



Book Review: Youth in Postwar Guatemala: Education and Civic Identity in Transition by Michelle J. Bellino

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BOOK REVIEW

*YOUTH IN POSTWAR GUATEMALA:
EDUCATION AND CIVIC IDENTITY IN TRANSITION*
BY MICHELLE J. BELLINO
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. 270 PAGES
\$95.00 (HARDCOVER), \$34.95 (PAPER)
ISBN 978-0-8135-8799-8

In *Youth in Postwar Guatemala: Education and Civic Identity in Transition*, Michelle J. Bellino draws on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork to examine the complexities that the historical memory of armed conflict offers for the consolidation of democracy and the expansion of citizenship among youth. Bellino argues that the construction of historical memory mediates the way in which young people from diverse socioeconomic contexts relate to their sense of citizenship and how they perceive the opportunities the future holds for them. She proposes the concept of “wait citizenship,” which describes the condition young people must navigate when relating to a state that obliges them to prioritize the development of their autonomy over their ability to show solidarity with others. As Bellino’s text conveys, awaiting citizenship limits young people’s ability to impact the political and economic structures that have distributed opportunities unequally in Guatemala. Her argument sheds light on the tensions and challenges involved in transforming a society shifting toward a more democratic and just version of itself.

Through this argument, Bellino raises two points that link the contents of the book, and which also represent key contributions to the field of education in emergencies. The first is to present historical memory as an intergenerational social practice that is continuously disputed. The second is to expand the discussion of violence as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, thereby linking social structures with forms of individual agency.

After introducing the history of the armed conflict in Guatemala and anchoring it in recent debates on citizenship, transitional justice, and historical memory (chapter 2), Bellino builds her argument through an analysis of social interactions in four varied educational institutions, two in Guatemala City and two in the rural province of Izabal. The selection of these different sites enables her to analyze

the future aspirations that a nation marked by strong social inequalities offers its youngest citizens. She dedicates chapters 3-6 to an in-depth analysis of each institution. This organization of the book enables the reader to navigate four social worlds, each different and distant from the others, while raising important common themes.

Chapter 3 focuses on the story of Alejandro, a student at International Academy, a private urban educational institution with strong international connections. The author introduces the tensions Alejandro must navigate as he tries to reconcile his activist parents' expectations regarding his political participation with the limited space for agency offered in the dogmatic history of the armed conflict taught in his social science class. In chapter 4, Bellino describes the blurry line between political violence and urban violence by analyzing the excursions taken by students from the Paulo Freire Institute. She examines the forms of exclusion middle-class youth experience, and through these she depicts the phenomenon of marginalization that is part of Guatemala's history. The construction of historical memory as a platform for social change is limited by the relationship young people at this school establish with the state through their notions of risk and fear. In their interactions with the police and the public university, students manifest mistrust and skepticism about the role the state can play in transforming Guatemala's society.

In chapter 5, Bellino examines in detail the consequences of teaching about Guatemala's armed conflict through explanatory frameworks that refuse to differentially distribute responsibility among the actors who have proliferated the violence. When analyzing the presentations that a group of students at the Sun and Moon rural school make about the armed conflict and their interpretations of a film, Bellino concludes that these neutral explanatory frameworks lead students to approach history from preconceived notions, rather than through critical analysis and questioning of historical sources. In chapter 6, Bellino discusses Tzolk Ochoch, a boarding school also in rural Guatemala. In this case, Bellino examines the way the calls for justice and social action promoted by the institution's curriculum are limited by the living history of the armed conflict that, 20 years after its end, still defines the location of each actor on the social map of Guatemala. In these four chapters, Bellino offers a solid illustration of the ways young people build historical memory as an object of political dispute through their encounters with individuals and institutions.

Bellino closes the book with a discussion of historical memory as a localized dimension of the lives of young people living and learning in a postwar society. She presents historical memory as an unfinished project that, through both individual and collective constructions, links the past, the present, and the future. In summary, Bellino invites us to adopt historical memory as a central dimension of citizenship. *Youth in Postwar Guatemala* is a study that will appeal to those in our field who are interested in historical memory, youth, citizenship, and anthropological approaches to violence.

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