

Saying More with Less—

EDUARDO GALEANO INTERVIEWED BY JONAH RASKIN

Eduardo Galeano, who was born in Uruguay in 1940, has written big, thick books. Open Veins of Latin America (1973), which Hugo Chávez of Venezuela handed to Barack Obama in May, hoping it would teach him history, is more than 300 pages. Then there's Galeano's Memory of Fire Trilogy: Genesis, Faces & Masks, and Century of the Wind that adds up to nearly 1,000 pages. More recently, he has written shorter books, and practiced a kind of ecology of the word. Mirrors, his newest work, contains more than one hundred short entries about almost everything—from salt to maps and money, and almost everyone, from Cleopatra to Alexander Hamilton and Che Guevara. None of the entries is longer than a single page. Not surprisingly, Galeano's answers to the questions in this interview are pithy, poetical, humorous, and sometimes oblique. "I'm fighting word inflation, which in Latin America is worse than monetary inflation," he says. "I try to say more with less—because less is more." —J.R.

Jonah Raskin: You've described Latin America as a woman who talks into your ear? Was that your mother?

Eduardo Galeano: No, it wasn't my mother's voice that I heard, but rather the secrets whispered to me by a lover.

JR: What have you lost over the course of your lifetime?

EG: Well, I would say that I am the sum of my failures. When I was young, I wanted to be a soccer star, but I had wooden legs. Then I wanted to be a saint, but I could not do that because I had sinful tendencies. After that I tried to be an artist. Now I paint with words.

JR: When you first read that the novelist Sandra Cisneros said that you write like a woman, what was your response?

EG: I did not laugh or grunt. I took it as an eulogy.

JR: Is there such a thing as writing like a man, or writing like a Latin American?

EG: The one important thing is to write honestly. We know one another by the words that we speak. I am the words that I speak. And if I give my word to you I give of myself.

JR: Is there a zeitgeist now, a spirit of the age we inhabit?

EG: The world today goes about like a blind person caught in the middle of gunfire.

JR: I tend to see history as the story of the rise and fall of empires. Is there another view that you might suggest?

EG: It just so happens that some of the best stories of history don't end happily. Of course, history itself doesn't ever end. It begins anew each day, and when we think that it is saying goodbye to us it is really just saying "see you later."

JR: The year 1968 was pivotal for my generation. Is there a pivotal year for you, or are pivotal years a nice fiction we tell ourselves?

EG: Time makes fun of those who try to measure it. But it also seems to me that time understands our need to fix our memories with dates so that they won't just vanish like sand dunes in the wind.

JR: Artists and writers tell me that "magical realism" isn't simply a literary school or style, but a whole way of being in the world. How do you see it?

EG: All reality is magical—in the South and in the North, in the East and the West, and all over the planet. Reality always has surprises and mysteries, though we are often blind and deaf to it. Perhaps writing can help a little bit to capture it in its fullness.

JR: Edward Said, the literary critic and author of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, believed that our age—more than any other in history—is defined by exiles, refugees, and displaced persons. What do you think of that?

EG: The dominant culture of the world teaches us that The Other is a threat, that our fellow human beings are a danger. We will all continue to be exiles in one form or another as long as we continue to accept the paradigm that the world is a racetrack or a battlefield. I believe that we can be compatriots of many different kinds of people, even though they are born far from our own lands and in other places and in other times.

JR: Is there a world center? Is there a periphery?

EG: I have written my books, especially my last one, *Mirrors*, to try to show that no place is more important than any other place, and that no person is more important than another person. Our collective memory has been mutilated by the controllers of the world, who day after day, also mutilate our present reality. The dominant countries have to begin to learn how to substitute the word “friendship” for the word “leadership.”

JR: Looking back at Che from this point in time, and after all the Che T-shirts, movies, and mammoth biographies, as well as the awe and respect that people all over Latin America have for him, how do you see him now?

EG: Che continues to be Che. He is a stubborn fellow and keeps being reborn, and refuses to die. That is because he was an exceptional human being. He did what he said he would do, and he said what he thought, and that is unusual. In our world words and deeds rarely find themselves in alignment; when they do they rarely recognize or salute one another.

JR: In what ways has Marxism helped you or hindered you as a writer of fiction?

EG: I had a Catholic infancy and a Marxist adolescence. I could be one of the few individuals who poured over *Das Kapital* and the Bible. They ought to exhibit me in an anthropology museum. Of course, both influences are still alive in me, but they do not own me.

JR: Many contemporary writers have said it is easier to tell the truth in fiction than non-fiction. Would you agree?

EG: I'm not sure. I can only say that reality trumps all of the poets put together for horror, beauty, and craziness.

JR: Have you ever found yourself in a place where you have thought, “This is a highly developed culture?” Are there more advanced and less advanced cultures?

EG: All cultures merit being known. All voices merit being heard. I do not share that famous saying of my dear friends in Liberation Theology who say, “We want to be the voice of those who do not have a voice.” No, no, and no. We all have a voice. We all have something to say to others that deserves to be celebrated, or at least to be pardoned. It simply happens that the majority of humanity is muzzled, and prohibited from talking.

JR: What do you have to say about the latest technology?

EG: Machines are not to blame. We have become servants of our machines. We are the machines of our machines. Without a doubt, the new tools of communication can be very useful if they are in our service—not the opposite. Cars drive us. Computers program us. Supermarkets buy us.

JR: You have been a newspaperman for much of your life. How do you view the demise, as it has been called, of the newspaper as an institution?

EG: Journalism has left a profound mark on me. I am a child of journalism, though now I am much more devoted to writing books than articles. I should also confess that I come from the Gutenberg era. It is almost impossible for me to read an article or a book on a screen. I prefer to read on paper which I touch and that touches me.

JR: As you have aged have you come to feel that biology plays more of a role in human life than you did as a young man?

EG: Einstein said it takes many years to learn how to be young. That's what I'm going about doing now.