

John T. Way (2012)

**The Mayan in the Mall: Globalization, Development and the Making of Modern Guatemala**

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 310 p.

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On 21 May 2013, the day after Guatemala's Constitutional Court overturned the conviction of General Efraín Ríos Montt, the official Twitter account of the Starbucks coffee shop at Guatemala City's posh Oakland Mall asked its followers: "How is your day going? Have you visited us already?" (21 May 2013, [https://twitter.com/Starbucks\\_gua/](https://twitter.com/Starbucks_gua/)). The tweet concluded with a link to a picture of the chain's iconic white cup labeled with a smiling emoticon and the metadata tag "#indivisible". Instead of selecting one of the ubiquitous photographs of Maya women protesting the ex-president's dropped genocide charges, the Oakland Mall store repurposed a stock image from Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's 2012 U.S. anti-partisanship campaign. Fans of the second of the chain's two franchises in the country failed to respond to this ambiguous national solidarity, answering instead with descriptions of favorite beverage orders (French-pressed Kenya blend) and praise for the location's modern conveniences (electrical outlets). These digital conversations present a very different face of a city criticized frequently in the international press for what its modernity

has yet to fix: sinkholes, crime, poverty, and racial violence.

Just how Guatemalan urbanization has produced these two disparate and precariously coexisting worlds – one of luxurious *ladino* (non-Maya) consumption and another of impoverished indigenous subsistence – is central to J.T. Way's *The Mayan in the Mall*. Way, an assistant professor of Latin American history at Georgia State University, delivers in his debut monograph a captivating urban narrative that showcases the insights gained from his years spent as an historian and resident of Guatemala City.

The book, a revision of Way's 2006 dissertation, is perhaps best viewed as a series of impassioned essays that reveal this underside of Guatemalan modernity. Sampling from documents as diverse as legal briefs, newspaper accounts, and contemporary novels, as well as scores of interviews, Way argues that Guatemala City's modernity is continually built upon its "anti-modern" past and present (35); the indigenous and poor are at once the scourge and the mascot of a nation whose

informal economy employs nearly three times the workforce of the formal sector. In his introduction, Way re-periodizes Guatemala's twentieth century in terms of different eras of "modernism", which are explored in seven roughly chronological chapters. Way examines each of these periods from an array of perspectives and scales, complementing other findings on the discontents of Guatemalan modernity by scholars like Greg Grandin, Deborah Levenson, and Jean Franco.

Chapter 1 explores the transition from the "romantic modernism" of the 1920s to the "reactionary modernism" promoted by the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931-1944). Examining spiritual fads, labor culture, and tourism, among other topics, Way argues that in the century's first four decades Guatemalan political and economic elites (along with their North American imperialist accomplices) helped to indelibly write racist ideology into discussions of what a modern nation should resemble.

Chapter 2 focuses on El Gallito, a centrally-located shantytown that is home to two perils of sanitation: the public cemetery and the municipal dump. Way follows the paper trail of contested land invasions and the "high modernist" schemes of the Juan Arévalo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Árbenz (1951-1954) governments to rationalize through city planning the chaos engendered by the mid-century surge of the urban poor. Of particular note is Way's resistance to idealizing the social democratic revolution comprised of these two administrations, whose own variant of modernism extended

the reach of the state into the lives of the poor in complicated and often destructive ways.

Chapter 3 examines the informal economy – which Way regards as the only economy – through the eyes of the women that constitute the majority of this workforce. Fleshing out the previous chapter's stories of land invasions, Way creatively explores how poor women navigated the military government's anticommunist high modernism. His readings of social worker reports and neighborhood petitions reveal the impacts of the military's feminized, family-oriented discourses of welfare and failure to acknowledge the importance of women's labor.

Chapter 4 describes how the consequences of the military's modernism transformed the city into what he calls an "immoral metropolis" (93) where crime, vice, and violence became quotidian realities. Way insightfully chronicles the imploded dream of modern infrastructure by examining the failures of La Terminal, a massive bus depot and market inaugurated in the early 1960s, to provide safe and efficient transportation and commerce.

In chapter 5, the author discusses the impact of Guatemala's modern economy, characterized by an emphasis on agricultural exports and continued anticommunist security campaigns, on urban life and labor. Whereas most accounts of the years 1970-1985 focus on the genocide of poor and Maya *campesinos* in the rural highlands, Way uncovers the export-caused food

shortages and increased state surveillance on urban labor groups like Carlos Melgar's meat vendor association.

Way's last two chapters investigate the neoliberal modernism of the post-genocide period, seeking to understand how globalization has impacted urban culture. Chapter 6 is an ethnographic portrait of market vendor organizations – primarily those of the Mercado Cervantes and La Terminal – that highlights the ethnic and gendered fault lines of the informal economy. Chapter 7 details how third-party developmental modernism, promoted by NGOs, multinational corporations, sweatshops, evangelical movements, and transnational crime networks, has done little to ameliorate inequality. Forgoing a separate conclusion, Way's closing words in this chapter reveal his skepticism that any future modernisms will solve Guatemala's structural crises.

Despite Way's eye for historical detail, the book suffers somewhat from a lack of spatial representations of Guatemala's urban development. The publication's front matter provides only two unscaled maps of the city, one generated with data from the 1970s and the other undated. Way's urban portrait would also have benefited from more and better-integrated photographs to illustrate the city's century of chaotic expansion, as well as clearer chapter organization. Some of Way's richest archival work gets lost in a proliferation of subsections that are often tenuously tied to the genealogy of modernity presented (but not theoretically defined) in the introduction. Lastly, it is

important to note that the first part of the book's title should be understood as a metaphor rather than a preview. Way's discussion is not really about urbanization or the indigenous-cum-consumer (the proverbial Mayan in the mall) but about interrogating why the iconography of the Guatemalan poor simultaneously undergirds and threatens spaces like the sleek, import-laden shopping center.

These editorial criticisms aside, Way has innovatively documented Guatemala City's cultural and social history. He provides an excellent historical ethnography of the urban poor that decenters the traditional historiographical focus on the country's rural agrarian conflict. He is at his best when exploring the nuances of the "everyday politics" of state formation, especially through the lenses of gender, labor, and urban planning (p. 170). His critical analysis of the policies of the Arévalo and Árbenz years is a welcome reappraisal of pre-coup society. Undergraduates and non-specialists may find Way's discussion more easily digestible when paired with a broader account of modern Guatemalan history, especially for the 1944-1954 and 1970-1985 periods. Latin Americanists of all disciplines, however, should take careful note of Way's themes, methods, and sources, which will undoubtedly serve as a guide for future scholars attempting to destabilize the field's omnipresent rural/urban binary.