The Open Veins of Latin America by Eduardo Galeano
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Book Review: The Open Veins of Latin America by Eduardo Galeano

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Published in 1973, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution and growing economic nationalism, The Open Veins of Latin America by Eduardo Galeano stays true to its title. It puts forward an emotionally stimulating and fact-filled narrative that centres on the argument that Latin America’s underdevelopment is a major cause and a result of European development. Dense with examples, Galeano chronicles Latin America’s exploitation at the hands of different European empires and, subsequently, the United States. Throughout the book, Galeano plays the role of historical narrator on behalf of a continent. Galeano’s thesis is that Latin America’s underdevelopment was caused by the exploitative practices of its various European colonizers, who in turn used the riches of the continent to fund the development of their mother countries. Adopting a “world systems” analytic, Galeano argues that the exploitation of the Latin America “at the periphery” by the European and North American “core” fuelled the growth of their industries through access to cheap raw materials and labour. To paraphrase Galeano, Europe happens to have won thanks to Latin America’s loss.¹

To guide the reader to this same conclusion, Galeano offers several examples of Latin American countries that have been exploited by Europeans in search of valuable resources. Once found, those resources were used by the colonizers to enrich themselves at the expense of their colonies. The discovery of gold by the Portuguese in Brazil in the eighteenth century, for example, enriched the Portuguese crown. At the other end of the chain, the Portuguese used their wealth derived from their colonial gold mines to buy British industrial products which led to the increasing availability of capital that stimulated the industrial revolution.²

To illustrate that exploitation is not only a relic of the colonial era, Galeano details Latin America’s checkered experience with “free trade,” foreign aid, and the neoliberal values exalted by international organizations. With numerous cases of where these ideals have left the region in an even more precarious situation he reaches the conclusion that these are contemporary forms of economic exploitation. In the case of foreign aid, especially with regard to the United States, Galeano outlines the hypocrisy of aid programs in which the helping hand is ultimately extended to the industries of the donor’s own country.³ Focusing on the 1950’s and 60’s he provides examples in which aid was used by the U.S. to secure markets for its production surpluses by tying aid credits to the purchase of American goods and restricting the economic freedoms of aid recipients, prohibiting them from exporting goods

² Galeano, 94.
³ Galeano, 249.
that could compete with U.S. alternatives or from trading with countries that U.S. deemed incompatible with its own interests.⁴

The book focuses on the colonial legacy of exploitation on the continent and Galeano considers a variety of Latin American resources that the Europeans exploited. In the context of the imperial economic structure, these resources and their places of origin served merely as repositories for colonial empires. This system fostered an economic dependence on Europeans by Latin Americans that proved detrimental to the economic development of Latin America. In the case of sugar and coffee, for example, in the seventeenth-century Europeans established plantations in the Caribbean and Africa to secure larger and cheaper yields of both products. This created competition for countries like Brazil, which had come to depend on these products for their economic wellbeing. It also reduced the price of obtaining these raw materials, allowing Europeans to increase already huge profits. These imperial products ultimately served to reinforce this colonial system of domination.⁵ Through their exploitation, the colonies were forced to depend on Europe for their wages, national export income and whatever “development” its masters were willing to bring.

For the most part, Galeano offers a convincing and coherent argument linking the underdevelopment of Latin America to the development of Europe and North America. However, in order to achieve this coherency he glosses over any possible counterarguments to his book’s thesis, as well as the significant differences between the Thirteen Colonies (of the U.S) and Latin America. He briefly touches on alternate reasons for Latin America’s underdevelopment, such as its small population and coffee as a contributor to economic growth (an idea put forward by Columbian Eduardo Arteta in his essays on the Columbian economy) but the reader gets the sense that Galeano never really entertains these viewpoints. The book frames Latin America’s underdevelopment in thematic fashion, detailing the various ways that time and again that various colonizers - from Europeans (Iberian and British) to United States - have exploited its resources, enriching themselves in the process. In doing this, he implicitly casts Europeans in the role of “villain” and Latin Americans solely as its “helpless victims.” One cannot help but feel that this is an oversimplification of what must have been a complex relationship. In the second part of the book, Galeano points out that various foreign economic interests (Rockefeller’s Standard Oil and United Fruit Company) are responsible for ousting national governments and recruiting a latifundio (large landholder) class to perpetuate an unequal system on its behalf. The author uses Argentina’s political turmoil in the 1930’s and 40’s and the Chaco war to illustrate Standard Oil’s capacity to affect Latin American politics. Once again this seems like an oversimplification, it is hard to imagine that national governments on a continent-wide basis were dancing so mindlessly to the tunes of foreign companies, even harder to fathom is that the respective populations of these nations, so brutally oppressed and increasingly marginalised would stand by and watch this play out. By seemingly exalting the power of the foreign concerns, Galeano limits Latin American people’s agency in deciding their own history.

In a section entitled “The Thirteen Colonies and the Importance of Not Being Important,” Galeano seems to favour the colonisation model of what is now the United States and goes further to argue that had Latin America “enjoyed” the same fate, it would have surely progressed further than its current state. In reaching this conclusion he points to the different legislative steps taken in the U.S. and contrasts them to those taken in Latin American countries, such as Brazil. Galeano argues that while the U.S. enacted the Homestead Act (1860) increasing access to land, during the same period Brazil restricted access to land. He also argues that the original settlers in the U.S. were colonists rather than conquerors, as in the

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⁴ Galeano, 249.
⁵ Galeano, 83.
case of Latin America, and that the North American colonies did not have the fertile soil to grow crops that Europe could demand. For these reasons, as well as the tolerant attitude shown to North American industry by the British, he suggests North America was able to industrialise and develop a relatively autonomous economy. Again, these points are presented in broad strokes to create the contrast that Galeano seeks in order to illustrate his point. However, in most cases the contrasts he makes are unfair. The contrast between the Homestead Act and various Brazilian government measures during the same time period is an example of an unfair comparison. While the Brazilian acts were solely about the access to land, the Homestead Act which did increase access to land also displaced the original Native American population. Many historians would be reluctant to refer to the Homestead Act as the agrarian master plan that Galeano suggests it was. On the point that the Northern colonies had no complimentary products of its own, in the early seventeenth century shortly after it was formed, Jamestown began growing and exporting tobacco to Britain. Also, Britain did not have a tolerant attitude toward its Northern colonies’ economic autonomy, legislations such as the Navigation Acts and the Stamp Act attest to the Britain’s repeated attempts to curtail the trade of its North American colonies. Finally, in praising the American model of colonisation, he is right in that they were colonised differently but not in the ways that he describes in the book. The difference is that the American model is more of an implantation of a new people because the “Americans” that he refers to were Europeans who essentially redefined what it meant to be American. At the end, this book describes the exploited history of Latin America and helps the reader understand why many of the revolutions and elected governments in the region have been politically left-leaning, priding themselves on anti-imperialist rhetoric. However, this is the aim of the book and it is hard to see it as anything more than the “losers” account of events in which the blame for their loss is laid solely at the feet of the “winners.”

Not since the ‘pink tide’ of the early 2000’s has Galeano’s argument been more relevant. All around the region governments that hold similar world views are experiencing rising domestic opposition and the erosion of popular support because the promises of the left tide have largely been unfulfilled. Even in a country like Venezuela, where there has been remarkable reductions in poverty since Hugo Chavez’ reign in the late 1990’s, the divisiveness that has accompanied such strides has led to increased opposition to the regime culminating in the closest electoral results in over two decades. Beyond Venezuela, the Argentine government has faced mounting domestic pressure due to various socio-economic problems and has sought to address them by rhetoric reminiscent of Galeano’s book. It has accused Britain and US creditors of neocolonialism in different issues but even this once trusted oratory is increasingly seen as diversionary tactics employed by an incompetent government. The former Venezuelan President, Chavez once referred to the book as “a monument of Latin American history.” In many ways Chavismo, the cult of personality around Chavez and the other ‘isms’ associated with contemporary leftist leaders in the region are a monument to the book for they are all cultivated from Galeano’s basic premise of exploitation. How they fare in the coming years will determine whether that monument stands the test of time or dissipates with the decline of their influential leaders or the resurgence of a new continental narrative. Whatever the outcome, the _Open Veins of Latin America_ has greatly influenced generations of Latin Americans and its ideas still serve as the guiding principles of many of the region’s current governments.

**Bibliography**
