



Octavio Paz.
(Portrait by Arturo Espinosa.)

LITERATURE

Octavio Paz, Media, and Mexican Politics

By Priscila Dorella (translated by Deborah Meacham)

Mexican poet Octavio Paz (1914–1998) died well aware of the success of his intellectual contributions. In addition to winning a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990, over the course of his career Paz received more than 200 awards from around the world and witnessed the emergence of numerous studies devoted to the analysis of his poetry, literary criticism, and essays like *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1950). But while the poet receives unconditional praise for his literary works in Mexico, his political ideas have often been stifled and ignored.

It is not unusual to see a well-loved poet, one endowed with a profound and creative love for words, be the object of tremendous discord in political affairs. Literary history boasts many examples, including Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, Federico García Lorca, and André Breton. Still, one ponders the reasons why Paz felt it necessary to express his political thoughts publicly and the possible meanings of the controversies his ideas provoked in Mexico.

Paz was a vanguardist poet who contributed to the renewal of literary forms and the critical perception of language. He also served as a diplomat, the editor-in-chief of two magazines, and a television host. In an effort to foster the documentation, creation, dissemination, and awareness of Mexican politics, among other issues, the poet embraced a commitment to modern criticism, as he frequently explained. In adopting this position of rigor and experimentation, Paz sought to stand apart from the dogmatic intellectual perspective of Latin America, influenced during the Cold War by rigid political positions like the military dictatorships of the right and the many guerrilla movements of the left.

From his ideas about modern poetry to his notion of “being Mexican” or even his blatant controversy with the left, the poet took a combative stance. With great care and perseverance, Paz began to write political essays in the 1940s, motivated by his disillusionment with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, his most controversial opinions appeared in Latin America from the 1960s onwards in public speeches and written works such as *Posdata* (*Postscript*, 1970), *El ogro filantrópico* (*The Philanthropic Ogre*, 1979), *Tiempo nublado* (*Stormy Weather*, 1982; published in English as *One Earth, Four or*

He was always important.
He was always relevant.
— Susan Sontag

Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History, 1986), *Pequeñas crónicas de grandes días* (*Small Chronicles of Great Days*, 1990), and *Itinerario* (*Itinerary*, 1993).

According to the Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska, Paz liked controversy and enjoyed a worthy opponent but was ferocious when he argued. He debated with Mexican intellectuals and political parties about things like “real” socialism, the role of intellectuals, the Mexican state, the Latin American left, and democracy. His temperament was described as choleric, mordant, ironic, sarcastic — all characteristics that made him a fearsome character of Mexican letters. It’s easy to imagine that many “misunderstandings” may not have been gratuitous but collectively contrived to boost his fame. With regards to the discomfort he provoked, the poet stated in his book *Itinerario*: “My literary and aesthetic opinions confused some and bothered others; my political opinions exasperated and outraged many.” Yet the intellectual justifications given by Paz (and many of his readers) to explain the intensity of the impact, relevance, and provocation of his work in Mexico rarely take into account an important historical dimension of his trajectory, that is, his insertion in the mass media.

Photography, film, television, and computers are spheres of visual communication that have completely restructured our understanding of culture and the role of the intellectual in recent times, intensifying the idea of the need for images to be perceived as real. The fact that Paz was a poet who published books and articles and helmed such important Mexican magazines as *Plural* and *Vuelta* facilitated his recognition, but it was his televised appearance on programs widely disseminated in Spanish-speaking countries by the Mexican telecommunication company Televisa that helped make him a public “celebrity” who was certainly more often seen than read.



Photo by Pepe Franco/Cover/Getty Images.

Octavio Paz gives a television interview.

Like Paz, several other writers of the Latin American Boom experienced the massive circulation of their works hand in hand with significant participation in the mass media, fueled by a few broadcasting networks directed at millions of people. Since the 1960s, writers like Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Antonio Skármeta (Chile), and Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia) have been elevated to rock-star status in Latin American culture through televised appearances. Yet their audiences have never been as expressive as those of entertainment programs (soap operas, football, daily news, etc.), which were especially captivating — and occasionally addressed the writers' personal lives.

In 1976, Paz began presenting weekly commentaries for the conservative “24 Horas” television news program, and then went on to collaborate on the famous interviews “Conversaciones con Octavio Paz” (Conversations With Octavio Paz, 1984). A series of documentaries were his definitive launch to the general public: “México en la obra

de Octavio Paz” (Mexico in the Work of Octavio Paz, 1989). In addition, in 1990 he organized a conference to discuss world politics after the fall of the Soviet Union, with a live broadcast on Televisa entitled “El siglo XX: La experiencia de la libertad” (The 20th Century: The Experience of Freedom). Many Mexican intellectuals, including Carlos Fuentes and Jorge Castañeda, strongly opposed this conference due to the predominance of neoliberal ideas and reductionist interpretations of Marxism in the debate.

Despite initial optimism about television's democratic possibilities, which Paz expressed in essays like “Televisión: cultura y diversidad” (Television: Culture and Diversity, 1979), “El pacto verbal” (The Verbal Pact, 1980), “Democracia: lo absoluto y lo relativo” (Democracy: The Absolute and The Relative, 1992), and “El pacto verbal III” (The Verbal Pact III, 1995), his remarkable relationship with the media sparked tremendous controversy, primarily concerning his appearances on Televisa. Since 1950, the station had

held hegemonic power and maintained a problematic relationship of favoritism and back-scratching with the Mexican government under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party).

Some prominent Mexican intellectuals, such as Enrique Krauze and Miguel León-Portilla, praised Paz's presence on Televisa and even took part in some of his programs, emphasizing how his critical and moral authority contributed to public debate as well as the expansion of his influence in society. But the question that should be asked is: How could a poet who was committed to freedom, democratic values, intellectual independence, and criticism of the patrimonial state be on such friendly terms with Azcarrága Milmo, the owner of Televisa, turning a blind eye to the conservative and unscrupulous measures of his telecommunications company?

This very question was raised by Mexican intellectuals, specifically by the Mexican left, which has associated Paz with the imperialist interests of the right since the late 1970s. Strikingly, just a few years earlier, in 1968, Paz had been held up as a moral standard by the left when he renounced his diplomatic career in protest of the Mexican

government's authoritarian repression of students in the Tlatelolco Massacre.

One of Paz's most heated controversies with the left in his country occurred at the 1984 Frankfurt International Book Fair, where he was recognized for his literary achievements. The essay “El diálogo y el ruido” (Dialogue and Noise, 1984), written to commemorate the award, presents a critical analysis of the developments of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. It was read by Paz in Germany and broadcast throughout Mexico on the Televisa news program “24 Horas,” sparking significant protests in the country.

This was during the first democratic election in Nicaragua, after the Nicaraguan Revolution had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship. The Mexican left supported this electoral process, while Paz criticized the viability of democracy in the country, associating the elections with Cuba's authoritarian experience. The consequence was a huge public demonstration of intellectuals, journalists, artists, deputies, and militants of the left, who accused Paz of taking an illogical and unfair position because Sandinista Nicaragua was fighting a civil war against the Contras' paramilitary army, which

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Mexican troops confront demonstrators in the days leading up to the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968.



Photo from Celilji/Wikimedia Commons.

was financed by the government of U.S. President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989).

In “El diálogo y el ruido,” Paz stated that in the modern world, revolution was understood as a utopia, capable of breaking with the established order and building another, hopefully better, world that was simultaneously equal to the original. This debatable ambivalence in the meaning of revolution was not unrelated to Paz’s recognition of the importance of the state in society. However, the poet believed that the only state able to establish conditions of peaceful coexistence was the democratic republican state, since it has a duty to guarantee critical and pluralistic freedom of expression. The problem of revolutionary movements would then be that they enabled the creation of authoritarian and violent states in the name of peace.

In this regard, the case of Nicaragua was quite emblematic for Paz. The Sandinista Revolution gained legitimacy by overthrowing a corrupt authoritarian government in the name of constituting a democratic government. In his speech at Frankfurt, Paz stated: “The actions of the Sandinista regime reveal their desire to establish a bureaucratic-military dictatorship in Nicaragua according to Havana’s model, thus changing the original meaning of the revolutionary movement.” His position on Sandinista Nicaragua came under considerable scrutiny, since at that time the country was substantially different from the Cuban experience: it had a plural political system and an economy that did not eliminate capitalism. It’s no wonder, then, that Paz’s perspective was interpreted as biased, hasty, and even illogical.

The response of the Mexican left to the poet’s presentation at Frankfurt was meaningful: it was not merely an isolated episode but a good indication of the mood in Latin America during the Cold War. Some of the intellectuals associated the declarations of Paz with the right, linked with the defenders of unqualified democracy, neoliberalism, and politics allied with imperialist interests, clearly incompatible with revolutionary nationalism.

It is important to remember that under the influence of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, resistance movements in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador gained strength in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements were impacted by serious economic crises, anxious for national sovereignty, and determined to reject U.S. imperialism. The success of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 not only inspired other countries in Central America and gained support from a significant segment of the international community, but brought in its wake the option of democracy, pluralism, and independent foreign policy. However, the Sandinistas’ military confrontation with the opposition armed by the

U.S. government resulted in serious political and economic problems, as well as thousands of deaths.

Few Latin American intellectuals, like Paz, openly opposed the Nicaraguan government and condemned the censorship imposed by the Sandinistas on the country’s opposition newspaper *La Prensa*. Paz’s political stance even differed from that of the Mexican government, which eventually recognized the 1984 elections as legitimate. In the opinion of the Mexican left, the poet’s discourse in defense of democracy in Nicaragua was clearly linked to U.S. foreign policy interests.

The Nicaraguan election not only spawned intense controversy because of violent actions by both the left and right, but also spurred debate about the real ability of the revolution to establish a democratic political system in the region. Mexican historian Aguilar Camín argued that throughout the 20th century, a portion of the Mexican left believed that revolutionary violence was a constituent component of legitimate social transformation. In society’s mind, leftist revolutionary violence was “good violence,” with its adepts and heroes like Pancho Villa, Augusto César Sandino, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, among others.

Thus, over time, Paz’s relationship with the Mexican left became increasingly problematic. Nonetheless, the poet bluntly clarified the need for dialogue with this ideological stance: “I always believed — and I still do believe — that my natural interlocutor was the so-called leftist intellectual. I have come from so-called leftist thinking. I do not have anything to say to anyone else.” Marxist historian Arnaldo Córdova disagreed with Paz and argued that the poet didn’t really want to talk with the left, but had a simplistic understanding of it.

Paz’s discourse provoked strong indignation for many reasons, and one of the most important is related to the way in which his views were transmitted by Televisa: on prime time, reaching millions of viewers. According to many intellectuals, the impact of Paz’s televised discourse was unparalleled in comparison to the written press and, consequently, led the public to question the viability of the Sandinista Revolution precisely at the moment when it needed more support. The unequal power of the United States over the Sandinistas had not been adequately taken into account by Paz or Televisa.

However, according to the Peruvian writer Vargas Llosa, who was already in line with the neoliberal perspective at that time, Paz always condemned U.S. intervention in Latin America and distrusted the benefits of the free market, so he did not deserve to be pilloried by left-wing intellectuals or have his image burned in a public square in Mexico City with shouts of protest like “Reagan

rapaz, tu amigo es Octavio Paz” (Reagan, man, Octavio Paz is your friend). For Vargas Llosa, this response was an example of the level of “sectarianism and idiocy” that public debate had reached in Latin America.

Paz himself responded to the criticism by explaining that he was never in favor of U.S. intervention in Central America, but rather supported genuinely democratic political conditions. As for the hatred expressed by the left in reaction to his statements, the poet said: “Not only have my sentences been taken out of context, but my words have been disfigured or things have been attributed to me that I did not say.” The heated intellectual debate on Latin American politics — so often unforgivable, as evidenced by the aforementioned political protests — was a fundamental element for the disenchantment with the revolutionary movements, the questioning of binary positions (United States vs. Latin America, capitalism vs. communism, reform vs. revolution, right vs. left), and the resurgence of the debate on democratic values.

Reactions to Paz’s discourse likewise highlight the need to reevaluate the suspicion that television news broadcasts are mere strategies to anesthetize the dissatisfied, wronged, or oppressed. Resistance also takes

the form of spectacular action. Public demonstrations, such as the protests against Paz, are aimed at drawing everyone’s attention. They make public space a “public display” insofar as they may also be broadcast by the mass media. The recent history of Latin American political and social struggles is intimately intertwined with the media and intellectual discourse. And Paz soon realized that television was capable of projecting beyond the local context by connecting to a more complex, varied structure with many possibilities.

Tuning to television allowed Paz to enter a universe of broader dimensions that has the potential to help people better understand the plurality of the world if it is clearly regulated, without market pressure or state censorship. And if he understood this potential, despite all the questioning, how could he not jump on the chance of communicating events by establishing multiple relations with the media and contributing to democracy?

Priscila Dorella is Professor of Latin American History and U.S. History at Universidade Federal de Viçosa (UFV) in Brazil. She was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley and spoke for CLAS on November 15, 2017.

A Mexico City Day of the Dead sculpture honors Octavio Paz in 2014.



Photo by Abril Cabrera A. / Secretaría de Cultura