

## CRITICA / REVIEW

Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). 336 pp.

### **Downsizing Democracy During the Cold War**

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Writing in the 1930s, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, like the conservative historian William Beard before him, reflected on the incompatibility of capitalism and democracy in America. Where capitalism valorized individual interest and followed an amoral logic of profit, democracy mandated emphasis on the common good. In contrast to Beard, who looked to America's middle class as the foundation for achieving the democratic ideal, Niebuhr is said to have identified the proletariat "as a Chosen People who would escape the bondage of capitalism and bring the democratic promise of history to its fulfillment" (Noble 72). The instrument of this transformation in Niebuhr's view was to be a Marxist theology. With the advent of the Second World War and the specter of fascism, Niebuhr recanted. U.S. historian David W. Noble identifies this reversal with a paradigm shift in American historiography from an emphasis on the incompatibility between capitalism and democracy to the belief that the former was the foundation of the latter. Where Niebuhr had once identified the proletariat as the driving force of the revolution that would overthrow capitalism, making possible the realization of a socialist democracy, in

the wake of the Second World War he became an ardent advocate of the U.S. role as the principal defender of the global status quo. Today capitalism has come to be equated with democracy to such a degree that it is difficult to recognize this dubious equivalence as a product of the Cold War and to recall that even theologians like Niebuhr once identified capitalism as a threat to democracy and looked to a Marxist-inspired proletariat as the agent of a democratic, socialist revolution.

In *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, Greg Grandin reveals the cost of Niebuhr's post-war conclusion that capitalism was the foundation for democracy and the wisdom of his identification of the Marxist-inspired proletariat as the vanguard of social transformation. Grandin demonstrates that democratic practices in Guatemala derived neither from elites nor middle class reformers, but from popular democrats, many of them rural Mayan activists, who transformed the abstract ideals of liberalism and Marxism into what might be described as a "lived democracy" by demanding that the emergent Guatemalan state live up to the liberal ideals it proclaimed. Grandin emphasizes Marxism's centrality to this struggle, suggesting that it enabled people to understand the larger social structures in which their own lives were embedded, granted them a means of engaging in political transformation, and facilitated the creation of a network of activists linking distinct regions and people of Guatemala. Grandin's analysis demonstrates through a close, historical study that, in its efforts to prevent social transformation, the U.S. "either executed, patronized, or excused" a Cold War terror that "fortified illiberal forces, militarized societies, and broke the link between freedom and equality, thus greatly weakening the likelihood of such a fulfillment and making possible the reversal of the gains that had been achieved" (Grandin xiv).

Grandin's conclusion lamenting the reduction of democracy, once identified with justice and equality, to a down-sized, neo-liberal model of individual rights and free trade, reflects the pessimism regarding the possibilities for social change that marks our own historical moment. However, his work also offers testimony to the tenacity and capacity of people to organize, to analyze, and to fight for democratic ideals grounded in concrete demands for access to material resources and political representation, even (or perhaps especially) in the face of extraordinary repression. If the liberal ideals proclaimed by successive Guatemalan states came closest to realization in the democracy promoted by popular classes, in many cases strongly influenced by Marxism, the memory of each success (and failure) was also strongest among those who fought ardently for these ideals and suffered the most from their defeat. Grandin's examination centers on the activism of Q'eqchi' Mayan organizers in the department of Alta Verapaz between the 1940s and the 1980s to illustrate how successive generations used the experience and networks created by their predecessors to promote reform. Each of these organizers is associated with a reformist conjuncture, which their activism helped to promote locally, and with its destruction by forces directly or indirectly supported by the U.S. Grandin analyzes three key moments of the popular struggle for democratic ideals, their violent defeat in each case by U.S.-sponsored forces, and the closing off of the options for reform and democratization by the Guatemalan state's violent militarization, leaving armed revolution as the only alternative available to popular sectors.

Among the most compelling aspects of Grandin's work is his careful construction of how individuals' personal circumstances led to their political engagement. Through a combination of interviews and extensive archival research, Grandin brings these

reformers to life and places them in their historical contexts, demonstrating that people make history, but not under conditions of their choice. In each case, Grandin shows how Q'eqchi' organizing, while embedded in local contexts, transcended temporal and geographic boundaries. Thus José Angel Icó from the small town of Chitaña in Alta Verapaz, who was compelled to act by his personal experience of the impact of the expansion of the coffee economy on Q'eqchi's, serves as a paradigmatic example of how Arbenz's reforms were made possible by the activism of local leaders. Indeed, Icó is said to have willed himself to stay "alive to see Arbenz take power; [and to have] campaigned for him from his sickbed" (Grandin 19). Icó's nephew, Alfredo Cucul, would carry on this reformist tradition by expanding his uncle's network, defending Q'eqchi's in court, organizing unions, working to end compulsory labor, planning literacy programs, and campaigning for revolutionary candidates. Cucul's activism was itself made possible by the reforms instituted first by Arévalo and subsequently by Arbenz, whom Icó had helped to propel into the presidency.

Grandin emphasizes that the U.S. decision to overthrow the Arbenz government was not motivated purely by economic considerations, as has been suggested by researchers who stress the United Fruit Company's displeasure with Arbenz's land reform. Rather, the U.S.-sponsored coup against Arbenz was carried out at least as much for ideological as for economic reasons. The U.S., he suggests, moved against Arbenz due to its largely accurate evaluation of the growing strength of the communist Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo (PGT) and its important role in the implementation of Arbenz's reforms. Through its links to local Q'eqchi' networks and activists like Icó and Cucul, the PGT facilitated agrarian reform in rural areas and became the key mediating force

between rural communities and the national government. For the U.S., however, the PGT's participation in Arbenz's reformist project indicated a pernicious international communist influence in Guatemala that had to be stamped out. Grandin demonstrates that by seeking to destroy the PGT and communism in Guatemala, the U.S. attacked the most important organized force for the democratic transformation of the country and thereby undermined the potential for reform.

Despite the best efforts of the U.S., the PGT's networks were not immediately destroyed by the coup against Arbenz. Rather, as Grandin shows, they again became a vanguard in promoting democratic reform even in the face of growing repression under the military dictatorships that succeeded Arbenz. In other words, Grandin suggests that even as the U.S. overthrow of Arbenz diminished the possibility of reform and increased the likelihood of revolution in other Latin American countries, most notably Cuba where Ché Guevara would repeatedly assert that "Cuba will not be Guatemala," within the country PGT members and reformers continued to view the Arévalo and Arbenz governments as evidence of the country's democratic potential (5).

According to Grandin, a reformist military uprising in 1960 received little support from the PGT, which instead continued to work with Q'eqchi' activists in Alta Verapaz using the limited government institutions available for organizing. The recently created Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INTA) and peasant leagues, which remained legal even as unions were outlawed, provided an institutional framework through which activists rebuilt the PGT network. In many cases the same leaders continued to play a key role, yet Grandin also emphasizes the importance of new organizers like Efraín Reyes Maaz who had been forced into exile for his defense of

Arbenz and embarked on a program of reading to try to understand U.S. intervention and how it fit into a larger structure of exploitation within Guatemala and internationally. Grandin demonstrates that for Reyes, Marxist theory provided a foundation for this understanding and created the basis for his participation in political reform. Reyes became the key liaison and the most important cultural link between the national PGT and local communities. His successful creation of a vast PGT network resulted from his organizing ability and his capacity for transforming Marxist ideals into the local cultural and linguistic idioms of the Q'eqchi' community. Grandin shows that far from being a foreign imposition, Marxism became part of a syncretic Q'eqchi' ideology. While a good deal has been written recently on the Marxist left's use of the Maya during the armed struggle of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Grandin makes it clear that well before this the Maya Q'eqchi' were not merely passive followers of Marxist ladinos but rather actively made their own, creative use of Marxism.

Through the efforts of Reyes and other organizers, the PGT was able to recreate a political base in Alta Verapaz, to organize to demand land from INTA, and to fight against forced labor. Nevertheless, their success was inhibited (indeed made impossible) by the hardening of an alliance between the military and local planters that destroyed this reformist potential. Reform required that the state uphold the laws it promulgated. Instead, in Guatemala the military and planters formed a "natural alliance" to repress violently the democratic reformers who pushed the national government to live up to its proclaimed liberal ideals.

Grandin identifies two key points following the overthrow of Arbenz at which the non-democratic, indeed one might say fascist, potential of the Guatemalan military-state

was crystallized. The first, like the overthrow of Arbenz, came as a direct result of U.S. intervention. In 1965, the U.S. government sent John Longan to create a “rapid-response security unit” in Guatemala. This was Longan’s second round of training in Guatemala and it followed his engagement in a range of “Cold War trouble spots” where he was charged with responsibility for training local security forces. The security unit Longan created in Guatemala on the eve of the election of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, who campaigned on the promise of a return to the ideals of the Arévalo/Arbenz revolution and advocated negotiations with the guerrillas, would “within three months [of Longan’s training], working under the name Operación Limpieza (Operation Cleanup), conduct over eighty raids and multiple extrajudicial assassinations, including an action that during four days in March captured, tortured, and executed more than thirty prominent left opposition leaders” (Grandin 73). Operation Cleanup, promulgated by U.S.-trained forces, and as Grandin demonstrates, undertaken with the full knowledge of the U.S. embassy, massacred the country’s most important reformers and marked a transition to terror that radicalized democrats and further polarized domestic politics in Guatemala at the same time that it marked a general radicalization of the region.

Grandin demonstrates, in fact, that just as the left had been organizing for reform through the PGT, the right had been organizing for militarization through the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN). Famously described by Mario Sandoval Alarcón as “the party of organized violence” and the “vanguard of terror,” the MLN would be prominent in both death squads and the expansion of military power into rural areas (Grandin 89). Following the overthrow of Arbenz, the military began to expand its presence in rural areas by creating a social base that linked planters, provincial military

officers, and paramilitary organizations led by military commissioners. The number of these commissioners increased from about one commissioner for each of Guatemala's three hundred municipalities in 1954, to over nine thousand by 1966. Thus the expansion of an increasingly radicalized military presence in rural Guatemala preceded the advent of the guerrilla movement. Grandin shows that the presence of the MLN and military commissioners would play a crucial role in the intensification of state-sponsored violence and terror after 1966.

Grandin argues that the final transition point to the terror in Guatemala would come with the Panzós massacre in 1976, which “marked a watershed in Guatemala's war, an overdetermined moment of cause and effect. Perhaps no other event had such far-reaching political and symbolic consequences, consequences that rang through all levels of society – the left, unions, indigenous movements, the insurgency, the Church, the military, and the state” (155). The protesters massacred by the Guatemalan military at Panzós belonged to an alliance of twenty-five families led by Adelina Caal, known as Mamá Maquin, who were seeking land titles from INTA. Just as the PGT and communists, who formed the core of Guatemala's democratic movement in the 1950s, represented a perceived threat to the U.S. because of their increasing power and activism, Mamá Maquin and the Q'eqchi' peasants with her represented a threat to planter and military interests. Grandin emphasizes not the passivity usually attributed to the “peaceful protesters” massacred by the military, but their justifiable anger, frustration, rage, and even hatred for those responsible for their poverty and oppression. Following decades of legal efforts to gain access to land titles, dating back to Arbenz and the agrarian reform, at the Panzós protest led by Mama Maquin, “not only did the marchers

take over the plaza but their ringing machetes decolonized sound, penetrating the shut doors and windows of Ladinos” (Grandin 153). Grandin’s emphasis on the active, aggressive, and even “*alegre*” nature of the protest is meant not to dismiss the widely accepted view that the massacre was planned by the military in advance with the collusion of the region’s most powerful planter, which Grandin affirms, but to demonstrate the rage of Q’eqchi’ peasant leaders at the repeated reversals of land reform and the murder of relatives and friends by military forces. The subsequent radicalization of the popular struggle in Guatemala, Grandin argues, was the result of such violent repression of democratic movements rather than something inherent to either peasants or Guatemala.

For Grandin the Panzós massacre marked the end of any possibility for peaceful social transformation in Guatemala. The PGT virtually disappeared, and its “decimated structure was replaced by armed insurgents, most notably the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), which now included in its ranks Adelina Caal’s [Mamá Maquin’s] son and grandson” (Grandin 159). The massacre “hardened the border between reform and revolution” making evident that the former was impossible:

The Panzós massacre galvanized the national left, providing a focal point of unification. The killings further radicalized politics and destroyed the lingering ability on the part of not just the PGT but a range of other parties, organizations, and individuals to work through state institutions. It not only brought together the city and the country but rhetorically merged isolated land conflicts into a single movement with a common enemy. But more than this, the massacre made more explicit the tendency

to understand relations of rule and resistance in racial terms (Grandin 165).

Grandin cautions against this tendency, emphasizing that reducing conflict to race and implying that it reflects an unbroken chain of violence against indigenous people dating back to the colonial period and is thus inherent to Guatemalan society, eliminates historical causality and obfuscates U.S. responsibility for the violence. By historicizing the potential for reform and the causes of conflict and demonstrating the direct engagement of the U.S. in promoting state terror within Guatemala, Grandin proves that the escalating violence of the Guatemalan civil war was a direct result of the Cold War and not the inevitable consequence of local conflicts.

After the Second World War, Reinhold Niebuhr's fear of fascism and his belief that communism (like fascism) was inclined to totalitarianism led him to promote capitalism as the foundation of democracy and to mandate that the U.S. "must engage in a cold war against the attempt of communist Russia, the most totalitarian government, to impose uniformity on all nations" (Noble 84). If, as historian David Noble has suggested, the "cold war for Niebuhr justified the use of limited violence to stop Marxist subversion in other nations or even to keep a nation from voluntarily choosing Marxism" (Noble 84), then the logical outcome of this policy was not to prevent the development of fascism, but to contribute to it. In Guatemala, the counterinsurgent state produced and made efficient by U.S. intervention in order to prevent the spread of "totalitarianism" and "fascism" would massacre 200,000 people. The Cold War's impact in Latin America would be the direct murder of thousands more by similar military dictatorships throughout the continent and the indirect death of hundreds of thousands through

“democratic reforms” defined as the adoption of free market capitalism (Young Kim, et al., Robinson). Democracy would come to be dissociated from justice or equality and reduced to its minimum definition as respect for the most basic human rights and the rule of law. As Grandin concludes “Democracy is now but a shade of its former substance. This is Cold War terror’s most important legacy” (Grandin 198). *The Last Colonial Massacre* manages both to reveal the terror of this legacy and at the same to provide a moving, compelling, and beautifully written account of individual agency confronted by inexorable global exigencies. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the Cold War, popular organizing, the decline of democracy, or simply in human potential or the potential to be humane.

#### **WORKS CITED**

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