



Julie Gibbings. *Our Time Is Now: Race and Modernity in Postcolonial Guatemala.* Cambridge Latin American Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 419 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-48914-0.

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Julie Gibbings's *Our Time Is Now: Race and Modernity in Postcolonial Guatemala* provides a fascinating history of how Guatemala's transition to liberal capitalism (1860s-1950s) resulted in the exclusion of Q'eqchi' Maya from full citizenship in the Guatemalan nation. Her methodological focus on multivocal narratives places Q'eqchi' Maya as historical actors who asserted their own visions of what it meant to be Guatemalan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this meticulously researched work, she teases apart multilayered interactions between Q'eqchi' Maya patriachs and commoners, Tzuultaq'as (deities), ladinos, German coffee planters, and the emerging Guatemalan state to provide a nuanced view of how different groups asserted and negotiated their own vision of society. In doing so, Gibbings contributes pathbreaking insights into how people defined and used time to assert shifting definitions of citizenship.

Gibbings uses the department of Alta Verapaz as a laboratory for exploring how indigenous and ladino Guatemalans understood "the elusive concepts of modernity and time" (p. 12). In nineteenth-century Guatemala, the dominant narrative of modernity placed European (Western) society as the origin and pinnacle of democratic nation-states, economic expansion through capital-

ism, and adoption of science and reason. The expansion of coffee production drew Guatemalan elites and European settlers to fertile highlands of Alta Verapaz. These settlers viewed historical time as a linear progression forward toward a "developed" future. The "past" became irrelevant as human society "progressed" to ever higher levels of civilization (p. 14). This metanarrative of progress "naturalized" time as universal and quantifiable, ultimately turning time into a commodity.

The Q'eqchi' did not see time as a linear progression toward civilization. Instead, time folded; past and present became entwined in "time knots." Past experiences did not get erased as society progressed but coexisted in processes that shaped, and were shaped by, contemporary daily life. These distinct perceptions of modernity, time, and space caused ladinos to identify Q'eqchi' as anachronisms that had no place in Guatemala's advance toward modernity. European definitions of space also reinforced linear definitions of modernity. Coffee planters saw the land as empty and unproductive, waiting for the civilizing influence of ladino and European farmers. Mapping and titling land erased Q'eqchi' religious practices that recognized mountain spirits as active participants in shaping community life by asserting human dominance over the divine. For Q'eqchi', land was

inhabited by mountain spirits (Tzuultaq'as), who provided for communities by ensuring productive crops and village harmony. For planters and the Guatemalan state, Q'eqchi' religious practices proved that the indigenous belonged in "the past"; in the present, they existed only as relics that slowed national progress. Many Q'eqchi', however, interpreted nineteenth-century liberalism's vision of modernity as a path toward full indigenous citizenship in the nation because it promised equality, representation, and, most importantly, an end to forced labor.

Through the rest of the book, Gibbings argues that European views of modernity, with its control over time and space, dominated Q'eqchi' modernity because the coffee economy depended on the availability of indigenous labor. Gibbings shows that planters, ladinos, and the Guatemalan state denied indigenous people full citizenship by using the "politics of postponement," which labeled Mayas as primitive and passive, holdovers from ancient peoples who were not fit for participating in "modern" society until they "shed their uncivilized ways" (p. 6). Ladinos used modernity to maintain *mandamientos*, the practice of requiring indigenous peoples to perform forced labor for planters or government officials. Ladinos argued that forced labor trained indigenous people to adopt modern, capitalist economic practices that fueled national development. The Q'eqchi' challenged depictions of themselves as uncivilized, rejected the "politics of postponement," and repeatedly pushed for full inclusion as "modern" national citizens.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 examines why the rise of coffee capitalism cemented racial divisions that nineteenth-century liberalism purportedly sought to eliminate. Rather than describing racial hierarchy in Guatemala as a state-orchestrated, top-down imposition, Gibbings shows that multiple factors within indigenous communities contributed to the growth of racial capitalism. By incorporating indigenous voices, she shows how economic demands for plantation

labor divided Q'eqchi' communities and eroded shared values of labor reciprocity, subsistence agriculture, and community solidarity. Q'eqchi' patriarchs typically mediated between Q'eqchi' commoners and external authorities and between Q'eqchi' and local deities. Patriarchs struggled to protect community land rights and minimize *mandamientos*, arguing that forced labor undermined subsistence agriculture and weakened communal reciprocity. Gibbings privileges Q'eqchi' knowledge by showing how a mountain deity, Tzuultaq'a Xucaneb, attempted to restore balance to communities disrupted by coffee production and land privatization. Xucaneb punished coffee growers with a freeze that destroyed their crop, but the freeze also provoked a millenarian movement against forced labor. Q'eqchi' resistance resulted in the military enforcement of *mandamientos*, highlighted the inability of Q'eqchi' patriarchs to protect commoners, and provided planters with sovereignty over Q'eqchi' workers. Coffee elites cemented racialized capitalism by creating *fincas de mozos*, a system that tied workers to small subsistence plots while requiring them to work the coffee harvest.

In the second part, Gibbings explores the uneven efforts to practice modernity in Alta Verapaz during the dictatorships of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) and Jorge Ubico (1931-44.) By tracing international, national, and local interpretations of "modern," she demonstrates how ladinos advocated indigenous assimilation by requiring them to participate in Minerva festivals and acknowledge Greco-Roman culture as the path to civilization. The ousting of President Cabrera provided political space for Q'eqchi' efforts to end the "politics of postponement" and define themselves as modern citizens. The dictatorship of Ubico again rejected indigenous efforts to assert an inclusive, reciprocal vision of citizenship. He abolished *mandamientos* but replaced them with equally harsh vagrancy laws that maintained Q'eqchi' as forced laborers. Gibbings provides a rich discussion of how the Guatemalan state

gradually replaced planters as the arbiters of coerced labor. Elites and the state blamed Q'eqchi' for "failing" to assimilate, repeatedly defining them as uncivilized. This uneven movement between repression and small democratic openings highlighted Guatemala's fundamental challenge to maintain control of indigenous labor. Racial capitalism required access to cheap, abundant labor.

Q'eqchi' laborers took advantage of Guatemala's "Ten Years of Spring" (1944-54), when the country's democratic opening provided substantive hopes for rural reform. Gibbins explains how Q'eqchi' interpreted Decree 900 as recognition and partial rectification of historical injustices that disrupted community solidarity and labor reciprocity. The success of agrarian reform created a massive backlash by planter elites who refused to see Mayas as sufficiently modern to assert their own definition of an inclusive society. The failure of the Guatemalan Revolution and subsequent violence renewed the "politics of postponement." In addition to defining Mayas as backward and anachronistic, elites also defined Q'eqchi' values of reciprocity and solidarity as a communist threat to the nation.

Our Time Is Now contributes to Guatemalan historiography through its innovative methodology that prioritizes alternative understandings of history and society. This work highlights the complex ways that indigenous peoples asserted their demands for justice in the face of fierce opposition. The book may be challenging because it asks the reader to step outside of typical historical frameworks to see the world through an alternate (Q'eqchi') lens. The one critique is the length of the book. At a time when many publishers encourage authors to write books under two hundred pages, it is refreshing to see a book that incorporates the *longue durée*. My concern is that few professors will assign the book, and fewer students will read it. That would be a shame because this book has

much to offer both historians of Guatemala and people interested in historical methodologies.

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