PAZ, PRI, AND PROGRESS: OCTAVIO PAZ'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND LITERARY STRUGGLE TO INSPIRE REFORM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICO

D. Gene Pace
Alice Lloyd College

ABSTRACT

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Mexico's political and economic policies were heavily influenced by the Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI). The landmark 1998 victory by Vicente Fox, the first presidential candidate in seven decades to win without the official sanction of the PRI, marked an important milestone in Mexican history. Octavio Paz, an eloquent proponent of political, economic, and social reform, sought for decades to inspire change. This paper seeks to illuminate Paz's economic philosophy, and to demonstrate how the acclaimed writer, through courageous symbolic action coupled with an inimitable and potent pen, challenged the PRI's hegemony in Mexico and contributed to the historic election he almost lived to celebrate (an elderly Paz died shortly before the historic 1998 election).

"The Aztec ritual of 2 October [1968] in the Plaza de Tlatelolco... convinced me to abandon the Mexican Foreign Service."¹

"October 2, 1968 ended the student movement. It also ended an era in the history of Mexico."²

Introduction

Both his father (Octavio Paz Solórzano, 1883-1936) and his grandfather (Ireneo Paz, 1836-1924) were writers and both took a passionate interest in matters political. His grandfather, initially a fervent supporter of the Mexican leader Porfirio Díaz, later served time in prison, punished by the same dictator he had previously served. His father was such an ardent supporter of Emiliano Zapata in the Mexican Revolution that he acted as that leader's agent in the United States during the chaotic time of the Mexican Revolution.³ As the revolutionary heir of these "revolutionary intellectuals,"⁴ perhaps it was natural that a young Octavio Paz would take a keen interest in politics, economics, social justice, and—above all—writing. Of course no one could have predicted that ultimately this youngest Paz intellectual would emerge as a world-class writer, gain greater fame than his father and grandfather combined, and help weaken the mighty Mexican political giant, the Partido Revolutionario Institutional (PRI). Given the extensive nature of the PRI's political and economic clout, the impact of Paz's pen could never be quantified but his efforts seem, in retrospect, to have left their eloquent mark on Mexican history.
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“As a young man Paz had become a Marxist,” but he became disillusioned with the implementation of Marxist economic philosophy in real world settings, especially in Stalin's Russia. “My critics,” he reflected, “provoked a bilious eruption of vituperation” because of the young writer's intellectual independence. Paz deplored the shallow pseudo-Marxism of intellectuals who subscribed to “versions of Marxism” that were increasingly “simplistic” and who expounded ideas that were mere “caricatures” of the philosophy originally expounded by Karl Marx. As time passed, Paz increasingly found serious flaws in Marxist theory itself. As he argued in “Las dos razones” in 1964, “Marxism has been one of the agents of the historic changes of our century but its explanation of those changes has been insufficient and, above all, its forecasts about its meaning and direction have proven false.” The word history, argued Paz, “designates primarily a process,” a process which involves a “search because it is movement and all movement is a going toward.” Paz came to abhor what Marxism was “going toward.” Given Paz's social consciousness and love of freedom, his increasing preference for capitalism comes as little surprise. Although plagued with their own problems, capitalistic economic systems typically had allowed more open literary expression, greater political freedom, and less military repression than had their Marxist counterparts.

With regard to his own country's history, Paz deplored much of its past, and mistrusted historical writing about earlier periods, but he personally could not resist the urge to search for a more full interpretation of the past, as well as for an understanding of the complexities of the present. “Perhaps because of family influence from childhood,” he reminisced, “I was passionate about the history of Mexico.” Central to his theoretical explanations of past and present was the dynamic tension between isolation and interaction, or as he explained, “the double rhythm of solitude and communion.” A related binary pair that emerged from the Mexican author's pen was that of “solitude-modernity,” a perceptive theoretical concept with important macro- and micro-level economic and political applications.

In his book Itinerario (1993), Paz maintained that “ruptura y unión” (“rupture and union”) has characterized Mexico's history. The “ruptura” of the Conquest was accompanied by the “unión” of a common, universal faith shared in adapted ways by both victor and vanquished. This “dialectic” rhythm of “ruptura y unión” was part of the historical process that Mexico shared with peoples across the globe. “Ruptura y unión” also characterized Paz's own life. His extensive service abroad demonstrated the “unión” between himself and his homeland, but it was not a blind, uncritical relationship, even before his landmark “ruptura” in 1968 quickly replaced the earlier “unión,” as Paz denounced the brutality of the PRI for its startling crackdown on a peaceful demonstration of Mexican students.

To have retained an economic outlook based on Marxist economic theory would have kept Paz more in the mainstream in terms of the literary elite of his time and place. But Paz was no mere intellectual sheep; he was fiercely independent in the positions he chose to take. From the vantage point of the present, we can increasingly appreciate the
intellectual wisdom and courage of Octavio Paz for avoiding the political and economic quicksand that proved so enticing to other leading intellectuals. The gifted Mexican writer surmised that if he had published his classic El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude) in 1937 rather than 1950, he “would have without doubt affirmed that the meaning of the revolutionary Mexican explosion—that which [he] had called the search—would end in the adoption of communism.” During the same era, Martin Heidegger backed Nazism, Pablo Neruda supported Stalin's brand of Marxism, and Ezra Pound sided with the fascists. Paz, by contrast, maintained his intellectual independence, and balance, by rejecting rigid ideological positions, whether in the direction of Adam Smith or Karl Marx: “No ofrezco a mis contemporáneos un sistema o una filosofía” (“I do not offer my contemporaries a system or a philosophy”). He wished, however, that his pen had exerted a stronger influence on contemporary Mexicans, intellectuals as well as politicians; but, as he observed, “Nadie oyó” (“Nobody heard”).

It was not feasible for Paz to publish a scathing attack on the USSR in his native Mexico, but he did write such a statement in Paris and publish it in Argentina in 1951. He had to look beyond Mexico to publish his denunciation of the Soviet dictator and his archipelago of prison camps because “nobody in Mexico dared to do it because nobody believed him.” Paz, “who since his youth had put his faith in the socialist revolution,” had lost confidence in the merits of Stalin's sadistic socialism. Paz was unequivocal, however, in his assertion that Stalinism's failure was not necessarily socialism's total failure: “It is imprecise . . . to say that the Soviet experience condemns socialism.” Socialism, he reasoned, is not automatically achieved when a planned economy is imposed or the property of large landowners and capitalists is confiscated. Paz deplored “the forced labor camps, the slavery and the deification in life of the leader.” Stalin's ruthless bureaucracy belonged, he said, to the Soviet Union, not to socialism. The USSR, with its cruelty, its “obligatory communion,” and its “authoritarian socialism was not the resolution of the Mexican Revolution.” The forced “Unión” of Soviet Socialist Republics was not at all what a younger, idealistic Paz had found appealing in Marxist theory. The kind of just progress Paz longed for had not materialized under Mexico's ruling party (the PRI), but he had become convinced that the elusive solution to his country's problems was not to be found in the “ruptura” of a failed Soviet experience.

**Economic Modernization and Political Democracy**

Paz viewed modernization with ambivalence. It was simultaneously “condemnation” and “salvation.” Clearly, balance was the key, not a modernization based on either heartless capitalism or wooden-headed socialism. The economic theories of Karl Marx and Adam Smith, if wisely applied, could each make important contributions, but neither could safely be taken to extremes without hurting the people these theorists sought to serve. A creative Paz was repelled by the dangerously monotonous uniformity of thinking and feeling, and by the social and economic inequalities that typically accompanied modernity. Such tendencies were reinforced by the closed rule of the PRI, whose
dominance discouraged creative solutions to pressing policy matters that cried out for solutions. Modern society, Paz lamented, served as such a poor example, tainted as it was with its "publicity, cult of money, abysmal inequalities, fierce selfishness, uniformity of tastes, opinions, consciences."24

Yet Paz maintained a balanced view vis-à-vis modernity. He had learned that there was no socialist panacea to solve the twentieth century's intractable problems. Equilibrium, not extremism, characterized his thinking. In spite of its curses, a selfish modernity could also bring generous benefits, including the promotion of "a radical transformation of the society," a transformation that would require "true democracy." Obviously the PRI had failed to live up to the ideals Paz saw in the Mexican Revolution. "Universality, modernity and democracy are today inseparable terms," he proclaimed.25

The global trend toward economic liberalization was one in which Mexico participated, thereby increasing the possibility for the creation of a truly democratic political system. However, this liberalization had been accompanied by rapid urbanization, which, in turn, had been at least partially the cause of the distressing marginalization of the already painfully deprived lower economic strata of Mexican citizens. Paz saw no "true alternative to modernization" but warned that it must be a modernization with wise limits.26 In the 1960s and 1970s, many looked with optimism at Mexico's consistent economic growth. But their sanguinity took a serious blow when in 1982 Mexico openly admitted that it could not manage its huge debt. A decade later (1993), Mexico's active backing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) illustrated the country's willingness to try new approaches to meeting its serious economic challenges.27

In 1983, fifteen years before his death, Paz warned that "if the PRI wants to survive, it must convert itself into a party like the others; besides, it must learn to share the government with the opposition." He warned that those opposing the entrenched PRI "must always keep in mind that democracy without governability, as occurred in the Mexico of Madero and in the Chile of Allende, means opening the doors of chaos and, later, to dictatorship." In 1983, he predicted that the next few years would be decisive in the history of Mexico ("... creo que los próximos años serán decisivos"). The reform he visualized must, he argued, "come from below, from the entire society."28

Paz, the critic, was never satisfied with the economic, political, social or intellectual development of Mexico, but he was not a hopeless cynic. As his friend and literary associate Enrico Mario Santf wrote in his prologue to the commemorative fiftieth edition of El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude), "Who has seen Hope, never forgets her," and like Paz himself, "he seeks her under all the heavens and among all men."29 When, in his mid-thirties, Paz finished The Labyrinth of Solitude, he had written "perhaps the most important book of meditation on national self-knowledge in the Mexican twentieth century."30 In the following half-century, until his death two years prior to the new millennium, Paz would continue his meditation, much of it reflected in his poetry and prose.
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2 October 1968

"Though the deep-seated cult of authoritarian government in Mexico would not recognize the fact," wrote Krauze, "1968 was both its highest point of authoritarian power and the real beginning of its collapse."31 In his "Olimpiada y Tlatelolco,"32 Paz reflected, with customary global perspective, on the crucial year 1968, a year of "protests, tumults and mutinies in Prague, Chicago, Paris, Tokyo, Belgrade, Rome, Mexico, Santiago."33 The Mexican poet responded to the PRI's repressive tactics with his own protest, an abrupt and highly publicized resignation as Mexico's Ambassador to India. That Mexico City had been awarded the privilege of hosting the 1968 Olympics was an indication of the increased international respect that the city, and the country, had gained over the previous decades. The economic progress that had brought greater international prestige to Mexico had also, in Paz's view, increased the probability that student protests for democratic reform would occur. "It could be said that the student movement and the celebration of the Olympics in Mexico were complementary" to one another, Paz noted; "both were signs of the relative development of the country."34 Unfortunately, he lamented, "at the moment in which the government obtained international recognition for forty years of political stability and economic progress, a spot of blood dissipated the official optimism and provoked in the spirits of all a doubt about the meaning of that progress."35 Probably over 300 died, with thousands more wounded, on that tragic 2nd of October. In spite of official attempts "not to speak of the violence of the police or the army," the public outcry in Mexico, and beyond, was immense; a particular "silent demonstration" drew about two-thirds of a million people, an unprecedented occurrence in Mexican history. The desire for real reform, for open democracy, for a weaker PRI, and for a humane modernity was obviously widespread.36 "Without criticism and, above all, without self-criticism, there is no possibility of change," reasoned Paz in his attempt to rationalize President Díaz Ordaz's irrational order to oppose the students with military force. The PRI's "demonstration" of force was neither silent nor peaceful; it imposed "ruptura" and fled from "unión." The PRI had, in Paz's view, acted with appalling "mental and moral weakness."37

Octavio Paz must have been particularly sensitive to the plight of the students in 1968. As a teenager he, too, had taken part in a strike by Mexican students.38 A decade before the 1968 student massacre, as he and another prolific Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, gazed from a window, they observed a demonstration that included students and intellectuals, two groups with which the two writers could identify, and sympathize. "Suddenly, the police charged, breaking heads with their clubs."39 Determined marchers traversed the same route several days later, but this time Paz and Fuentes were not mere onlookers, but marchers.40

Paz's outlook on Mexico and the world might appropriately be described in terms of a spiral, an image he found profoundly meaningful. The path from the Mexico of the Aztecs to that of Díaz Ordaz was neither circle nor straight line; rather, like a spiral it was a voyage whose trajectory "endlessly returns and endlessly distances itself from the point
of departure. A strange lesson: there is no return but neither is there a point of arrival." As Paz the poet wrote:

The injustice of being: things suffer
one with the other and with themselves
for to be is the desire to be more,
to always be more than more.
To be time is the sentence; history, our punishment.

The location of the tragedy, at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (or Tlatelolco, its widely used Indian name), held symbolic meaning for Paz, a careful student of his country’s Aztec heritage. It was as if the barbaric practices of the past, a part of Mexican history that the modern nation-state hoped was now defunct, had been revived. “History, our punishment” had reasserted itself. As though trapped in a relentless historical spiral, some of the troops who fired on the civilians emerged “from their hideouts in the Aztec ruins.” The killing at Tlatelolco, Paz lashed out, “reveals to us that a past we believed buried is alive.” Like the heartless sacrifices of the Aztecs or the brutal hegemony of Cortés’s Spaniards, the use of terror by the PRI in 1968 did not inspire confidence, but fear. Tragically, the spiral of Mexican history had spiraled out of control as it exacted brutal sacrifices as blood donations to heartless hegemony.

The events of October 1968, which received more direct and rapid international publicity than the bloody rituals of earlier eras, approximated, but did not replicate, events of other times in Mexico’s past. Paz had written many years earlier of a sixth sense, a “moral sense,” which he had explored in relation to such fundamental issues as integrity and freedom. The erosion of the integrity of the PRI had seriously threatened the freedom of all Mexicans, not simply those at Tlatelolco. Ten days later (Columbus Day, or Día de la Raza), the Olympic flame was lit in Mexico City, but it was painfully clear that the Olympic flame, like the outward glow of economic development in a city plagued by poverty, was merely a facade, an artificial flame that symbolized the duality that was Mexico, a nation that its former Indian ambassador both loved and detested. As Paz’s friend Santf explained, the ambassador’s resignation was publicized across the world and was regarded “as an act of intellectual courage that converted him overnight into a hero.”

“The morning of 3 October [1968], I learned of the bloody repression of the previous day. I decided that I could not continue representing a government that had acted in a manner so openly opposed to my manner of thinking." As he observed in his 1968 poem “Intermitencias del oeste” (“Interruptions from the West”), “The municipal employees wash the blood from the Plaza of the Sacrificed.” In previous years, Paz had “both represented and criticized the establishment.” Now he would dedicate himself only to the latter.

A Plural Life: Critic in Exile, Critic at Home

The year 1968 was a turning point for Mexico, and for Paz. Thereafter the talented writer became an even stronger critic of the PRI’s antidemocratic practices than he had

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been in earlier years. Although previously he had urged Mexico to embrace democracy, the need for reform now seemed even more compelling. Following the October massacre at Tlatelolco, Paz spent his next ten years abroad. Even when he finally returned to Mexico he remained determined to continue his role as outspoken critic of the entrenched ruling political party. His persistent linkage of political involvement and intellectual courage had by now become habitual. A case in point was his assumption of the directorship of a new publication whose title, Plural, also expressed a deeply held philosophical thesis.

Of particular note regarding Paz’s oversight of Plural was his acceptance for publication of a controversial article by Gabriel Zaid. This eloquent critic of the PRI—a gifted writer, business consultant and engineer—possessed intellectual courage that resembled that of Paz himself. The future author of El progreso improductivo (1979), La economia presidencial (1987), and La nueva economia presidencial (1994), Zaid had decided views about Mexico, and fairness, and was willing to have his outspoken remarks put in print, if only he could find someone to publish them. He submitted an article that was critical of President Luis Echeverría Álvarez to a journal named Siempre! (“Always!”), but its editor was too cautious to put Zaid’s article in print, perhaps in part due to criticism the editor had received years earlier for publishing a photograph deemed offensive by an earlier Mexican president. In accordance with the rather craven, not to mention uninspiring, dictum “Nothing against the President or the Virgin of Guadalupe,” José Pagés Llergo, Siempre’s director, rejected Zaid’s article.

Llergo’s decision, no doubt, spared him trouble with the PRI, since Zaid’s piece included the abrasive contention that “the only historic criminal in Mexico is Luis Echeverría,” a reference to Echeverría’s support (as Minister of the Interior) of Díaz Ordaz’s 1968 assault on peaceful demonstrators. The new president struggled to distance himself from his predecessor Díaz Ordaz, and presumably from his own conscience, to the point that he nearly suffered the humiliation of having his presidential-victory-guaranteeing PRI nomination rescinded. Many may have forgotten or looked the other way, but not Gabriel Zaid, who had no intention of criticizing the Virgin of Guadalupe but was zealously willing to speak out against the president. For his part, Paz was perfectly willing to see that Zaid’s criticism was heard. As director of Plural, Paz published the controversial article. In a 1978 letter to Pere Gimferrer, Paz wrote of Gabriel Zaid, “I admire him a lot.”

During an earlier presidential administration, that of Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-52), this PRI-nominated president had boasted of his desire for “all Mexicans to have a Cadillac, a cigar and a ticket to the bullfights.” Success was more pronounced, as might be expected, in the cigar and bullfighting businesses than in the sale of luxury automobiles. Economic expansion, extensive industrialization in the national capital, and heavy reliance on US investment dollars characterized Miguel Alemán’s regime. He relied on deficit spending, which would later become the norm rather than the exception, to stimulate growth, and endorsed a form of trickle-down economics in which lavish expenditures in support of the economy of Mexico City were expected, indirectly,
to benefit the rest of the country. The statue of himself that he had placed in a particular area that he had promoted seemed a fitting symbol of the economic leadership of Alemán and the PRI.58 "The Alemán people took over Mexico, but they made it grow," one young businessman later recalled.59 Gabriel Zaid would later maintain that "the Mexican political system is the greatest modern business that the Mexican genius has created."60 The PRI, with its close ties to the business community, had promoted stability, education, economic growth, and many other things important to Mexicans of all economic classes, but had done so on its own terms. "Its principal objective," Krauze reminds us, "has been to coordinate power within the country."61 Zaid writes of "a dynamic market in buying and selling obedience and goodwill" and insists that "the essence of [the government's] social contract, the balm that calms souls, reconciles minds, and resolves contradictions is state money. . . . Politics does not consist of winning public elections but of rising within the system."62 The watershed 1998 victory over the PRI had major implications not only for Mexican political development, but also for the country's economic future. In his compilation of the political thought of Octavio Paz, Grenier poses the question, "What would Paz say about the electoral defeat of the PRI?"63 No one can know what his exact response would have been, but it seems safe to speculate that had he lived to relish this victory, the Nobel Prize winning author would have found an eloquent way to celebrate. Perhaps, too, he would have reflected in commemorative fashion on the thirtieth anniversary of the 1968 massacre that had mocked Mexican democracy.

In an interview with Enrico Mario Santí, Paz observed that "it is the intellectual that struggles with the constituted powers and with society, but he has no arms, only his own pen, nothing else."64 Armed with ingenious poetry, convincing prose, a judicious economic philosophy, an insatiable fascination with politics, and an undying sense of fairness, Paz helped reform Mexico. Had he lived to see a rival party do the seemingly impossible and defeat the PRI candidate for president in 1998, perhaps Paz would have been inclined to modify his previous lamentation: "Nadie oyo" ("Nobody heard"). In fact, by the late twentieth century, the Mexican nation, and a sizeable foreign audience, had both heard and seen the persuasive exhortations and courageous symbolic actions of the poet who, with "no arms [but] only his own pen, nothing else" had challenged the PRI's hegemony in Mexico and contributed to the historic election he almost lived to celebrate (an elderly Paz died shortly before the historic 1998 election).

Notes

1. Octavio Paz to José Blanco, cited in Enrico Mario Santí, "El sueño compartido," in Paz, El laberinto de la soledad, con Postdata y Vuelta a El laberinto de la soledad, 2 vols. (México, D. F: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 2:130; all translations from Spanish sources are mine unless otherwise noted.
5. Krauze, Mexico, 651.
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14. Itinerario 38; italics in original.
16. Grenier, Prologue to Sueño en libertad, xii.
17. Paz, Mexico, 592.
18. Krauze, Mexico, 592.
19. Krauze, Mexico, 592.
22. Paz, Itinerario, 38; italics in original.
23. Paz, Itinerario, 40.
26. Grenier, Prologue to Sueño en libertad, xiii.
29. “Quien ha visto la Esperanza, no la olvida. La busca bajo todos los cielos y entre todos los hombres,” 9.
30. Krauze, Mexico, 589.
31. Krauze, Mexico, 737.
33. Paz, Laberinto de la soledad, I: 218.
34. Paz, Laberinto de la soledad, I: 228.
38. Paz, Itinerario, 46-47.
40. Krauze, Mexico, 623-624.
41. Paz, Itinerario, 8-9.
44. Paz, Laberinto de la soledad, I: 229.
45. Krauze, Mexico, 722-23.
47. Santf, “El sueño compartido,” II: 129.
49. Paz, Obras Completas, 10: 485.

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52. Grenier, Prologue to Sueño en libertad, xii.
53. Krauze, Mexico, 743.
54. Krauze, Mexico, 743.
55. Krauze, Mexico, 725-728.
56. Memorias y palabras (Editorial Seix Barral: Barcelona, 1999), 176-177.
57. Krauze, Mexico, 543.
58. Krauze, Mexico, 543-544, 549.
59. Krauze, Mexico, 544.
60. Cited in Krauze, Mexico, 550.
61. Krauze, Mexico, 551.
62. Cited in Krauze, Mexico, 551.
63. Grenier, Prologue to Sueño en libertad, ix.

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