

**Joel Wainwright**

*Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya*

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

xiii + 312pp., £19.99/€27.00 paperback (ISBN 978-1-405105706-3), £55.00/€74.30 hardback (ISBN 978-1-40515705-6).

Most writers in genres other than fiction state their objectives at the outset and move on. Not so with Joel Wainwright, author of this erudite, impressively researched monograph. Towards the end of a giddy Introduction called ‘Capitalism qua Development’, he reiterates his case by spelling out for the reader what *not* to expect in the pages that follow. ‘[T]his book is not about the geography of Belize’, he informs us, but instead ‘an intervention’ (here Wainwright turns for enlightenment to Edward Said) into ‘the struggle over geography’ (p. 28). Neither is his work, he declares, ‘an exercise in offering a social history of a place’. Like much of Wainwright’s text, these negative clarifications, while instructive, are excessive, not least because he has already identified his subject as ‘a study of the history and politics of development as a form of power, one with a truly global sway’ (p. 4). What concerns him most are ‘the processes that have played the greatest role in shaping the political economy and social life in Belize’, which he asserts are ‘both colonial and capitalist’ (p. 5) in nature. Hence his decision, and rightly so, to ‘focus on these relations’ by engaging issues that charge the literature on development as well as ‘Marxist and postcolonial traditions’. Those who like their geography heady and intellectually challenging, spun in ways that see the parsing of ‘post-colonial’, ‘postcolonial’, and ‘anticolonial’ share the stage (and the same page, p. 37) not only with such luminaries as Said and Martin Heidegger but also J. S. Bach and Glenn Gould, are in for a treat. What the Maya farmers of southern

Belize, whose communities are the empirical grist for Wainwright’s theoretical milling, would make of it all is anyone’s guess. A celebrated line of Marx on the book’s last page—‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it’—is more an epitaph than a valediction, prompting one (this reviewer at any rate) to reflect (here I turn to T. S. Eliot, not Heidegger, for insight into time and being) on ‘what might have been’. *Burnt Norton* (Eliot 1943 [1935]) is a long way from Blue Creek or Aguacate, but that’s where I ended up after reading *Decolonizing Development*.

Wainwright’s basic premise, that ‘the colonial period has not ended’, is certainly pertinent enough, and applies as much to Maya peoples in Chiapas and Guatemala as to their counterparts in Belize. So too is his central argument, namely that because ‘colonialism solicited development as a form of power appropriate to winning hegemony for capitalism, there are no clear lines separating a colonial past from the development present’ (p. 28). Again the bitter, often tragic experiences of Maya life in regions neighboring Belize support Wainwright’s thesis and lend credence to his beliefs. Innovative and illuminating as his narrative of ‘capitalism qua development’ is, however, its exposition is marred by clubby writing that, in the end, fails to do justice to the rich material at hand. Whether in the ‘unsettling’ (Chapter 1) or ‘fixing’ (Chapter 2) of Maya cultural mores; whether in constructing ‘an archaeology of Mayanism’ (Chapter 3) in the vein of Said’s Orientalism or in deconstructing the colonialist tendencies of Charles Wright, O.B.E. (Chapter 4); whether in discussing his own experiences of ‘fieldwork in the ruins of development’ (Chapter 5) or in critiquing well-intentioned if ill-fated efforts at involving Maya communities in mapping and safeguarding their lands (Chapter 6), Wainwright relays key findings in hermetic, elitist prose that will appeal

for the most part only to a confraternity of like-minded associates. What he has to say deserves to reach a wide audience, from undergraduate students in development studies programs to political activists committed to meaningful social change, but how he has chosen to say it will surely lessen the impact of his book.

Since Wainwright allows himself to ‘quibble’ (p. 98) with Eduardo Galeano over the latter’s temporal depiction of one miniscule aspect of the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, allow me to close by quibbling with Wainwright over the spatial compass of his subtitle. ‘The Maya’ are a decidedly heterogeneous and far-flung lot who, in his own words, ‘may well have the dubious distinction of being the most-studied ethnos in the world’ (p. 103). That being the case, it makes sense to distinguish which Maya group in which territorial context is the focus of inquiry, even if the designation links the former to a polity not of its design or choosing. In the grand historiographical scheme of things, Maya peoples in Belize have received a fraction of the scholarly attention afforded Maya peoples across the border in Mexico or Guatemala. Despite the reservations articulated above, Wainwright is to be applauded for marshalling his considerable intellectual skills to advancing our understanding of Maya colonial experiences (past and present) in the confines of Belize. Somewhere in the title of his book, that geographical fact should be communicated, even if, ideologically, it remains a bone of contestation.

## Reference

Eliot, T.S. (1943 [1935]) *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber.

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*Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*

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xii + 236pp., £19.99 paperback (ISBN 0-7453-2285-8), £75.00 hardback (ISBN 0-7453-2286-5).

In 2001 I was a geography undergraduate following a course on nation, identity and territory. A popular text for this course, and one that was never available from the library because sadly I wasn’t always the first to get the books on the reading list, was *A Geography of Heritage: Place, Culture and Economy* (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000). This was an earlier text written by the authors of the book under review here: *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies* (2007). So why bother with the anecdote above? Well, it was (and still is) a book popular with undergraduates and course leaders—much like the sequel.

*Pluralising Pasts* examines the importance of heritage in contemporary society, in particular focusing on plural heritages, multiculturalism and place identities. The authors argue that it is impossible to talk about multicultural societies and collective identities without considering the role of heritage: ‘Our working assumption is that heritage provides one (although by no means the only) means of facilitating the operationalisation of pluralism, and that, in so doing, it functions at a variety of scales, in public and private and through both official and unofficial channels of representation and power’ (p. 13). The term heritage is, as the authors admit, very slippery. It encompasses the ‘events, artefacts and personalities of the past’ (p. 39), as well as the practices, policies, processes and