

Reseña / Review

Christopher R. Boyer, *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico*.
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When Forests Become Political in Michoacán and Chihuahua

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Mexicanist environmental historian Christopher Boyer offers compelling reasons to believe forests in Mexico became political—that they became “political landscapes,” as the appropriate title of his book suggests. He defines such a concept as those kinds of “geographies made meaningful through the interaction of private interests, collective action, and the often discriminatory application of state power in ways that one social group or more interprets as illegitimate.” They are places, he continues, “where contention over resources has provoked official intervention and forced historical actors to negotiate with bureaucrats who ultimately determine which social groups will gain access to the land and its fruits.” Overall, he concludes that Mexican forests “are the embodiments of not only natural processes, but of political ones as well” (10). Boyer sees all of this politicization of forests as a twentieth-century phenomenon, especially when the state started to intervene during times of local conflicts over land and resources. It took the state, Boyer posits, to arbitrate inter-

village disputes between neighboring communities, or when outside interests like logging companies, or even federal officials like forest wardens clashed with local interests. In such cases “corrupt and interventionist bureaucracies” politicized Mexico’s forests because “their attempts to regulate the use of resources frequently ended up aggravating local tensions rather than resolving them” (11).

Political Landscapes is the history of such forest politicization for the states of Michoacán and Chihuahua. That Boyer researches the forestry history of only those two Mexican states is unfortunately not indicated in the title, where “Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico” as the subtitle may mislead many readers to assume this study will be more comprehensive of the country as a whole. Nor does Boyer explain in detail why the forests of just those two states become the focus of his attention, as certainly other Mexican states have forests, logging, federal intervention, local conflicts, and ecological change as part of their environmental histories. There is nothing inherently wrong with a work of this type that zeroes in on two states as *case studies* (if that is what Boyer intended), especially with comparative analysis, but the title should have reflected that focus better. If it was the press’s decision to exclude the exact states of study from the title or subtitle, it was a mistake. And Boyer should have addressed the “why just these two states?” question more clearly in the introduction, and spelled out more succinctly how the experiences in Michoacán and Chihuahua do or do not represent Mexican forestry history and/or state interventionism in community forests for the entire republic.

To be clear, Boyer does compare the two states’ forest experiences, and how they “present striking contrasts.” The quite different histories of the two states in general become reflected in their comparative forestry histories. Chihuahua, being a northern border state enriched by ranching, mining, and logging enterprises, often financed by foreign investment, and with a robust history of drug trafficking often linked to illegal logging, also is characterized by its rural Rarámuri population (hardly “grazed” by the “trappings of modernity”) that has had its own unique relationship to forests and forestry.¹ This contrasts greatly with the history of Michoacán where native people had “acculturated more completely to the dominant mestizo culture

¹ On the matter of drug-trafficking, it is surprising that Boyer did not draw from (or even cite) Joel Simon’s important exposé on Chihuahuan “narco-logging,” as there would have been important insights to have imported into Boyer’s discussion on this topic in various chapters of *Political Landscapes*. See Joel Simon, “The New Treasure of the Sierra Madre,” chapter five of *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

over the course of the twentieth century,” but who also had wielded “a degree of control over their woods” that indigenous peoples in Chihuahua were not able to attain (20). Also, there were different agricultural pressures on the Michoacán forests and different political interventions by the Mexican state. These contrasts make for interesting and important comparative reading and analysis, but do not by themselves explain why *just* these two states or why not the forest history of other states.

Likewise, Boyer at times waxes too general in his approach to “the forest ecosystem” of Mexico (xv)—as if there were just one. He hints that he wanted to write “a social history of Mexico’s forests” (xvii, 21)—something that does not quite occur in this book, surprisingly tending to neglect the much-accepted idea of the country being “many Mexicos” with each region, and often state, having its own unique characteristics, cultural histories, and ecologies. This is especially in contrast to his own description of Mexico’s “five major bioregions (biomes) ranging from the neotropical rainforests in the south to the megadiverse cloud forests of south-central Oaxaca to the Sonoran Desert.” Even for the regions of study in this book, he appreciates the “pine-oak ecosystems”—plural! (5), which negates his earlier generalized descriptions.

Subtitle and some of these specifics notwithstanding, there are important goals—achieved, I would strongly argue—in *Political Landscapes*. One was for the book “to excavate the historical conditions that allowed some communities to acquire their own forests and manage them, if not precisely sustainably, then at least responsibly.” This makes good sense, as Boyer explains, especially as “many rural people grew increasingly interested in marketing their timber and came to see the landscape as—among other things—a natural resource that professional foresters could help them use sustainably” (xiv). This kind of analysis frames the book nicely in the intersection of environmental and social history, which for this reviewer represents the best kind of environmental or social history, blending the two seamlessly together and tossing out earlier delimitations for both subfields that too narrowly confine the larger story of peoples and regions. As Boyer suggests, forests in Michoacán and Chihuahua “are more than just natural landscapes whose very appearance reflects a history of social conflict and cooperation stretching back for generations.” Thus, “reading the landscape this way,” Boyer hopes, “will encourage historians to take seriously the idea that particular forms of historical knowledge and human behavior are both inscribed on and structured by ‘the environment’” (xv). Bravo!—*that’s* what social/environmental history should be all about.

So, where does one start to understand this intricate social/environmental history of forests in Michoacán and Chihuahua? Boyer argues that the story begins with the passage of Mexico's comprehensive forestry code that "attempted to reconcile rural development with expert management," which took effect in 1926 and was responsible for forestry management into the 1980s (11).² The law came out of Mexico's unique blend of agrarian populism and a burgeoning emphasis on scientific management that resulted in massive land reform initiatives. Boyer situates this development in the larger context of the Mexican Revolution, referring to such land-use initiatives as "revolutionary forestry" in which resource development became embedded within "social justice and scientific management practices" (12). This analysis follows in the stream of historian Emily Wakild's insightful book *Revolutionary Parks*, which explores Mexican conservation and national park development in light of social justice ideals promulgated by the Mexican Revolution. While Wakild's direct connections to conservation from the Revolution are at best arguable, the point is that science started taking a prominent role in land-use issues in the post-Revolution years, especially during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s—analysis that applies here to Boyer's study of forests in Michoacán (Cárdenas' home state) and Chihuahua.³ However, similar to Wakild's problem of proving links to the Revolution, Boyer admits that by the late 1940s "revolutionary forestry never had a chance to take root" due to newer forestry codes the Mexican legislature enacted that encouraged "private corporations [to be] the engines of economic progress" and provided them with "exclusive access to timberlands—including woods held by *ejidos*, native communities, and private smallholders" making the corporate entities "targets of intense popular resentment" (12). This scenario was comparatively worse for Chihuahua than Michoacán. "The process of industrialization and commodification overtook Michoacán," he posits, "but it washed over Chihuahua like a flash flood" (40). But for a while, and perhaps more in theory than in reality, there was some degree of "revolutionary forestry" that took place in these two states, and as Boyer concludes, with a new focus on scientific management, "rural people had begun to

² On this note of policy and political changes from Mexico City that affected the states under discussion here, I very much appreciated Boyer's inclusion of a two-page explanation of the literally bewildering array of political departments, and their history of name changes, between 1908 and the present (see pp. xv-xvi). From the simpler Department of Forests, to a variety of different, and long, acronymic agencies—Boyer was able to get a handle on them chronologically, and provided this very useful discussion here of the different departments over time.

³ See Emily Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011).

engage with new ecological understandings of their landscape,” albeit perhaps without all of the economic benefits they might have believed they would accrue (13). Fittingly, Boyer suggests “native people and timber companies may have seen the same trees, but they perceived quite different forests” (4).

The environmental ramifications of later industrial forestry practices became readily self-evident. Deforestation became the norm, which according to Boyer resulted in about half of all of Mexico’s forests disappearing by the mid- to late-twentieth century. By the 1990s the rate of deforestation was so severe that a third of the remaining forests across the country were threatened to disappear (16-17). Social problems that accompanied such destruction included loss of employment, loss of community input on decision-making, and loss of local control of logging. However, at that point, many “community forestry” initiatives started taking root, with Mexico becoming a world leader in that kind of forest management. His coverage is excellent of this dimension, especially in the final chapters. And *Political Landscapes* contributes to the literature on Mexican community forestry, especially adding newer historical information and analysis for the two states under study.⁴ As such, in the newer trend of better environmental histories, readers are not left in a declensionist narrative funk, but rather can see local involvement in forestry decision-making and better, more sustainable, planning with these community forestry initiatives.

To accomplish so much under one cover, Boyer evenly divides *Political Landscapes* into two parts, with three chapters, arranged chronologically, in each. Part I is “The Making of Revolutionary Forestry,” with chapter 1 “the Commodification of Nature, 1880-1910,” chapter 2 “Revolution and Regulation, 1910-1928,” and chapter 3 on “Revolutionary Forestry, 1928-1942.” This structure is very effective, guiding the reader along Mexico’s history of the twentieth-century in neat chapter packages. I found Boyer’s analysis of forestry during the Porfiriato (1876-1910) to be especially strong and useful, particularly as the backdrop of what was to change in Mexican forestry policy and how it would affect Michoacán and Chihuahua. Likewise, Boyer’s coverage of forestry during the Revolution was excellent, and certainly the stuff to add to class lectures on such a topic. As alluded to above, the idea of “revolutionary forests” in the post-Revolution period up to 1942 is arguable, and as Boyer laments, did not actually transfer into the post-Cárdenas years.

⁴ See especially David Barton Bray, Leticia Merino-Pérez, and Deborah Barry, eds., *The Community Forests of Mexico: Managing for Sustainable Landscapes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

Part II is “The Development Imperative” with chapter 4 on “Industrial Forests, 1942-1958,” chapter 5 entitled “The Ecology of Development, 1952-1972,” and chapter six, “The Romance of State Forestry, 1972-1992.” Each chapter is packed with excellent analysis of the time-periods discussed, all based on careful archival harvesting of the most important documents, policies, reactions, etc., to changes in Michoacán and Chihuahuan forestry. Most of the book goes back and forth between Michoacán first Chihuahua in a workable comparative way, but also with thematic discussions throughout the text. The book is exceptionally well written; all in a readable style with the kind of language craft we have come to expect from Boyer. Concerning the construction of the book, I applaud the author and the press for their inclusion of such a wealth of footnotes, bibliographic references, and indexing—not always the case these days even among academic publishing houses. These book’s attributes make *Political Landscapes* a very welcome addition to Mexican environmental historiography, and to the broader environmental histories of both Latin America and North America. As such, it should be adopted for classes focused on those topics, as well as for graduate seminars in geography, anthropology, history of science, and sociology.

Finally, a note on the conclusion to *Political Landscapes* seems fitting here. Entitled “Slivers of Hope in the Neoliberal Forest” (a great title in and of itself), Boyer takes the reader into the world of timber poaching and narco-logging, and perhaps even more important, into the world of neo-liberal deregulation and how it has affected forestry in Michoacán and Chihuahua. Here we see more links between “city and landscape” (244), and the effects on Native Mexican communities, but Boyer correctly chooses not to frame such an analysis in a “tragedy of the commons” type of scenario. It is different in Mexico, with the country’s rise of community forestry in the face of neo-liberal economic reforms. But with the history of what kinds of forestry has worked well, and which have not, over the past few decades, Boyer concludes that local communities in these two states have “created a valuable storehouse of knowledge that can help them to balance their needs with the not-so-political landscapes they inhabit” (257). That is an encouraging final note to the book, one that we should all keep in mind as we consider forestry and conservation histories anywhere, and especially in light of the continued world-wide need for economic and environmental balance.