

A CHILD LOST IN THE STORM

By Eduardo Galeano

From EL PAIS, 28 March 1990

In Bucharest a crane carried off the statue of Lenin. In Moscow an avid crowd stood lined up before the doors of McDonald's. The abominable Berlin Wall is being sold in pieces, and East Berlin has confirmed that it is situated to the right of West Berlin. In Warsaw and in Budapest the ministers of Economy are talking like Margaret Thatcher. In Peking, meanwhile, tanks crush students. The Italian Communist Party, the largest in the West has announced its own suicide. Soviet aid to Ethiopia has been reduced and Colonel Mengistu is suddenly discovering that capitalism is good. The Sandinistas, protagonists of the most beautiful revolution in the world have lost the elections. "The Revolution Falls in Nicaragua" headlines the daily papers.

It seems that there is no place for revolutions, except perhaps in the showcases of the archeological museums, nor is there a place for the Left, except for the contrite Left which has agreed to sit on the bankers' right hand. We are all invited to the world wide burial of socialism. The funeral cortege includes, so they say, all of humanity.

I do confess that I do not believe this. The morticians have the wrong body.

Perestroika and the passion for liberty that it has unleashed has been bursting the seams of an asphyxiating straitjacket. Everything is exploding. Changes are proliferating at a dizzying rhythm, beginning from the certainty that social justice does not have to be the enemy of liberty or efficiency. There was an urgency, a collective necessity: the people could not give any more; they were fed up with a bureaucracy as powerful as it was useless, in which, in the name of Marx, it was prohibited to say what one thought and to live like one wanted. All spontaneity was guilty of treason or madness.

Socialism, communism? Or was all this really an historical deception? I write from a Latin American point of view and I wonder: if it was true or if it might have been, why are we paying this price for such a deception? We never saw ourselves in that mirror. In the recent elections in Nicaragua, national dignity has lost the battle. It was defeated by hunger and the war; but also, it was defeated by the international winds which are blowing against the Left with greater force than ever. Unjustly, the just paid for the sinners. The Sandinistas are not responsible for either the war or hunger, nor can one attribute to them even the least bit of guilt for what has been happening in the East. Paradox of paradoxes: this democratic, pluralist, independent revolution that copies neither the Soviets, the

Chinese, the Cubans, not anyone; it has paid for the dishes that others broke, while the local Communist Party voted for Violetta Chamorro.

The authors of the war and hunger are now celebrating the election results that punish the victims. The day after, the United States government announced the end of the economic embargo against Nicaragua. The same happened years ago following the military coup in Chile. The day after the death of President Allende the international price of copper rose, as if by magic.

In reality the revolution that overthrew the Somoza family dictatorship has not had even one minute of respite in 10 years. It was invaded every day by a foreign power and its hired criminals. It was subjected to an unceasing state of siege by the banker- and merchant-owners of the world. And notwithstanding all this, it turned out to be a more civilized revolution than the French, because no one was guillotined or shot; and it was more tolerant than the Northamerican because in the middle of the war, it permitted, with some restrictions, the free expression of the local spokesman for the colonial master.

The Sandinistas brought literacy to Nicaragua; they overcame considerably infant mortality and they gave land to the campesinos. But the war bled the country dry. The damages were equal to one and one-half times Nicaragua's gross national product which means that Nicaragua was destroyed one and one-half times. The judges of the International Court in The Hague issued a decision against Northamerican aggression. It meant little. Neither did the congratulations of United Nations organizations concerned with education, nutrition and health. One can't eat applauses.

The invaders rarely attacked military objectives. Their favorite targets were agrarian cooperatives. How many thousands of Nicaraguans were killed or wounded in this decade by order of the United States? Proportionately this would be equivalent to 3 million Northamericans. And, nevertheless, in those years, thousands and thousands of Northamericans visited Nicaragua. They were well-received and nothing happened to any of them. Only one died. The Contreras killed him. (He was very young, an engineer and a clown. He walked around pursued by a swarm of children. He organized the first school for clowns in Nicaragua. The Contreras killed him while he was measuring the water in a lake to construct a dam. His name was Ben Linder.)

But ... what about Cuba? Isn't it happening there as it has been happening in the East -- a divorce between the power and the people? Haven't the people there had enough of one party and one press and one truth? "If I am Stalin, my dead are enjoying good health," Fidel Castro has said. And certainly that is not the only difference. Cuba did not import a prefabricated model of vertical power from Moscow, even though it was compelled to become a fortress so that its all-powerful enemy would not chew it up in small bits. It was under these conditions that this small underdeveloped country made some astonishing achievements: day by day, Cuba has less illiteracy and

infant mortality than the United States. Moreover, different from the various countries of the East, Cuban socialism was not orthopedically imposed from above and outside, but it was born from inside, and it grew from the bottom up. The many Cubans who have died for Angola or have given the best of themselves for Nicaragua without asking anything in exchange have not been carrying out the orders of a police state submissively or against their will. If that had been true, it would be inexplicable: there have never been desertions and there has always been more than enough fervor.

Now, Cuba is living in times of tragic solitude. Dangerous times: the invasion of Panama and the disintegration of the so-called socialist camp are influencing the internal process in the worst manner, I fear, favoring the tendency to a bureaucratic torpitude, ideological rigidity, and the militarization of the society.

Before Panama, Nicaragua or Cuba, the U.S. government invokes democracy like the governments of the East invoked socialism: a kind of alibi. Throughout this century, Latin America has been invaded more than a hundred times by the United States. Always in the name of democracy and always to impose military dictatorships or puppet governments to protect the threatened money. The imperialist system does not want democratic countries. It wants countries on their knees.

The invasion of Panama was scandalous, with its 7,000 victims among the debris of the poor neighborhoods levelled by the bombardments; but more scandalous than the invasion was the impunity with which it was carried out. Such impunity leads to repetition of the crime and encourages the delinquent. Faced with this crime of sovereignty, President Mitterand discreetly applauded and the whole world crossed its arms, after paying their small dues — statements of some sort.

In this sense silence proves to be eloquent, including the badly disguised complacency of some countries of the East. Does the liberation of the East imply a green light for the oppression of the West? I never shared the attitude of those who condemned imperialism in the Caribbean, but applauded or shut up when national sovereignty was trampled in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan. I can say this because I've never been two-faced: the right to self-determination of peoples is sacred in all places and at all moments. It could well be said that Gorbachev's democratic reforms have been possible because the Soviet Union does not run the risk of being invaded by the Soviet Union. And, correspondingly, it could well be said that the United States is safe from coup d'etats and military dictatorships because in the U.S. there is no U.S. Embassy.

Beyond any shadow of doubt, liberty is always good news — for the East which is justly jubilant about its own liberation, and for the whole world. But, on the other hand, are the elogies to money and the virtues of the market good news? The idolatry of the "american way of life?" Or the naive illusions of joining the "international club of the rich?" Bureaucracy, which is agile only in accomodating

accommodating its own needs, is adapting itself at an accelerated pace to the new situation, and the old bureaucrats are beginning to turn themselves into the new bourgeois.

We have to recognize, from the Latin American and so-called Third World point of view, that the defunct Soviet bloc had at least one essential virtue: it did not enrich itself off the poverty of the poor; it did not participate in the pillage in the international capitalist marketplace; and, on the other hand, it helped to finance justice in Cuba, Nicaragua, and many other places. I suspect that this will be remembered with nostalgia after a while.

For us, capitalism is not a dream to be realized, but a nightmare come true. Our battle does not consist of privatizing the State, but in taking it out of private hands. Our States have been bought at bargain prices by the landowners and banks, and all the others. And the market is not, for us, anything more than a pirate ship -- the freer it is the worse it is. There are the local and international markets: The international market has two branches. The commercial branch sells to us for higher and higher prices, and buys from us more and more cheaply. The financial branch, which lends us our own money, pays us less and less and charges us more and more.

We live in a region of European prices and African salaries, where capitalism acts like that good man who said, "I like the poor so much, that it always seems that there are not enough." In Brazil alone, as an example, the system kills a thousand children every day through illness or hunger. In Latin America capitalism is anti-democratic -- with or without elections. The majority of the people are prisoners of necessity and are condemned to sorrow and violence. Hunger lies, violence lies: they say they are a part of nature; they give the appearance of forming a part of the natural order of things. When this natural order is thrown out of kilter, the military enters the scene, hooded, or faces uncovered. Like they say in Colombia, "The cost of living rises and rises, and the value of life becomes less and less."

The elections in Nicaragua were a very hard blow. A blow like the hatred of God, as the poet said. When the results were known, I was, and still am, a child lost in the storm. A lost child, I say, but not alone. There are many of us. All over the world there are many of us.

At times, I feel that they have stolen from us even our words. The word socialism is used in the West to disguise injustice; in the East it evokes purgatory or perhaps even hell. The word imperialism is out of style and already it no longer exists in the dominant political dictionary, although imperialism still exists, plundering and killing. And the word militancy? For the theorists of disenchantment it is a ridiculous antique. For the contrite it is a nuisance in their memory.

In only a few months we have attended the spectacular shipwreck of a system that has usurped socialism, that treated the people like an eternal child, dragging him by the ear. But three or four centuries ago the Inquisitors slandered God when they said they were carrying out his orders. And I believe that Christianity is not the Holy Inquisition. In our times, the bureaucrats have discredited hope and defiled the most beautiful of human adventures. But I also believe that socialism is not Stalinism.

Now we must begin again. Step by tiny step, without any more shields than those born of our own bodies. We must discover, create, imagine. In a speech Jesse Jackson made shortly before his defeat in the U.S., he reclaimed the right to dream: "We are going to defend this right," he said: "We are not going to allow anyone to take away this right." And today, more than ever, it is necessary to dream. To dream together dreams that can become real and be incarnated in the material world, as another poet said, and as he wanted. My best friends live fighting for this right and, for it, some have given their lives.

This is my testimony. The confession of a dinosaur? Perhaps. In any case it is the testimony of someone who believes that the human condition is not condemned to selfishness and the obscene chase for money, and that socialism did not die because it still has not been; that today is the first day of the long life that it has to live.

Translated by Marilyn Buck.