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American Value: Migrants, Money, and Meaning in El Salvador and the United States.

David Pedersen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2013. 316 pp.

ROBIN MARIA DELUGAN

On the most obvious level, this well-written and ambitious book is about the transnational connections between Intipucá, an iconic migrant-sending town in eastern El Salvador, and Washington D.C., the preferred destination for many Intipucueños. In its recent history, Intipucá has benefitted from monetary and other contributions of faraway citizens. It also stands apart from neighboring rural communities in El Salvador for being very “Americanized” with its welcome signs in English, quality paved roads, residents who sport the latest gadgets in technology, and a constant back and forth of people who take a chance that migration might improve their economic condition knowing they can return home if things go awry. Such stories about Intipucá have appeared in major US media, and in international policy it is often touted as a model for the power of immigrant entrepreneurs whose remittances can be a productive investment for community development.

Pedersen, after learning about Intipucá while living in Washington D.C. and first visiting the Salvadoran town in 1993, challenges this dominant representation of Intipucá in a number of ways. He demonstrates that, while most accounts identify El Salvador’s civil war as the primary push factor for contemporary out-migration, members of Intipucá’s “middle class” sought their fortune in the US as early as the

1960s, thus laying the social and economic foundation for subsequent waves of migration. Through snippets of the life stories of select individuals from Intipucá, we learn how they adapted to 20th century shifts in El Salvador's "national wealth", as the country transitioned away from being a producer of such commodities as cotton, maguey fiber, and coffee—whose value rose then fell on the global market. More recently, rural El Salvador has relinquished the surplus production of basic foodstuffs and come to rely instead on migration and migrant remittances.

Two primary conceptual and methodological threads intertwine to rationalize the geospatial and temporal complexity of this creative multi-sited and hemispheric value study. Transvaluation, "the capacity for the same form or sign to shift or expand its immediate object and therefore its meaning" (p. 24), is complemented by an "open holism", where instead of two end points on a transnational map, Intipucá and Washington, D.C. are entry points to examine local, national, regional, hemispheric, and even global registers of interaction and meaning-making. For example, when the anthropologist's lens shifts to Washington, D.C., we see how migration from Intipucá occurs alongside the de-industrialization of the US economy and the growth of its low wage service sector; in addition, how the intensity of local real estate development was spurred by the expansion of a defense industry that also engaged El Salvador's civil war, as well as the resulting downtown gentrification and suburban expansion. Migrant's personal stories also tell of the boom of cocaine dealing and other transitory economic successes. Later, the collapse of the financial and speculative real estate market in Washington DC is linked to the shifting

priorities of the defense industry and also to the emergence of Washington, D.C. policies that launch a war on drugs and increasingly target certain undocumented migrants as “illegals”. Through an examination of multiple and diverse phenomena, *American Value* connects the circulation of capital and the production of value to the everyday experiences of people from Intipucá.

The essential link between economics, value, and power is illustrated throughout the ethnography. By highlighting the action of a few key individuals, Pedersen illuminates concealed, historically constituted, and contextualized social relations and social identities to explore how sense is made of the world. His analysis of historical and contemporary structural conditions that influence the everyday decisions and practices of Intipucá is attentive to class, gender, and race dynamics that appear in intimate worlds of families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and rural and urban communities.

American Value traces the political and economic preconditions of contemporary migration from Intipucá, and Pedersen deepens our historical understanding of hemispheric economic and political ties between Intipucá and Washington, D.C. reminding us that U.S. interests have long influenced El Salvador. From proxy Cold War interventions in Central America, structural adjustment policies of the World Bank, and the influence of the “Washington Consensus” which authorized neoliberal policies in the region, Pedersen explains how being from Intipucá can be understood from the vantage point of the impact of US imperialism and global neoliberalism.

This is the complex broader view that challenges dominant circulating ideas about Intipucá and the partiality of the Intupucá success story. The multiple sites, registers, and temporal frameworks of *American Value* are kaleidoscopic and at times a bit dizzying. Still, its valuable theoretical reach redefines anthropology's holism, and challenges narrow approaches to the transnational by showing how the local is tied to national, regional, hemispheric, and global processes.