



Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas

1968 as a turning point in historical thinking: changes in western historiography

Proefschrift vijftig jaar na de revolutie van mei 1968 gaat Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas na wat de betekenis van de revolutie is geweest.

Reconsidering the significance of the 1968 Cultural Revolution

Thirty years after the symbolic year of 1968 - that great 'rupturing - event' - occurred, it is now so much easier to adequately measure and comprehend its true and profound significance. The reason is that, with the perspective provided by three decades that have since transpired, it is now clear that 1968 was in fact only the concentration point and the most evident and spectacular reflection of a more comprehensive moment of profound revolutionary changes that affected practically the entire planet. These include the great Chinese Cultural Revolution unleashed in 1966 along with the 'hot' Italian autumn of 1969, obviously passing through the famous French May, the Czechoslovakian Spring of Prague, the tragic October 1968 massacre of Mexican students and civilian population, the brief uprising rehearsal of the Argentinean 'Cordobazo', or the different movements leading to the occupation of facilities in New York or Berkeley in the United States, among many others.¹

Because today, it is clear that the fundamental dividing circumstance of 1968 has spread on a *worldwide* scale. And it is now also clear that - way and beyond its multiple and diverse forms of expression at the different geographic spots, obviously associated with the historic features of each respective region, nation or space - the 1968 movement is basically a true *cultural revolution*. Consequently, at its most representative and charac-

1 Regarding the general characterization of this movement cf. Immanuel Wallerstein, '1968: Revolution in the World - System. Thesis and Queries' in: *Geopolitics and Geoculture* (Cambridge 1991).



Studentenoproer in Rome. Uit: *Het aanzien van 1968* (Haarlem 1969).

teristic epicenters as well as at the entire group of places and spaces of its multiple appearances, the historical 1968 rupture always emerges with a double scenario: one, as a process in which the explanation is never entirely complete stemming only from the data of the corresponding *local* situation - forwarding us therefore to its *universal dimension* - and the other, also as a transformation in which, whatever might be the political fate or the mediate or immediate destiny of its direct actors, as individuals or collectively, it always ends up by radically upsetting, without any possibility of turning back, the forms of functioning and of reproduction of the main cultural structures that it refutes and questions.²

2 Regarding this cf. Fernand Braudel, 'Renacimiento, Reforma, 1968: Revoluciones Culturales de Larga Duración', *La Jornada Semanal*, 226 (Mexico 1993) and Carlos Aguirre Rojas, '1968: la gran ruptura', *La Jornada Semanal* 225 (Mexico 1993) and 'Repensando los movimientos de 1968', in: *1968: Raíces y Razones*, Ed. UACJ (Ciudad Juarez 1999).

Thus, the 1968 Revolution, 'actually and in fact travels all over the world', having first to readapt itself to conditions of the developed capitalist world (as in the French May movement), and to the main dilemmas of the different projects of 'real socialism' societies (as in the case of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and later the tragic Spring of Prague), or, finally, to the contextual peculiarities of the Third World and underdeveloped countries (as the experience of the Mexican student-popular movement). This worldwide experience was to anticipate the world economic crisis unleashed in 1972-1973, to generate the birth or re-launching of the new social movements displayed during the last thirty years, to build the emergency conditions for the 'new leftist' revolutionaries, and to finally make possible a total and complete renewal of the cultural sphere of modern societies the world over.

Because if 1968 is not just a simple minor change or a simple mutation, but actually a *true revolution*, and if this revolution is fundamentally of a *cultural* nature, it is then logical that what has changed since 1968, is much more the nature and the essential function of the three main institutions within which modern culture is produced, generated, maintained and reproduced, that is to say: family, school and mass media. It is precisely here, at the core of these three contemporary cultural reproduction apparatuses, where the mark of the passage of the 1968 revolution has left its definitive imprint, signaling a clear break between before and after in the history of these three spaces.³

Acting upon those three privileged spaces where culture is conceived and reproduced, which are schools and universities, the mass media and the family, the 1968 revolution destroyed the structure of the group of forms in effect of that same, precise contemporary culture, closing an important chapter of that cultural history and initiating the forms of cultural organization and creation which have been developed during the last configuration of modern knowledge and the entire collection of the different cultural scenarios of the world, as well as the processes of conformation of

3 In regard to this item, cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The short Twentieth Century 1914 - 1991* (London 1994). Even though Hobsbawm relates several of these changes, his assessment of the 1968 movement is entirely *different* from the one we are here developing. For another assessment of this same period of 1945-1990, that, on the contrary, especially underlines the breaking point of the years 1967-1973, cf. the book coordinated by Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Age of Transition. Trajectory of the World System 1945-2025* (London 1996).

new subjects, of the new social movements and of the new left, have been modified as well. All of this lasted thirty years and goes on up to this date. And in keeping with these essential changes, both the obviously ended up by causing a profound impact in the general profiles themselves of contemporary historiography after 1968 in a manner that is well worthwhile reconstructing more thoroughly and with utmost attention.

The irruption of the present into history

Given the enormous desire for change expressed in 1968 –and given also how radical the forms of expression of this desire were at the length and breadth of the world-, there is no doubt whatsoever that this movement signified for all of the societies of those times, a definite *irruption of the present and of its total validity* in the group of consciences that took part and were close range witnesses of those events. And, viewing that in every case that the '68 movements were determined to change was their own present, overthrowing the alienated, or falsified or authoritarian reality in which they lived, their outburst necessarily became evident in the action of placing at the center of attention the most *recently lived experience*, the burning and essential facts of the most vivid current situation.

'To live without dead time and to enjoy without restraint' is one of the '68 slogans. This slogan that emphatically expresses the reassumption and radical updating of the present that is characteristic of any time of revolution and that was to cause significant impact upon post – '68 historical studies. From this perspective, it is clear that the root of this cultural revolution of the second half of the sixties, *the present*, is going to appear with much more strength in historiography, breaking with the rigid division between present and past that was still dominant, and installing in its place, with full rights and a diversity of forms, *actuality* within the objects and the pertinent and habitual themes of the study of historiographic research.

The reason is that against the traditional and reductionist vision of history that had survived until 1968 and that stated that history was only the science 'of the past', these last thirty years are going to witness the assertion of an each time more disseminated and accepted position that states that history is the science 'of man within time' and therefore, the science of the most absolute and burning present, as well as of the many and most diverse

pasts that have already occurred.⁴ This is a vision that is also to vindicate the present as an object of historical study and that was not invented after 1968, but actually its most ancient connections go back to a whole critical and marginal tradition that begins with Marx and continues to this day, passing through authors such as Marc Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Norbert Elias or Fernand Braudel, among many others. A tradition that has been and continues to be in a minority, but that nevertheless, as a result of the effects of 1968, is to win an important battle regarding this issue. Because if Marx, the 'Annales School' and the School of Frankfurt had already 'vindicated' the present as history, 1968 is going to *definitely legitimize* it as such within the historiographic activity, turning it precisely into one of the inevitable fields of research of this activity.

This irreversible legitimization and incorporation of the present into historiography shall become apparent in multiple forms, in the different national historiographic spaces. For example, in the enormous popularity attained over the last six lustrous by the branch and method of *oral history*; or in the important 'migration' of 'today's specialists' towards history. Thus, after 1968, it was common for sociologists and political scientists, as well as economists, to penetrate into history, once again contributing their approaches to historic teaching and occupying themselves mostly with those same periods of the recent past and of the present, that are now legitimized and incorporated by historiography in a more vast and popular fashion.

Changing the agenda of historical studies

Fundamentally, 1968 is a profound and structural cultural revolution. For this reason, when it bursts with great force into the ambiance of contemporary 'culture' and of its principal mechanisms of reproduction, the movement of '68 does away with the structure of this sphere of social totality, mobilizing all the spotlights of the historic drama towards those *cultural dimensions*, and providing the space for the obvious boom that the study of the history of all these themes was to have during the last thirty years that have since transpired.

It is therefore not a coincidence that after 1968, practically all the historiographies of the Western World - and possibly even beyond - became involved in the group of new themes, where the common denominator

4 Regarding this matter, cf. Françoise Dosse, 'Mai 68: les effets de l'Histoire sur l'histoire' in *Cahiers de l'IHTP* April 1989, 11 (Paris 1989).

was that they were *themes of cultural history*. Because it is clear that it is the spirit of '68 and its multiple effects that always make themselves present, in the studies of English *psychohistory* as well as in the multiple and heterogeneous models of the confessedly ambiguous French *histoire des mentalités*, in the *new critical intellectual history* of North America, in the branch of cultural history of Italian *microstoria*, in the British history of *popular culture*, and in the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, among many other expressions.⁵ An international movement is created then that surfaces during the sixties in multiple locations of the planet. Post-'68 historians begin to investigate the new, and up until then, unexplored themes of the history of the family and of sexuality, the history of attitudes regarding death or madness, the deciphering of the rite and the myth of the witches' sabbath, of the history of women and of the image of the child in the old regime, of popular culture in modern ages and of the cosmovision of the oppressed in the XVIth Century, of the traditions and folklore of those becoming a real working class, or of the 'imaginaries' popular in the old French regime, among many, many of the cultural history themes that have been since addressed.

At the same time and together with this opening of themes that were formerly given little attention or simply ignored by historiography, an intense and plurifacetic of *methodological reflection* shall develop, that attempts to construct the most adequate categories for the study and explanation of those cultural realities, at the same time that it intends to create ambitious global models for the interpretation of these same cultural type phenomena. And then, criticizing the inadequacies and ambiguities of the French concept of 'mentalities', as well as the rigid system of fading always in the direction of the culture of the elite towards popular culture, or, delving deeply into the debate of the complex relations between folklore, tradition and

- 5 We refer to that entire collection of works and approximations that, ever since 1968, have intended to 'problematize' the object of culture from very different angles. Simply as a sample, see for instance the methodological reflections that this movement has raised in the texts by Jacques LeGoff, 'Las mentalidades: una historia ambigua' in the book *Hacer la historia*, vol. 3, (Barcelona 1980), Carlo Ginzburg, *Mitos, emblemas, indicios* (*Myths, emblems, clues*) (Barcelona 1994) Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (Oxford 1985), Edward P. Thompson, *The poverty of theory* (London 1978), Robert Darnton, *The kiss of Lamourette. Reflections in cultural history*, (New York 1990), or Alf Lüdtke, *Histoire du quotidien*, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris 1994).

culture, after 1968, 'Clio' practitioners have passed from the anachronistic and limited history of ideas towards a new and more elaborated version of that new history of culture.⁶

Simultaneously and as an almost spontaneous supplement of this renovation of the agenda of historians' themes that now incorporates these cultural themes with full rights, and thanks to the already mentioned development of these new focuses and models for their treatment and approach, there is also a profound *renovation* in the manner of approaching old historiographic themes, that from this post-'68 perspective are to be learned in a radically different way. For example, the old and traditional histories of the workers movement that always concentrated its attention on the history of its leaders and of the workers' elite and of the political destiny of the movements, have, over the last three decades, addressed the transformations in customs and daily life of the workers' masses after these same movements; questioning themselves also regarding the effects of these movements in the workers' conscience and in their forms of the most daily and elemental forms of organization and work.

History in the new constellation of the social sciences

Also, after 1968, occurred the collapse of the 'system of knowledges', constructed during the second half of the XIXth Century and that, upon multiplying itself constantly and progressively consolidating new 'disciplines' or social sciences, ended by establishing, as an epistemological strategy for grasping (what is) 'social', to that host of ambits, specialized among themselves and supposedly autonomous that were the diverse social sciences of the XXth Century. These different social sciences divided the complex unity of the social ambit, postulating that this division *indeed corresponded* to reality itself, which at that time gave us, according to this vision, an economic object next to a psychological field, a purely political sphere and an exclusively social dimension, a uniquely geographic ambit and a space reserved for anthropology, and, in consequence, the necessary foundation so that each of these 'sciences' or 'disciplines' could elaborate and vindicate for themselves their own study object, their specific techniques, their particular

6 In our opinion, the most interesting model for the study of this cultural history is the model proposed by Carlo Ginzburg. Cfr. *The Cheese and the Worms, Night Battles, No Island is an Island, Wooden Eyes*, just to mention some few examples of Carlo Ginzburg's works.

concepts and their completely singular methods. Nevertheless, and regardless of having affirmed itself as the dominating 'episteme' during the last third of the XIXth Century and the first two thirds of the XXth Century, this system of divided and autonomized knowledges, based on specialization, rapidly showed its epistemological limits, being criticized and questioned by practically all of the innovative trends and by all of the critical thinkers of the century that goes approximately from 1870 to 1968.⁷

Here is a new situation of knowledge regarding the social ambit, in process of developing and maturing, that, in immediate terms and for the specific ambit of historiography, has redefined the relation of alliances and of links of the latter with all of the remaining social sciences. And here also is a new concert with many voices, of history with all the social disciplines, which is exemplified paradigmatically with the opening towards anthropology in regard to which history is to recuperate, after 1968, practically the whole collection of its contributions. We are to see the *classical* themes of anthropology, traditionally occupied in the study of customs, of everyday life, of issues of relationships (kinship / bonds) or of the myths, as well as its most characteristic techniques including polls and participative observation, are to be taken up again by history to become in the last thirty years, the history of everyday life, as well as the history of family and of sexuality or, also, in the history of material civilization and of the cultural archetypes. Similarly, this is repeated in the case of the anthropologic techniques mentioned before, that on the side of history are to be reproduced under the forms of oral history and of history constructed 'to bottom up' with the working classes and from absolute immersion in their struggles and in their daily and regular practice.

History is also to become impregnated with the legacy of anthropology while attempting to copy its principal methods, becoming interested in its direct and meticulous analysis of the experiences lived by different historical actors and in a closer approach to the concrete dimension of its analyzed objects, as well as grasping the perspectives and the specific 'glances' that

7 Regarding this, cf. Immanuel Wallerstein and others '*Open the social sciences*' (Stanford 1996). To cite just one example of the radical criticism of this organization of social sciences, cf. the case of the 'Annales School' and its permanent defense of the paradigm of *global history*. To this regard, see Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, *L'histoire conquérante*, L'Harmattan (Paris 2000), ed., *Os Annales e a Historiografia Francesa* (Marínga 2000), *Fernand Braudel und die Modernen Sozialwissenschaften* (Leipzig 1999), and *Braudel a debate*, (Caracas 1998).

make it possible to capture those problems of folklore, tradition, of beliefs and of cosmovisions to which anthropology is accustomed. Finally, it shall become impregnated of this legacy by readapting concepts and models developed within anthropology, such as those regarding macro / micro dialectics, the analysis of social networks, the study of “in situ” phenomena or the global reconstruction of a ‘thick description’. Clio practitioners have given life to that anthropologic history or historical anthropology that has had so much success and development during the recently experienced last decades.⁸

From general history to live history

Supporting itself on a new rebellious social subject; the student sector - which up until that time scarcely had a leading part, and that from 1968 on has shown itself as a particularly *active* subject in anti-systemic movements - the movement that occurred three decades ago, placed in doubt the *absolute* validity of the great general models that had been developed many years before, and whose total validity had been considered legitimate and unquestionable during several decades.

In this sense, 1968 is a breaking off with those *general, abstract, rigid* and almost always, empty models that were defended by the old left wing and that proclaimed that only the working class was revolutionary, and that history marched by force and almost automatically towards socialism. The different movements of the end of the sixties demonstrated precisely, that there was no automatism in history and that history is made by men. Which implies that with the complexity of capitalism, the anti-capitalist fronts also become more complex and diverse and that with the expansion and spreading, both extensive as well as intensive, of capitalist exploitation and oppression, there must also be a multiplication and diversification of its opposition’s movements and actors.

Thus, with the crisis of the old left came also the crisis of those general models incapable of grasping reality at the same time as an explicit demand of reintroducing into the analysis, the live element of history, the dimension

8 Two clear examples of the intense approach of history and anthropology would be both that of the marxist history of E. P. Thompson, like the majority of Italian micro-history authors. On this item, cf. E.P. Thompson, *The Essential E. P. Thompson* (New York 2001), Edoardo Grendi, “Microanalisi e storia sociale” en *Quaderni Storici*, vol. 35, 1977, and Giovanni Levi, *La herencia inmaterial* (Barcelona 1990).

truly lived by the actors and, more generally, the vindication of the need to rescue for social sciences, the entire collection of those *concrete-historical* elements progressively excluded by social analysts when they constructed these models as a simple assemblies of structures, abstract, rigid and completely devoid of content.

The former was assumed in the field of historiography in two diametrically opposed forms. On one hand, the easiest but also the most sterile through the postmodern position: the one that in the face of this real crisis of general models, simply chose to deny any general model, stating that the time had arrived when the 'meta-narrative' and of the 'great constructions' had come to an end; thus leading to relativistic and logocentric positions that completely deny the scientific character of history, they reduce it to its sole condition as discourse and at the end, represent a dead end for this same historiography.⁹

On the other hand, and in a much more complex and difficult vision, but also more fruitful, this crisis of the general models and the concomitant demand to restore its rights to the concrete-historic dimensions, gave birth to those multiple efforts that, after 1968, passed from the history of structures to the history of the actors, from the history of economic and social realities to the history of subjectivity and of cultural perceptions, from the history of power to the history of resistance and of insubordination, from general histories to local and regional histories, from the macro-historic processes to the micro-historic universes, from the history of laws and norms to the history of non-typical individuals and deviations, and from the history of the established and central groups to the history of minorities, of the underprivileged and of the small groups. A pluri-facetic and complex movement of many and very different actors, whose general sense is not to renounce to the general models and to macrohistory, but rather to once again level the scales of historical analysis, reintroducing together with these structural and more universal coordinates of history, the collection of concrete-historical dimensions, and of levels and realities that are supplementary to said coordinates.

9 Cfr. about this postmodern point of view in history Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris 1978) and Michel DeCerteau, *La escritura de la historia* (Mexico 1985).

1968: the opening of a new situation of 'historical bifurcation'?

Together with the mentioned changes and in a more general way, 1968 has also changed the *manner itself of functioning and interconnecting* amongst each other of the national historiographies, more globally incorporated within that cosmos we could call western historiography. Because if we analyze from a long lasting perspective, the entire journey of the curve of contemporary historiography – that clearly begins with Marx in the second half of the XIXth Century and that continues to unfold to this day – our attention will immediately be caught by the change produced once again by the deep 1968 breach.

Before 1968, historic studies had always functioned under the pattern of always constructing an *historiographic hegemonic center*, a national or regional space in which nine out of ten times the most important historiographic innovations in existence were generated and produced, where the great historical debates of the period were staged, and where those, that shall later be the 'classic' works of the historiography of that same period, were to be written. Thus, it is clear that between 1870 and 1930 it has been a German and Austrian, German-speaking historiography that has played the role of the leader within the Western World's historiographic scenery, building then the "dominant model to be imitated" by the rest of the historiographies of Europe and of the world, establishing the then famous 'trip to Germany' as a mandatory activity in the preparation of any historian who wished to be at the royal height of that profession's demands in those years towards the end of the XIXth and the early part of the XXth Centuries.

There is a model that, between 1930 and 1968, has placed that domination within the French hexagon, giving France the quasi-monopoly in the discovery and invention of the new historiographic paradigms, concepts, problems and developments during those four intermediate decades of the chronological XXth Century. This is an asymmetric way of functioning of the collection of national historiographies of the Western World, that also ruptures as a consequence of the profound changes contributed by the 1968 Cultural Revolution.

If, as we follow the route of the entire curve of contemporary historiography, we ask ourselves what has happened after 1968, at that command post of domination of Western historical studies, we will realize that no such successor to France exists, because the form of interconnecting with

these national historiographies has changed during these last thirty years. At present, *there no longer exists a hegemonic center* within the Western and worldwide panorama, since historiographic innovation is generated and processed today, and ever since six lustri ago, throughout the length and breadth of the weave of that same planet-wide historiography. In this, and during the three decades following 1968, lies the importance of the third and fourth generations of the French *Annales* or of several branches of Italian micro-history, as well as the representatives of the new North American radical history and the new German social history, passing through many others, including the recent Portuguese institutional history, the renovated Latin American regional history, Russian historical anthropology or several currents of British Marxist history.

This plural and polycentric situation that, otherwise, does not seem to be exclusive of historiography and not even of the social sciences, but would rather seem to extend very much further, and appear as one of the possibly general strokes of the global situation of world capitalism after 1968. We now see many structures and movements where centers decline. And where the role itself of centrality as a global mechanism of social functioning is de-legitimized in its own foundations, which may basically express the opening of a new and radically different situation of world capitalism, that after 1968 – 73 began entering into a clear situation of historical ‘bifurcation’.¹⁰ This situation of divergence in which the mechanisms of stabilization and reproduction of the world capitalist system as a whole ceased to function, announcing its inevitable end as well as the pressing need for its deep mutation and transformation. Following Immanuel Wallerstein’s incisive hypothesis, we could ask ourselves if 1968 did not then have, in addition to its profound character as a global reaching cultural revolution with civilizing consequences, a new and additional supplementary significance: that of having inaugurated with its irruption, this clearly terminal phase of the life of modern capitalism that was initiated more or less five centuries ago.

However, as we have well been reminded by the ‘soixante-huitard’ generation the world over, history is not an automatic process that is inevitably one way, but rather it is a process carried out by men themselves, who with our collective action and our reflections help to decide their possible destinies, in accordance with the conditions of possibility of each specific historic moment.

10 This is the hypothesis set forth by Immanuel Wallerstein in his most recent essays. Cfr. for example, his book *After liberalism* (New York 1995).