

THE MAYAN IN THE MALL

Globalization, Development, and the Making of Modern Guatemala



J.T. WAY

The Mayan in the Mall

LA PATRIA NUEVA

El pueblo de la Patria Nueva
se levanta y se organiza
para la defensa de su territorio
y para la construcción de una
nueva sociedad.





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J. T. WAY

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For my mother

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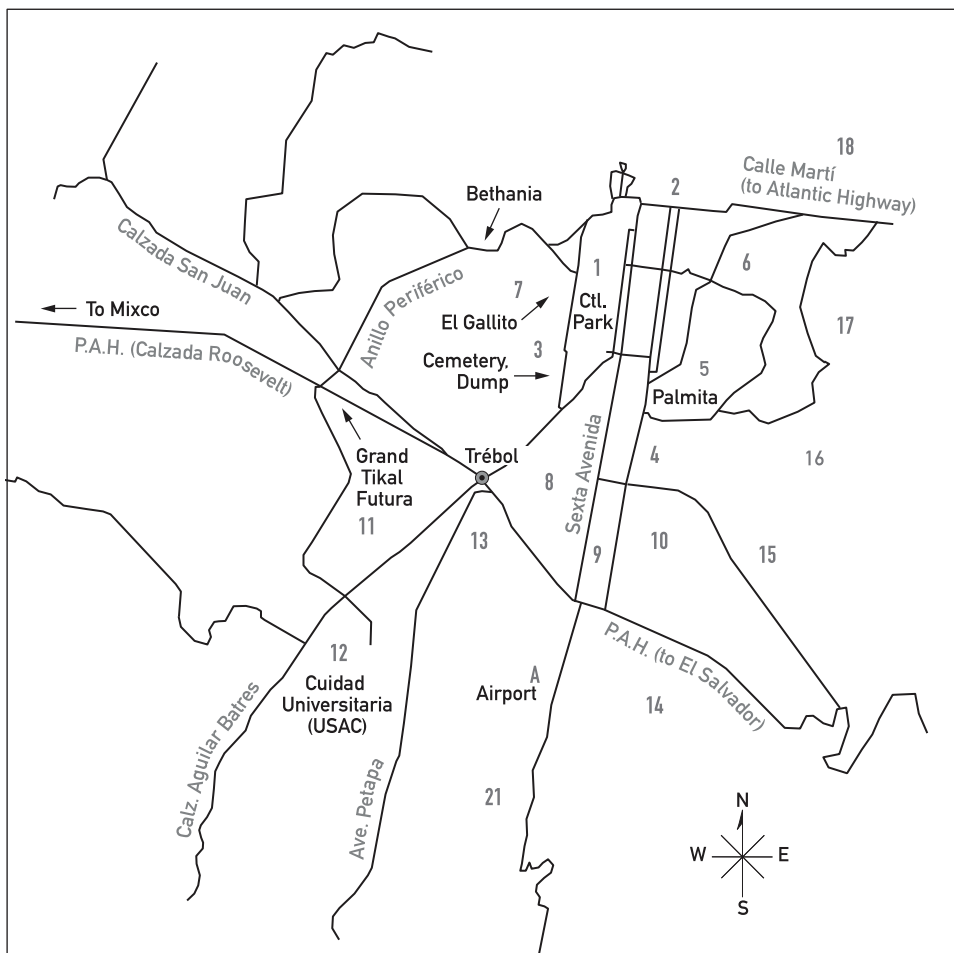
Departments of Guatemala. Not to scale.



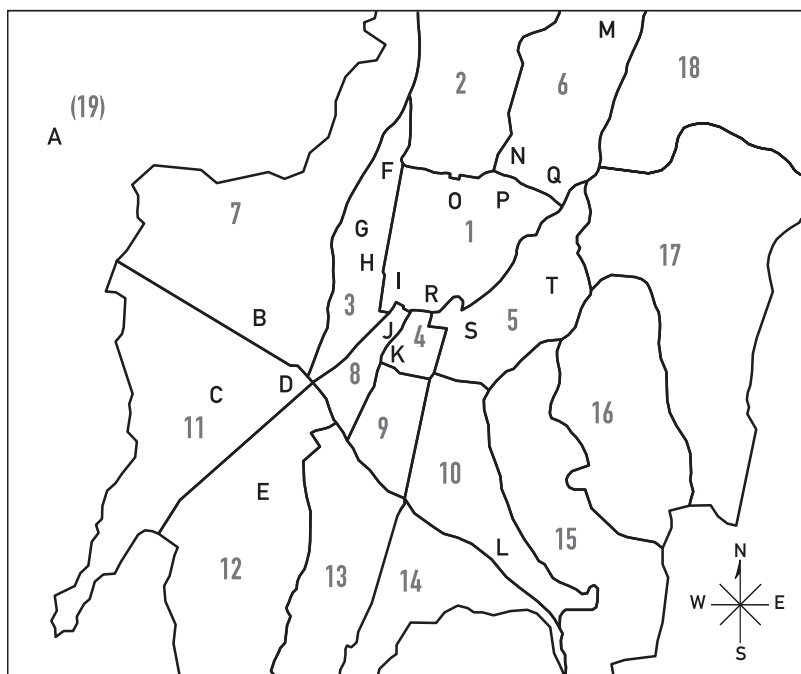
Highways of Guatemala. Only major routes are indicated. The P.A.H. is the Pan-American Highway, commonly called the Inter-American Highway in Mexico and Central America. Not to scale.



Municipalities of the Department of Guatemala. These municipalities make up the Guatemalan metropolitan area. All show some degree of urbanization. Neighboring departments are indicated in bold, uppercase lettering. On the right-hand side of the municipality of Amatlán is Lake Amatlán. Not to scale.



Overview of Guatemala City. Only major streets and highways are shown. Large numbers indicate city zones. Not to scale.



Municipal Markets of Guatemala City, 1972. Large numbers indicate city zones.

Source: *Esquema director de ordenamiento metropolitano (EDOM) 1972–2000: Plan de desarrollo metropolitano* (Guatemala: Municipalidad de Guatemala, 1972). Note that many zones lacked markets. Not to scale. Legend: A: Florida. B: Mercantil. C: Roosevelt. D: Guarda Viejo. E: Reformita. F: Sauce. G: Gallito. H: Cervantes. I: Presidenta. J: Granero. K: Terminal. L: Villa de Guadalupe. M: Candelaria. N: Parroquia. O: Central. P: Colón. Q: San Martín de Porres. R: Sur 2. S: Palmita. T: Asunción

Welcome to another Guatemala, one in which a mammoth shopping mall and hotel complex, Grand Tikal Futura, looms above the neighboring buildings in the nation's capital, Guatemala City. Named after the magnificent Mayan ruins at Tikal, whose architecture it mimics, the mall is much like malls anywhere. Behind the jade-toned tower and pyramid-like façade are stores like The Gap, McDonalds, Payless Shoes, and other shrines to modern consumerism. Tikal Futura references a national cultural treasure and a Mayan national identity but portends a homogenized nation. Figuratively speaking, Tikal Futura and the economic system it represents are “putting the Mayan in the mall.”

This book tells the story of the making of modern Guatemala. A history of the construction of social space from the 1920s to the new millennium, it focuses on Guatemala City's poor neighborhoods, on the markets that provision them, and on their connections with the countryside and the greater world beyond. The history of modernism in the land that modernity forgot is a human history, as cultural and social as it is political and

economic. It is a story that ties together hemispheric development endeavors and the grass-roots everyday development that built neighborhoods and made them function. It encompasses the growing rural migration to Guatemala City, the exploding of the contemporary informal economy, the descending of a nation into war, and the striving of ordinary individuals to survive even as their efforts defined the life and feel and texture of the land.¹

Seemingly endless paradox and contrast are assimilated in the spatial unfolding of Guatemala's distorted development. Grand Tikal Futura, harbinger of first-world consumerism though it is, sits at the epicenter of a country in which roughly three-quarters of the economically active population works in the informal economy, slightly more live in poverty, and well over half are illiterate.² The mall's neighbors include multistoried transnational corporate offices at intersections where rag-clad urchins spit fire for a tip. The Kama Sutra love motel and the Pentecostal temple are nearby. Mayan vendors hawk tortillas next to Goodyear Tire shops and cinderblock shacks where cockfight spurs and guns are sold.

All these installations are denizens of a highway known as the Calzada Roosevelt, named after FDR. The Roosevelt is really part of the Pan-American Highway—the part that runs through the city where gated enclaves of the wealthy rub elbows with shantytowns on open sewers. It connects that city with the corn-terraced villages straight out of *National Geographic*. A U.S.-built road network that links the Americas, the Pan-American (called the Carretera Interamericana in Central America) is a highway whose construction was the largest infrastructure and development project in contemporary Latin America. One of the great, globalizing development schemes that this book explores, the Pan-American was the stuff of imperialism and dreams. The section of the highway that lies in Guatemala City, the Roosevelt, epitomizes Guatemala's contemporary dichotomies. The Roosevelt is the broken heart of the road network that ties the nation together, a miracle mile on acid, an asphalt ribbon through a manmade ruin.

That the ruin was manmade is an overarching premise of this book. From the arrival of the Spanish, Guatemala has been marked by oligarchic control, huge landholdings, coerced labor, and profound racial division. Today, the nation is still not even remotely healed from the genocide that its military committed against the Maya in the early 1980s or from decades of generalized state terror. Its civil war, in which the United States was

intimately involved, began in the 1960s and did not end until 1996. A great deal has been written about racism, imperialism, and genocide in this small nation, but very little about the fabric of development that binds them together.³

A dialogical and complex process of development—one that pairs the plans and projects of national and international power brokers with the everyday actions and economic activities of the populace—serves as a connecting thread in Guatemala's tumultuous twentieth-century history. It reveals a basic continuity and coherence in a past most commonly characterized by a series of radical political upheavals. Once Guatemala can be understood as a fully, if tragically, developed nation, its history becomes one of a place where people not only killed, but created; not only died, but lived.

Chapter 1, “‘Like Sturdy Little Animals’: Making the Modern Anti-Modern, 1920s–1944,” tackles the paradox of Guatemalan modernity—namely, how anti-modern it looks. Detailing discourses that remain embedded in contemporary Guatemalan culture, the chapter traces a change from romantic modernism in the 1920s to “reactionary modernism” from the 1930s to the mid-1940s.⁴ Colonialist racism, I argue, connects the seemingly disparate ideas of Pan-Americanism, development, progress, and identity seen throughout the period and beyond. Today's upper classes see not the Maya but the Mayan in the mall. So they build fortresses to hold back and hide the third world around them. Their racism, their U.S.-influenced vision, and even the shape of the social landscape they would love to transform but never do are all products of modernist, internationally influenced development as articulated through Guatemalan race, class, land, and labor relationships.⁵

From the 1920s to the mid-1940s Guatemalans vigorously propounded and contested modernist ideas, influencing the lives and worldview of generations to come. Consider, for example, Ramón González, the hero of a Guatemalan proletarian novel entitled *Camino de adolescente: La vida de Ramón en el barrio “El Gallito”* (1990), whose story—and whose neighborhood, El Gallito—I will revisit many times throughout this book.⁶ The opening lines of the novel reflect the modernism of the 1920s, as does the very existence of El Gallito itself. Too, Ramón's attitudes about race, work, and even his own identity bespeak deep-seated attitudes filtered through and colored by the modernism of decades before his birth.

"LIFE microscopic," begins the novel, *"seed so fecund in your developing, in time you will be: A MAN—AN ANT—A FLOWER—A BUTTERFLY—A TREE; in the end, what you are in the essence of your being."*⁷ These words, written by Ramón's friend and biographer Cristobal Monzón Lemus (the author of the book, called *Crimolém* for short), evince the life philosophy of the 1920s, one element of the rich romantic modernism that characterized the decade. Life philosophy and theosophical mysticism, replete with fascination about the ancient Maya, were elements of romantic modernism that mixed with more political modernist expressions: anti-imperialist Pan-Americanism and vibrant, internationalist labor organizing. The labor unions of the 1920s pushed the government to form state-owned worker neighborhoods like the gritty El Gallito, where Ramón grew up.

In Guatemala City the workers' mission of forging proletarian consciousness where none had existed before was far from complete when the Great Depression hit. With the fall in world coffee prices and the election of President Jorge Ubico, romantic modernism fast gave way to reactionary modernism. Ubico assumed dictatorial power and crushed the unions. His rule, from 1931 to 1944, was quasi-fascist, statist, and paternalistic. His regime attempted to enforce an organic national unity even as it established a police state and resurrected forced labor, primarily Mayan, in the service of development and agrocapi-talism. The "Indians" may have become the national mascot, but together with their brown-skinned mestizo relatives they suffered intense repression. That racist repression, based in labor relationships, modernized and cemented a "space-is-money" instead of an equally repressive "time-is-money" formula within the culture of development. It also carried forth into the age of modernization race-based relationships that made the Maya the symbol of Guatemala's skewed modernity—the modern anti-modern.

Ubico combined his racist and backward-looking "agromodernism" not only with modern technologies of public intrusion into the private sphere, but also with development, much of it led by the United States. U.S. Pan-Americanism overshadowed its Hispanic variety. Unionization stopped, but clubs and associations proliferated. Some of them, like Rotary, were headquartered in the United States. Many, though, like the *Invencibles* soccer club that Ramón helped to found in El Gallito, sprang from the most humble of neighborhoods.

Humble Guatemala City neighborhoods were either born or completely transformed during the decades of modernization. Chapter 2 turns

to the formation and early years of El Gallito, Ramón's neighborhood. On one hand, it tells the heretofore unresearched story of the great land invasions of 1945–48 that turned the ravines surrounding El Gallito and other neighborhoods into shantytowns and backtracks into the 1930s to detail the neighborhood's formation. On the other hand, this chapter, "Chaos and Rationality: The Dialectic of the Guatemalan Ghetto," explores the melding of romantic modernism and reactionary modernism detailed in chapter 1 into the social democratic high modernism of the Revolution of 1944–54.

The Revolution, commonly referred to as the Ten Years of Spring, was brought to a head by military reformers in 1944. It was both a capitalist movement and a deep democratic opening. Revolutionary policies were economically nationalist. They promoted industry, infrastructure, education, and social welfare. Political parties bloomed. Grass-roots organizing exploded among workers, urban and rural alike. The Revolution also provided many citizens with their first and only empowering interaction with the state. However, as I argue, the Revolution's leaders were high modernists. They believed in top-down, plan-rational solutions to the nation's problems. Politicians ranging from presidents to petty municipal officials all propounded state-led development plans. These schemes, far from engaging in a gradual process of supporting, educating, and empowering the vast underclass, instead envisioned sterilizing and remaking the great unwashed. The profound nature of the social democratic opening in Guatemala, however, guaranteed that the workers and the poor—organized or not—continually pushed the state faster and further than it wished to go.

The story of the birth of the modern Guatemalan ghetto related in chapter 2 exemplifies the dialectic between chaos and rationality that to this day has characterized development in the nation. It was precisely this dialectic, which came to light at a time of rapid modernization and urban growth, that influenced the way politics and development tragically played out in the crucible of the Cold War. Just as citizens outpaced the state's ability and willingness to meet their demands, so did the nation, taken as a whole, venture beyond boundaries acceptable to the United States. After launching a comprehensive land reform, the government was overthrown in 1954 by an invasion of Ubico-era military men organized, funded, and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Until 1986, right-wing

military governments followed in a string broken only from 1966 to 1970, and even then just nominally.

Though they could not have been more different from their predecessors, the anticommunist military governments appropriated a great deal from the Revolution of 1944–54. They adopted the revolutionary structure of state and brought its high-modern developmental plans to fruition. The astonishing and paradoxical continuity between the developmentalism of the social democratic Revolution and the repressive, military Cold War governments that followed is the subject of chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3, “*Oficios de su Sexo: Gender, the Informal Economy, and Anticommunist Development*,” examines the transition from the social democratic high modernism of 1944–54 to the anticommunist, authoritarian high modernism of 1954 to the early 1960s. The highly gendered discourses of Cold War–era development, I argue, open a window on how the right wing donned the mantle of the very Revolution it had thwarted, setting off to save a supposedly dissolving nuclear family, which I contend had broken apart long before, the government’s social engineers unleashed feminized development endeavors with names such as Social Welfare and Integrated Community Development. In so doing, they continued the projects of the Revolution but stripped them of social democratic content.

The United States was a leader in this process. Up north, the project of development became increasingly intertwined with public relations, advertising, and espionage in the age of the communications revolution. Development became as much a part of the burgeoning culture industry in the United States as it was a conglomeration of institutions dedicated to creating infrastructure. These changes, too, were ushered in with biological, gendered language that focused on family and pushed Guatemalans to team their Ubico-esque, repressive “State-as-Father” with a giving “State-as-Mother” that was more aesthetic than effective.

The race-tinged turn to agromodernism explored in chapter 1 and the dynamic of chaos and rationality shown in chapter 2 conditioned the woes of modernization that the State-as-Mother confronted. Chapter 3 unearths these problems at the neighborhood and household levels. Drawing on life stories from petitions and the reports of social workers as well as on Ramón González’s childhood in El Gallito, the chapter maps the neighborhood-based creation of economy and social safety net against the history of the state’s attempt to do the same. It zooms in on single-parent families in hellish ghettos and details the maturation of the modern informal econ-

omy. The informal economy still characterizes Guatemala, but, I contend, would be more appropriately called *the economy* itself, since it accounts for some three-quarters of all economic activity. It is no coincidence that this sector, relegated to secondary status despite its centrality, is epitomized by and was cocreated by women's labor.

Guatemala, like a child, would grow up to be like the United States, the dominant ideology held. Its informal economy would be subsumed by a formal economy. Its premodern social structures would give way to streamlined relationships with corporations and the state, and its new, liberal citizens would be individual worker-consumers free from the radical mess of popular organizing. None of this occurred. The very process of modernization fueled the informal economy and forged informal bonds of solidarity that only today are beginning to dissolve.

If social welfare programs and soft-edged plans like Integrated Community Development were the feminine side of development, infrastructure projects and war were the masculine side. Chapter 4, "Making the Immoral Metropolis: Infrastructure, Economics, and War," turns to the constructive developmentalism of the mid-twentieth century. Examining the period from 1959 to roughly 1970, it details how the anticommunist, authoritarian modernism that followed the invasion of 1954 emerged as unbridled military modernism in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. It examines this modernism at ground level, looking at the creation of a ghetto-speckled, gang-ridden, murderous city. Today, dangerous male *mareros*, or gang-bangers, are held responsible for the immoral metropolis. Development and war, however, are the real culprits. In midcentury the government built new highways, transforming the economy. The main roads converged in Guatemala City in a cloverleaf called the Trébol, which neighbored La Terminal, a new, gargantuan wholesale market for foodstuffs. The Trébol and La Terminal fast devolved into cesspools of crime and violence. In the midst of what was already a period of rapid social change, civil war broke out. Chapter 4 examines the development-related growth of the Marxist guerrillas and the use of repression and terror on the part of the government, which the military completely took over in 1963. It contextualizes state-led development within the rubric of Cold War polarization, arguing that the problems development today looks to fix were themselves the product of development as it played out physically and politically in the 1960s and 1970s.

As Guatemala City mushroomed in the second half of the twentieth

century, it became the immoral metropolis today symbolized by the hyper-macho marero. This tattooed tough, however, is himself an expression of development. The original “immorals,” in state discourse, were the misguided youth who, inspired by Cuba and communist internationalism in general, turned to armed insurrection against the illegitimate state. The anticommunist military government, born of polarized politics, turned to death squads, torture, and scorched-earth tactics to defeat the rebels—helped by the United States, just as it was in unleashing its huge infrastructure development projects. In Guatemala City these projects had the effect of exacerbating the conditions that fed the insurgency and grass-roots resistance. They increased homelessness, crime, poverty, and delinquency of all sorts.

At the same time, proletarianization and poverty were spreading throughout the countryside. The new economic landscape convinced Ramón González to try his hand as an independent corn wholesaler. It ruined him and spurred him to migrate to Los Angeles, where he met Crimolém at work in the Metropolitan Car Wash. Had he stayed in Guatemala, Ramón might well have been caught up in the brutal war that culminated in the genocide of the 1980s. It was a war that had everything to do with development and that in part was fueled by the very forces that pushed Ramón to migrate.

Chapter 5, “Executing Capital: Green Revolution, Genocide, and the Transition to Neoliberalism,” covers the developmental policies of the military elite from 1970 to 1985, a period in which the military modernism of the 1960s led to economic and social transformation through terror. Focusing particularly on Guatemala’s peculiar participation in the worldwide phenomenon of increased agricultural production known as the Green Revolution, the chapter examines agrarian transformation policies developed in the 1960s and their confluence with acts of war in the years that followed. It maps the history of the military-led, blood-soaked Green Revolution against the story of Carlos Melgar Zamboni, a humble city beef retailer who lived an urban version of Guatemala’s martial agrarian transformation. At heart, agrarian transformation sought to extend agrocaptalism by commercializing and diversifying agriculture, a project that had particular impact in the highlands. During the 1970s, military heads of state and technocratic, civilian cabinet members worked together to bring this project to fruition. In so doing they created a much more modern structure of state, triggered a nontraditional agroexport boom, caused near famine in

the highlands, and teamed counterinsurgency with development in ways that came to a head in the killing fields of the early 1980s. The military, pairing unspeakable crimes against humanity with a program of “Inter-Institutional Coordination” and “Development Poles,” brought the Green Revolution to the highlands in a final paroxysm of violence.

The Green Revolution, coinciding with genocide, bequeathed to civilian rule a nation firmly embedded in global discourses of developmentalism. From 1970 forward, both the public and private sectors created scores of institutions that would increasingly interface with a dispersed universe of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational aid agencies—a conglomeration that itself congealed in the tumultuous seventies and eighties. Carlos Melgar and city butchers like him organized at the grass roots to participate in this process of modernization and win the Guatemalan small retailer a place at the table. As his story shows, state terror held them back until 1985. Meanwhile, the large enterprises in Guatemala’s evolving agroexport sector continued to marginalize them. The chapter concludes with an epilogue that details the butchers’ story from 1985 to the new millennium. Their dreams of retail development finally came true, only to be quashed by the sad realities of neoliberalism. While vast economic forces might keep creating small proprietors like Melgar, and while the development industry might putatively keep trying to incorporate them, the very logic of the system favors large capital enterprises.

The Guatemala of today became politically recognizable in 1986, when the first in a continuing string of civilian presidents took office. The period from that time to the present can be considered one of “postmodernism and return to democracy.” The fragile, so-called democracy confronted immense challenges. The government negotiated peace with the still-extant guerrillas, a process that took until 1996, and meanwhile began to resettle tens of thousands of refugees.⁸ National projects included returning the military to the barracks, establishing a culture of civilian rule, and simultaneously marginalizing and incorporating the diverse, widespread popular movement. A series of right-wing and center-right governments gradually and sometimes reluctantly instituted neoliberal policies as globalization transformed the face of Guatemala and social indicators failed to improve.⁹ Crime, narco-trafficking, and massive migration to the United States were three of the most visible phenomena of the new era.

Not long after the generals returned the country to civilian rule the Cold War ended. It remained and still remains to be seen whether or not government repression and global corporate development have effectively killed popular democracy and installed individualistic, consumerist ideology in its place.¹⁰ Chapters 6 and 7 take up this topic, looking at retail and development panoptically. The first focuses specifically on the Guatemala City municipal markets, showing how social and commercial formations ostensibly opaque to global, neoliberal capital are an inherent part of the new, postgenocidal landscape gradually made more transparent to that system. The second, covering developmental, political, and cultural trends in the age of globalization from 1985 to the new millennium, focuses on another dialectic: that between the concentration of power and the fragmentation of space. Together, these two chapters underscore the paradoxes and deadening aftereffects of Cold War development.

Chapter 6 is titled “A Society of Vendors: Contradictions and Everyday Life in the Guatemalan Market.” Continuing the story of Carlos Melgar, it focuses on the development schemes of the previous chapters and examines where they converged, detailing infrastructure building and institutionalization in urban markets. Tracing the history of a vendors’ advocacy group in the 1990s and 2000s and delving into everyday life, commerce, and politics in the markets, the chapter also looks back at the growth of municipal markets and informal, sidewalk satellite markets since the early 1970s. I argue that Guatemala, far from having the rationalized, engineered systems envisioned by the developers, remains in many ways a society of vendors—vendors who vie with each other and selectively contest the transnational corporate project as a whole and who also nearly single-handedly perform the life-sustaining task of keeping the population provisioned. The very existence of these people is paradoxical. On one hand, grass-roots retail bespeaks the incomplete success of the formal sector, that is, the supermarkets, malls, agroexporters, and large corporations, in structuring distribution and consumption according to its logic. On the other hand, the continued growth of both municipal and street markets is precisely the result of the trajectory of development. Development has modernized Guatemala. However, the starvation wages and exploitation of workers embedded in that modernization guarantee the expansion of the informal economy that development putatively seeks to incorporate and transform. The case studies in chapter 6 demonstrate that corporate capi-

tal is unintentionally reproducing the class of small business proprietors that is at the heart of its own mythic origins even as the logic of corporate capital seeks to destroy that very class and reincorporate it as low-paid wage labor.

Such contradictions are at the heart of chapter 7, “*Cuatro Gramos Norte: Fragmentation and Concentration in the Wake of Victory*,” which examines the creation of space from 1986 to the middle of the first decade of the new millennium. It argues not only that this process embeds within it all the development of the previous century, but also that globalization is characterized by a dynamic that pairs the concentration of power with the fragmentation of social space. It contrasts government policies with the aims of NGOs, the waning of the left with the florescence of grass-roots movements, and evangelism with pop culture, pornography, and consumerism in an age marked by crime, corruption, and violence. The chapter also sketches the urban geography of globalized Guatemala, noting the rise of the maquiladora, the growth of land invasions, and the rapid spread of malls like Grand Tikal Futura and foreign franchises around the city. Like the book to which it serves as conclusion, this chapter takes its name from a play on words. *Cuatro Gramos Norte*, or Four Grams North, is what clever college kids call an upscale street mall and restaurant complex in Guatemala City whose real name is Cuatro Grados Norte (Four Degrees North). They are joking about cocaine. Not unlike the way Grand Tikal Futura symbolizes the Mayan in the Mall, Cuatro Grados stands as a sad example of globalized Guatemala. It is chic, it could be in Denmark, and it is an oasis ringed by unspeakable human misery. The book concludes by contrasting Cuatro Grados to the municipal dump near El Gallito. Here, under clouds of vultures, scores of starving paupers pick through garbage to stay alive.

The postmodern era is marked not only by intense social and political fragmentation, this book argues, but also by the concentration of political and economic power imposed upon Guatemala by decades of sustained violence. The results are lack of solidarity, increased division of wealth, spiraling crime, migration, and hopelessness.

Nothing in Guatemala's primal nature, Indian soul, or location in Latin America caused these problems to be inevitable. The problems were developed, quite literally. Perpetuating the myth that Guatemala is underdeveloped perpetuates the myth that development can solve the very problems it has created and continues to create.

Grand Tikal Futura is aptly named. It stands, paradigmatically, for all that development has achieved and for the shining future its promoters dream of creating. Whether or not the Maya themselves or their mestizo cousins ever get to enter the postmodern, global retail emporium as shoppers is immaterial. Either way, they lose. Development has put the Mayan in the mall.

Guatemalan modernity is paradoxical. The nation's landscape embraces malls like Grand Tikal Futura and mountain villages where no light bulb has ever shone. Its labor and wage structures are at once futuristic and anachronistic, showing where transnational corporate capital, if unchecked, is headed but simultaneously reproducing racist, colonial peonage. Guatemala, enigmatic, cutting-edge, and caught in time like a bug in amber, is the land of the modern anti-modern.

Even the busiest urban spaces can seem anti-modern in Guatemala. In part this is thanks to their chaotic organization. Mostly, though, it's due to race—to the presence of the ethnic other, the Maya, whose very bodies stand emblematically for the past. Consider La Sexta, or Sixth Avenue, the main commercial boulevard of zone 1, the city's historic center. In the early twentieth century, La Sexta was the city's most luxurious strip—a history that an urban remodeling project in 2010 and 2011 has tried to recapture. Before its facelift in the new millennium, La Sexta had been an iconic low-brow street market for decades. Its sidewalks were lined with vendors' kiosks, each equipped with blasting boombox and offering cheap Asian Walkmans, fake Duracells, knockoff Nikes, bootlegged CDs, and maquiladora-made clothes. Only a footpath separated the stalls and the storefronts, and it overflowed with humanity.

The stores, like the vendors, did a bustling business, even those that sold exactly the same *chafa* (junk) that those outside were hawking, their fluorescent interiors adding value in the form of distinction. Other commercial fixtures included Payless Shoes, McDonald's, and Burger King. The portal of Electra Stereo served as a shelter for homeless paupers addicted to sniffing glue. There were several *centros comerciales*, precursors to the mod-

ern mall, and cinemas with Hollywood's latest. One porn theater featured B-grade Italian smut. Cantinas abounded, and in some of them the neighborhood drag queens could be heard bragging about how many of the vending campesinos they had bagged. And rounding out the local commerce were retailers on foot: shoeshine boys, gum and candy sellers, and men pushing Coke and ice cream carts as they hollered promotions for their wares.

Before a team of Guatemalans had managed to "rescue" the historic center and Sexta Avenida,¹ I asked one rich man what was so wrong with the area. He gestured widely: "*Them*." The street vendors. "Indians," the gesture said. "They're why no one goes there," this man told me.

In fact, no one went there *at night*. When the vendors rolled their boxes off on dollies toward the shantytowns at sundown, La Sexta died a sudden death. Only the sounds of street fights and occasional pops of gunfire broke the stillness. By day, however, the area provided entertainment and low-cost shopping for thousands of lower- and middle-class families. Many of the postmodern planners who were clamoring to remake the district and who continue to opine on urban development overlook the culture and commerce of the "popular class," envisioning instead a future exemplified by Grand Tikal Futura. Theirs is a first-world future that effaces the local and enshrines the global. They see the Mayan in the mall, a commercial universe in which Sexta Avenida's brown-skinned "them" couldn't hope for a better job, ever, than starvation-wage service work. Their racism, their U.S.-influenced vision of the future, and even the shape of the social landscape they seek to transform are all elements of specific modernist, internationally influenced developments in Guatemala.

Race, just as much as Guatemala's adherence to its status as agroexporter, conditioned the nation's modernism and affected its culture of development. Race serves as the thread that connects the national imaginary that emerged from the 1920s and the new labor movement, born in the same decade, that has had cultural and political impact ever since. Notions of race affected the nation's marketing of itself abroad, its relationship with other countries and international movements, and even its perceived position in a burgeoning hemispheric system dominated by the United States. Finally, racial ideas, labor patterns, and demographics were integral to Guatemala's institution-building and infrastructure-building projects and help in part to illuminate the underlying continuity behind

the shocking swings in the style of modernism from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War.²

Sea changes in Guatemalan modernism were marked by outbreaks of violence. The years from 1920 to 1944, key in Guatemala's process of globalization, began and ended with democratic revolutions. Overall, these years show a trajectory from romantic to reactionary modernism. In 1920 a cross-class popular movement dating to devastating earthquakes in late 1917 and early 1918 overthrew the dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898–1920). This democratic movement heralded an era of ebullient and idealistic romantic modernism that lasted through the presidencies of Carlos Herrera (1920–21), José María Orellana (1921–26), and Lázaro Chacón (1926–30). Political chaos ensued when Chacón fell ill, and, ultimately, Jorge Ubico (1931–44) was elected. At the end of the first year of his term, Ubico began establishing himself as dictator. The nation moved into an age of “reactionary modernism,” a term I borrow, as noted, from Jeffrey Herf's book on Germany during Weimar and the Third Reich. Herf argues that the Germans combined antimodernist “inwardness” with modernist “means-end rationality” and technology, a phenomenon also seen in Guatemala as the oppressive Ubico state appropriated and retooled the effervescent ideas and politics of the 1920s.³

The anti-modern—or the myriad ways in which the Guatemalan landscape, culture, material culture, society, and economy reference and look like the past—is in fact fully modern, and much of what gives daily life its seemingly anti-modern texture unfolded as part of the modernizing process itself. Pausing from time to time to contrast the present and the past, I want to turn back the clock to 1920. At that time La Sexta, until recently most notable for its Mayan street vendors, occupied a very different space in the national imaginary. So too did the country's indigenous citizens.

“La Patria Nueva”: Romantic Modernism, Mysticism, and Marketing the Maya

La Sexta's architecture is charming. Largely rebuilt in the 1920s and 1930s after a series of earthquakes wrecked the city in 1917–18, its structures show an aesthetic of nostalgic colonial folkloricism mixed with arts-and-crafts and art-deco idioms. The buildings bespeak the romantic modernism of the cultural and commercial elite in the twenties and early thirties. *Sextear*

was the verb they coined for strolling along the avenue. *Sexteando* meant enjoying luxury stores, hotels, and restaurants, watching foreign films in palatial theaters, and even showing off the nation's first automobiles in a low-speed cruise.

The romantic modernism of the long 1920s (ca. 1918–31) left sociopolitical traces that, like La Sexta's buildings, still grace the landscape today. For example, the era saw the maturation of an ideology of biological vitalism, the sort of life philosophy alluded to in Crimolém's introduction: "*LIFE microscopic, seed so fecund in your developing.*" Elite thinkers teamed their life philosophy with mystic spiritism, and politically with anti-imperialist Hispanic Pan-Americanism. Like their upper-class counterparts, workers were protagonists in this period of political opening. They organized the nation's first militant unions. In so doing they drew on numerous international discourses of social justice and working-class identity and solidarity.

All of these modernisms conditioned anti-modern Guatemala. All were imbued with notions of race, and all affected how different sectors, later to go to war, imagined the nation. The vitalism and spiritism of the generation of the 1920s, for example, later reappeared in the army high command's biological nationalism, a major contributing factor to its scorched-earth genocide against the Maya in the 1980s. Through the mechanisms of commerce and media, life force and spirit appeared in pop culture, in the marketing of the Maya, and in the commodifying of a national imaginary for the tourism industry. At the same time, anti-imperialism and Latin Pan-Americanism influenced two revolutionary generations, those of the 1940s and the 1960s, both of whom correctly identified the racism embedded in the imperial mission of the United States but failed to overcome its effects either in Guatemalan society or in their own organizations. Indeed, throughout the long haul of social space creation in the 1900s, modernist and progressive elites and workers alike consistently reproduced the great Guatemalan divide—Maya/Ladino—even when they sought specifically to erase it.

In the 1920s the elites drew on U.S. racist images of servitude even as they picked up on an image of Mayan glamour, itself created abroad. La Sexta's famous stores, both foreign-owned and national alike, used Sambo images in their ads. The National Tobacco Company depicted a boy in blackface carting a giant pack of cigarettes on his back, in an image strangely reminiscent of Mayan porters hauling firewood with tumplines.⁴