

PROFMEX Award to Larry Rohter for His Classic Review:

Author Changes His Mind on '70s Manifesto: Eduardo Galeano Disavows His Book *The Open Veins of Latin America*

By **Larry Rohter**

***New York Times*, May 23, 2014:**

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/24/books/eduardo-galeano-disavows-his-book-the-open-veins.html?_r=0

For more than 40 years, Eduardo Galeano's "The Open Veins of Latin America" has been the canonical anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist and anti-American text in that region. Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's populist president, even put a copy of the book, which he had called "a monument in our Latin American history," in President Obama's hands the first time they met.

But now Mr. Galeano, a 73-year-old Uruguayan writer, has disavowed the book, saying that he was not qualified to tackle the subject and that it was badly written. Predictably, his remarks have set off a vigorous regional debate, with the right doing some "we told you so" gloating, and the left clinging to a dogged defensiveness.

"*Open Veins* tried to be a book of political economy, but I didn't yet have the necessary training or preparation," Mr. Galeano said last month while answering questions at a book fair in Brazil, where he was being honored on the 43rd anniversary of the book's publication. He added: "I wouldn't be capable of reading this book again; I'd keel over. For me, this prose of the traditional left is extremely leaden, and my physique can't tolerate it."

The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent was written at the dawn of the 1970s,¹ a decade when much of Latin America was governed by repressive right-wing military dictatorships supported by the United States. In this 300-page cri de coeur, Mr. Galeano argued that the riches that first attracted European colonizers, like gold and sugar, gave rise to a system of exploitation that led inexorably to "the contemporary structure of plunder" that he held responsible for Latin America's chronic poverty and underdevelopment.

Mr. Galeano, whose work includes soccer commentary, poetry, cartoons and histories like "*Memory of Fire*," wrote in *Open Veins*: "I know I can be accused of sacrilege in writing about political economy in the style of a novel about love or pirates. But I confess I get a

¹ [First edition in Spanish: Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI, 1971.

First edition in English: New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973.

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https://archive.org/stream/fp_Open_Veins_of_Latin_America/Open_Veins_of_Latin_America_djvu.txt]

pain from reading valuable works by certain sociologists, political experts, economists and historians who write in code.”

Open Veins has been translated into more than a dozen languages and has sold more than a million copies. In its heyday, its influence extended throughout what was then called the third world, including Africa and Asia, until the economic rise of China and India and Brazil seemed to undercut parts of its thesis.

In the United States, *Open Veins* has been widely taught on university campuses since the 1970s, [in courses ranging](#) from history and anthropology to economics and geography. But Mr. Galeano’s unexpected takedown of his own work has left scholars wondering how to deal with the book in class.



Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela, handing President Obama a copy of Eduardo Galeano's *The Open Veins of Latin America* in 2009.

Credit Matthew Cavanaugh/European Pressphoto Agency

“If I were teaching this in a course,” said **Merilee Grindle**, president of the Latin American Studies Association and director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard, “I would take his comments,

add them in and use them to generate a far more interesting discussion about how we see and interpret events at different points in time.” And that seems to be exactly what many professors plan to do.

Caroline S. Conzelman, a cultural anthropologist who teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder, said her first thought was that she wouldn’t change how she used the book, “because it still captures the essence of the emotional memory of being colonized.” But now, she said: “I will have them read what he says about it. It’s good for students to see that writers can think critically about their own work and go back and revise what they meant.”

Michael Yates, the editorial director of [Monthly Review Press](#), Mr. Galeano's American publisher, dismissed the entire discussion as "nothing but a tempest in a teapot." *Open Veins* is Monthly Review's best-selling book — it surged, if briefly, [into Amazon's Top 10](#) list within hours of Mr. Obama's receiving a copy — and Mr. Yates said he saw no reason to make any changes: "Please! **The book is an entity independent of the writer and anything he might think now.**"

Precisely why Mr. Galeano chose to renounce his book now is unclear. Through his American agent, Susan Bergholz, he declined to elaborate. She said he had gradually grown "horrified by the prose and the phraseology" of *Open Veins*.

Mr. Yates said Mr. Galeano might simply be following in the tracks of the novelist John Dos Passos, a radical as a young man "who became a conservative when he got older." On Spanish- and Portuguese-language websites, others have suggested that Mr. Galeano, who in recent years has had both a heart attack and cancer, might simply be [off his game intellectually](#).

In his remarks in Brazil, Mr. Galeano acknowledged that the left sometimes "commits grave errors" when it is in power, which has been taken in Latin America as a criticism of Cuba under the Castro brothers,² and of the erratic stewardship of Venezuela under Mr. Chávez, who died last year. But Mr. Galeano described himself as still very much a man of the left,³

and on other occasions he has praised the experiments in social democracy underway for the last decade in his own country, as well as in Brazil and Chile.

"Reality has changed a lot, and I have changed a lot," he said in Brazil, adding: "Reality is much more complex precisely because the human condition is diverse. Some political sectors close to me thought such diversity was a heresy. Even today, there are some survivors of this type who think that all diversity is a threat. Fortunately, it is not."

² [En 2003, durante otra ola de represión a los disidentes en la isla, Galeano escribió un texto fuerte titulado "Cuba duele", *La Jornada* (Ciudad de México), 18 de abril, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/04/18/004a1mun.php?origen=index.html>]: "Las prisiones y los fusilamientos en Cuba son...noticias tristes que mucho duelen, para quienes creemos que es admirable la valentía de ese país chiquito,... pero también creemos que la libertad y la justicia marchan juntas o no marchan....**Son visibles, en Cuba, los signos de decadencia de un modelo de poder centralizado, que convierte en mérito revolucionario la obediencia a las órdenes que bajan...desde las cumbres**".

³ [Ironicamente, Galeano nunca rompió con el régimen y en 2012 cuando regresó a La Habana, donde en alusión a su escrito de 2003, dijo que **los mejores amigos son aquellos que se dicen las cosas de frente**. Ver: <http://www.telemundo47.com/noticias/Muere-escriptor-uruguayo-Eduardo-Galeano-Las-venas-abiertas-de-America-Latina-299635491.html>]

Still, Mr. Galeano has caught many admirers by surprise, including the Chilean novelist **Isabel Allende**, who wrote a foreword for the English-language edition of *Open Veins*. In it, she describes how she “devoured” the book as a young woman “with such emotion that I had to read it again a couple more times to absorb all its meaning” and took it into exile after Gen. Augusto Pinochet seized power.

“I had dinner with him less than a year ago, and to me, he was the same man, passionate and talkative and interesting and funny,” she said of Mr. Galeano in a telephone interview from California, where she now lives. “He may have changed, and I didn’t notice it, but I don’t think so.”

In the mid-1990s, three advocates of free-market policies — the Colombian writer and diplomat Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, the exiled Cuban author Carlos Alberto Montaner and the Peruvian journalist and author Álvaro Vargas Llosa — reacted to Mr. Galeano with a polemic of their own, *Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot*. They dismissed *Open Veins* as “the idiot’s bible,” and reduced its thesis to a single sentence: “We’re poor; it’s their fault.”

Mr. Montaner [responded to Mr. Galeano’s recent remarks](#) with a blog post [May 9, 2014] titled “Galeano Corrects Himself and the Idiots Lose Their Bible.” In Brazil, [Rodrigo Constantino](#), the author of [*Esquerda Caviar (The Caviar Left)*], took an even harsher tone, blaming Mr. Galeano’s analysis and prescription for many of Latin America’s ills. “He should feel really guilty for the damage he caused,” he wrote on his blog.

But Mr. Galeano continues to have defenders. In a discussion on the website of the Spanish newspaper El País, one participant noted that in a world dominated by Apple, Samsung, Siemens, Panasonic, Sony and Airbus, Mr. Galeano’s lament that “the goddess of technology does not speak Spanish” seems even more prescient than in 1971.

And on his Facebook page, [Camilo Egaña](#), a Cuban émigré who is the host of “Mirador Mundial” on CNN en Español, remembered meeting Mr. Galeano in Havana in the 1980s and hearing him tell a story about a man taking his son to the ocean for the first time. “In the face of that interminable blue, the child said to the man, ‘Daddy, help me to see,’” Mr. Egaña recalled.

“That is what Galeano has done with his book, 43 years after it having been published,” Mr. Egaña concluded. “Thank you.”