

**Review / Reseña**

Foss, Sarah. *On Our Own Terms: Development and Indigeneity in Cold War Guatemala*. University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 334 pp.

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Sarah Foss’s “On Our Own Terms” begins with an evocative photograph. The cover depicts two young Indigenous boys against the verdant backdrop of a Guatemalan jungle. Shirtless and smiling, they stand near their classroom, their chests painted with the anatomical details of the human body for a biology lesson. This scene is set in a Comunidad de Población en Resistencia in El Petén. A community of refugees, having fled state repression during the Cold War, have settled here. Despite—or perhaps inspired by—their escape from violence, the children in El Petén receive a distinctive education. The curriculum, tailored by teachers from these communities, is expansive enough to include both sciences and Indigenous history and culture. The educators’ goal is to nurture their community’s holistic development.

This makeshift classroom serves as a vivid introduction to a broader history of “development” in Guatemala from 1940 to 1996. Foss moves beyond the conventional understanding of development as policies imposed from above or from outside of Indigenous communities. Instead, she adopts a more capacious definition, exploring how different groups sought to increase the social capacity of one another during this period. Through this lens, she elucidates the activities of Indigenous educators and anthropologists, as well as national politicians, mid-level bureaucrats, and international agencies. She consequently invites readers to view development not as a

unilateral endeavor, but as a dynamic, “layered,” and contested exchange emerging from an assemblage of actors.

In Chapter 1, Foss explores conceptions of development advanced by Guatemalan elites before and during the Guatemalan Revolution (1944-1954). Unlike community-led models that prioritized local knowledge and goals, state-driven efforts advocated for external intervention. Elites stressed the need to “make the Indian walk” and to help the “indígena get to know himself”(5, 28). This top-down vision portrayed Indigenous Guatemalans as petulant children in need of a paternalistic state to steer them toward modernity. Foss expertly chronicles how this racist model of development rose to prominence in the mid-1940s, despite the efforts of dissenting voices.

Chapters 2 and 3 chart the persistence of indigenista understandings of development through the later years of the Guatemalan Revolution. Foss foregrounds the Instituto Indigenista Nacional de Guatemala (IING), established in 1945, and its attempts to address perceived “problems” of Indigenous communities. She pays particular attention to literacy campaigns, examining primers that were distributed in Indigenous communities and that introduced archetypal figures: Juan and Juana Chapín. These characters were cast as “permitted Indians”—as exemplary Indigenous citizens—engaging in community service, adhering to state-promoted hygiene regimes, avoiding political organizing, and participating in the formal capitalist marketplace. Juan is noted for his sobriety, while Juana is commended for maintaining a spotless home.

Using such documents, Foss showcases how development programs implicitly characterized Indigenous Guatemalans as dirty, drunk, and disruptive. Simultaneously, they suggested that national progress hinged on the latter’s adherence to these idealized roles. By exposing this history, Foss joins a growing group of historians complicating rosy representations of the Guatemalan Revolution. Her research supports arguments by scholars such as Jorge Ramón González Ponciano that revolutionary-era development policies sought to forge a “homogenous nationality of consumers and literate civilians” under the aegis of Presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz.<sup>1</sup>

Simultaneously, Foss avoids portraying Indigenous Guatemalans as mere bystanders in these developmental endeavors. Specifically, she uncovers their reactions to nutrition initiatives by the Instituto de Nutrición de Centro América (INCAP) and the agrarian reform under Decree 900 introduced by Arbenz. Responses varied

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Ramón González Ponciano, “The ‘Indigenous Problem,’ Cold War US Anthropology, and Revolutionary Nationalism: New Approaches to Racial Thinking and Indigeneity in Guatemala.” In *Out of the Shadow* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 107.

significantly. In the Sacatepéquez Department, for instance, some rejected nutrition programs as communist impositions, while others embraced the agrarian reform, and even deployed stereotypes of Indigenous poverty to claim land. Foss's excavation of these dynamics enriches ongoing scholarly discourse on Indigenous agency in both modern and colonial Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Her book highlights how, beyond simply resisting or accepting attempts at social engineering, Indigenous communities could simultaneously reject, reify, and rework such initiatives.

Subsequent chapters trace how notions of development shifted following the 1954 U.S.-orchestrated coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz. This period, marked by the counterrevolution and the onset of civil war in 1960, witnessed right-wing governments employing development as a counterinsurgency tool, moving from more horizontally organized initiatives to more vertical, technocratic projects. These efforts were epitomized by the USAID-funded National Program of Community Development (DESCOM). DESCOM aimed to use rural development specifically to prevent peasant radicalization. Foss skillfully employs a range of sources, including municipal archives and oral histories, to show how this pivot diminished local participation and escalated the risks for Indigenous Guatemalans—a group, she emphasizes, that continued to resist despite growing dangers.

In Chapter 6, Foss locates this escalating peril in the Ixcán Grande, an agricultural colony founded in the Huehuetenango Department. Born from collaboration between Indigenous Guatemalans and Maryknoll missionaries, this development project initially received the endorsement of Guatemala's Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INTA). INTA support stemmed from the project's approach: it provided Indigenous Guatemalans with fallow land without expropriating property from wealthy landowners. Nonetheless, the colony's fortunes shifted in the 1970s with the discovery of oil and the entrance of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the region. The government began portraying the Ixcán Grande as a "little Cuba in the jungle," leading to intense surveillance, military occupation, and escalating violence. Foss poignantly delineates how, by the 1970s, these charges of communism rendered previously-approved development models subversive and, in the Ixcán Grande, resulted in genocidal outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Recent examples include, respectively: David Carey Jr. *I Ask for Justice: Maya Women, Dictators, and Crime in Guatemala, 1898-1944* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013) and Peter Vilella, *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

By illuminating this process, Foss places Indigenous Guatemalans at the heart of the global Cold War. Her concluding chapter furthers this focus by analyzing two contrasting development projects that emerged amid the refugee crisis following the armed conflict's most violent phase: the military-controlled "Polos de Desarrollo" and the community-driven *Comunidades de Población en Resistencia* (CPR). Employing visual analysis, Foss scrutinizes these initiatives. The *polos* aimed to set the rules for President Ríos Montt's La Nueva Guatemala, instructing Indigenous refugees on "appropriate" forms of economic, political, and social action. The *comunidades* championed an alternative development structure based on collective decision-making from within communities. By juxtaposing these projects, Foss exposes the various forms development took during the bloody nadir of Guatemala's armed conflict. Where one reinforced the notion of "permitted" and "prohibited" Indigenous people, the other repudiated such a dichotomy outright.

Notwithstanding these contributions, Foss's final chapter raises some questions. On the one hand, Foss's visual analysis represents a necessary departure from conventional approaches to this period in Guatemalan history. She captures the challenges of "photographing development" and rightfully emphasizes the need for "ethical spectatorship," urging viewers to actively engage with images rather than passively observing them (203). Simultaneously however, Foss elects not to interview former refugees who witnessed these specific development projects to avoid retraumatizing survivors. This choice is sensitive and commendable given the ongoing risks associated with speaking about the war. However, Foss's decision contrasts with her extensive use of interviews with and personal archive of Rolando Paiz Maselli, an engineer of the *polos*. The lack of testimonies from Indigenous residents of the CPRs and Polos de Desarrollo results, at times, in an asymmetrical narrative. Incorporating even the refusal of survivors to speak would have lent a more comprehensive view, acknowledging their autonomy in determining the narrative of their experiences.

This critique in no way detracts from the achievement of the book. *On Our Own Terms* emerges as a pivotal contribution to the study of development and Indigenous history in Guatemala. Foss's account places Indigenous communities at the center of the global Cold War, revealing them as purposive participants in development initiatives over a half-century of Guatemalan history. Despite consistent attempts by various elites to impose development as a means of social engineering, as a Cold War tactic, as a tool of counterinsurgency, "development" remained a "process" shaped by its "intended recipients." These "recipients" responded in myriad ways, resisting,

reifying, and reworking initiatives. By exposing this history, Foss' compelling study showcases how Indigenous groups in Guatemala attempted, and often succeeded, to pursue development "on their own terms."