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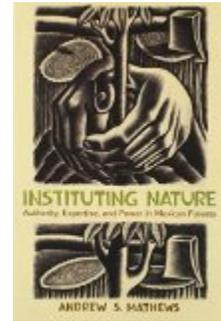
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew S. Mathews. *Instituting Nature: Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011. xii + 304 pp. \$54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-01652-0; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-51644-0.

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State, Community, and Forests in Mexico

Andrew S. Mathews's *Instituting Nature* is a work of historical anthropology that focuses on Mexico's forestry bureaucracy and community forestry in the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca. It centers, in particular, on the Zapotec town of Ixtlán de Juárez, which, the author points out, has become a model for community forestry projects around the world. The author argues that the success of forestry at Ixtlán has been built from the interface between the bureaucracy and the community: transparent knowledge of the forest, he writes, "was produced not by official declarations or scientific projects of mapping, but from the texture of encounters between officials and their clients, the foresters and indigenous people who manage and own the pine forests" (p. 2). In tracing how that state of affairs developed, Mathews ultimately hopes to inform our general understandings of the workings of modern states, science, and power.

Mathews begins by laying out the history of forestry in twentieth-century Mexico. He indicates that the scientific forestry that arrived in Mexico early in the century had three fundamental components: the promotion of scientific silviculture, the position that fire was bad for forests, and a belief in desiccation theory. Naturally, there were limitations to this body of knowledge, as the author—who has forestry training—helpfully explains. Fire, he notes, is necessary for the generation of pine seedlings in the Sierra Juárez. Meanwhile, desiccation theory—which holds that deforestation can cause decreasing rainfall, a decline in stream flow, and destruc-

tive flooding—is today a matter of controversy. Unfortunately, he is not clear about precisely where that controversy lies (my largely uninformed impression is that its impact on stream flow and flooding is broadly accepted).

During the 1920s, the postrevolutionary regime began to enact laws that expanded the federal government's role in forests based on its claim to this body of knowledge. Not surprisingly, that government expansion sometimes pitted the state against local communities. Miguel Angel de Quevedo, Mexico's most renowned advocate of forests, took the position that the state needed to employ science to correct the degradation created by rural people and their fires, a discourse in which "rural indigenous people became the imagined opposite of modern state knowledge" (p. 41). President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) made Quevedo head of a new forestry department, and, though Quevedo's critique of campesino ignorance did sometimes clash with Cárdenas's land reform program, the Cárdenas administration, according to Mathews, often acted on his advice.

Quevedo's vision was undermined, however, by what Mathews calls "institutional fragility," which manifested itself in such forms as limited funding, a reduced commitment to forest protection after Cárdenas left office, and a severe shortage of trained foresters. Beginning in the 1940s, the Mexican government found it easier to let large companies take most of the responsibility for managing forests off its hands, even requiring that they pay

the salaries of government foresters as part of their concessions. By the 1970s the activities of these large companies prompted community protest in various parts of Mexico, and in the 1980s the government yielded to pressure to cancel many of the concessions and began to enact laws that gave communities more control over their forest resources.

In chapter 3, Mathews narrows the focus to land use in Ixtlán. There, he maintains, histories of fire, political contestation, and ecological knowledge produced a particular kind of forested landscape. The nineteenth-century landscape was a relatively open one, heavily burned and grazed, but since then significant reforestation has occurred. Mathews attributes this to twentieth-century fire suppression, an extended period of population decline, and a shift away from agriculture when roads built by logging companies at mid-century enabled trucks to supply food from outside the sierra. Mathews's forestry expertise allows him to examine a small area of forest to determine that there had been "fires about every six years for more than 200 years, until around 1940, when fires disappeared from the scar record" (p. 86). Armed with this information, he elicits a nearly suppressed history of fire from some of the older residents of the area. Agricultural burning had indeed been a widespread practice until the arrival of the state's anti-fire discourse and its gradual internalization by residents of Ixtlán.

Between the 1930s and the early 1950s, wildcat loggers controlled by regional elites, fuel wood collectors, and swidden agriculturalists found it easy to circumvent state efforts at regulation. Unable to monitor what happened in the forests, in 1956 the state ceded management of the forests of Oaxaca to two large logging companies, the most prominent of which was Fábricas Papaleras de Tuxtepec (FAPATUX). The inhabitants of Ixtlán now found employment with these companies, and it was from them, Mathews contends, that they adopted both desiccation theory and official attitudes toward fire as part of a hybridization of traditional and modern environmental notions. And in the 1980s, after decades in which local ignorance had been blamed for forest degradation, Ixtlán residents turned the discursive tables against the logging companies, which they charged with reckless clear-cutting and attendant desiccation. State officials now saw the political need to join their voices to accusations that FAPATUX was engaged in predatory logging, which subsequently became the official story. Emphasizing their new anti-fire credo, community foresters took charge of Ixtlán's forests.

The final three chapters focus more directly on Mathews's extensive fieldwork, exploring the interaction of bureaucracy and community forestry during the contemporary period. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on the forest service bureaucracy, first in general and then in Oaxaca. Building on the theoretical offerings of such works as James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), and Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent's edited volume, *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (1994), Mathews argues that the state constantly performs power and knowledge, but that the forestry sector in particular has been remarkably unstable both institutionally and in terms of individual careers. Charged with enforcing broad regulations through which the state hopes to make forests legible but provided with limited resources, forestry officials spend most of their time in their offices doing paperwork, and fear that they do not really know what is happening in the forests. Their careers depend on sending good news to their superiors about progress and development, but they worry that they might be called to account for developments of which they are either unaware or cannot control. Firewood cutting, for instance, is broadly practiced but largely ignored in official reports, apparently because it is impossible to track. Clarity and communication are further undermined by the fact that though the performances of forestry officials are rarely contradicted in public, in private there is widespread belief among various populations that performance masks corruption and other unpleasant realities. None of this silencing and suppressing of knowledge is peculiar to forestry or to Mexico, according to the author, but is rather a fundamental part of the production of public knowledge. The result is that states cannot produce legibility on their own.

In chapter 8, Mathews turns his lens back on Ixtlán, arguing that "the political, symbolic, and material clout of communities such as Ixtlán allowed officials and rural people to collaborate in producing shared knowledge" (p. 202). Ixtlán's power was based not only on the local knowledge of forestry that has already been mentioned, but also on a history of effective defense of communal lands and plenty of practice in dealing with outsiders who had periodically been interested in sierra resources. Mathews is careful to point out that there was significant conflict and inequality in Ixtlán, and even more careful (perhaps excessively so) to clarify that in making that observation he does not mean to sound critical. When he did his fieldwork, much of the power in the community lay in the hands of the three hundred men with the legal status of *comuneros*, who controlled logging profits and

the most important political offices. There were also various community factions, each of which now had members educated in forestry who could evaluate forest management plans and decisions. With one faction policing another, the previous state of affairs in which “knowledge” was generally disbelieved largely disappeared, as did accusations of abuses, and working arrangements with the forestry bureaucracy became much more effective. The key, he finds, was the mutual need of a powerful community and weak officials, which led to an effective alliance that finally made the forest legible—or at least produced agreement about what constituted knowledge of it.

My favorite parts of this book were those that were most concrete: the historical sections, the discussion of material changes in the landscape, and the interview material from both bureaucrats and members of the Ixtlán community. I enjoyed Mathews’s exposition of the case of Aldo Domínguez, a government forester who tried to enforce regulations as they were written and asked for “truth” in foresters’ reports, and who ended up accused of corruption and out of a job for not maintaining a “seamless public representation of success” (p. 199). Mathews’s understanding of the science of forestry allows him to take unconventional positions, as when he refuses to demonize FAPATUX as the residents of Ixtlán have done, arguing that the company did not always clear-cut and that, in any event, clear-cutting did not necessarily mean degradation. One might wonder if he lets corporate loggers off too easily, but he certainly complicated my understanding of forestry practices.

I found the abstract theorizing about the state less en-

tering. The basic lines of the argument are persuasive—the weakness of this sector of the state, the importance of performance, “knowledge” that is extremely problematic. There are many useful insights here into how bureaucracy functions (or does not). These sections of the book, however, were sometimes arid and repetitive, and often not well integrated with Mathews’s data. Readers might also be disappointed if they are looking for agency from nature. The author notes the need to “take trees seriously as living and growing actors,” and he personifies even silver mines in this way, a strong suggestion that he thinks the influence of nature on society and culture is pertinent to his story (pp. 64, 90). But the book is primarily about the interactions of people and human ideas about nature, and, to a lesser extent, how they have shaped it. Aside from a few passing remarks on how they reproduce, Mathews’s “lively” trees do little to influence the developments discussed here. Finally, on the subject of how humans have shaped nature, I was left wondering whether agricultural burning around Ixtlán stopped or dramatically slowed after the 1930s, or whether the real story is that it continued but was repressed in the official record. I imagine the former is closer to the mark, but Mathews seems to want to have it both ways.

For the most part these quibbles reflect my preferences and expectations. This book makes a crucial contribution on the subject of the historical engagement of Mexican peasants with science, a topic recently addressed in Gabriela Soto Laveaga’s work, *Jungle Laboratories* (2009), but otherwise little studied. More broadly, it sheds important light on our understanding of the genesis of community forestry in Mexico.

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