

# The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America: Some Obstacles to its Perception in Europe

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In my studies on the formation of cross-cultural understanding, I have repeatedly encountered the difficulties that we Europeans have when it comes to recognizing the immense injustice done to the people of most Latin American countries, which are kept in a state of underdevelopment, or when it comes to understanding their struggle for human rights and for liberation on their own terms, without that struggle being interpreted as yet another expression of the East-West conflict.

These difficulties in understanding do not occur by chance but are produced systematically by the mass media in their news coverage. There is a clear political purpose behind this, as the former assistant secretary of state of the United States, Elliott Abrams, has recognized:

With respect to human rights situation in Nicaragua under the Somoza government or to the present situation in El Salvador we must not think only of the internal conditions. We must also think of how the country in question fits into the system of East-West relations. I can only confirm here that the government considers its policy on human rights in the context of East-West relations (Gottwald et al., 1988: 20).

But the difficulties involved in creating a basis of cross-cultural understanding are not only the result of a political program that is indifferent to the political and social rights of Latin Americans and which takes up the question of human rights only when it can be used as a weapon in the East-West conflict. These difficulties are more fundamental. They have their starting point in our efforts to understand the resistance to oppression and exploitation in Latin America in terms of our own prosperity and to make the Latin American situation fit into our own ideas on social peace and harmony.

Consequently, it is difficult for us Europeans to understand the words that "Che" Guevara wrote to his children in his farewell letter: "Above all, always be capable of feeling most profoundly any injustice committed against anyone in any part of the world. This is the greatest virtue of a revolutionary." (Guevara,

1985: 392). This profound feeling for all injustice that "*Che*" describes is much more than the mere moral indignation and "concern" which are so much in vogue nowadays as an acceptable form of emotionality. It implies, above all else, the ability to distinguish between justice and injustice in the first place, not understanding them as purely abstract opposites, but as aspects of life with a real social content.

In my presentation I wish, therefore, to refer to some of the psychological and ideological barriers which must be overcome in the effort to foster an awareness in Europe of the social situation of the majority of the people in most Latin American countries.

Overcoming these barriers in Europe is necessary not only in order to understand fully the extent of exploitation, repression, and organized violence to which most of Latin America is subjected. It is necessary, above all, in order to practice solidarity and to provide reliable support for the resistance to that oppression. This solidarity must be maintained not only when such resistance is defensive, i.e. a mere self-defense of the victims against injustice and dictatorship, but also when that resistance takes revolutionary forms aiming at a positive reconstruction of society, i.e. when it sets out to eliminate the roots of injustice and to develop democratic participation hitherto denied to the majority of the population. These forms will not, of course, always take the form of the parliamentary democracy familiar to us and will certainly not be designed to satisfy our ideals or to serve as a backdrop for the projection of our needs.

It is when we reach this point, at the latest, that Europeans' efforts to understand always fall short. Gabriel García Márquez has pointed out some of the reasons that lead to this failure. In the speech he delivered on receiving the Nobel prize for literature in 1982 he attacked the Eurocentrism present in our way of seeing things and noted that interpreting the reality of Latin America with conceptual structures imposed from outside succeeds only in making Latin America less understood, less free, and more isolated (García Márquez, 1982).

For García Márquez the problem is that the intellectually gifted Europeans obsessed with the consideration of their own culture have still not found any valid method of interpreting Latin American reality, because they insist on measuring it with the same yardstick with which they measure society on their side of the world, without considering that suffering and harm to life are not the same for all.

The imposition of alien criteria for the judgment of Latin American reality that García Márquez criticizes has even worse effects when we try to attain some kind of supposedly scientific objectivity. Collective resistance to repression and the use of organized violence as we know it today in countries such as Chile, Guatemala, and El Salvador, can only be understood in the light of their relationship to their own culture, society, and current situation. The same holds true for revolutionary projects in countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua.

But, in accordance with the bourgeois European scientific ideal. "objectivity" demands abstraction from the context in which subjects act.

Furthermore, the schematic descriptive categories that science draws on cannot provide context-free descriptions of actions. They merely place the actions described in a context that is not reflected on and which, as a rule, is different from the context in which the actions actually took place (Schwemmer, 1987). Thus far this is no doubt a general methodological problem associated with the understanding of actions. But when it comes to creating a cross-cultural basis of understanding, the problems involved have more serious consequences. In creating an intracultural basis of understanding it can be assumed that the schematic categories set the actions and their interpretation within the culturally normal context (thus providing a basis in reality). This is no longer the case with a cross-cultural basis of understanding. What in a developed country may be merely a question of moderate reform, for example, may be a revolutionary act in a Latin American country, a project to overthrow the dominant system.

Among the conditions that pose difficulties in the process of creating a cross-cultural basis of understanding between the members of an industrial European society such as the Federal Republic of Germany and the actors involved in a social revolution in an underdeveloped Latin American country, the first that should be mentioned is the extent of the socio-economic differences. These must be considered from several points of view.

First, the difference in socio-economic conditions between the industrialized and the underdeveloped countries is of such magnitude that members of an industrialized European country have no yardstick for measuring and judging revolutionary social advances in a third world country. For us, for example, it is almost impossible to grasp the significance of gains such as the supply of basic food products or of literacy for the people of a third world country who have been kept in a state of misery and ignorance.

Second, prosperity, high living standards, and social welfare services have become so much a matter-of-course for the average West European that he is largely unaware of these conditions of his everyday life and thus has no standard by which to judge them.

The meaning of processes of social revolution for all those who experience them or play an active part in them can only be understood, however, through an awareness of the factors and conditions determining their existence. The same is also true of the resistance movements, as in Chile, Guatemala, and El Salvador. In fact, it applies in general to the understanding of all activities of Latin Americans.

If we do not take into account the historical, social, and cultural preconditions and conditions of these societies, it will in principle be possible for us to approach an understanding of the socio-cultural structures regulating Latin American society. But our approach will necessarily be different from that of the Latin Americans themselves, since it is not practical but only the result of

theoretical efforts. This also holds true for European social scientists who spend long periods of time on field work in Latin America.

The German writer Hans Magnus Enzenberger draws erroneous conclusions when he writes that, although one could demand that each community be described and judged only in terms of its own preconditions, such a thoroughgoing relativism would presuppose the existence of an observer able to put down his leaving his own cultural baggage at home (Enzenberger, 1982). A relativism thus understood would not be capable of advancing a single step in the direction of improved cross-cultural understanding. Even if some Europeans become Latin Americans, this does nothing to promote European understanding of the true reality of Latin America.

On the contrary, in order to contribute to the process of understanding, we have to insist on the difference in our socio-cultural starting points, for the effort to understand the reality of Latin America on its own terms always means that we Europeans must consciously create the context in which that reality can be understood. Therefore, our understanding of the Latin American situation can in no way be a simple copy. Its validity can only be demonstrated as an act of cross-cultural transfer. As such, it can only be negotiated in an intercultural debate in which the different preconditions of understanding in both societies, Latin America and Europe, must themselves be made the subject of a discourse in which the participants are on equal terms.

Only if and when we are ready to begin such a discourse will we Europeans have a chance to recognize what García Márquez has pointed out so insistently: that the immense violence and immense suffering of Latin American history are the result of centuries of injustice and innumerable bitter experiences and not of a conspiracy hatched out three thousand miles away (García Márquez, 1982).

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