

Julie Gibbings, *Our Time Is Now: Race and Modernity in Postcolonial Guatemala*

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Nathaniel Morris

University College London

*Our Time Is Now* is an extensive, carefully-researched and elegantly argued book that presents its readers with multiple, intertwined histories: of the development of coffee production and the nation-state in Guatemala's heavily Indigenous Alta Verapaz region; of the concurrent emergence of key ideas about race, progress and 'modernity' in Guatemala as a whole; and also, more reflexively and as its title suggests, about the often-contentious ways in which history is created, and how such processes may be tied to contested definitions of time itself.

The first monograph authored by Julie Gibbings, a historian at the University of Edinburgh, *Our Time Is Now* covers the period of nearly one hundred years from the establishment of the first coffee plantations in Alta Verapaz in the mid-nineteenth century, up to the 1954 military coup that put an end to Guatemala's democratic revolutionary experiments during the late 1940s and early 1950s. It charts in fascinating detail the world-shattering economic, social, political and cultural impacts of coffee production on the people of Alta Verapaz – particularly the region's Indigenous Q'eqchi' majority, but also on the German immigrants who grew to dominate them via their control of the coffee trade, their mixed-race offspring, the region's Spanish-speaking *ladino* political elite. The cast of characters also includes a few key local non-human entities, such as the *Tzuultaq'a* mountain gods who controlled nature in Alta Verapaz and had the power to wipe out coffee harvests, and *el Q'eq*, the monstrous product of a German coffee-planter's union with a cow, which roamed the coffee plantations at night, disciplining recalcitrant Q'eqchi' labourers and stealing their eggs.

But as well as constituting a political and economic history of coffee's central role in shaping the emergent Guatemalan nation-state – a country in which 'state revenues derived from coffee jumped from less than one percent of total exports in 1852 to half of the nation's exports by the end of Conservative rule in 1873,' and would only become more important during subsequent eras (p.4) – Gibbings' book is also fundamentally about time: about how different groups conceive and conceptualise it, divide it into periods, and understand the relationships between past, present and future; and about the political consequences of such definitions, especially when they clash with one another. In particular, Gibbings charts how such clashes and disconnects allowed non-Indigenous elites – Conservatives, Liberals, German coffee magnates, and even supposedly pro-Indigenous 'revolutionaries' – to create what she calls the 'politics of postponement': a discourse that defined present-day Q'eqchi' people (and by extension the rest of Guatemala's Indigenous population) as inhabitants of a distant 'past,' in order to withhold their rights 'until an undisclosed time in the future when they had finally shed their uncivilised ways and become modern.'

This idea, eagerly propagated by racist intellectuals and sycophantic journalists, allowed Guatemala's non-Maya minority 'to set limits to [Indigenous] democratic participation and deploy [against them] practices largely regarded as antiquated remnants of colonialism and feudalism, such as coerced labour' (pp.5-6). And Gibbings makes a convincing case for it paving the way for further abuses during the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in the Guatemalan state's genocide against the country's Maya communities during the US-sponsored Civil War in the 1980s.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part one, 'Translating Modernity,' charts 'the rise of coffee capitalism and the consolidation of new forms of plantation labour management between the 1860s and the onset of World War I in 1914' in Alta Verapaz (p.27), which quickly became the centre of Guatemala's coffee industry. To tell this story, the section's four chapters examine local Maya rebellion – influenced both by older traditions of indigenous autonomy, and newer, 'popular liberal' ideas about representative government – against both the Maya upper classes, and oppressive outside forces; analyse the political, social and cultural effects of state efforts to privatise property and institute regimes of coerced wage labour, and the consolidation of the repressive plantation economy under the domination of repressive German landowners; and expound on the role of non-human entities as historical agents in a deeply magical-realist world, where European and Indigenous ontologies and feudalistic and capitalist economic models collided, spawning creatures like *El Q'eq*.

Part two of the book, entitled 'Aspirations and Anxieties of Unfulfilled Modernities,' goes on to explore 'the political, economic, social consequences of the kind of postponed modernity that took hold in Alta Verapaz' from the first decade of the twentieth century through to the 1954 coup. Another four chapters here tell stories of state-building projects fixated on ideas of 'civilisation' and modernity; of political revolutions and clashes between rival radicalisms; and the ways in which immigration and nationalism, world wars and inter-village conflicts, and global political currents of fascism and anti-fascism, collided together in the towns, villages, and plantations of Alta Verapaz. Behind them, these processes left fake Greco-Roman temples dedicated to 'modernity' abandoned on the outskirts of jungle villages, in surreal contrast with the genuine ruins of ancient Maya cities; and radicalised Q'eqchi' patriarchs and commoners coming together to demand an end to forced labour, the abolition of debt contracts, and full citizenship in a truly democratic system. Pushing forward these demands with strikes and land invasions legitimised through reference to the same history that their enemies had weaponised against them, Gibbings shows how Q'eqchi' political organising helped to overthrow the populist dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, ushering in a short-lived burst of land redistribution and political and social reform – the 'justice' that Q'eqchi' people had sought for more than a century – before it was snatched away from them by the CIA-backed coup against reformist president Jacobo Arbenz.

An extra map or two would have been useful additions to this book (to illustrate, for example, the expansion of Alta Verapaz's coffee plantations into communally-owned Maya lands), as would a bibliography (presumably missing for reasons of space and/or economy – but something that, given the high price of the hardback, one would think the publishers could have afforded). But the text itself is a fantastic one, which uses a variety of archival excavation techniques to privilege Q'eqchi' voices and points of view regarding a history that is, above all, about the *silencing* of Indigenous people in order to construct a supposedly 'modern' – and unarguably racist – Guatemala. In so doing, this book recognises and celebrates the 'ingenuity and agency' of increasingly hard-pressed and disenfranchised Q'eqchi' people (p.163), without ever treating them as homogenous and morally spotless 'victims,' nor falling into the postmodern trap of playing down violent injustice they suffered as just another thing for them to subtly 'resist' or 'subvert.' Gibbings similarly resists the temptation, all too prevalent in much of the literature, to present Guatemalan history as 'defined by a binary conflict between Mayas and ladinos, rather than to discover more complex stories that cross racial, gender, and class divides' (p.358).

Ultimately, then, by recentring typically Maya ways of seeing and understanding the world, within a broader social, political and economic history of coffee capitalism and nation-building in Guatemala, *Our Time is Now* helps to map out an alternate, brighter and more just future for the country, in which the Indigenous majority, their ontologies, their historic struggles and their present existence, are respected in the present for the benefit of all.