



Nourishment

**What they believe: 18. Eduardo Galeano
Dreaming a continent into being**



Eduardo Galeano (with Bolivian president Evo Morales, above left, and with icons of over half a millennium, right) shows the people of Latin America where they have come from, who they are, and where they may go. He is a muse of the social and political movements that have created new popular social democratic governments, such that Latin America is now a beacon for the South and the world.

‘In dreams begins responsibility’, wrote WB Yeats. Eduardo Galeano (1949-2015) ranks with two of the Latin American Nobel Literature prizewinners Gabriel Garcia Marques and Pablo Neruda. Like them his writing not only evokes but creates the nature of Latin America. This gives a sense of his stature. But putting him in any list is misleading. It was he, not they, who made me want to move to and live and work in Latin America, which I did in 2000 – I admire what they write, but I wanted to be within and part of what he reveals, which perhaps I am now. His first significant and best-selling book, *Open Veins of Latin America*, I bought in London in 1998, and read it with a sort of shock of recognition, thanks also to the work of his faithful comrade and translator Cedric Belfrage.

How to explain, for those who have not yet imbibed him? When Isabel Allende went into exile after the Pinochet coup in 1973 she had to leave in a hurry. In her letter of love to her friend in the 25th anniversary edition of *Open Veins*, she writes:

Cannon G. Eduardo Galeano. Dreaming a continent into being, and other stories
What do you think? [Column]. *World Nutrition* June 2015, 6, 6, 518-533

I could not take much with me: some clothes, family pictures, a small bag with dirt from my garden, and two books: an old edition of the *Odes* by Pablo Neruda, and the book with the yellow cover, *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. More than twenty years later I still have that same book with me.

In 2009 Hugo Chavez, when president of Venezuela, gave a copy of *Open Veins* to Barack Obama at a Summit of the Americas meeting in Trinidad. He was doing his best to explain himself to the president of the US, and show in the short time he had, what the newly resurgent republics of Latin America were doing, what they stood for, and why. Now the gift seems even more appropriate than it did at the time.

Staying alive

This is because Eduardo Galeano, while certainly a democratic socialist, has a philosophy of being-in-the-world which is ideological for sure, which transcends the conventional variations of 'left' and 'right', or capitalist and communist. He believes in solidarity, as did the great trades union movements now mostly smashed. He is more radical, acutely aware of need for people, societies and cultures to be and stay alive, and intensely interested in recording the essence of people and occasions, as great painters and photographers do, irrespective of the implications. He would have been a catastrophe in committee. Isabel Allende characterises his writing as

A mixture of meticulous detail, political conviction, poetic flair, and good story-telling. He has walked up and down Latin America listening to the voices of the poor and the oppressed, as well as those of the leaders and intellectuals. He has lived with Indians, peasants, guerillas, soldiers, artists and outlaws; he has talked to presidents, tyrants, martyrs, priests, heroes, bandits, desperate mothers, and patient prostitutes. He has been bitten by snakes, suffered tropical fevers, walked in the jungle, and survived a massive heart attack; he has been persecuted by repressive regimes as well as by fanatical terrorists...

He himself sketches a time in his life at first in Uruguay after *Open Veins* was published, in a 2008 interview with Scott Witmer in Chicago:

In the beginning of 1973, I was in jail for a short period in Uruguay and I decided prison life was not healthy, so I went to Buenos Aires. The magazine was a beautiful experience. *[After the military regime imposed censorship]* it was impossible to go on. We were obliged to choose between silence and humiliation. We could stay alive if we accepted the obligation to lie, or we could shut up. We decided to shut up entirely and not pretend to be free.

Many members of our staff were killed or disappeared or jailed or went into exile, and so it was a good decision to go away. We left behind a very good memory of an exceptional cultural magazine. We showed that it was possible to have a different conception of culture. Not culture made by professional people to be consumed by non-professional people, like workers or anonymous people. Instead, we were trying to hear their voices. Not only to speak about reality, but asking reality, 'What would you tell me?' In the middle of 1976, I was obliged to fly away from Argentina because I was supposed to be on the death squad list to be killed. Many of my friends had been killed, and being dead is so boring, so I chose exile in Spain.

Box 1

The struggle continues

Children of the Days reviewed in *The New York Times* in 2013 by Greg Grandin

One would think that Latin Americans, after all they've suffered, from the tortures and terrors of the Spanish Inquisition to the death squads and disappearances of the Cold War, would have given up on the idea that history is redeemable. But it seems that centuries of repression and struggle have had the opposite effect, searing into their political culture an ability to recognize the dialectic lurking behind the brutality and to answer every bloody body with ever more adamant affirmations of humanity.

Inspirational wisdom

Eduardo Galeano was driven first out of his own country of Uruguay in 1973 after a military coup, and then from Argentina after another coup. He found refuge in post-Franco Spain, where he began to pioneer a new literary genre. In such books as *Open Veins of Latin America* and the trilogy *Memory of Fire*, he weaves together fact, pre-Columbian myth and snippets from everyday life into not so much people's histories but sprawling people's epics. Think of Pablo Neruda crossed with Howard Zinn.

His new book, *Children of the Days*, is for those who feel that history has become too much of a burden to bear — a collection of inspirational wisdom, its 366 entries, one for each calendar date in the (leap) year, keeping alive the memory of courage and beauty amid the carnage. Well-known horrors born of the conquest of America, slavery, the Holocaust and European colonialism take their place alongside lesser-known events and people: the founding of a Brazilian community by escaped slave women for example, or Simeon Stylites, a Syrian Christian saint who lived for 37 years atop a column, a feat that for Eduardo Galeano is a symbol for the more than one billion people who today live without decent housing.

The whirligig of time

His best entries reconcile opposites. 'The Left Is the university of the Right' notes that Rupert Murdoch's youthful admiration of Karl Marx helped him master the 'inner workings of capitalism.' History tends not to move in the direction he would like: in 1837, Nicaragua's Conservative Party partially legalized abortion; 170 years later, the leftist Sandinistas outlawed the practice 'and thus condemned poor women to prison or the cemetery.' But sometimes defeat creates the possibility for future victories: having lost their country to Franco, Spanish Republican exiles were among the first liberators of Nazi-occupied Paris.

He uses a format that leads to an a-historic, almost medieval experience of time, a liturgical calendar in which the days don't move forward into the future but rather pile up into an eternal present. He celebrates non-Western peoples who experience history as repetition. In the Quechua language, he writes, *naupa* means 'was,' but it also means 'will be'. He reminds readers that moderns are stuck in their own kind of regression: genocide in the 16th century looks a lot like genocide in the 20th.

Thus *Children of the Days* commemorates insurgents so audacious they thought they could stop time, like the Parisian revolutionaries who on July 29 1830 took stones to the city's clocks, or the Mayan peons in Mexico who on July 31 1847 rose up and seized both the plantations and the local archives, eventually burning the 'documents that legalized their enslavement and the enslavement of their children and the enslavement of their children's children.' Mostly, though, Eduardo Galeano simply wants the word 'progress' to live up to its hype, as the title of his May 15 entry, on the enormous 2011 anti-austerity protest in Spain, suggests: 'May Tomorrow Be More Than Just Another Name for Today.'

Here is how it is

The era of people like Eduardo Galeano in Latin America may be coming to an end. The intense dangers he happened to survive, as did a number of once-young militants all over the continent who are now writers, or professors, or politicians, was of military regimes and secret police hit-squads, openly or covertly financed and supported by successive US governments, that threatened anybody who upheld respect and freedom for the people. His courage and conviction did not spring from nowhere, it was forged in fire. His genius, in the Latin American tradition of inventing and discovering realities which otherwise would have been seen, is in his creation of a style of writing which cannot be classified as 'fact' or 'fiction', and which has the strengths of both types of writing, somewhat similar to 'drama-documentaries'.

He enables the reader to believe what he writes, including when his stories are obviously fabulous, partly because great myths have their own super-reality, and mainly because of his iron integrity. This may explain why, although by all account a charming and courteous companion, he appears in almost all pictures taken of him to be grim. His nature is best expressed in what he writes. Here are some examples, taken from a 2008 interview with Niels Boel. Here he is, on eating, culture, and the resurgence of Latin America:

The meaning of eating

The perfect symbol of globalisation is the success of firms like McDonald's, which opens five new outlets around the world each day. Something more significant than the fall of the Berlin Wall was the queue of Russians outside McDonald's on Moscow's Red Square as the so-called 'Iron Curtain', which turned out to be more like a Mashed Potato Curtain, was coming down. The McDonaldisation of the world is planting plastic food in the four corners of the planet. The success of McDonald's has inflicted a kind of open wound on one of the most basic human rights, the right to choose our own food. The stomach is part of the human soul. The mouth is its gateway. It's not about how much you eat but what and how you choose to do so. How people prepare food is an important part of their cultural identity. It matters greatly to poor or even very poor people, who have little or no food but who respect traditions that turn the act of eating into a small ritual.

Identity on the move

Cultural identity is always moving, changing and being challenged by reality that is itself in perpetual movement. I am what I am, but I am also what I do to change what I am. Every culture is made up of some elements that come from afar. What defines a cultural product, whether it be a book, a song, a popular saying or a way of playing football, is never where it comes from but what it is. The Cuban daiquiri has nothing Cuban in it: the ice comes from somewhere else, just like the lemon, the sugar and the rum. Christopher Columbus first brought sugar to the Americas from the Canary Islands. Yet the daiquiri is considered quintessentially Cuban. The *churro* fritters of Andalusia originated in the Middle East. Italian pasta first came from China. Nothing can be defined or decided on the basis of its origin. The important thing is what is done with it, and how far a community identifies with something that symbolises its favourite way of dreaming, living, dancing, playing or loving.

Box 2

Books by Eduardo Galeano

Guatemala: Occupied Country, 1969. *Open Veins of Latin America. Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, 1971. *Days and Nights of Love and War*, 1978. *Memory of Fire* (three books), 1982-1986. *The Book of Embraces*, 1989. *Football in Sun and Shadow*, 1995. *Upside Down. A Primer for the Looking Glass World*, 1998. *Voices of Time: A Life in Stories*, 2004. *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, 2008. *Children of the Days. A Calendar of Human History*, 2011. *Women* (anthology), 2015. Another 20 books not published in English.

The resurgence of Latin America

This is the popular will, the will of the people to change reality. They have been cheated for so many years. We have become prisoners of what I call 'the culture of impotence.' It's very difficult in Latin America to build a democracy after so many years of military terror and in a non-democratic world that will veto your attempt to change something. The experts will come. Not soldiers, now it is experts. Sometimes experts are even more dangerous than soldiers. They say, 'You cannot. The market is irritated. The market may be angry.' It is as if the market is an unknown but very active and cruel god punishing us because we are trying to commit the cardinal sin of changing reality.

Look at Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia. Bolivia was the richest country in all of the Americas at the beginning of the conquest period. They were the owners of the silver, which enriched Europe. Bolivia is now the poorest country in South America. Her richness was her ruin. Morales is now trying to break with this shameful and humiliating tradition of always working for another's prosperity. When he nationalised the gas and the oil, it was a scandal all over the world. 'How could he? It's terrible!' Why is it terrible? Because recovering dignity is a cardinal sin. But he is also committing another cardinal sin. He has been doing what he promised he would do. We in Latin America are suffering with special intensity the divorce between words and facts. When you say yes, you do no. When you say more or less, you do less or more. So facts and words are never encountering each other. We are trained to lie. We are trained to accept lies as a way of life.



WN *Nourishment*

This story carries a new WN 'brand image' for 'nourishment'. Our interest is in relationships between foods, meals, dietary patterns and food culture, and mental, emotional, and spiritual as well as physical health and well-being. We propose more attention to delight and less preoccupation with disease. The image is of whole food and each time we use the category, we will use a different image, starting with fruits – here, a papaya, and beginning the story, guavas. Why, is because the visual equivalents of 'diet' or 'nutrition' are graphs, or extracts from dietary guidelines like the now-discredited US 'pyramid', or indiscriminate pictures of foods, or images connected with dieting regimes.