

# *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*

by Greg Grandin, University of Chicago Press, 2004, 336 pp.

## James P. Woodard

Don't be fooled by the subtitle. Greg Grandin's book is not a history of Latin America during the Cold War. In its core chapters, it is a contribution to the scholarly literature on twentieth-century Guatemala. In its preface, introduction, and conclusion, it is one academic's ruminations – not all of them compelling or coherent – ranging geographically from lower Manhattan to the Southern Cone and temporally from the post-World War II period to our unhappy present.

The chapters on Guatemala provide a history of Mayan political activism, particularly of Mayan participation in the Guatemalan Communist Party (PGT), its antecedents, and its offshoots from the 1920s through the 1970s. These chapters are well-researched and well-wrought. Insight and information garnered through extensive oral-history interviews (no mean feat in a society as riven by terror as Guatemala) are particularly important in allowing Grandin to make the stories, struggles, and sorrows of ordinary men and women come alive.

These life stories take their place in a larger narrative that will be depressingly familiar to anyone with a basic knowledge of twentieth-century Guatemala. Grandin's indigenous activists played an integral part in Guatemala's postwar political opening under presidents Juan José Arévalo (1945-51) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-54), contributing in meaningful ways to attempts to reform their society as part of a broad coalition that included the Moscow-aligned PGT. When this coalition was overthrown by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in 1954, they were among the first to suffer. In the decades of state – and planter-directed terror that followed, they sought to carry on the fight for social justice through legal and extra-legal means. They and their fellow Maya were the principal victims of the mass murder of the early 1980s, in which more than 100,000 villagers – men, women, and children – were massacred by the Guatemalan army.

Remember when Ronald Reagan declared that critics were giving his Guatemalan counterpart a 'bum rap?' That was at the height of this genocidal campaign.

## WOODWARD | The last colonial massacre

Unreconstructed Reaganites might howl, but few serious Latin America watchers would disagree with the basic story. Indeed, apart from Grandin's often-moving depictions of ordinary Guatemalans' engagement with politics, which will be of interest to his fellow historians of Guatemala, one has to wonder for whom he is writing and why.

There is no simple answer to this set of questions. At different points in his preface, introduction, and conclusion, he addresses neoconservatives, neoliberals, postmodernists, historians of U.S. foreign relations, and supporters of the war against al Qaeda's Afghanistani hosts. He does so in passages on September 11, the 'war on terror' (his scare quotes), and U.S. empire. A forceful rejection of what passes for grand theory among End-of-History types is readily apparent (a rejection that to my eye is shared by most serious historians), as is a generalized anti-anticommunism and a special pleading on behalf of certain sectors of the Latin American left – to say nothing of a certain looseness with the facts – that get progressively tougher to swallow the further one gets from the degraded history of post-1954 Guatemala.

A glance at the book's preface suffices to establish Grandin's antipathy for free-market millenarians, Cold War triumphalists, and the idea of History's end. I can't imagine that I will soon come across another book on Guatemala that bothers with Fareed Zakaria.

September 11 and the war against Islamic terror also find their way into the preface, the former in an evocation of Ariel Dorfman's response to the mass murder of some 3,000 of Grandin's fellow New Yorkers (first published in the *Independent*), the latter in his taking to task those 'who support some version of the "war on terror" in the name of progressive values' and 'argue that the past does not necessarily have to determine the future' (xiv).

This deterministic scolding brings Grandin to the question of imperialism. 'Empire,' he writes, 'rather than fortifying democracy, weakened it' (xiv). He elaborated in a recent interview: 'to the fragile degree that democracy and human rights exist today in Latin America, they have been achieved not through the mercy of a US empire but through resistance to that empire.' [1]

Were that things were so simple. In many, probably most, cases, the U.S. government has bolstered repressive governments in Latin America, whether on the basis of

## Democratiya 5 | Summer 2006

national-security strategy, for economic gain, or out of sheer callousness and stupidity. More rarely – and among these rare cases, often inadvertently and nearly always fleetingly – the actions of the U.S. government have served to advance civil rights (Puerto Rico at the turn of the last century), hasten the fall of an unpopular leader (Díaz, Huerta, the last Somoza), support political liberalization (in the immediate post-World War II period throughout Central and South America), or assist in the kind of socialized democratization that Grandin claims was ended everywhere in the region by 1954 (as in Costa Rica). It is not a particularly palatable argument to make at a time when so many of Reagan's regional Cold Warriors are back in the saddle and the International Republican Institute has been riding roughshod throughout the circum-Caribbean, but some of us are not out to please.

Joining the U.S. government on Grandin's list of regional democracy's unequivocal enemies are 'Latin American liberals' who '[b]y the mid-twentieth century... had long since abandoned' the project of democratization (13). Where, exactly? Who were these 'liberals?' (A hint to non-specialists: again the issue is not nearly so cut and dry.)

Grandin's take on 'Latin American liberals' has the virtue of straightforwardness, however mistaken it might be. Elsewhere, his arguments are found wanting even in this regard:

The overthrow of Arbenz convinced many Latin American reformers, democrats, and nationalists that the United States was less a model to be emulated than a danger to be feared. Che Guevara, for example, was in Guatemala working as a doctor and witnessed firsthand the effects of US intervention. He fled to Mexico, where he would meet Fidel Castro and go on to lead the Cuban Revolution. He taunted the United States repeatedly in his speeches by saying that 'Cuba will not be Guatemala.' [2]

Someone who knew nothing of Latin America – a student, perhaps – could be excused for reading this and falling under the misapprehension that Che Guevara was, 'for example,' a reformer, a democrat, or a nationalist. He was none of the three – and would have reacted with particular scorn to the suggestion that he was ever a 'democrat.'

But Grandin is not at all interested in Che as a leader or as a thinker. He is interested in scoring points for another argument, that the guerrillas of the 1960s were the

## WOODWARD | The last colonial massacre

legitimate heirs of those who sought democratic change in the postwar period:

My book argues that the transformation of Latin America's Old Left – led by socialist, nationalist, or Communist parties with working-class and at times peasant bases of support – to a more insurgent, armed New Left – inspired by the Cuban Revolution, Algeria, and Vietnam and based in the countryside – was not a result of ideological utopianism, as some today argue. Rather, the spread of Latin America's guerrilla movements was driven by the frustration of efforts to consolidate post-World War II social democracies. [3]

In point of fact, the first major Cuban-backed insurgency in South America took aim not at a U.S.-installed dictatorship, but rather at a popularly elected, reformist government. Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt had been the most prominent figure in his country's government of postwar reform; exiled by a military coup, he was returned to power through the ballot box in 1959 after a general strike that led to the overthrow of Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Despite the best efforts of Guevarist insurgents, Betancourt turned over power to a democratically elected successor in 1964.

The pity, for the purposes of Grandin's region-wide arguments (his extrapolations from northern Central America), is that Latin America is not Guatemala. I don't know any Latin Americans who wish otherwise.

Still more troubling, if ironic, is that despite Grandin's antipathy to End-of-History-ism, he conjures up his own vision of History's end. It is dystopian rather than utopian, unlike those of the grand and not-so-grand thinkers he cites in his preface, but it is similarly inattentive to the complexities of actual history and the potentialities of human agency. 'Cold War terror destroyed [a] vision of a social and historical commons,' he writes:

Violence had the effect of dissolving the affiliation between individual activists and their wider social network.... Repression severed alliances between reforming elites and popular classes, disaggregated powerful collective movements into individual survival strategies, extracted leaders from their communities, and redefined the relationship between human beings and society. ... The key to counterinsurgent triumph lay in the creation of a new way of thinking. Terror trained citizens to turn their political passions inward, to receive sustenance from their families, to focus on personal pursuits, and

## Democratiya 5 | Summer 2006

to draw strength from faiths less concerned with history and politics. Such conversions were the routine manifestations of the larger reinterpretation of democracy...: the idea, widely held in different forms at the end of World War II, that freedom and equality are mutually fulfilling has been replaced by a more vigilant definition, one that stresses personal liberties and free markets and sees any attempt to achieve social equity as leading to at best declining productivity and at worst political turmoil. (pp. 196-97)

Here and elsewhere, Grandin – for all of his ambition – refuses to consider the broader context in which the apparent exhaustion of alternatives occurred, specifically the degree to which the horrors (at worst) and inefficiency (at best) of ‘real existing socialism’ served to discredit any socialist project. How else to explain the seeming absence of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism in societies the world over that never experienced the kind of state terror described in *The Last Colonial Massacre*?

More importantly, *The Last Colonial Massacre* exaggerates the permanence of a particular present. Some of Grandin’s Guatemalan informants may have retreated from political activism into evangelical Christianity, but that does not mean that their children will remain superstitious and withdrawn, or that men and women elsewhere are not actively working to reconcile freedom, social justice, and solidarity. Still less should it be taken to mean that the struggle for these values in Latin America or anywhere else is over. It’s not even past.

---

James Woodard is a fellow at The Center for Humanistic Enquiry at Emory University.

### References

University of Chicago (2004.) ‘An interview with Greg Grandin, author of *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*’ <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/305724in.html>

### Notes

[1] University of Chicago 2004.

[2] University of Chicago 2004. See also *The Last Colonial Massacre*, pp. 5, 12-13.

[3] University of Chicago 2004.