



Heather Vrana. *This City Belongs to You: A History of Student Activism in Guatemala, 1944-1996.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. xviii + 325 pages \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-29222-2.

Reviewed by Anthony Andersson

Published on H-LatAm (March, 2018)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Guatemala City has not received the scholarly attention it is due. Its exoticized popular reputation as overrun by juvenile gangs obscures the reality of a city that has long been the economic, political, and cultural heart of the largest country in Central America. The historiography of Guatemala tends to focus on agrarian issues and US imperialism—which while not unwarranted, has pushed Guatemala City and the urban middle classes into the background. Yet the momentous cycles of political violence that swept Central America during the twentieth century are incomprehensible without reference to this big, messy, frequently dangerous, and always intriguing place—the city where middle-class Guatemalans fought over the bounds of democracy and the rights and duties of citizenship. These urban political conflicts, which simultaneously played out across international networks of intellectuals and activists, set the terms of debate nationally and carried repercussions for the region as a whole. Thankfully, the Guatemalan capital city has come in for more academic scrutiny of late. The historian Heather Vrana has provided a major new contribution to this scholarship with *This City Belongs to You: A History of Student Activism in Guatemala, 1944-1996*. Vrana's book is a welcome addition for Guatemalanists, but it also has much to say about middle class formation and youth po-

litical culture in the global South that goes well beyond one city or one country.

This City Belongs to You examines the political activism of students and faculty at the University of San Carlos (USAC), from the mid-1940s through the 1990s. A coda brings the narrative into the present day. During most of this period, USAC was the most important institution through which the Guatemalan middle classes forged their identity and struggled to imprint their values on the nation at large. Nearly every professional, bureaucrat, and public intellectual in the country passed through its halls, making the identifier *San Carlista* (a graduate of USAC) effectively synonymous with *middle class*. Vrana's central argument is that San Carlistas forged a "student nationalism," described as "a loose consensus around faith in the principles of liberalism, especially belief in equal liberty, the constitutional republic, political rights, and the responsibility of university students to lead the nation" (p. 2). While student nationalism was never homogenous (its ideals informed far-left and far-right movements alike), San Carlistas created a shared language of rights, freedom, and duty that challenged the authority of the oligarchy and the military, while serving as a means to create a middle-class identity. When the university came under sustained attack by the military, student nationalism evolved

into a weapon to wage a culture war over historical memory. That battle over memory-making continues to this day through the “archival and historical practice” (p. 214) of the students (now professionals) who lived through the war. A new generation of students and activists unaffiliated with the university are also once again reclaiming the public space in ways that draw on the activism of the past to reject the impunity that pervades postwar Guatemalan society.

The book unfolds over six chapters. The first half is chronological, beginning with the mass demonstrations against the dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico in 1944 and moving through to the rise of the military state in the early 1960s. Chapter 1 discusses the student who ushered in the Revolution of 1944 and the “Ten Years of Spring” during which Guatemala experienced its only democratic opening before the end of the war. Chapter 2 examines the conservative backlash to the revolution through the anticommunist Catholic students who appropriated the ideals of the revolution to set the foundations for the counterrevolutionary state during the administration of Carlos Castillo Armas. At the center of this chapter is the *Plan de Tegucigalpa*, an anticommunist student manifesto that laid out the philosophy of the Liberation Movement and the Constitution of 1956. Importantly, while these anticommunist students brokered the alliance between the oligarchs and the military, they maintained themselves (the middle class) as intellectual leaders. Chapter 3, which parallels the chaotic presidency of General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes (1958-63), shows how student nationalism increasingly became defined by anti-imperialism and an antagonism to the state from which students had not long before drawn their legitimacy as its agents.

The second half of the book is structured differently than the first. Chapter 4 spans fifteen years (1963-77) in order to chart San Carlitas’ attempts to put their ideas about national develop-

ment into practice, all within a context of intensifying political polarization and repression. For this generation of San Carlitas, dependency theory provided a framework to understand their country and its history, but their encounters with their own peasantry and urban poor forced them to reconcile theory with the specificities of Guatemalan society. Guatemala’s large indigenous population, its outsized reliance on natural resource extraction, and “semifeudal” social relations defied conventional *dependentista* and *desarrollista* models, leading social scientists to elaborate their own, locally specific variants that were especially critical of mining and other primary exports as a means of national development. Chapters 5 and 6 both treat the bloody climax of the civil war in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but from different points of view. Chapter 5 examines the emergence of a broad-based popular movement against the military regimes as middle-class students made cross-class and multi-ethnic alliances. Chapter 6 then discusses how, in response to the military’s brutal crackdowns, the popular movement adopted an affective “politics of death” that resisted state repression through public rituals of mourning and embracing international human rights discourses. With the public terrorized by the counterinsurgency, public funerals and eulogies became political acts that could respond quickly to acts of violence by presenting the state as morally bankrupt and dead activists as martyrs to the moral authority of the pueblo. The affective politics of death were the substrate from which the politics of memory later emerged.

Vrana anchors the narrative on the carnivalesque *Huelga de Dolores*, an annual demonstration and ribald street festival put on by San Carlitas since 1898. Stories about particularly eventful huelgas make for entertaining introductions to each chapter, but they also open a compelling view into what it was like to be a student in a time and place where the very question of nationhood was under fierce debate. Key to Vrana’s analysis is the satirical newsletter issued for each year’s

huelga titled *No Nos Tientes* (roughly, “Do Not Mess with Us”) that skewers the biggest events and personalities of the past year. Anyone who has spent any time in Guatemala has probably seen some of the playful and dark cartoons from its pages, which are reprinted throughout *La Otra Historia*—a popular comic book history of Guatemala by the political cartoonist (and San Carlista) José Manuel Chacón, better known by his pen name, Filóchofo. *No Nos Tientes* is an unusual text to read as representative of prevailing intellectual currents, but Vrana does so to great effect, using it to reveal the values, assumptions, and contradictions of middle-class identity-making. Other source material is standard fare for historians—archives in the United States and Guatemala, contemporary journalism, interviews, and so forth—notable for its breadth of coverage. Vrana’s treatment of visual imagery stands out, such as the caricature of the indigenous campesino Juan Tecú in *No Nos Tientes*, or the murals and graffiti on USAC’s campus, bringing the subjects to life in a way that few historians can pull off.

For readers interested in Guatemala, *This City Belongs to You* makes several important contributions to the historiography. Its focus on the middle class, and students in particular, does much to begin correcting a glaring scholarly neglect, given how central students have been to the defining moments of Guatemala’s political history. Vrana also reveals a surprising degree of intellectual continuity between the revolution and counter-revolution—typically seen as riven by the 1954 coup. This fits into an emerging historiographical trend that stresses the shared values of modernization, gender, and especially race on both sides of that divide. The chapters on the 1954–63 period—that is, after the counterrevolution prevailed but before the rise of the “true” military state—add to another neglected aspect of Guatemala’s violent political history. The administrations of Carlos Castillo Armas and Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes were not simply preludes to the military regimes

that followed. Rather, they incorporated many of the middle-class ideals of the revolution into their governing philosophies and laid institutional foundations that, even if unsuccessful in their own right, were later appropriated by the military to legitimize its grip on power. Also, the shifting power relations within the right-wing coalition visible at this time point to contradictions that military governments also struggled to contend with throughout the civil war. In the effort to re-balance the geographic analytical scales, Vrana avoids severing the countryside from the city, showing just how strongly agrarian concerns shaped urban students’ views of themselves and their mission. This is especially apparent in the way *San Carlistas* tied nationalism to conservation, protesting neocolonial “dispossession of the pueblo’s land and natural resources” (p. 143). Resource nationalism encouraged students to see their own struggle for political freedom as inseparable from peasant demands for subsistence and dignity, paving the way for broad cross-class and inter-ethnic alliances.

Despite the title, the period between the early 1980s and 1996 (indeed, all the way to 2017) receives just a few pages in the coda. Readers who want to know more about student activism in the mid to late 1980s, or what role it played in the peace negotiations that brought the war to its formal end, will not find much here. I do not consider this a shortcoming of the analysis, which explains clearly that by 1980, “the republican ideal” underpinning the “statist horizon of student nationalism” had been “undone” by mass political violence (pp. 167, 228). The phenomenon that Vrana explores ended decisively in 1980, and today’s activists operate in a world fundamentally different from that of their predecessors. So, quibbles over title dates aside, suffice it to say that there is plenty in this book for Guatemalanists of any taste to digest and appreciate, and plenty more work to be done on this topic.

This City Belongs to You deserves attention from a broad audience. The middle classes are now a major subject of study in Latin America, and this book expands the scope of that literature to include a country that is generally not regarded as a major contributor to or standard-bearer of international cultural trends.[1] Yet Guatemala City is more representative of the cities in the global South than the larger, more cosmopolitan, and better-researched metropolitan centers like Mexico City, Buenos Aires, or São Paulo. Its cultural and economic influence are regionally significant, but it is not a global destination. The Guatemalan state, like most of Central America and the Caribbean, was structurally weaker than that of Argentina, Mexico, or Brazil, and it was dominated by the military and dependent on imperial patronage. The migrants that drove Guatemala City's growth came mostly from within the country, rather than from waves of foreign immigrants. And yet, *This City Belongs to You* shows that in some ways, Guatemala City was ahead of the curve of world events like the student protests of 1968, forcing us to reconsider some well-established narratives about who and what inspired the radical movements of the 1960s. Guatemala and its capital city have a lot to tell us about the forces that have shaped the contemporary world. *This City Belongs to You* shows how young people with ideas, surrounded by powers seemingly greater than them, indelibly shaped their nation. It is a history relevant to us all.

Note

[1]. See Ricardo A. López and Barbara Weinstein, eds., *The Making of the Middle Class: Towards a Transnational History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and Louis Walker, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Class after 1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Anthony Andersson. Review of Vrana, Heather. *This City Belongs to You: A History of Student Activism in Guatemala, 1944-1996*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50928>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.