

TRIBUTE:

EDUARDO GALEANO (1940-2015) THE UNFORGETTABLE VOICE OF A WORLD CITIZEN

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ABSTRACT: Uruguayan writer and journalist, Eduardo Galeano is here remembered for his passionate belief in the possibility of building a different type of world, a more caring world characterised by greater social and economic justice, a world that is free from the neoliberal chains that continue to enslave millions of human beings.

RIASSUNT(Maltese/Malti): Il-kittieb u ġurnalista Urugwajan, Eduardo Galeano jingħata ġieħ għat-twemmin kbir tiegħu fil-possibilità li nibnu kollettivament dinja differenti u aħjar, dinja bbażata fuq aktar ġustizzja ekonomika u soċjali, mehlusa mill-ktajjen neoliberali li qed iżommu l-siera miljuni ta' bnedmin.

Keywords: globalisation, death squads, world citizen, Cold War, imperialism, colonialism.

I first came across Eduardo Galeano during my time in El Salvador way back in 2005. I singled out a copy of *Patas Arriba: Escuela del Mundo al Revés* (Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World, 1998) as I was searching for some books to read about various social as well as political phenomena pertaining to Latin America.

As I was reading *Patas Arriba*, I was immediately captivated by two things. First, I was amazed by his mighty pen as he analysed countless issues relating to capitalism and globalisation. Bearing in mind the international financial crisis that erupted in 2008, Galeano was amazingly prophetic when he wrote that “Profits are privatized, losses are socialised” (p.155). Second, I was fascinated by his ability to present detailed arguments concerning a breath-taking range

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of subjects. Among the many topics mentioned in this book, one could find education, sexism, and justice.

Having finished one book, I wanted to read more of his works. The more I read, the more I could understand several events that I witnessed during the five months that I spent living in El Salvador. In a country where the minimum wage was around USD 160 a month and where gang warfare contributed strongly to the average of 11 murders a day that were reported on the evening news, one could not help asking many questions about the social consequences of the dominant neoliberal economic model.

Eager to learn more, I soon discovered one of Galeano's most famous works - *Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina* (Open Veins of Latin America, 1971). Although more than four decades have gone by since the time it was published, the book remains extremely popular and relevant to present-day events. During the fifth Summit of the Americas in 2009, Hugo Chavez – the former Venezuelan President – gave a copy of Galeano's book to President Obama as a gift.

What is the main reason underlying the huge success of *Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina*? The latter presented a left-wing analysis of the history of Latin America starting from the European colonisation associated with Christopher Columbus to events that were taking place in the 20th century. Galeano focused on the social and economic consequences of centuries of imperialism exercised first by a number of European nations and then by the United States.

During the 1970s, many Latin American countries were governed by right-wing military dictatorships. Determined to contain the spread of Marxism-Leninism at all costs, the US government frequently provided a great deal of financial as well as military support to the dictators who vowed to wipe out all traces of any leftist influences. Galeano's *Venas Abiertas* was banned in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.

Similar to several other leftist writers and activists living in Latin America during the Cold War years, Galeano was often subjected to persecution by the authorities. Imprisoned in his native Uruguay following the military coup of 1973, he went to Argentina following his release. In 1976, he escaped to Spain shortly after becoming aware that he was being targeted by death squads. He was unable to return to

Uruguay prior to 1985. The fact that Galeano lived in a number of different countries makes it possible to consider him as a world citizen.

Galeano could also be regarded as a world citizen given that his works convey various messages that can apply to numerous countries. Regardless of whether one is reading about his views concerning racism or poverty, it is clear that many of his writings transcend specific places. Put differently, Galeano's analyses of various phenomena could be regarded as valid across several borders.

In his later works, Galeano continued to explore the theme of the dynamics between the most powerful members of a particular society and the most vulnerable persons or groups. His *Memoria del Fuego* (Memory of Fire, 1982-1986) trilogy is a clear example of this.

Throughout his long writing career, Galeano never stopped focusing on the plight of the downtrodden, the have-nots, those who are usually ignored by the more prosperous groups. The following words about the "nobodies" are quite chilling:

...nobodies dream of escaping poverty: that, one magical day, good luck will suddenly rain down on them – will rain down in buckets. But good luck doesn't rain down, yesterday, today, tomorrow or ever. Good luck doesn't even fall in a fine drizzle, no matter how hard the nobodies summon it, even if their left hand is tickling, or if they begin the new day on their right foot, or start the new year with a change of brooms. The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no-ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way. Who are not, but could be. Who don't speak languages, but dialects. Who don't have religions, but superstitions. Who don't create art, but handicrafts. Who don't have culture, but folklore. Who are not human beings, but human resources. Who do not have faces, but arms. Who do not have names, but numbers. Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the crime reports of the local paper. The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them." (quoted in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, Paul Farmer, 2004, University of California Press, p.1).

To conclude, Eduardo Galeano was surely not the type of person to believe that there is some fixed destiny or economic

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model that cannot be changed. Indeed, he will continue to be remembered for his passionate belief in the possibility of building a different type of world, a more caring world characterised by greater social and economic justice, a world that is free from the neoliberal chains that continue to enslave millions of human beings.

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