

Open Veins of Latin America Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent

By Eduardo Galeano

Introduction: 120 Million Children in the Eye of the Hurricane

The division of labor among nations is that some specialize in winning and others in losing. Our part of the world, known today as Latin America, was precocious: it has specialized in losing ever since those remote times when Renaissance Europeans ventured across the ocean and buried their teeth in the throats of the Indian civilizations. Centuries passed, and Latin America perfected its role. We are no longer in the era of marvels when fact surpassed fable and imagination was shamed by the trophies of conquest—the lodes of gold, the mountains of silver. But our region still works as a menial. It continues to exist at the service of others' needs, as a source and reserve of oil and iron, of copper and meat, of fruit and coffee, the raw materials and foods destined for rich countries which profit more from consuming them than Latin America does from producing them. The taxes collected by the buyers are much higher than the prices received by the sellers; and after all, as Alliance for Progress coordinator Covey T. Olive/," said in July 1968, to speak of fair prices is a "medieval" concept, for we are in the era of free trade.

The more freedom is extended to business, the more prisons have to be built for those who suffer from that business. Our inquisitor hangman systems function not only for the dominating external markets; they also provide gushers of profit from foreign loans and investments in the dominated internal markets. Back in 1913, President Woodrow Wilson observed: "You hear of 'concessions' to (page 12) foreign capitalists in Latin America. You do not hear of concessions to foreign capitalists in the United States. They are not granted concessions; He was confident. "States that are obliged. . . to grant concessions are in this condition, that foreign interests are apt to dominate their domestic affairs. . . ," he said, and he was right.1 Along the way we have even lost the right to call ourselves Americans, although the Haitians and the Cubans appeared in history as new people a century before the Mayflower pilgrims settled on the Plymouth coast. For the world today, America is just the United States; the region we inhabit is a sub-America, a second-class America of nebulous identity.

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. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources. Production methods and class structure have been successively determined from outside for each area by meshing it into the universal gearbox of capitalism. To each area has been assigned a function, always for the benefit of the foreign metropolis of the moment, and the endless chain-of dependency has been endlessly extended. The chain has many more than two links. In Latin America it also includes the oppression of small countries by their larger neighbors and, within each country's frontiers, the exploitation by big cities and ports of their internal sources of food and labor. (Four centuries ago sixteen of today's twenty biggest Latin American cities already existed.)

For those who see history as a competition, Latin America's backwardness and poverty are merely the result of its failure. We lost; others won. But the winners happen to have won thanks to our losing: the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is, as someone has said, an integral part of the history of world capitalism's development. Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others—the empires and their native overseers. In the colonial and neocolonial alchemy, gold changes into scrap metal and food into poison. Potosi, Zacatecas, and Ouro Preto became desolate warrens of (page13) deep, empty tunnels from which the precious metals had been taken; ruin was the fate of Chile's nitrate pampas and of Amazonia's rubber forests. Northeast