

Anthropology Book Forum

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GIOVANNI BATZ, 2024, *The Fourth Invasion: Decolonizing Histories, Extractivism, and Maya Resistance in Guatemala*, Oakland: University of California Press, 248 pp., ISBN 978052040173

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Giovanni Batz's *The Fourth Invasion: Decolonizing Histories, Extractivism, and Maya Resistance in Guatemala* is a poignant and unflinching account of the long, ongoing legacy of colonial dispossession in Guatemala, specifically in the Cotzal region. Batz masterfully situates local struggles and Indigenous resistance against contemporary economic megaprojects within a broader historical framework of colonial invasions and structural violence. His work, both ethnographic and political, offers a visceral narrative that interweaves historical trauma with present-day realities in a way that is both analytically rigorous and emotionally harrowing.

The book's most striking analytical contribution is the characterization of four "invasions" that structure the social, political, and ecological landscape of Guatemala—and Cotzal in particular. These include the Spanish conquest, the liberal land reforms of the 19th century, the internal armed conflict of the late 20th century, and the current wave of transnational megaprojects. Batz demonstrates how each wave builds upon the last, deepening dispossession and entrenching inequality. This framing captures the cyclical nature of violence and resistance, underscoring both the historical continuity of colonial structures and the adaptability of Indigenous responses.

Structurally, the book is divided into two parts, comprising three chapters each, and is bookended by a powerful introduction and conclusion. Of particular interest is the foreword by the B'o'q'ol Q'esal Tenam K'usal, which sets the tone for the book's collaborative and community-anchored ethnography. This in itself exemplifies the political praxis of the text, showing ethnography as a form of resistance and alliance.

In the first half of the book, Batz outlines the historical legacy of the first three invasions. The first invasion, Spanish colonization beginning in 1524, introduced religious, cultural, and territorial domination. It marked the beginning of a long pattern of forced conversions, land theft, and the dismantling of Indigenous governance systems. The imposition of Christianity and colonial hierarchies laid the foundation for systemic racism and land dispossession that persists into the present. Yet, even in this initial period, Batz highlights the role of Ixil women in preserving cultural and spiritual practices. Their quiet yet deliberate refusals to abandon ancestral traditions constitute a powerful form of resistance, one that threads throughout the book.

The second invasion came with 19th-century liberal land reforms and the rise of the plantation economy. During this period, vast communal lands were privatized and seized by local elites and foreign investors, including the establishment of fincas in Cotzal. This era entrenched exploitative labor systems and displaced Ixil communities from their ancestral lands, exacerbating economic dependency and social inequality. Still, the Ixil did not remain passive. Batz details acts of resistance, most notably the 1936 uprising, in which community members organized against exploitative landowners and plantation conditions. This rebellion, though brutally repressed, reflected a continued refusal to submit to systems of racialized labor and land theft.

The third invasion occurred during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), when the Guatemalan state unleashed extreme violence on the Ixil population under the pretext of counterinsurgency. Entire communities were massacred, displaced, and terrorized through genocide, forced disappearances, and military campaigns. Batz draws on survivor testimonies and his long-term fieldwork to convey the enduring psychological trauma and communal dislocation this period inflicted. And yet, resistance persisted. Despite unimaginable violence, the Ixil found ways to safeguard their knowledge systems, sustain kinship ties, and document atrocities—often at great personal risk. As Batz shows, even acts of survival—of remaining on the land, of speaking the language, of remembering the dead—became political acts of resistance against a state attempting to erase them.

The second part of the book explores what Batz terms the fourth invasion: the arrival of multinational corporations and the imposition of megaprojects in the region. He focuses on the case of the *Palo Viejo* hydroelectric plant, constructed by the Italian company Enel Green Power

on the Finca San Francisco. Despite promises of electricity and employment, the plant exports power to other regions while many Cotzal communities remain without reliable energy access. The environmental and social consequences are severe. Rivers were diverted, agricultural cycles disrupted, and sacred landscapes desecrated. Community members who resisted faced militarization, criminalization, and surveillance. What Enel and state officials called “dialogue” was in practice coercive and one-sided—what local leaders rightly described as “forced dialogue.” The use of security forces to suppress peaceful protests starkly echoes the repression experienced during the civil war. Framed as development, these projects represent a new phase of colonial extractivism. The critique of the notion of “development” is one of the book’s most subtle yet impactful achievements. What is often presented as apolitical or benevolent is, in practice, deeply violent when imposed without community consent. Batz’s critique resonates far beyond Guatemala, compelling readers to reconsider how “progress” is defined and for whom.

Yet Batz foregrounds resistance just as forcefully here. Through road blockades, community assemblies, ancestral ceremonies, and legal challenges, Ixil communities actively challenged the legitimacy of these megaprojects. The *Alcaldía Indígena of Cotzal*—a traditional Indigenous authority—emerges as a critical actor in organizing collective responses and asserting territorial sovereignty. Far from reactionary, these forms of resistance are shown as rooted in Ixil cosmologies and communal visions of the future. They are not merely defensive, but generative: efforts to protect the land are also efforts to protect language, memory, and intergenerational life.

Despite these powerful accounts of resilience, a sense of loss and grief permeates the text. Batz’s conclusion notes that resistance continues but the scale of destruction, both environmental and cultural, is staggering. The people of Cotzal are not only struggling for land or rights. They are fighting against the erasure of entire ways of being. In this sense, *The Fourth Invasion* transcends its local context, becoming a mirror to global struggles against extractivism and colonialism.

The Fourth Invasion is a powerful and timely contribution to the anthropology of violence, resistance, and Indigenous politics. It exemplifies engaged, ethical scholarship grounded in long-term collaboration and mutual trust. Batz reminds us that colonialism is not a past event but an ongoing structure—and that resistance to it is not only necessary, but profoundly important. While

the book leaves the reader with a sense of mourning for all that has been lost, it also affirms the unwavering commitment of communities who continue to fight for their culture and community.

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