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Christopher R. Boyer’s *Political Landscapes* seamlessly blends environmental and social history to expose how forest conservation reflected larger social and political processes in twentieth-century Mexico. Using the forestlands of Michoacán and Chihuahua as his case studies due to their long history of commercial logging, Boyer outlines the contentious battles over landscapes and natural resources among forestry experts, rural peoples, foreign investors, and government officials. Over the course of the twentieth century, approximately half of Mexico’s forests disappeared, transforming existing forests into what Boyer calls “political landscapes,” or the geographic sites where “conflicts over the use of forests both provoke and are provoked by state intervention that historical actors regard as illegitimate” (p. 254). These competing engagements over the meanings and purposes of forestlands help to trace the historical trajectory of conservation and national development in Mexico.

Beginning in the liberal period of the 1880s and ending in the neoliberal era of the 1980s, Boyer guides readers who are unfamiliar with Mexican history through the intricacies of the country’s twentieth-century experience, while simultaneously offering those expert in the Mexican historiography a fresh interpretation of how revolutionary, developmentalist, and neoliberal goals became variously applied to forestlands. He argues that forests first became politicized in the late nineteenth century when Liberal goals of promoting individualism and wealth accumulation ultimately privatized the commons and courted foreign commercial interests. These developments clashed with traditional uses of forestlands that tended to value community ownership and subsistence agriculture.

A common thread throughout *Political Landscape* is the presence of forestry professionals who used their expertise to justify their management of forests. At the turn of the century, scientific foresters, particularly Manuel Ángel de Quevedo (1862-1946), regarded rural people as too “backward” or “primitive” to manage forests in a rational way. Instead, Quevedo and other forestry
professionals instructed villagers on how to behave and manage their own resources. This contest over forestry authority represented a larger social fissure in an unequal society on the brink of revolution. The Revolution of 1910, and particularly the land reform program of president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), gave peasants access to and control over valuable agricultural and forest lands. Boyer argues that this populist experiment with widespread land reform became one of the first experiments with “community forestry” in the world.

Community-oriented forestry came to a crashing halt with the outbreak of WWII and the need for more natural resources to supply the war effort. Over the next several decades the Mexican political establishment began to redirect its development interests away from rural issues and toward urban development and industrialization, or what Boyer calls “muscular developmentalism.” Despite some attempts at regulating overuse and implementing sustainable approaches to forestry during the presidency of Luís Echeverría (1970-76), with the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, bureaucratic intervention in the forests ended and conservation programs became defunded. In a nuanced interpretation of neoliberalism, Boyer explains that deregulation of the forests provided villagers with the freedom to manage their own lands according to the needs of their communities. Earlier experiments with cooperatives and “community forestry” in the 1930s gave them experience to manage their affairs in a sustainable way.

While his research ends in 1992, Boyer briefly mentions contemporary struggles that forest communities have faced, which open up potential avenues of scholarly exploration. The presence of narcotraffickers, looters, and arsonists has forced villagers to form militias to protect their homes and livelihoods. The neoliberal, free-market era of deregulation may have allowed communities to autonomously manage forests, but it has provided little protection and security against such threats. Today many of these villagers are requesting state intervention to help protect “their natural patrimony and collective security” (p. 239). These recent developments, albeit with some new actors such as narcotraffickers and environmental activists, mark another episode of battles over forest landscapes.

This impeccably researched book is rich in detail and case studies, and incorporates an assortment of primary sources from the various actors fighting over forestlands. Boyer acknowledges that since clandestine logging was a persistent reality throughout much of the twentieth century, the archival record remains incomplete. Instead, he claims, “oral traditions constituted the most useful archive” and that through oral tradition, “elders and local intellectuals preserved the memory of past trials and made it available at moments of crisis” (p. 244). Despite this recognition and acknowledgment of the absences in official archival sources, neither the author’s methodological approach nor his source base include oral histories, which could have provided another layer of depth to this interesting story.

Political Landscapes makes an important contribution to the growing body of literature on Latin American environmental history. While this book does not go beyond the nation-state as a focus of analysis, other scholars may find it useful when making transnational connections about similar experiences with conservation, social justice, and development projects throughout the world.
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