



NAVARRA CENTER
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**
DEVELOPMENT

THE EXPERIMENT OF GUATEMALA

GENERAL ESSAY OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

AUTHOR
EDUARDO GALEANO

REVIEW OF
JAVIER LAREQUI FONTANEDA

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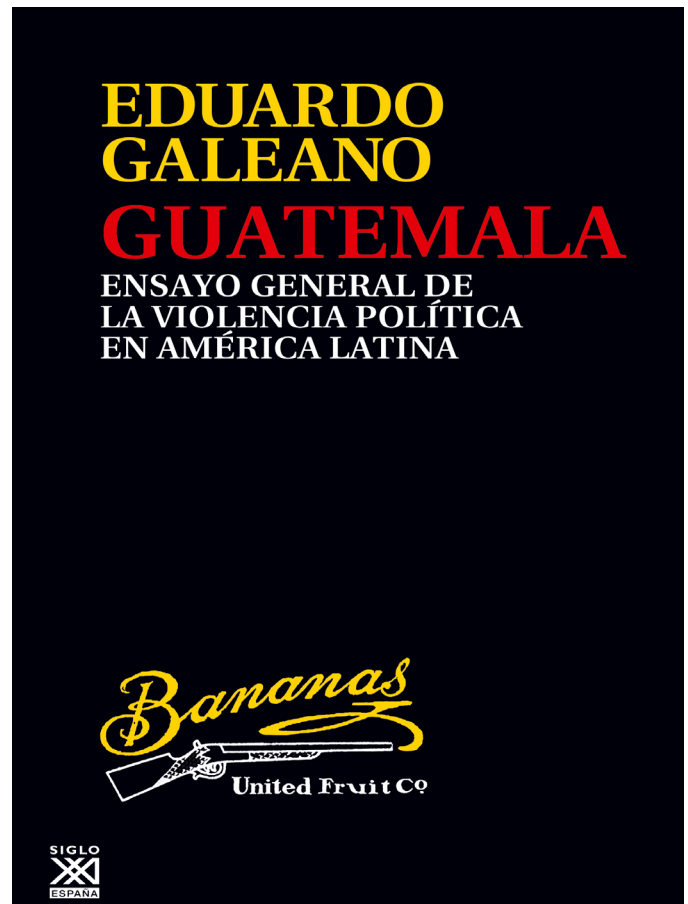
he ignored Guatemala had received little international attention until Eduardo Galeano visited the country between April and May 1967 to get a close-up look at the war that was taking place since 1960. Curiosity about the guerrillas and a virtually unknown country was the driving force behind the trip Galeano embarked on when he was just beginning to write. Five years after the author's death, Siglo XXI published an expanded revision of the book *Guatemala. General essay of political violence in Latin America*. The relevance of this book, which undoubtedly offers an interesting overview of Galeano's vision not only of Guatemala, but of Latin America in the context of the Cold War, lies in the fact that until now it was practically unpublished in Spain, despite being the direct predecessor of *Open Veins of Latin America* (1971).

Not only is it an important contribution to our knowledge of Galeano's thinking in his youth, but this Siglo XXI edition also includes two valuable additions: an introduction by the editor, Pedro Daniel Weinberg, a great connoisseur of Galeano's literary work, and a postface by Roberto García, a historian and expert on Central American issues. These two contributions should not make us forget that, as could not be otherwise, the main part of the book is Galeano's work. As Weinberg himself points out, "the reader has before him an important, long-awaited work, difficult to access and of limited editorial circulation" (p. 7), which allows us to delve into the roots of Galeano's thought and to get to know a vision that exalts the guerrilla movement in the way that it is still expressed by a large part of Guatemalan society. It is, in any case, a point of view very much marked by Galeano's revolutionary ideology and by the social context of the time, in which all the guerrilla movements had gained a lot of strength.

Galeano's work is not exactly an example of literary orthodoxy, and this book is also characterised not only by "a new style of journalism" (p. 23), but also by a writing that combines narrative journalism with political analysis and history. This style, so characteristic of Galeano, is not only his own, but is also characteristic of an era in which, among others, Herbert L. Mathews' report on Fidel Castro in Sierra

Maestra in 1957 or Jorge Ricardo Masetti's interviews with the leaders of the Cuban Revolution in 1958 were disseminated. Therefore, as Roberto García points out in the postface, "Galeano's trip was not exceptional" (p. 215), but was part of the immersion in the guerrillas that other American and European journalists had already undertaken.

At the age of 26, Eduardo Galeano travelled to Guatemala because, in his opinion, the Central American country had become the great laboratory of the United States on the continent: "Guatemala is the face, clumsily masked, of all Latin America; the face that shows the suffering and hope of these lands of ours, stripped of their wealth and the right to choose their destiny" (p. 89). For both Galeano and Weinberg, the overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in 1954, which was aided by the United States through the CIA, was a "foretaste" of the militarisa-



tion and coups d'état that would sweep Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. The interest of Galeano's work lies primarily in his early realisation that, in a way, it is in Guatemala that a new strategy of US intervention in Latin America begins. His to some extent preoccupation and even obsession with the US is evident in the frequent passages in which he includes the Vietnam situation in his analysis.

Galeano places the Guatemalan conflict in the clear context of the Cold War and turns everything into a dichotomy between communism under the classic slogan "the land for those who work it" (p. 79) and a capitalism that "creates the means of its own destruction" (p. 81). In other words, the classic discourse of guerrillas all over the world in this historical context. The author clearly positions himself and does not shy away from the "ideological bias" (p. 35) he presents in his analysis. In fact, in the preface, Weinberg points to three historical events that undoubtedly influenced Galeano's vision of the Guatemalan conflict: the Spanish Republic, the Vietnam War and the problems of Guatemalan democracy from 1954 onwards. What is certain is that he not only calls on the guerrillas to continue with the conflict, but also calls for a "popular revolution" (p. 171), an element that is very reminiscent of the Spanish Civil War, in which some sectors of the left wanted to take advantage of the context to make their socialist revolution.

Although the humanitarian drama in which Guatemala was living at the time is evident, plunged into an armed conflict that left some 37,000 dead according to the historian Carlos Sabino, who is far from Galeano's positions, a certain victimhood can be appreciated in the Uruguayan author's discourse, as he often uses superlative adjectives and exaggerations: "The Guatemalan peasants, workers and students torn to pieces by torture or riddled with bullets in the city and the countryside do not deserve, on the other hand, even a second of transmission on the news" (p. 55). This victimhood is also particularly evident when analysing the history of Guatemala and, above all, the conquest of America: "Four and a half centuries of continuous exploitation by the conqueror and his children have not passed in vain: crushed by the miserable and humiliated life they have been forced to lead" (p. 76).

The author is also highly critical not only of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, but also of democratic or open-minded ones: "Civilian governments either cease to be governments or cease to be civilian" (p. 56) to which he adds that "power is like a violin, which is taken with the left, but played with the right" (p. 131). Galeano is therefore critical of the exercise of power not only by dictators and those who make pacts with the United States, but also of those left-wing leaders who do not fulfil - or fail to fulfil - their electoral programme. Perhaps it is this pessimism about Latin America's use of power that leads the prologue writer to sternly assert that "Guatemala is not a failed state but a rotten one" (p. 37-38).

Finally, it is also worth noting the justification and exaltation of the guerrilla as an idea that runs through the book, very much in line with the theses of the international left at the time. In a very journalistic style, he also advances the combat strategy: "The guerrilla is in continuous movement (...) We have learned war in the exercise of war itself" (p. 64), "Guerrilla violence is the answer to the challenge of the violence of the system" (p. 168).

After reading *Guatemala. Ensayo general de la violencia política en América Latina*, the reader understands the title perfectly: Galeano wants to make it clear from the title of his work that Guatemala is not just another country, but the foretaste of a greater US presence in Central and South America, which in his biased vision translates into greater violence, greater capitalism and, in short, a worsening of the general situation on the continent. The historian Roberto García himself points out that Galeano's main aim with this book was to "awaken international solidarity" (p. 219) with Guatemala. Probably due to the book's limited editorial impact, he did not succeed on this occasion and had to wait for the publication of his best known work, *Open Veins of Latin America*.

INFORMATION

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AUTHOR

EDUARDO GALEANO (1940 - 2015) is an influential Uruguayan journalist and writer with a lot of influence in the Latin American left. His best known books are *The Open Veins of Latin America* (1971), of which the essay on Guatemala is the direct antecedent, and *Memory of Fire* (1986). The characteristic feature of his work is that he does not present books based on a single genre, but combines narrative and journalism in his them.

Galeano was born in Montevideo (Uruguay) into an upper-class, Catholic family. From his father, Eduardo Hughes Roosen, he took his first name, and from his mother, Licia Esther Galeano, he took his surname as his artistic name. From his youth, the author worked as a labourer, draughtsman, painter and messenger, and at the age of 14 he sold his first caricature to the weekly *El Sol*. In the 1960s he began to work as a journalist for the weekly *Marcha*, where other influential writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa and Mario Benedetti also were writing as contributors. At that time he also edited the newspaper *Época* for two years.

As a result of the coup d'état of 27 June 1973, Galeano was imprisoned and forced to leave Uruguay, where he returned in 1985 after a few years in Spain and founded the political weekly *Brecha*. He died in 2015 after several years of lung cancer.