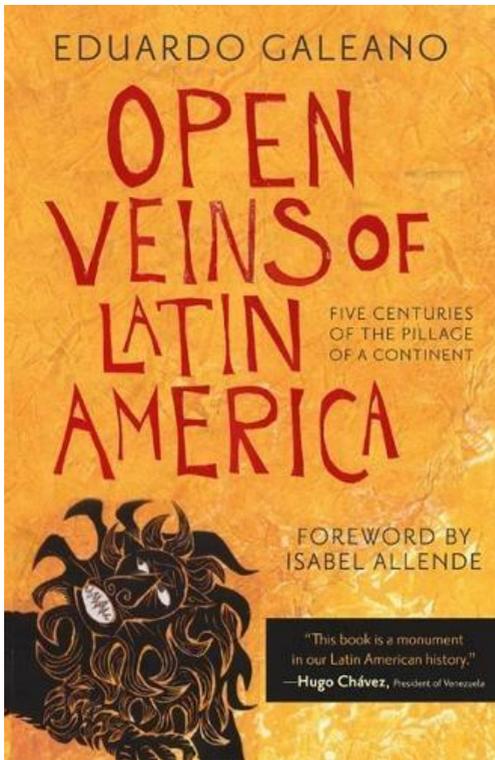


# OPEN VEINS OF LATIN AMERICA: A RE-APPRAISAL 50 YEARS ON

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Fifty years ago, the Uruguayan journalist and author Eduardo Galeano published his classic study of the European – and later United States’ (US) - colonisation and rapacious plunder of Latin America titled *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (1997). When it was first published in 1971, *Open Veins* was banned by military governments in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, and Galeano was imprisoned and forced into exile. The book has always retained its reputation for meticulous research and a luminous writing style which the

novelist Isabel Allende suggests is ‘poetic in its description of solidarity and human capacity for survival’ (Allende, 1997: xii). Galeano gives an unsparing account of ‘how the Spaniards and Portuguese in America combined propagation of the Christian faith with usurpation and plunder of native wealth’ (1997: 14). In a review of the book, Mongredien suggests that it offers an ‘impassioned and lucid’ account of how:

“A continent blessed with bountiful natural resources has been systematically stripped of its gold, silver, tin, copper, oil, nitrates, manganese and rubber, while its people remain among the poorest on earth, with high levels of infant mortality, illiteracy and child prostitution” (2009).

The five hundred years of ‘pillage’ that followed Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas in 1492 included indentured slavery, extractivism, colonialism, indigenous genocide and, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an economic re-colonisation through debt, neoliberalism, rigged trade rules, corporate impunity and tied aid. This article reflects on Galeano’s text as it reaches its fiftieth anniversary and considers what it tells us about the importance of history to the contemporary discourse on development.

### **Dependency theory**

Galeano was heavily influenced by dependency theory which argued that ‘as a result of the unequal distribution of power and resources, some countries have developed at a faster pace than others’ (Rose, 2016). Dependency theorists suggested that:

“we cannot formulate an adequate development policy for a majority of the world’s population without knowing how their past economic and social history influenced their current underdevelopment” (Ibid.).

One of the leading advocates of dependency theory, Andre Gunther Frank, argued that global trade is between strong core states and weak peripheral states and the latter have been subjected to centuries of domination by the core with a view to maintaining their peripheral status as suppliers of primary resources and consumers of processed commodities (Frank, 1967). In *Open Veins*, Galeano explicitly links the development of Europe and, later, the United States, to the under-development and exploitation of Latin America. He suggests:

“Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European – or later United States – capital, and, as such has accumulated in distant centers of power” (Galeano, 1997: 2).

It was the permanent peripheral status of Latin America in a dependent relationship with European powers and the US that resulted in leading academics questioning the legitimacy of the ‘development’ process itself (Esteva, 1992; Escobar 1995). Post-development thinkers rejected the development concept completely as an ‘ideological export’ and ‘a simultaneous act of cultural imperialism’ (Reid-Henry, 2012). For the Colombian scholar, Arturo Escobar: ‘development amounted to little more than the west's convenient “discovery” of poverty in the third world for the purposes of reasserting its moral and cultural superiority in supposedly post-colonial times’ (Ibid.). *Open Veins of Latin America* informed this reflection on what development actually means with what Allende describes as its ‘meticulous detail’ and ‘political conviction’ (Allende, 1997: xii). ‘Great literary works like this one’, she argues, ‘wake up consciousness, bring people together, interpret, explain, denounce, keep record, and provoke changes’ (Ibid.: xiii).

### **How Latin America developed Europe**

‘Poverty is not written in the stars’, writes Galeano, ‘underdevelopment is not one of God’s mysterious designs’ (1997: 7). It is instead the product of imperial design and Galeano reveals the full horror of what followed when ‘Renaissance European ventured across the ocean and buried their teeth in the throats of Indian civilizations’ (Ibid.: 1). *Open Veins* has three parts and in the first he recounts how European lust for gold and silver brought Spanish and Portuguese colonists to the Americas under the cloak of propagating Christianity (Ibid.: 14). Entire indigenous populations were exterminated through indentured slavery in gold and silver mines or from their lack of resistance to the bacteria and viruses carried by their conquerors. Some died by their own hand in anticipation of the fate that awaited them; in Haiti, ‘many natives... killed their children and committed mass suicide’ (Ibid.: 15). In

1532, the Inca leader Atahualpa fulfilled his promise to Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, of filling one room with gold and two more with silver but was not spared (Ibid.). From 1545 to 1558, 99 per cent of Spanish mineral exports from the Americas came chiefly from the silver mines in Potosi (now Bolivia) which ‘not only stimulated Europe’s economic development; one may say that they made it possible’ (Ibid.: 22-23). The Spanish aristocracy frittered away much of this wealth on creating new titles, extravagance and needless wars to the point that the Hapsburg regime fell into bankruptcy by 1700 (Ibid.: 24, 26).

The Latin American satellites with the strongest links to the core in the period of imperialism are today the poorest. Potosi, argues Galeano, is the best example of this under-development when poverty and de-population followed the stripping of silver from the seams of the mines. That part of Bolivia that was once Potosi had a population larger than Argentina but is now ‘six times smaller’ (Ibid.: 32). ‘The Indians of the Americas totalled no less than 70 million when the foreign conquerors appeared on the horizon; a century and a half later they had been reduced to 3.5 million’ (Ibid.: 38). Eight million Indians died in the mines of Potosi, including women and children, many from toxic gases and freezing temperatures (Ibid.: 40-41). In addition to claiming millions of lives, the forced labour tore indigenous people from sustainable and collective agricultural production that was abandoned. There was indigenous resistance where it could be mounted, most notably by the Incan monarch, Tupac Amaru in Cuzco (now Peru), who abolished slavery and taxes until his capture and death (Ibid.: 44-45).

During their colonisation of Brazil, the Portuguese transported an estimated ten million slaves from Africa as forced labourers in sugar, tobacco and wood plantations, and gold mines (Ibid.: 51-52). By ploughing much of their mineral riches into buying English manufactured goods, the Portuguese destroyed their own nascent manufacturing sector and that of their colonies. As Galeano suggests: ‘the English had conquered Portugal without the trouble of a conquest’ (Ibid.: 56).

## **Monoculture**

The soil of Latin America proved as lucrative as the mine seams with sugar becoming a dominant agricultural product after it was planted in several Caribbean islands and north-east Brazil, cultivated by ‘legions of slaves’ from Africa (Ibid.: 59). The demand for cash crops from Europe such as sugar, cotton, rubber, cocoa, tobacco and fruit resulted in monoculture, the cultivation of a single crop as the main driver of an entire economy. The relentless cultivation of the soil for cash crops created hunger for those who lived from the land and, when the soil was spent, sugar cultivation shifted elsewhere. When the conditions for growing sugar in the formerly buoyant north-eastern Brazil began to deteriorate, it slumped into poverty and became the ‘most underdeveloped area in the Western hemisphere’ (Ibid.: 63). For countries like Cuba, that remained dependent on sugar-based monoculture, a legacy of colonialism was their precarious economic alignment with world market prices that fluctuated with supply and demand. Galeano cites Cuban revolutionary José Martí: ‘a people that entrusts its subsistence to one product commits suicide’ (Ibid.: 69). For former colonies, diversifying their economic base in a weakened post-colonial state of dependency and monoculture would be a tremendous challenge, particularly when many Latin American states fell under a regime of debt and neoliberalism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hickel, 2017).

## **US colonialism**

Chapter three of *Open Veins* discusses the implications of United States’ industrial expansion for Latin America based upon a rapacious consumption of minerals and petroleum from states south of the Rio Grande. Chilean copper, Bolivian tin, Brazilian iron ore and Venezuelan oil were among the resources extracted from the continent by the US, often secured through military, political and economic interference to enable Washington to dictate the terms of trade (Galeano 1997: 134-170). US support for a military dictatorship in Brazil in 1964, for example, ensured that disputed iron ore rights fell into the hands of a Cleveland based mining company (Ibid.: 156). As one of the key architects of neoliberalism, Friedrich von Hayek, once remarked after a visit to Chile following a US-backed military *coup d’état* in

1973 that installed military despot, Augusto Pinochet: ‘My personal preference leans toward a liberal dictatorship rather than toward a democratic government devoid of liberalism’ (Grandin, 2006). Authoritarian leaders could be relied upon to implement neoliberal reforms by force if necessary and to suppress voices of dissent.

Section two of *Open Veins* is dominated by the narrative of a European retreat from Latin America and the advancement of US commercial interests described by Galeano as the ‘contemporary structure of plunder’. The buoyancy of the US economy post-World War Two saw the exponential growth of US corporations with the complicity of military and business elites across the continent. Thus, the new Brazilian dictatorship enabled fifteen car factories to be ‘swallowed up’ by Ford, Chrysler and other US auto corporations between 1964 and 68 as the country was ‘hawked’ to foreign capitalists (Galeano, 1997: 217). As in Brazil, Argentina removed all restrictions on foreign investments which were to be ‘considered on an equal footing with investments of internal origin’ (Ibid.: 218).

Abetting the process of foreign control of key Latin American industrial sectors, primarily by US corporations, was the International Monetary Fund which began extolling the virtues of what Klein described as the ‘shock economics’ of neoliberalism: currency devaluations, removal of price controls, wage freezes, and tariff reductions on imports (Klein, 2007). Indeed, the laboratory of neoliberalism was Pinochet’s Chile under the tutelage of neoliberal guru Milton Friedman to disastrous effect (Ibid.: 77-87). In a post-script to *Open Veins*, comprising section three, written seven years after its publication, Galeano could reflect upon the 1973 coup in Chile, the rolling out of neoliberal ‘reforms’ and the debt crisis that was enveloping the continent. He concluded that:

“Underdevelopment in Latin America is a consequence of development elsewhere, that we Latin Americans are poor because the ground we tread is rich, and that places privileged by nature have been cursed by history” (Ibid.: 267).

## Legacy

When the late Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela from 1999-2013, decided to provide the newly elected US president Obama with a history of Latin America at a summit of the Americas in Trinidad in 2009, he chose *Open Veins of Latin America* (Clark, 2009). This cemented Galeano's text as the pre-eminent account of the continent's colonial history but also emphasised the importance of framing development interventions within the context of historical relations between the global North and South. The book is a reminder to development educators that we can't fully understand the development or underdevelopment of any country or continent without the framing of the social and economic processes that shaped and defined their history. Prescribing development interventions like the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) are doomed to failure if they are not informed by the historical causes and legacies of colonial interventions like those described in *Open Veins* (McCloskey, 2020a).

In 2020, I reflected on another classic work from Latin America, which had reached the milestone of fifty years in print, written with same sense of humanity, solidarity and social justice (McCloskey, 2020b). Like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996), *Open Veins* is designed to raise consciousness, support debate and agitate for social change. *Open Veins* remind us, as Cannon suggests, that Latin America 'remains a key site of hegemonic struggle between neoliberalism and contesting development models' (2016: 1). As such it can be considered a 'development belweather' which deserves close monitoring and discussion in the development education sector (Ibid.).

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