francisco Barbosa, Elaine Carey, Patrick Barr-Melej, James Green and Natan Zeichner, Nelly Blacker-Hansen, Victoria Langland, Valeria Manzano, and Jaime Pensado.

⁷ Van Gosse, “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left,” in Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 292; Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left*.

leftward turn in politics (for instance, in Venezuela and Bolivia) underscores perhaps the weakness of consensus about the term's special relevancy for the 1960s.⁸ When referencing the social mobilizations of the 1960s, for Latin American historians there is no equivalent term to New Left as it is used to describe the U.S./European nineteen sixties, this despite the fact that, at least in certain historical contexts, "New Left" was a phrase embraced by youth and intellectuals at the time in ways that coincided with its usage in the United States.⁹

More recently, the term New Left has begun to be incorporated by historians writing on the period, but here it is mostly used to refer to the politics of revolutionary action and *foquismo*, not in the broader conceptual sense employed by historians writing on the United States. Greg Grandin's important work, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, for instance, succinctly defines New Left as a "will to act."¹⁰ Gilbert Joseph, in his Introduction to the newly published collection, *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounters with the Cold War*, employs the phrase "grassroots Left," which comes closer to the broader definitional approach I am proposing. However, in the same discussion he, too, adopts the phrase New Left to mean "[a] new generation of vanguardist revolutionaries."¹¹ Perhaps the most explicit definition is given by Ricardo Melgar Bao, who defines New Left as encompassing the multitude of revolutionary movements that "glorified violence...and distanced

⁸ Greg Grandin, "Latin America's New Consensus," *The Nation*, 1 May 2006; Claudio Lomnitz, "Latin America's Rebellion: Will the New Left Set a New Agenda?," *Boston Review*. [accessed 25 September 2007, <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.5/lomnitz.html>].

⁹ See the dissertation by Jaime Pensado, "Student Resistance, Political Violence and Youth Culture in Mexico City, c.1867-c.1965: A History of the Antecedents of *Porrismo*" (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 2008), esp. Chapter 5, "The Polarization of Student Politics Inside the University Following the Cuban Revolution" where he talks about various publications, including one called *Nueva Izquierda*, that were forums for topics included in the broader conceptual way I am suggesting we use the term.

¹⁰ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15.

¹¹ Gilbert Joseph, "What We Now Know and Should Know: Bringing Latin America More Meaningfully into Cold War Studies" in Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 29, 23.

themselves from the political traditions of opposition movements that came before them, whether Marxist, reformist, or pacifist.”¹²

Using the term in this narrow sense of a “will to act,” however, leaves virtually no room for inclusion of practices that lie outside of the revolutionary/counterrevolutionary dichotomy. In fact, if we were to employ the term in this same way to describe what transpired in the United States during the period, it would reflect only the radical, “ultraleftism” that constituted simply one strand of the broader “movement of movements” of the era.¹³ The problem with Latin Americanists’ use of the term in this restrictive sense is two-fold. For one, it excludes the vast sectors of largely middle-class youth that took no direct part in armed revolutionary activities, yet who were deeply impacted by the cultural and political trends of the time. Second, its ideological narrowness allows no interpretative room to address the countercultural practices found on the left, practices that have been silenced by the historical process which has tended to emphasize the overriding significance of armed revolt and repression. There is, in short, a need to broaden our conceptual understanding of what transpired in Latin America during the 1960s, and a change in terminology will us help to accomplish that wider vision.

Historians require a revisionist framework that encompasses the non-armed aspects of radical challenges to political and social norms—counterculture practices, new aesthetic sensibilities, trends in film, literature, theater, music, the arts, as well as the impact of Liberation Theology—and links those aspects to transnational processes, without disaggregating them from the discourses and proximity of violent revolutionary movements. Rather than viewing armed struggle—the “heroic guerrilla”—as distinct from seemingly non-revolutionary, consumptive practices—such as the Mexican *jipitecas* or Latin American *roqueros*—we should regard these as twin facets of diverse and intersecting movements that confronted state power, on one hand, and patriarchal norms, on the

¹² Ricardo Melgar Bao, “La memoria sumergida. Martirologio y sacralización de la violencia en las guerrillas latinoamericanas” in Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, eds., *Movimientos armadas en México, siglo xx*, vol. 1 (Zamora, Mich.: El Colegio de Michoacán/CIESAS, 2006), 37.

¹³ See Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2006).

other. As Bartra neatly summarizes: “In the refrigerator of my house, there were as many Molotov cocktails as bags of marijuana. In the same breadth we were prepared to join the fight against a U.S. invasion of Cuba, while reading out loud the poetry of [Beat poet] Lawrence Ferlinghetti.”¹⁴

In Latin America during the 1960s, to be “on the left” meant clearly more than choosing between the competing ideological strategies of an older Communist Party beholden to the Soviet Union’s (comparatively) cautious approach to revolutionary transformation, and China’s (via Cuba’s) brasher insistence on revolutionary action. To be sure, in the wake of the Cuban revolution and inspired by the later Cultural Revolution in China, numerous “Guevarist,” Trotskyite, Maoist and other ideologically absolutist groups proliferated in the myriad splinterings that occurred within (and outside of) the various communist parties.¹⁵ At the same time, various radical factions emerged (such as the Montoneros in Argentina or the Tupamaros in Uruguay) with specific nationalist dimensions that transcended the utopian goals they advocated. Yet it would be as profound a mistake to presume an understanding of these groups’ internal dynamics and membership based on their ideological preferences as it would be to allow them to monopolize the definition of New Left in Latin America.

Where then might we place the slyly irreverent characters of Quino’s *Mafalda*, which was rightly perceived by the military government in Argentina as a subversive threat, or the comic books of Eduardo de Rio (“Rius”), who was kidnapped and threatened by Mexico’s paramilitary in the early 1970s? Neither of these cartoonists belonged to the “New Left” in the narrow definitional sense of the “will to act,” yet each clearly supported the Cuban revolution and the anti-imperialist politics of the era. Where, too, should we place the rock and countercultural movements that emerged across Latin America, whose participants came into direct confrontation with the ideological left (which sought to censure their bohemianism),

¹⁴ Bartra, “Memorias de la contracultura,” 36-7.

¹⁵ For an important discussion of the impact of Maoism in Mexico and Latin America see Matthew Rothwell, “Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Creation of Mexican Maoism,” (New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness, Queen’s University, Toronto, Canada, 13-16 June, 2007) and his forthcoming dissertation, “Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America” (University of Illinois, Chicago).

despite the fact that the countercultural left and ideological left likely shared points of reference in their support for revolutionaries throughout Latin America and globally?

Perhaps we should adopt a similar definitional approach as that taken by Gosse in his description of the New Left in the United States. Would not the sheer diversity of social, political, and cultural practices—which constellated around different movements, both formal and informal—also suggest that the left in Latin America was made up of a “movement of movements” sharing certain common frames of reference: support for the Cuban revolution, condemnation of the U.S. war in Vietnam, and the universal goal of socialism (whether Marxist-Leninist or Christian Democratic)? Such an embrace and broadening of the definition of the term New Left by Latin Americanists, moreover, will help facilitate a deepening of the historiographical dialogue between Latin Americanists and Americanists that has taken place in recent years. This will encourage each of these fields to recognize the transnational dimensions and interconnections between their respective New Left histories, while responding to the call for greater interdisciplinarity in both fields of study.¹⁶

From “Old Left” to New in Latin America

The emergence of a New Left in Latin America is characterized in broad terms by important similarities. Throughout the region, the legacy of popular front coalitions dating to the 1930s, in which Communist and Socialist parties put aside the goal of worker-backed revolutionary struggle

¹⁶ See Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine, eds., *Hemispheric Americas Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers’s University Press, 2007); Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman, eds., *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and the Special Issue of the *Radical History Review*, “Our Americas: Political and Cultural Imaginings” (June 2004) from which this volume emerged; Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered*.

Earlier examples of a transnational approach include Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (London: Verso, 1993); Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Deborah Pacini Hernández, Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Eric Zolov, eds., *Rockin’ Las Américas: The Global Politics of Rock in Latin/o America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004).

to assist in the more immediate defense against fascism, carried over into the post-war period. This meant a continued visibility throughout the hemisphere at the end of World War II for left-wing political movements with ties to labor, peasants, students, and intellectuals—movements that, by and large, regarded the Soviet Union as a successful model of state socialism. With the start of the Cold War came a concerted effort by the United States to outlaw the Communist Party across Latin America, policies that facilitated the criminalization of left-wing political activity more generally and—following a brief “democratic spring”—enabled the reconsolidation of conservative political factions nearly everywhere in Latin America.¹⁷ In response, elements on the left sought to recreate (or sustain, depending on circumstances) the strategic position of an Old Left, popular frontism, via rhetoric and actions that inevitably were channeled through the ideological prism of the Cold War.¹⁸

In this context of a hardening of political positions, during 1956 the Soviet Union suffered a series of dramatic blows to its international prestige and credibility. At the start of the year, at the Twentieth Party Congress, the new Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev stunned the Socialist camp by denouncing the “cult of personality” and numerous abuses committed under Joseph Stalin, a figure once synonymous with the strength and idealism of the Soviet system itself. Then in the fall, the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, in a violent suppression of a student-worker revolt against Soviet rule. These were dramatic turning points that shattered for many on the left an unqualified support of Soviet communism and threw the doctrinaire communist parties into a state of flux and uncertainty.

Aesthetically, the Old Left directly referenced the imagery of a heroic caudillo figure capable of leading the masses toward liberation: male, mestizo, strict yet generous. Writing about what she calls “monumentalism,” the aesthetic sensibility that marked the literary and

¹⁷ David Rock, *Latin America in the 1940s: War and Postwar Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Leslie Bethell, *Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944-1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). The subsequent fate of Guatemala epitomized this regional pattern (Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*).

¹⁸ In particular, I am thinking about the World Peace Council and its various activities in Latin America and throughout Europe. See also Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, “Introduction.”

artistic side of the Old Left, Jean Franco argues that it “reinforces the cult of the artist, turning art into a kind of pedagogy and the public into obedient pupils.”¹⁹ Yet a generational divide was rapidly introducing changing attitudes and demands from students, artists and intellectuals eager for a different form of democratic socialism—less authoritarian, more transparent, and arguably more culturally cosmopolitan. The cultural values and consumptive practices of this younger generation were often antithetical to the top-down, paternalistic form of leftwing politics that continued to dominate as a legacy of popular frontism.

The Cuban revolution of course ultimately pushed aside the cautious, coalition building logic favored by the Old Left in favor of the impatient heroics of armed revolutionary struggle, exemplified by the *foco* strategy of the Cuban revolutionaries.²⁰ But to reduce the idea of a New Left solely to such terms misses the larger picture, that of a generational shift taking place at the level of culture practice, discourse, and aesthetic sensibilities. “Arising from the utopian ethos of the early moments of the Cuban Revolution,” writes Diana Sorensen, “is an auratic value connected with the release of new political energies, infusing a spirit of vigorously creative—and even aesthetic—potential.”²¹ Indeed by the early 1960s, the Old Left consensus would implode both politically and aesthetically. Eclipsed by more heterogeneous, culturally cosmopolitan spokespersons catalyzed by the imperative of the Cuban revolution, on one hand, and disdainful of a patriarchal, authoritarian-based political leadership, on the other, the guardians of the Old Left discovered a quickly shifting ground beneath them as a more irreverent, colorful (literally and figuratively), and simultaneously violent form of political critique took shape.

By focusing on Mexico, this essay examines in greater detail the shift away from an Old Left form of politics and cultural practices toward the emergence of what I am calling a New Left sensibility, one that became common throughout Latin America beginning in the mid to late 1960s. Mexico, I would suggest, is one example—albeit, a prominent one for

¹⁹ Jean Franco, *The Decline & Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 69.

²⁰ Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*.

²¹ Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered*, 16.

reasons suggested below—of a similar historical trajectory found throughout Latin America, one which continued research will undoubtedly bear out.

Mexican Political Culture in the 1950s

As Stephen Niblo emphasizes, at the end of World War II the rules of the game that had governed Mexico since the early 1930s had fundamentally changed: the socialist coalition mobilized behind the leadership of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) had been eclipsed by a new coalition within the ruling party centered around the figure of President Miguel Alemán (1946-52), newly committed to capitalist development and closer ties with the United States.²² Once regarded as an incubator of vanguard revolutionary ideas and a bulwark against further U.S. expansionism, by the mid 1950s Mexico had changed dramatically. The absolute control of the electoral process by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the near deification of the position of the presidency facilitated the consolidation of a new political economy with clearer guarantees to domestic and foreign capital, all under the ideological rubric of a rabid anti-communism.²³ Often referred to as “presidentialism,” Daniel Cosío Villegas would later describe Mexico’s political system as one headed by a “president who is actually a king”; politics was “not made at the public plaza, at the parliament or by newspapers, at sensational debates or controversies,” Cosío Villegas lamented, but rather via “courtier intrigue.”²⁴ The PRI’s virtual monopoly

²² Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999).

²³ Elisa Servín, “Propaganda y Guerra Fría: la campaña anticomunista en la prensa mexicana del medio siglo,” *Signos Históricos* 11 (January-June 2004), 8-39.

²⁴ Daniel Cosío Villegas, “Politics and Mexican Intellectuals,” in H. Malcolm MacDonald, ed., *The Intellectual in Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 34; Eric Zolov, “The Graphic Satire of Mexico’s Jorge Carreño and the Politics of Presidentialism During the 1960s,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina* 17:1 (2006), 13-38. Ironically, the presidentialist regime was institutionalized under Lázaro Cárdenas who established the basis not only for the undisputed authority of the president, but more importantly the monopoly of power by the ruling party. In anointing his political successor and suppressing the opposition vote in the 1940 election, Cárdenas established the precedent of presidential politics as political theater in which the outcome of campaigns was predetermined.

on political discourse and the electoral process allowed the government to set the terms for public discussion, while alternately repressing or co-opting those who challenged the regime's new economic and political orientation. Yet despite glowing assertions of political stability from tourists and investors, fissures indicative of a pending split in the "revolutionary family" coalition were also present. Under the pressures created by this conservative political reorientation, in 1958-59—precisely at the moment of the unfolding of the Cuban revolution—the intricate ideological balancing act pursued by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) came close to collapsing.

Central to understanding the shift from an Old Left to a New Left social mobilization in Mexico is the attempt by opposition figures to recreate the mantle of populist leadership under ex-president Lázaro Cárdenas. The continued appeal of Cárdenas as the embodiment of a nationalist revolutionary tradition became apparent in the contested 1952 presidential elections, when, for the first time since 1940, the ruling party faced a significant political challenge to its authority from a coalition on the left. Led by ex-General Enrique Guzmán, who positioned himself as the inheritor of the Cardenista mandate, the *henriquistas* freely appropriated the image of Lázaro Cárdenas in their political propaganda and "assured followers that the ex-president supported Henríquez's candidacy," a position Cárdenas himself did little to contradict.²⁵ Following Guzmán's defeat at the polls (fraud would play a key role), his movement dissipated; many supporters gravitated toward a second figure who also ran in the 1952 election, Vicente Lombardo Toledano.

Toledano, who flirted with joining forces with Guzmán before ultimately deciding to run on his own, ran as the presidential candidate for the Partido Popular, an agglomeration of labor, peasant, intellectuals, and student groups hostile to the new direction of the ruling party. Toledano could also claim a direct affiliation with Lázaro Cárdenas, for he was central to the creation of the official labor movement (the Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM) during the Cárdenas era and had led the CTM

²⁵ Elisa Servín, *Ruptura y oposición: El movimiento henriquista, 1945-1954* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2001), 267.

until he was marginalized from power during the conservative reorientation of the PRI after World War II. As a result of losing his stature within the PRI, Toledano formed the Partido Popular in 1948 and in 1949 helped to found and became leader of a left-wing continental trade movement, the Confederation of Latin American Workers (CTAL). Both platforms were used by Toledano to project himself as the person best positioned to recapture the socialist mandate formerly advocated by the PRI under Cárdenas, though as Barry Carr notes, “[Toledano’s] authoritarian imprint was visible from the earliest days of the Popular party.”²⁶

After the 1952 elections, in which the official candidate of the PRI (Adolfo Ruiz Cortines) was readily declared the victor, for many on the left Toledano was the emblematic heroic personality capable of reorienting Mexico toward the realization of the nation’s revolutionary ideals. Under Toledano’s leadership, the Partido Popular not only embraced those economically impacted by the regime’s new political economy (which favored the upper and middle classes over the workers and peasantry), but also resonated with intellectuals and students disaffected by the coziness of the PRI with the United States and the vitriolic anti-Communism of the Alemán and, later, Ruiz Cortines administrations, policies manifest locally in the repression of dissidents and writ large in condemnation of the Soviet Union.²⁷

Tensions in this period between an Old Left seeking to reassert a relevancy in Mexican politics and a New Left in gestation can be found in the establishment of several new intellectual forums from mid decade forward. One such forum was the journal *Problemas de Latinoamérica*,

²⁶ Barry Carr, “The Fate of the Vanguard under a Revolutionary State: Marxism’s Contribution to the Construction of the Great Arch,” in Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 332.

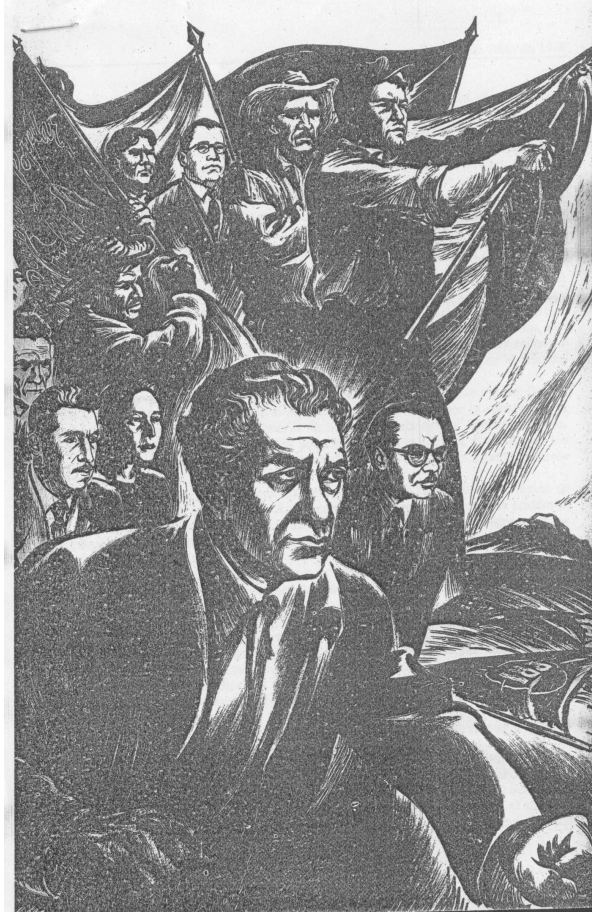
²⁷ Mexico’s situation was somewhat more complex than that of other Latin American countries, since the nation’s revolutionary traditions openly legitimized discourses of radical nationalism. The nation’s Communist Party (PCM), although one of the oldest in the hemisphere, was also among the weakest. Riddled by factionalist struggles internally, the party was also inherently disadvantaged in terms of popular appeal as it found itself in direct competition with the country’s nationalist revolutionary tradition. See Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

whose orientation was explicitly ideological and associated with an Old Left discourse, aesthetically and intellectually. Founded in the context of the overthrow of leftist Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz, from the start *Problemas de Latinoamérica* was explicitly trenchant in its socialist political orientation, an orientation manifest in the presentation of the journal throughout. For instance, in an editorial written just days after the fall of Arbenz, the United States was denounced as embarking on “a new ‘Manifest Destiny,’ fascist in nature” which “some members of this [Mexican] government, either out of fear or a cynical, hidden yet conscious calculus advise to embrace.”²⁸ Juxtaposed to this calculus was “the barricade of the popular masses, prepared unto death to sacrifice in the defense of liberty.”²⁹ Significantly, the journal became a vehicle for the lionization of Lombardo Toledano and his Partido Popular. Toledano’s speeches to the party were reprinted in their entirety and his position, above all others, was held out as that which could unify the left in “the struggle against economic and political imperialism—of the United States—and the achievement, at the end of the day, of a stage of socialism already visible as a new aura of well-being and harmony in something like geographically half of the contemporary world.”³⁰ A lithograph from the Marxist oriented, Taller Gráfico Popular (TGP) featuring Lombardo Toledano at the head of a popular working-class-peasant-intellectual front—boldly looking forward, over-sized fist clenched in heroic proportions as he leads a charge over the crushed flags of the PRI and the PAN—neatly encapsulates the hopes of a recuperation of leftist purpose in the aftermath of the overthrow of Arbenz and defiance of the conservative direction of the PRI.

²⁸ Editorial, *Problemas de Latinoamérica*, vol. 1, no. 2, 16 July 1954, 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Editorial, *Problemas de Latinoamérica*, vol. 2, no. 3, 15 April 1955, 2.



Vicente Lombardo Toledano, presidential candidate and leader of the Partido Popular (PP), depicted at the forefront of a resuscitated Popular Front-style coalition, an “authentic” revolutionary movement undaunted by the official PRI and conservative PAN parties (depicted by their fallen flags), in a lithograph done by the Taller Gráfico Popular. Source: Problemas de Latinoamérica, vol. 2, no. 9 (14 July 1955), n.p.

A second significant forum, this one linked to an incipient New Left position, was the *Círculo de Estudios Mexicanos* (CEM), a kind of left-wing “think tank” founded in October 1954. The CEM produced a journal (*Cuadernos del Círculo de Estudios Mexicanos*) and sponsored various conferences, mostly on political economy, whose presentations were subsequently published in the journal. Although Marxist in orientation, the eclectic membership of the CEM suggested an effort to distance itself from the pull of any particular political orientation, a position clearly established in the journal’s “Declaration of Principles.” The founding members of this “circle” included many of the noted public intellectuals of the time. For

instance, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (son of Lázaro Cárdenas) was a signatory member, as were Fernando Benítez, Pablo González Casanova, Jesús Silva Herzog, and Leopoldo Zea. Several other names that soon became central to the Old Left-New Left split that would erupt in the 1960s were also present: Manuel Marcue Pardiñas, Jorge Carrión, and Jorge Tamayo. Although notably absent from the list of CEM founders were names later identified with an emergent New Left (e.g., Carlos Monsiváis, Carlos Fuentes, José Luis Cuevas, Elena Poniatowska), certain individuals on CEM's editorial board would later take the *Círculo de Estudios Mexicanos* into new journalistic directions, leading first to the short-termed newsweekly, *el espectador*—which played a central role in the shift to a New Left sensibility—and later, under Marcue Pardiñas, the creation of the magazine *Política*, which came to incarnate the more violent end of the New Left spectrum.³¹

The most notable (and long-lasting) forum was the newsweekly *Siempre!* With a commitment to ideological pluralism, *Siempre!* quickly invigorated discussion about Mexico and its role in the world, thereby opening a vital space for debate over national identity and the post-revolutionary direction of the state precisely at a moment when the country was entering a critical crossroads. In the wake of the Cuban revolution, *Siempre!* and, after 1961, its weekly cultural supplement, *La cultura en México*, became highly influential forums for New Left intellectuals to propound upon the central intellectual, political, and cultural debates of the time: revolutionary identity, Mexico's leadership role in the world, and the challenges of living in the shadow of the United States.³²

³¹ For a thorough analysis of *el espectador* and its relationship to an emergent New Left see Jaime Pensado, "The Polarization of Student Politics Inside the University."

³² For works on the importance of *Siempre!* see John Mraz, "Today, Tomorrow, and Always: The Golden Age of Illustrated Magazines in Mexico, 1937-1960" in Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 116-57; Zolov, "Graphic Satire." For discussion of intellectual discourse and the role of forums such as *Siempre!* see Jorge Volpi, *La imaginación y el poder: Una historia intelectual de 1968* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Era, 1998); and Deborah Cohn, "The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 21:1 (Winter 2006), 141-82.

Mexico, Crossroads of *Las Américas*

In the context of these political developments, Mexico's proximity to the United States generated a unique cross-fertilization of imagery, musical styles, and ideas that were also central to the formation of a transnational, New Left sensibility. The transmission of these cultural values was linked in part to the flow of tourism, but also to the various expatriate communities that took root south of the border—whether in the form of cultural and political exiles fleeing the repression of McCarthyism, or in the Beat's search for a communal "Other."³³ Political stability, a growing infrastructure oriented toward tourism, and a favorable exchange rate (the peso was devalued in 1953) all proved a boon for foreign visitors, and what began as a trickle in the years right after World War II became a steady flow of tourism by the 1950s.³⁴ Students and would-be students also crossed the border, many under the pretext of a GI Bill that generously funded higher education for returning veterans from World War II. In an era when expectations of upward social mobility, on one hand, and a rigid, irrational racial divide, on the other, defined life in the United States, Mexico seemingly offered an "other world": exotic, slightly dangerous, and full of adventure.

One of the central destinations for these North American youth was Mexico City College (MCC). The school attracted a range of students, some of whom (such as James Wilkie) went on to become noted scholars of Mexican history and politics.³⁵ Among Mexico City College's most famous alumni were also the Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.³⁶ This

³³ Daniel Belgrad, "The Transnational Counterculture: Beat-Mexican Intersections" in Jennie Skerl, ed., *Reconstructing the Beats* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27-40; Diana Anhalt, *A Gathering of Fugitives: American Political Expatriates in Mexico, 1948-1965* (Santa Maria, CA: Archer Books, 2001).

³⁴ See Zolov, "Discovering a Land 'Mysterious and Obvious'" in Joseph, et. al., eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age*, pp. 234-72; Dina Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁵ The best history of the college is found in the essay by Richard W. Wilkie, "Dangerous Journeys: Mexico City College Students and the Mexican Landscape, 1954-1962" in Nicholas Dagen Bloom, ed., *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 88-115.

³⁶ Of all the Beats, Kerouac had the most experience living and traveling in Mexico and despite his "ambivalent feeling" about the country, as Gunn has written, his immersion was significant. He first arrived in 1950, at the height of President Miguel Alemán's conservative reorientation of Mexico's political

was also an era when Mexico City was rapidly becoming a thriving metropolis, and many of these American youth—imbibed with the Beats’ sensibility of the avant-garde—embraced the vibrant art, music, and cultural scene the capital had to offer. “For many of the intellectually oriented veterans and students at MCC,” Richard Wilkie reflects, “this was potentially the new Paris where ideas, art, literature, and revolution could be discussed in cafes, taverns, and at numerous and risqué parties where inexpensive liquor and ‘Acapulco gold’ could be found.”³⁷ The recently finished Pan-American highway was a central component of this bohemianism for it linked the possibility of crossing the border with that particularly American pursuit of freedom via the automobile. Hence, it is no surprise that Richard Wilkie and his brother, James, travel to—and throughout—Mexico by car, as do the characters in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). In short, Mexico City had quickly become not only a fabled destination for the new bohemians, but a place where a new sensibility was to be forged.

There is an uncanny coincidence in the fact that, although unaware of one another, two blocks from where the Wilkies rented a room and in the same neighborhood where Kerouac also lived, “Che Guevara was living with his Peruvian-born wife . . . Their apartment was at 40 Calle Napoles . . . near the corner of the block with Calle Hamburgo in the Zona Rosa.”³⁸ Indeed, often overlooked in the discussion of the New Left is that it was from Mexico that the Cuban revolution was launched and, perhaps more significantly, it was in Mexico that the erstwhile bohemian, Ernesto Guevara, discovered his revolutionary calling and became “El Che.” Guevara’s personal struggle with self-discipline while he was in Mexico and his later insistence on the necessity of purging indiscipline in the name of revolutionary commitment constituted, writ large, a central dynamic of the 1960s, one located in the often caustic polemics that erupted over questions of youth styles and consumptive practices. As Sorensen aptly writes in her

economy, and would enter and leave the country on several occasions over the next six years. (Drewey Wayne Gunn, “The Beat Trail to Mexico” in Bloom, ed., *Adventures in Mexico*, 80.) See also Jorge García-Robles, *El disfraz de la inocencia: La historia de Jack Kerouac en México* (Mexico City: 2000).

³⁷ Wilkie, “Dangerous Journeys,” 92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 90. See also García-Robles, *El disfraz de la inocencia*, 90.

analysis of the impact of the Cuban revolution and of Che Guevara for a new generation:

If the saints of the Puritan revolution were inspired by religious zeal, Che was imbued with an emotion that was its secular equivalent: deeply idealistic, uncompromising, with a private passion for the collective. . . . The emerging sensibility of the period found in Che a repertoire of forms through which a new masculine social identity could be worked out: less driven by the all-encompassing narratives of the American century, less competitive, more defiant and hip, reluctant to identify adulthood with conventional grooming, career, or marriage.³⁹

Thus, in exploring the transformation of Ernesto Guevara from bohemian wanderer to icon of the heroic revolutionary, we also encounter a means for exploring central themes of a New Left sensibility.

When Ernesto Guevara crossed over into Mexico in the fall of 1954, following the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, he initially regarded his time there as but a way station for his future travels to Europe. Yet it was in Mexico that his revolutionary consciousness crystallized and his continental meanderings took on concrete purpose: to join the revolutionary struggle in Cuba. Still, prior to his encounter with Fidel Castro in Mexico City in July 1955, Guevara seemed more concerned with escape from the trappings of married life and the sudden advent of fatherhood, both of which he appeared to have stumbled into somewhat haphazardly, than with any engagement with Mexican left-wing politics per se. As Jorge Castañeda writes in his biography of Guevara, prior to his meeting with Castro, he was “essentially a tramp, a wandering photographer, an underpaid medical researcher, a permanent exile, and an insignificant husband—a weekend adventurer.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Guevara’s first ten months in Mexico—the country that for him stood at the end of the “American continent”⁴¹—was consumed largely with leisure travel and idle contemplation, interspersed with the half-hearted pursuit of a medical career. Alternately bored and depleted by the challenges of domesticity, on one hand, and the struggle to make ends meet, on the other, in his writings

³⁹ Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered*, 27.

⁴⁰ Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara*, translated by Marina Castañeda (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997), 76.

⁴¹ Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 3.

Guevara seemed largely oblivious to the brewing cauldron of political activity in Mexico. By the mid 1950s, such activity pointed to a widening schism in the nation's body politic centered around the future direction of the nation's own revolutionary project—a schism that channeled the intellectual and political talents of a new generation of critics, many of whom came to be openly identified with a New Left politics.

It was coincidental but not insignificant that Guevara's travels directly overlapped with that of two other great bohemians of the era—Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg—who likewise viewed Mexico, in Kerouac's later immortalized phrasing, as “the end of America.”⁴² The fact that Mexico became an unbeknownst meeting ground for these two very different (yet parallel) sets of middle-class wanderers spoke to Mexico's place in the hemispheric imaginary: as a crossroads for the Americas, where *Latin* America ended (or began) and the Anglo, *yanqui* America loomed menacingly (or enticingly). Moreover, it requires us to consider the unrecognized role Mexico played in helping to germinate two modernist discourses in tension with one another that characterized the 1960s and which constituted twin facets of the New Left sensibility: the self-imposed discipline of the “heroic guerrilla,” on one hand, and the flight from discipline of the hippie counterculture—whose roots are found in the Beats—on the other.

The Twin Faces of Bohemianism

In describing Guevara's travels in Mexico, his Argentine friend Ricardo Rojo later noted that he had “the unmistakable appearance of a university student on vacation.”⁴³ Yet his interest or ability to establish relationships with Mexicans his own age was limited. “I haven't made any really worthwhile friendship, either intellectual or sexual,”⁴⁴ he wrote in his diary in late 1954, despite having been in the country for several months. Whereas elsewhere during his travels in Latin America, Guevara sought out

⁴² Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 224. These were not the only Beat writers who traveled to Mexico during this period—William Burroughs, who infamously shot his wife while living in Mexico City, was another—but they are emblematic of an era.

⁴³ Castañeda, *Compañero*, 51.

⁴⁴ Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 95.

and was introduced to political luminaries (such as the Dominican Republic's Juan Bosch and Venezuela's Rómulo Betancourt, about whom he wrote extensively in his journal), in Mexico he neither met with nor reflected upon any of the significant intellectual or political figures of the time. At one point, he makes reference to seeking out "the Gonzales [sic] Casanova couple,"⁴⁵ presumably a reference to Pablo González Casanova (a rising sociologist at the national university and member of the *Círculo de Estudios Mexicanos*), but his interest is half-hearted and there appears to have been no follow-up. More fundamentally, he regarded Mexico as a launching pad for his "great leap to Europe and, if possible, China"⁴⁶ rather than as some final training ground of his revolutionary experience. Indeed, by the time he reached Mexico he appeared practically fed-up with politics, noting in a letter to his mother, "my objective is Europe, where I intend to go come what may."⁴⁷

Guevara's meanderings while in Mexico must be understood in terms of his natural bohemianism and his struggle for self-discipline. "[I] don't wash my clothes much and I still don't have enough money for a laundry,"⁴⁸ he writes at one point, noting that between the whims of his landlady and his lack of finances, "some of my paunch has been disappearing."⁴⁹ From the start, his relationship with his Peruvian-born fiancé, Hilda Galdea (whom he had met in Guatemala and who followed him to Mexico), was full of drama—owing in large part to Guevara's philandering and indecisiveness. Restless, bored with the potential trappings of domesticity (a daughter, Hildita, was born in Mexico), and in an increasingly untenable living arrangement, he writes at one point: "I have to get out of the house and don't know where to go. . . . I'm practically living on air in every sense."⁵⁰ Anticipating a final paycheck from the Argentina press agency, *Agencia Latina*, for whom Guevara worked as a stringer photographer, he is ready simply "to pay off some debts, travel

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

around Mexico and then clear the hell out.”⁵¹ Tellingly, in a letter to his mother shortly before his encounter with Fidel Castro, Guevara writes: “I think [the Communists] deserve respect, and sooner or later I will join the Party myself. What most prevents me from doing it right now is that I have a huge desire to travel in Europe, and I would not be able to do that if I was subject to rigid discipline.”⁵²

Mexico, in short, provided Guevara with the freedom to roam—just as it did for the Beat writers and other adventure-minded youth who crossed the border during the 1950s. Still, the impact of Mexico had profoundly different meanings for these two sets of parallel wanderers. For Guevara, who could assimilate the country’s cultural and political logic into a framework of Latin American experience, Mexico eventually became a training ground where he finally came to terms with his struggle with indiscipline. In contrast, for Kerouac (and others) Mexico largely remained a screen upon which to project and act out fantasies of an escape from the staid, rigid modernity of the “American Way of Life.” Mexico remained fixed in the imaginary of the Beat writers and countercultural tourists who followed in their wake, as an “Other”—inscrutable, exotic, transgressive. Thus, with Guevara, one can sense in his multiple attempts to climb the famed volcano, Popocatepetl, a foreshadowing of the rigid discipline he will impose on himself and others later in seeking to launch a continental-wide revolution from Bolivia. By contrast, in describing his effort to ascend the pyramids at Teotihuacan, Kerouac writes: “When we arrived at the summit of the pyramid, I lit a marijuana cigarette, so that we could all get in touch with our feelings for the place.”⁵³

Finding Discipline: Che Discovers His Calling

Guevara’s meeting with Fidel Castro in July 1955 changed everything. “He is a young, intelligent guy,” he notes in his diary about Fidel, “very sure of himself and extraordinarily audacious; I think we hit it

⁵¹ Ibid., 97.

⁵² Ibid., 88.

⁵³ Quoted in Garcia-Robles, *El disfraz de la inocencia*, 105. My translation to English.

off well.”⁵⁴ Guevara, who associated more with the hodge-podge Latin American exile community than with Mexicans, had met Fidel Castro through Fidel’s younger brother, Raúl, with whom Guevara had socialized on several occasions. Although not entirely random, given the relatively close-knit interchanges among the exile community, the meeting was certainly fortuitous for it provided Guevara with a sense of mission and purposefulness that he had clearly been seeking. Equally important, through Castro, Guevara discovers the method by which he will impose the self-discipline he earlier bemoaned was lacking. It is the discipline of revolutionary preparedness but, more fundamentally, a repudiation of the bohemian expression of *anti*-discipline he had embraced up to that point. In a letter sent to his mother several months before he embarks on the overloaded yacht, the *Granma*, leading to Cuba and his revolutionary struggle, he insists adamantly and yet somewhat defensively: “I must tell you that I have done a lot to wipe him out—I mean, not exactly that unfamiliar spineless type, but the other bohemian type, unconcerned about his neighbor and imbued with a sense of self-sufficiency deriving from an awareness (mistaken or not) of my own strength.”⁵⁵ Affirming his new identity as one with a sense of missionary purpose, he signs this letter for the first time simply, “el Che.”⁵⁶

Whereas for Che, Mexico became the place where “the very concept of the ‘I’ disappeared and gave way to the concept of the ‘we,’”⁵⁷ for Kerouac and the beatniks Mexico offered the opportunity to indulge in the “I” of creativity and flight from social responsibility. Guevara’s bohemianism was repressed in the imperative of self-discipline deemed necessary for

⁵⁴ Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 99. For discussion of this meeting see Castañeda, *Compañero*, 83-7; Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Guevara Also Known as Che*, translated by Martin Michael Roberts (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 53-4.

⁵⁵ Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 109.

⁵⁶ Castañeda writes that the moniker “Che” was acquired by Guevara in Guatemala, given to him by his Cuban exile friends, “because of his Argentine nationality and his countrymen’s habit of endlessly repeating this expression” (Castañeda, *Compañero*, 75). Taibo, on the other hand, notes that it was during the Mexican days of training that the nickname came into being: “[H]e interspersed his conversation with *che*, used as the Mexicans used ‘hombre,’ and addressed everybody as *Che*. The Cubans found this very funny and nicknamed him Che” (Taibo II, *Guevara*, 67). “Che” in Argentine Spanish is roughly the equivalent of “dude” or “man” said at the beginning and/or end of a sentence in American English.

⁵⁷ Guevara, *Back on the Road*, 110.

revolutionary transformation. In turn, his own success in the repression of excess became the basis for the “New Man” that would arise from the Cuban revolution, and that of the “Heroic Guerrilla”—a central trope of the radical component of the New Left—whose cause was to usher in a utopian future across the Americas. As Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo eloquently articulates in her interpretative critique of the epistemological assumptions that underlie the radical revolutionary trajectory of the Heroic Guerrilla:

Guevara’s representation of revolutionary transformation ‘leaves behind’ a previously immature, complicit consciousness for a fully formed, collective one, resembling a model of development that ‘leaves behind’ premodern forms of subjectivity and agency for thoroughly modern ones. Both models invariably ‘leave behind’ the ethnic particularity of indigenous or peasant subjectivity, while carrying forward a racialized and masculinist understanding of fully modern, revolutionary agency.⁵⁸

By contrast, the Beats (and later, hippies) reveled in their lived embodiments of excess, which served as a strategy for the subversion of the disciplinary structures of time, productivity, and consumption central to the functioning of liberal capitalist society. On the surface, these two responses to excess appeared diametrically opposed. Yet in the context of the 1960s, they became fused as the twin components of what I am suggesting we call a New Left sensibility, a sensibility that believed in Che Guevara’s model of radical transformation as the basis for social evolution, while simultaneously embracing a politics of *fun* as the only imaginable basis for a truly democratic future.⁵⁹

Twilight of the Old Left

Several months after Che left Mexico for the start of the Cuban armed insurrection, Cárdenas received the “Stalin Peace Prize” in a ceremony organized by the Movimiento Mexicano por la Paz, the national branch of the World Peace Council. Numbering in the thousands, the assembled crowd crammed into every available space to see and hear from

⁵⁸ Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas*, 89.

⁵⁹ For a fascinating discussion on the “politics of fun” in revolutionary Cuba see Robin Moore, *Music & Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Chapter 4, “Dance Music and the Politics of Fun.”

Mexico's greatest living revolutionary. An article in *Excélsior* described the chaotic scene: "The multitude surpassed by several times the occupancy limit; each seat contained up to three people; dozens of men and women hung from the curtains and walls of the amphitheater. And stretching from the doors to the street to the main hall, a compact mass—expectant, enthusiastic—continued to struggle to get in."⁶⁰ Cárdenas's acceptance speech was brief. Remarking that, "At the present hour there is not a single nation that does not desire peace and work toward its consolidation," the former president denounced the Cold War while praising the non-interventionist traditions of the Mexican nation.⁶¹ When he finished, the audience's ovation lasted nearly five minutes yet Cárdenas, faithful to his moniker, the "Sphinx of Jiquilpan," maintained a presence of absolute inscrutability: "Not a single muscle on his face moved, his lips were immobile, he never smiled."⁶² Outside the theater, it would take nearly twenty minutes for him simply to reach his car through the density of the adulatory throng.

The timing of the Peace Prize, however, was historically ironic, for it came in the wake of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's excesses at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party, a connection openly mocked in some quarters of the Mexican press.⁶³ But the timing was also symbolic politically, for it transpired at a moment of a shift taking place within Mexico and across Latin America away from an "Old Left" politics, characterized by admiration for the socialist leadership of the Soviet Union, toward a "New Left" politics—irreverent, decentralized and ultimately shaped by the youthful radicalism unleashed by the Cuban revolution.

⁶⁰ Manuel Becerra Acosta, Jr., "No hay país que no busque la paz,' declara Cárdenas," *Excélsior*, 27 February 1956, 1A.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* Jiquilpan was the town of Lázaro Cárdenas's birth, in the state of Michoacán.

⁶³ In a cartoon by Arias Bernal, for example, a figure shown reading a newspaper with a photograph of Cárdenas alongside a headline about Khrushchev's revelations notes to his friend that the prize is "un poco 'devaluado'" ("a little 'devalued'"). Arias Bernal, "Tardío," *Excélsior*, 27, February 1956, 7A. The Twentieth Party Congress was held February 14-26, 1956.

If the impact of the Cuban revolution in the United States was to “lay the seeds of a new sensibility”⁶⁴ that directly shaped the emergent discourse and strategies of a New Left politics, the result for Mexico was initially its opposite. Catalyzed by their defense of the Cuban revolution, for a brief period the figures most closely identified with the Old Left approach to a movement-based politics, Lombardo Toledano and ex-president Lázaro Cárdenas, once more returned to the limelight. Toledano was the unchallenged leader of the newly renamed Partido Popular Socialista, whose “Pancho Villa Brigades” launched in defense of the Cuban revolution in the context of the Bay of Pigs invasion inspired youth and other working-class actors across the nation. Of greater impact was Cárdenas, who ascended to the forefront of a broad populist coalition, the Movimiento Liberación Nacional (MLN). The MLN was itself an outgrowth of a World Peace Council meeting chaired by Cárdenas in Mexico City in 1961, and for a brief period this coalition seemed capable of bridging an Old Left worker-peasant front with a emergent New Left sensibility and thus revitalizing—and revising—the democratic socialist principles of Mexico’s own revolutionary heritage.⁶⁵ Explanations for the abrupt collapse of the MLN by the end of 1963 include political repression unleashed by the PRI, alongside Toledano’s opportunism, and the cooptation of both figures by the ruling party. However, missing from an understanding of this collapse is a clearer understanding of how new cultural and political forces also contributed to the undermining of a coalition politics premised on an unquestioned reverence for such larger-than-life figures from the national body politic.

New Directions for a New Left Historiography

There is not space here to lay out a more expansive discussion of these forces and how, collectively, they constituted a New Left in the broader conceptual sense I am advocating. To be sure, there is still much

⁶⁴ Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*, 52.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the impact of the Cuban revolution on Mexican political culture in the early 1960s and in particular the role of Lázaro Cárdenas and the MLN see Eric Zolov, “*iCuba sí, yanquis no!*: The Sacking of the *Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano* in Morelia, Michoacán, 1961,” in Joseph and Spenser, eds., *In From the Cold*, 214-52.

room for future investigation. What this essay has sought to establish, nevertheless, is a mapping out of the general contours of the shift from an Old Left to a New Left in Mexico, and to draw our attention especially to certain cultural aspects of that shift by focusing on the cultural politics of Guevara, on one hand, and the Beats, on the other. In Guevara, we encounter the anxiety and sense of ambivalence he felt toward his own bohemianism, an *indiscipline* that he ultimately concluded needed to be crushed in the pursuit of a utopian, revolutionary future. Surely, such reflections and his narrative of personal transformation were not “new”; one imagines that many other revolutionaries wrestled with similar concerns.⁶⁶ But Guevara’s quest for self-discovery would have an impact beyond his own individual set of beliefs, for as “El Che” he embodied the essence of the New Left’s revolutionary spirit—its Third World solidarity—and, in certain quarters, its program for radical political action.⁶⁷ At the same time, and despite his own *inner* transformation, Che’s outer appearance contained signifiers of a pronounced bohemianism—his “revolutionary androgyny”⁶⁸—manifest in an irreverence for structure, hierarchy, and patriarchal norms that was central to the cultural practices of the New Left. Mexico provided the context in which Guevara’s transformation from bohemian to revolutionary could transpire, while at the same time the country nurtured the adventuresome antics of a very different set of bohemians, the Beats, whose own indiscipline remained unrepentant. For the revolutionary and countercultural movements that spread not only across the Americas but globally, these interlocking facets of a New Left epistemology—structure and anti-structure—were defining features of the era’s social upheavals.

To conclude, I would like to point out certain elements of the social and cultural forces I suggest constituted a New Left in Latin America and whose contours were already apparent in Mexico and elsewhere by the

⁶⁶ Saldaña-Portillo argues that Che’s transformation took place during the guerrilla struggle in Cuba, though I would argue its origins in Mexico should be considered as well. See her excellent discussion in *The Revolutionary Imagination*.

⁶⁷ Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of the U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered*, Chapter 1; Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*; Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*.

⁶⁸ Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination*, 79.

early 1960s. There was, for one, the new middle-class youth culture—what the mass media notoriously dubbed *el rebeldismo sin causa*—that aggressively appropriated sonic and aesthetic features of U.S. rock’n roll and would soon be transformed by the impact of the Beatles and other British bands. Although in many respects this movement was directly emulative of foreign models, at the same time intrinsic to its popularity among youth—and what made it anathema to the conservative press—was its posture of defiance of traditional hierarchies that formed the core principal of the new youth style.⁶⁹ A newfound irreverence for populist aesthetics was also evident in political caricature, itself a bell-weather of the shifting winds of political discourse, while in literature writers such as José Agustín and Carlos Monisiviáis were developing a new style of fiction writing and reportage akin to the “New Journalism” in the United States.⁷⁰ Similar trends were apparent in film, fashion, and the graphic arts. As Jean Franco argues, these elements of a new, cultural vanguard—so often overlooked in our discussion of Latin American politics in this era—would collide, often violently, with a political vanguard that pursued revolutionary transformation with devout seriousness. “Building a new society required discipline, not irony; hard work, not a freewheeling bohemian style,”⁷¹ notes Franco. By incorporating the more inclusive usage of the term “New Left” into our analytical vocabulary, the pursuit of a strict self-discipline evident in the myriad, factionalist-ridden revolutionary movements that erupted across the hemisphere can be married to the equally myriad cultural practices that eschewed a narrow self-discipline, though no less so the pursuit of a revolutionary aesthetic, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the “long 1960s” and that era’s impact on the present.

⁶⁹ Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). For a survey of the impact of rock music elsewhere in Latin America and the rise of youth countercultures in the 1960s, see Deborah Pacini Hernandez, et. al., eds., *Rockin’ Las Américas*.

⁷⁰ See Zolov, “Graphic Satire”; Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia.”

⁷¹ Franco, *Decline & Fall of the Lettered City*, 91.