

Book Review

David Pedersen, *American Value: Migrants, Money, and Meaning in El Salvador and the United States*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 336, 2013.

American Value is an innovative exploration of asymmetrical hemispheric connections. The focus is on two specific places and the links between them: Intipucá in El Salvador and Washington, DC. While the book traces a familiar story of migration and social change, it seeks to interrogate the conceptual and discursive moves that would abstract late twentieth-century labour migration from larger economic and political transformations. Instead of a mythic narrative of migration-in-search-of-a-better-life linking two previously unconnected places, Pedersen traces the replacement of one type of value, in the form of the primary commodities of coffee and cotton, with a new form: that of 'raw work capacity in people'.

Pedersen illuminates and critiques how certain stories about migration move and sediment, and in so doing acquire the status of self-evident facts. He does this through a complex and many-layered narrative: one that jumps between Intipucá and Washington, DC at various scales and historical moments. The book begins with a detailed exploration of what Pedersen calls the Intipucá–DC Connection Story, demonstrating how a mythic account of immigrant striving, investing, and the generation of home-town wealth solidifies through its reproduction in academia, policy and popular media. This story is then unpacked in the remainder of Part I, showing how early experiences of labour migration from the 1960s were intimately tied to the changing shape of the coffee industry, the rise and fall of cotton production in El Salvador, the monetarization of the Salvadoran countryside, the emergence of a new 'entrepreneurial class', the entrenchment of divisions between land-owning and landless members of the community, and the experience of U.S.-backed counter-insurgency.

In Part II, the focus narrows to explore particular connections between Washington, DC and Intipucá. Chapter Five interrogates specific experiences of wealth generation (including in the illicit drug economy) that have come to stand as paradigmatic of Intipucá's success in multiple newspaper accounts of migrant entrepreneurship. This is followed by an exploration of the rise and fall of the informal banking sector in Washington, DC. Pedersen shows how the apparent success of a small bank ('banquito'), the activities of which 'bolstered tenets of U.S. and Salvadoran nationalist discourse', was premised on the illegal movement of people and things and the transgression of

borders; its failure was tied to the collapse in the real estate bubble in Washington, DC at the end of the Cold War.

Part III explores the place of Intipucá within a Salvadoran national project, exploring the reception of a visit by President Calderón Sol to the town in 1995, and emergent inequalities resulting from new sources of remittance wealth. Although this is the intellectual and ethnographic conclusion of the narrative – the point where the story focuses in upon everyday struggles to survive, from fishing to making ice – the scope moves dramatically outwards again in the self-styled ‘Finale’ of the book: a story of U.S. counter-insurgency in Iraq and the travels of the ‘El Salvador model’ of political intervention. This final chapter makes an important argument about the way political ventures are replicated (and in their replication, how they ignore congealed histories of inequality) but it has the feel more of an appendix than a finale, not least because the rest of the narrative ends several years earlier and the chapter introduces an entirely new sweep of characters.

In the chapter just before this, Pedersen had addressed ethnographically the question of ‘scale and perspective’, drawing on an account of a Catholic priest attempting to remind his congregation of the ‘bigger picture’ in religious life. In some ways, the Padre’s problem of scale and perspective is also the central problematic – and problem – of the book: how to tell a complex hemispheric history of interconnections historically and anthropologically, attentive both to the complexity of specific lives and interconnections and the broader histories of capital accumulation that have brought them into being. Pedersen’s answer is a narrative collage, shifting from the very specific to the regional or national within chapters, from present events to past. This approach embraces complexity and highlights the interconnections between seemingly disparate events. From a reader’s perspective, however, the effect is sometimes bewildering. The narrative connections between different sections are often tangential and conjectural and we get little sense of ethnographic continuity from one chapter to the next, or of how individual lives and livelihoods evolve over the book’s forty-year sweep. The ethnography is prefaced by a list of 72 ‘characters’ who appear in the text. This is a useful tool of navigation, yet most of these characters make only cameo appearances in the text (including the first on the list, ‘value’). The result of this scale-changing narrative is hemispheric history on a grand scale: elegant and erudite in its critique of dominant narratives, but less convincing in its fleeting portraits of migrant modernity and meaning-making.

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