CONCLUSION

Slivers of Hope in the Neoliberal Forest

At the break of dawn on 15 April 2011, several women fired a volley of fireworks at three logging trucks loaded with timber illegally cut from the village commons of Cherán, Michoacán. The clap of "rockets" is nothing unusual in Purépecha villages like Cherán. People shoot them off to mark saints' day celebrations and announce festivals, but they are also used to raise the alarm in an emergency. A crowd quickly assembled around the women and began to pelt the trucks with rocks and more fireworks. A few of the drivers were briefly detained, and soon enough the vehicles beat a retreat out of town. The villagers knew the timber poachers would not stay away. The loggers had ties to narcotraffickers and had pillaged timber from neighboring villages for several years. Three elders from Cherán had already been killed, when they hiked into the woods and asked the narco-loggers to leave, or at least to spare a treasured stand of ancient trees.

The villagers soon learned that they could expect nothing more than rhetorical support from the authorities. The state police ignored the murders even though local leaders had pressed their case with the governor himself. The army also refused to get involved. So the residents built barricades to keep the trucks away and imposed a curfew on anyone from out of town. They issued press releases and posted messages on the Internet until bloggers and the international press took an interest in their story. Finally, they invoked their constitutional right to impose customary law (*usos y costumbres*) in a bid to defend themselves and maintain a degree of political autonomy. Residents formed a militia (manned in part by migrants who had returned from the United States) and stood vigil in the roads and hillsides, despite warnings from the police that so-called *ronda* militias were illegal, and despite the reprisal of narco-loggers, who murdered villagers as they replanted saplings in the communal woodlot. Some internal divisions also appeared, as it became clear that a few families had cut deals with the interlopers. For the most part, however, the villagers insisted on their right to protect their natural patrimony and collective security.[1]

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The uprising echoed events that had taken place in Cherán a century earlier, when the American timberman Santiago Slade sent logging crews into the village commons. Slade's lumberjacks appeared in Cherán sometime around 1902, brandishing cross-cut saws and rental agreements allegedly signed by village leaders. They clambered into the woodlots and returned with timber destined for train cars and eventually for the company sawmill in Uruapan. The residents understood that it would be futile to bring a lawsuit. The Porfirian-era legal system almost invariably sided with the wealthy, and company lawyers could always produce spurious contracts in court. So they decided to bide their time. Their opportunity for retribution came during the 1910 revolution, which broke the back of the Porfirian state and threw the countryside into turmoil. In 1913 villagers from Cherán fell in beside the troops of Eliseo Elizondo, a revolutionary general who intended to force Slade and his pro-government militia out of the hillsides and back to the city. The timber baron barely escaped with his life, but returned a few years later to restore his logging consortium. The mobilization in the Meseta Purépecha had galvanized the villagers, however, some of whom joined Michoacán's powerful agrarian movement and helped bring Lázaro Cárdenas to the governorship a few years later. The young governor and future president abrogated rental agreements such as Slade's and opened the way for what in Cherán became a long tradition of local autonomy in the woodlands.[2]

Over a century separated Santiago Slade's assault on the village commons from the narco-loggers' incursion of 2011, but the two events shared some remarkable similarities. Both occurred at moments of government "weakness," when authorities had few means at their disposal to enforce the law, even if they had wanted to, leaving villagers isolated as they confronted threats to their property and their welfare. The (neo)liberal policies that guided political life in each of these eras promoted free markets and placed minimal constraints on "entrepreneurs" or the use of natural resources. Like its Porfirian predecessors, the regime of the Institutional Revolutionary and National Action parties in the 1990s and 2000s put so much emphasis on creating a favorable climate for investment that it undercut environmental and social conditions. Finally, while the residents of Cherán eventually succeeded in expelling the outsiders in both cases, their capacity to stave off outsiders over the long term remained very much an open question.

Cherán was not the only place where the Porfirian tradition of impunity and land dispossession had reappeared. In one particularly well-

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documented case, villagers in the Sierra Petatlán, Guerrero, mounted a successful protest in 1998 against the Boise Cascade timber company. They accused the transnational corporation of colluding with the federal army to log their land without permission. The episode garnered enough bad press that Boise abandoned Guerrero altogether. Four years later, federal authorities falsely accused the protest movement's leader, Rodolfo Montiel, of drug trafficking, then sentenced him and an associate to seven years in prison. President Vicente Fox pardoned them a few years later, but not before Montiel had been tortured and his attorney, the human-rights advocate Digna Ochoa, had been assassinated.[3] Another protest movement in the Rarámuri ejido of Pino Gordo, in the far south of the Sierra Tarahumara, also attracted international attention when villagers denounced illegal logging operations that had encroached on their territory. Stunned by the unwanted attention from the international press, federal authorities put the brakes on commercial logging and pledged to address the problem.[4] Neither of these movements represented unqualified successes, however. Years later, Pino Gordo's case remained unresolved, and villagers accused their neighbors of invading their ejido at the behest of logging companies. The situation in Guerrero was more dire still, as a dozen or more peasant leaders lost their lives in confrontations with pirate loggers protected by the authorities, or narcotraffickers, or both. Their followers had to choose between organizing self-defense corps like those in Cherán or ceding their patrimony to timber poachers. Many chose the latter course and relocated in the cities or deeper into the forest, adding their number to Mexico's growing ranks of environmental refugees.[5]

These episodes reflect a heritage of rural resistance to forest dispossession that stretches back to the Porfiriato, but they occurred at a peculiarly unsettled moment in Mexican history, thanks to the paradoxical effects of neoliberalism. The disappearance of muscular development programs and unwieldy regulatory structures unquestionably opened a space for villagers to stake stronger claims to the woods. Progressive expert foresters and local activists leapt at the opportunity to establish ejidal timber enterprises in Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and elsewhere. In a few instances, such as in Quintana Roo, forest ejidos banded together in independent producers unions. David Bray, a longtime observer of the woodlands, has suggested that the 2010s may well represent the "optimal moment" for villagers and their allies to forge ahead with local experiments in locally managed, sustainable forestry.[6] Nevertheless, neoliberal deregulation has made it hard for rural people to take advantage of this historical conjuncture. Neolib-

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eralism relies on markets to allocate capital, which has effectively privatized management planning, formerly the sole domain of federal experts. Cutbacks and restructuring have forced the forest service to discontinue its free technical assistance, meaning that villagers need to fund their own management studies and seek capital from philanthropies and from the shrinking pool of rural credit. Timber companies that had once managed to secure logging permits by negotiating with the forest service have turned to other means. Some have taken advantage of business-friendly legislation that has once again opened federal land to foreign companies. Others have reached covert "understandings" with local powerbrokers such as military commanders, municipal presidents, and narcotraffickers. In many parts of the country (Michoacán, Chihuahua, and Guerrero in particular), organized criminal syndicates have lent support to illegal loggers. Apart from earning easy money, narcotraffickers use timber theft to intimidate rural people into capitulating to their authority and perhaps paying protection money as well. Neoliberalism has thus placed many rural communities on the precarious boundary between self-determination and abandonment.

The similarities between the early 1900s and early 2000s should not obscure the substantial changes in forest landscapes, however. Over a quarter of the nation's woods disappeared in that span of time. In the far north, commercial logging pushed the forest frontier southward, while colonization projects along the coasts and in the south helped to convert tropical forests into pastures and cornfields. Nearly all of the nation's woodlands experienced some degree of degradation, usually as a result of fire, pasturing cattle in the forest understory, or small-scale logging for domestic uses. By 2006, a mere 10 percent of the nation's woods could be considered primary (old growth) forest.[7] Conditions changed in social terms as well. Unlike in the nineteenth century, rural people owned most of the nation's woodlands—60.3 percent by the most careful estimate—in the early 2000s.[8]

The nature of scientific forestry also changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. The first generation of conservationists, epitomized by Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, worried that peasant backwardness made them fundamentally unfit to possess the nation's woodlands, much less manage it on their own account. While these early twentieth-century intellectuals cautiously hoped that education and didactic rituals like Arbor Day might one day change rural people's attitudes and convince them to "love the trees," experts in the era of revolutionary forestry

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continued to place much of their faith in robust regulations and mechanisms, like producers cooperatives, that facilitated a paternalist regime of environmental surveillance intended at its core to transform peasants' environmental consciousness. By the 1950s, scientists in the mold of Enrique Beltrán took a step away from this viewpoint to suggest that rural poverty—rather than peasant attitudes—drove land reform beneficiaries and indigenous people to overuse the woods. The midcentury generation of conservationist thinkers continued to believe in regulation and the inherent superiority of modern forms of extraction, such as carefully managed commercial logging, but they had become less certain that campesinos posed an inherent threat to nature. The foresters who came of age in the 1980s grew increasingly convinced that rural communities represented a potential solution to the problem of deforestation. Many of them believed that local knowledge and collective resource management could become the foundations of a scientifically informed regime of community forestry.[9]

Rural people's relationship to the woods had also shifted over time. Comuneros, land reform beneficiaries, and smallholders never stopped advocating for their rights to the land, but their use of resources and relationships to outsiders evolved dramatically. Whereas rural people dedicated most of their efforts to staving off outsiders' attempts to acquire their land during the Porfirian and revolutionary eras, the middle decades brought new opportunities and disappointments. Most communities received legal possession of the forests without earning corresponding authority over the landscape. Rather than dispossession, the main threat to local autonomy now derived from forestry regulations, logging contracts, and development projects. In addition to submitting petitions to political leaders to protest fraud and unclear boundary lines, some rural people began to request logging permits, tools, and technical assistance so they could make a living in their woods, but do so without harming their ecological integrity. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, many villagers' understanding of forests had begun to converge—on some points—with that of the forestry experts.

THE REVOLUTION AND THE COMMONS

Cherán's century-long bid to preserve its patrimony underscores the links between local histories of activism and the ecological integrity of forests over the long term. Villagers in Cherán (and elsewhere) employed a variety of practices to defend their territory. They petitioned the authorities and

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selectively ignored problematic regulations. They forged alliances with neighboring villages, if possible, and with accommodating officials. If necessary, they took up arms against loggers and pushy neighbors, and sometimes against each other as well. Villagers not only developed what Charles Tilly has called a "repertoire of contention" to confront threats to their subsistence, but also learned when to use a particular strategy and which tactics to avoid altogether.[10] In tight-knit native communities like Cherán, oral traditions constituted the most useful archive of such knowledge. Elders and local intellectuals preserved the memory of past trials and made it available at moments of crisis. These collective memories also functioned as a symbolic link among residents and in this sense helped define community identity. Popular ballads, such as the pirekua of Santiago Slade that many Purépecha schoolchildren still sing in Cherán today, for example, have become part of an imagined collective experience that (regardless of its factual basis) posits a strong symbolic bond between the villagers and their woodlands.[11]

The links between community and landscape were especially pronounced in indigenous townships, most of which had occupied the same territory over the course of several centuries. Generations of the same families had worked the land and, in some cases, assembled a nuanced understanding of the local ecosystem. By the twentieth century, most of Mexico's remaining "self-governing peoples" inhabited remote regions like the forested uplands, far from commercial centers and the inquisitive gaze of government authorities.[12] These same landscapes began to acquire unprecedented commercial value around 1900, when the Porfirian boom in mining, transport, and export agriculture accentuated the demand for wood products. Indigenous land had come under intense pressure in most places by the time the revolution broke out, in 1910. Agrarian demands did not detonate the uprising, but the promise of land reform did inspire some peasant groups to join the fray—with the notable exception of native people, most of whom tried to avoid the conflict altogether. And yet the revolutionary process represented a turning point in many native regions. It gave rise to a land reform that encompassed the forests and set the stage for an indigenista movement intended to "redeem" native people and improve their material and social conditions.

The Cárdenas administration stepped up the pace of land reform and rescinded the long-term contracts that allowed logging companies virtually unrestricted access to village commons. It enforced regulations that made producers cooperatives the only entities legally permitted to log

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Figure C.1. Lumber carts on the highway near Pátzcuaro, 1907. Photograph by Sumner W. Matteson. Milwaukee Public Museum.

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ejidos and common lands. The success or failure of the Cardenistas' plan for the woodlands hinged on authorities' ability to direct rural people's desire for greater productive autonomy toward the institutional goal of encouraging ejidos and cooperatives to collaborate with the forest service. The cases of Chihuahua and Michoacán suggest that this initiative met with mixed results at best. Foresters found it difficult to overcome rural people's distaste for management policies that vitiated their autonomy, while the cooperatives themselves almost invariably fell under the sway of local bosses (caciques) or agents of the timber companies. Nevertheless, the establishment of more than 850 producers cooperatives in the 1930s made it clear that rural populations, including indigenous people, could accommodate to official management policies, particularly if they retained some means of using their land.

That does not mean that native people reflexively sought to conserve "nature." The Rarámuri and Purépecha rarely articulated a desire to return the land to some former pristine state, much less to cease using it altogether. They had no shortage of uses for their woods, which they employed for everything from tejamanil shingle-making and artisanal charcoal manufacture to ambitious regional projects of sustainable forestry or resin production. Rarely did they intend to leave their forestland completely untouched. Native people often deployed liberal concepts of property rights leavened with some revolutionary concepts of social justice, to explain that they had both the right and the capacity to care for their property. They tended to petition the authorities under one of two circumstances: either when they believed that some entity (a logging company, a greedy neighbor, or someone within their own village) was exploiting their property without permission, or at least without paying appropriate compensation; or when power-holders (foresters, timber barons, or government authorities) refused them access to their own woods. In other words, native people, like rural folk generally, were most troubled by the pilfering of their timber and the bureaucratic roadblocks to cutting the wood themselves.

The ecologist Garrett Hardin contended in an influential 1968 essay that collective ownership of natural resources invariably leads to a "tragedy of the commons" or, in other words, to the depletion of a collectively held resource by those who use more than their fair share. Hardin argued that individuals not only had no motive to conserve common pool resources, but that they had strong incentives to take as much as possible before someone else did it first. It was only a matter of time before self-interest

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induced people to graze too many sheep on village pastures, to draw too much water from the village well, or to cut down too many trees from the collectively owned woodlot. It only takes one bad individual taking more than his due to destabilize the collective, because it creates an incentive for everyone else to escalate their own consumption before the resource is exhausted.[13] Deforestation in Mexican ejidal forests might seem at first blush like fodder for Hardin's theorem. The local histories of Michoacán, Chihuahua, and other locations in Mexico disclose many instances of villagers who clear-cut the forest to turn a quick profit, or perhaps to make sure that they made a bit of cash before someone else finished off the woods first. On some occasions (such as the cases of intentional arson in the contested stands of timber), ejidatarios and rancheros destroyed the woods rather than let them fall into their neighbors' hands. In the tropics, colonists hacked down rainforest and fenced the land for cattle ranching before someone else could stake their own claim to the newly opened land.[14]

Yet relatively few of Mexico's forest commons resembled the unregulated free-for-all that Hardin described. On the contrary, rural people often went to great lengths to protect their forests, either by agreeing on mutually acceptable uses of the land (as in many mestizo ejidos) or by adapting existing practices to the new realities of local commercial forestry (as often occurred in indigenous commons).[15] Mestizo ejidos like El Largo in Chihuahua were hardly alone in establishing successful ejidal businesses that promised jobs in the mountainsides and sawmills to ejidatarios.[16] Nor were indigenous communities like San Juan Nuevo or Cherán unique in developing viable, transparent local production processes. Native people in several states likewise succeeded in leveraging a heritage of collective decision making (and decades of work as resin tappers) to create successful community enterprises.[17]

A closer look at the history of forest-management policy in twentieth-century Mexico suggests that the destruction of forests stemmed less from rural people's anarchic misuse of the commons than from punitive regulations, official corruption, and poorly conceived development models that transformed forests into political landscapes. Rural people understood that they were in a precarious position, with little capacity to determine how their resources would be used. Forestry experts, Mexico City bureaucrats, and well-connected timber companies had much more influence with the federal government and hence more authority in the woodlands. While a heritage of collective action helped villagers to resist some of the most bla-

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tant efforts to wrest away their forests, they almost invariably needed to forge some sort of alliance with outside power-holders. In many instances, they turned to federal foresters posted in the countryside and tasked with overseeing ejidal production. Some of these professionals favored the more "rational" timber companies over community production; these experts had no intention of easing peasant access to the woods. Yet others had been reared on the promises of social justice that marked the Cárdenas years or on the more economistic logic of midcentury conservation practices. For these experts, as for so many rural people, the promises of the revolution might be in abeyance, but they had not disappeared altogether.

THE LEGACIES OF REVOLUTIONARY FORESTRY

The ideology of social justice that emerged from the revolution and inspired the constitution of 1917 opened a middle ground where expert foresters and rural people could arrive at a tentative working arrangement—a sort of ecological praxis—that allowed for both local use and expert oversight of the woods. Such an arrangement was all but inescapable insofar as poor rural people possessed an ever-increasing proportion of the nation's forests, even though the state directly or indirectly controlled their use. Postrevolutionary ideology cast doubt on Porfirian "development" policies, which was reimagined as an ill-considered strategy that granted foreign corporations unimpeded access to natural resources in ways that did little to appreciably improve the domestic economy. Postrevolutionary populism made it both feasible and expedient to enact the variety of populist development I have called "revolutionary forestry," that is, small-scale ejidal production, supervised by professional foresters, that provided rural people a source of income while making available the products necessary to rebuild Mexico's economy.

The experiment with producers cooperatives in the 1930s inaugurated one of the first global experiments in what has become known as "social" or "community" forestry. The cooperatives were predicated on some degree of collaboration between experts and rural people who, in theory, would be incentivized to protect and maintain their own woods to ensure their own economic survival. It is impossible to know whether the cooperatives would have lapsed into corruption and patronage like so many other ejidal organizations of the mid-twentieth century or whether they might have fostered a sense of environmental stewardship among rural people, as in the case of Cusárare, where the cooperative became embedded within

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existing traditions of community and collective labor. Given that so many village leaders continued to beseech for the right to manage their own woods, it seems clear that at least some people would have consented to a system that combined expert management with local production. Yet the postrevolutionary flirtation with community forestry never came of age. The Second World War and the ensuing developmentalist regime intensified the demand for wood products and opened the door to industrial logging on a scale that doomed the nascent system of ejidal production. Policymakers opened the way for private concerns by suppressing cooperatives in favor of UIEF neoconcessions, logging bans that exempted favored corporations, and the legalization of rental agreements that gave timber interests easy access to ejidal lands.

Peasant timber production and local management ceased to be national priorities, but they did not disappear altogether. Foresters using creative interpretations of logging regulations rechristened cooperatives such as Cusárare's as Forest Management Units (Unidades de Ordenación Forestal, or UOFs), effectively allowing them to endure the adverse regulatory conditions of the 1940s. Within a decade, other UOFs appeared, too. Organizations such as the UOF "Morelos" in northeastern Michoacán comprised multiple ejidos (as well as small private properties and indigenous commons), which they managed on a regional scale, all while injecting the countryside with new sources of income and employment. Federal foresters penned elaborate management plans intended to guarantee sustained-yield logging based on the "Mexican method" of selective extraction. Some UOFs essentially functioned, in other words, like the 1930s-era cooperatives, but on a wider scale. With the advent of paragovernmental enterprises (paraestatales), progressive foresters began to dream of a statewide productive landscape managed by experts and worked by a synergistic combination of village enterprises and timber companies.

Diluted variants of revolutionary forestry persisted in other pockets as well, both on the local level and within the federal bureaucracy. Regional initiatives such as the Coordinating Center of the Tarahumara in Chihuahua (CCIT) or the pine-resin industry promoted by the former president Cárdenas and the Banco Ejidal in the Meseta Purépecha of Michoacán kept the ideal of local production alive. Like the cooperatives, these ventures bonded expert oversight of resource extraction to bootstrapping models of community production. Foresters taught people in both these sites how to cut trees (or make incisions in them), while locally managed sawmills and resin-refining plants provided jobs and training in an industrial set-

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ting. Institutional and ecological factors kept many of these projects from scaling up to the national level, but they nonetheless became important platforms for subsequent experiments in community production. Even initiatives such as the UIEF forest concessions of the 1950s and 1960s and the paragovernmental organizations of the 1970s used the rhetoric of social justice and local autonomy to justify their procedures, despite the fact that industrial extraction converted most villagers into passive spectators to the destruction of their forests. Rural people repeatedly expressed disillusionment with these organizations' mismanagement of resources and stingy remuneration; many of them tried to undermine the UIEFs and paraestatales by selling their wood on the black market or abandoning the forests altogether. Yet villagers' exposure to forestry projects, even the mismanaged ones, helped lay the groundwork for the turn to community forestry in the late 1970s and 1980s, by giving them practical knowledge about resource management, industrial practices, and the federal bureaucracy.

These experiences turned out to be more valuable in Michoacán than in Chihuahua. Ejidatarios and indigenous people in the far north had to adapt more frequently to ventures designed for them by outsiders and put into effect with minimal consultation. The CCIT, for example, was the brainchild of the National Indigenist Institute, rather than a local invention. Sympathetic officials such as Francisco Plancarte and the schoolteachers in the Supreme Council of the Tarahumara managed to bend the CCIT's programs more closely to local expectations, but with considerably less success after Plancarte's death, in 1959. Moreover, the immense extension and hence commercial value of forests in the Sierra Tarahumara attracted well-funded logging firms, including those associated with powerful figures like President Miguel Alemán. In this sense, forest wealth constituted a sort of regional "resource curse" that distorted politics and development in Chihuahua.[18] The Rarámuris' historical success in maintaining their distance from mainstream (chabochi) society began to work against them in the twentieth century, because they had few political allies willing or able to take up their struggle.

Land reform beneficiaries in Michoacán, and Purépecha people in particular, confronted some of the same hierarchies as their northern counterparts, but they had several key advantages. In the first place, the history of agrarian militancy and alliance-making with political outsiders paid dividends in the mid-twentieth century. Lázaro Cárdenas and his enduring political dynasty in Michoacán cultivated clienteles in the coun-

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tryside and paid particular attention to the forestlands. More to the point, the former president helped to build the nation's most dynamic pine-resin industry in his home state and also helped to secure a concession for Michoacana de Occidente. The paraestatal corporation followed the well-trodden path of incompetence and corruption that characterized UIEF concessions, but its resin-buying program generated supplemental income for thousands of poor people, particularly after the 1950 logging ban made tree-tapping the only legal way for most villagers to use their land. Tensions between people who tapped their trees and villagers who wanted to log them became a staple of village politics in the following years (especially after the resumption of statewide logging in 1973), but San Juan Nuevo and a few other villages around Uruapan sidestepped some of these conflicts because they had recognized the potential for selective cutting in the wake of the Paricutín volcano and the sawfly remediation project.

Revolutionary forestry withered in the 1940s, along with many of the other Cardenista initiatives. Wartime demand and postwar industrialism favored commercial production over rural development and sapped the postrevolutionary state's commitment to social-justice initiatives. But revolutionary forestry did leave two key legacies that facilitated the reemergence of community forestry in the final decades of the twentieth century. In the first place, it survived institutionally, as the CCIT, the Banco Ejidal, and some elements of the forest service continued to support village-level production. In the second, it modeled what local control of forestry might look like. Experiments with producers cooperatives, UOFs, unions of ejidos, and other such institutional forms rarely achieved their full potential, but they gestured toward the possibility of community forestry. Unsurprisingly, villages that had positive experiences with midcentury populist initiatives in forestry were home to some of the most successful small-scale enterprises in the 1980s and 1990s.

THE UNSTEADY STATE

It is hard not to interpret Mexico's history of state forestry for most of the twentieth century as a succession of missed opportunities. The single greatest failure of Mexican management policy was that it subordinated the material needs and social aspirations of rural people to a model of development that treated economic growth as an end unto itself and privileged the nation's most influential commercial and political interests. Timber companies, paragovernmental enterprises, and forest-service per-

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sonnel mouthed platitudes about social justice and shared development throughout the postrevolutionary era and into the 1980s, but most of these institutions treated land reform and the legacies of revolutionary forestry as problems to overcome, rather than as potential assets to mobilize. The legal environment placed significant limits on local production in favor of large-scale, supposedly more rational institutions. In short, Mexican policy for most of the twentieth century disempowered rural people and politicized forest landscapes.

The debacle of twentieth-century forestry was not solely a product of bad politics, however. The institutional structures of land reform also created deep challenges for resource management. As the central institution of agrarian policy, ejidos were not mere plots of land. They organized the most privileged members of rural communities into an officially recognized collectivity that occupied a symbolically and economically significant territory. Ejidos also represented the main administrative bridge between rural people and state institutions such as the forest service. Ejidal leadership committees managed local production, executed contracts with timber companies, supervised sawmills, kept the books, and ensured that villagers (or company lumberjacks) followed forestry-management plans. As development projects grew increasingly complicated, it fell to the ejido and its leadership to ensure that villagers obeyed federal regulations and respected the mandates of project directors. Organizations that operated on a smaller scale than the ejido, such as the producers cooperatives of the 1930s or certain village pine-tapping organizations, often became lightning rods of local controversy because they excluded some ejidatarios, opening themselves to accusations of favoritism and corruption. On the other hand, it was difficult to manage forests on a regional level because entities such as UIEFs and paraestatales routinely discounted villagers' expectations and nourished a sense of resentment and powerlessness. Regional unions of ejidos and management districts fared somewhat better, but they typically lacked the technical capacity or moral authority to implement logging plans. That left the ejido as the primary unit of land management. In many parts of Mexico, forests became a patchwork of individually managed ejidal forests, each with its own leaders, productive routines, and sawmills.

A second structural challenge originated with overambitious proposals to place forests at the center of rural economic development in some of the most desperately poor regions of the country. Experts and land reform beneficiaries routinely overestimated the capacity of forests to generate jobs and revenue, and they allowed these unrealistic expectations to guide

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their ambitions. Political leaders hoped that small-scale logging projects would inject cash into the countryside and develop the rural economy, while at the same time providing raw materials to timber companies, railroads, and paper mills. Anthropologists such as the ones in the CCIT hoped that employment in the forests and sawmills would coax native people into the nation's cultural and economic mainstream. Most experts understood forests as renewable resources that could be sustainably harvested, whether by local residents or timber companies. And national leaders like Cárdenas and Echeverría portrayed forests as renewable engines of social justice and rural development on a vast scale. Yet the nation's woodlands, extensive though they were, could never meet the crosscutting demands placed on them. Already in the 1970s, some foresters recognized that ejidal forests—including the ones that were "properly managed, milled, and marketed"—could never provide a livelihood for everyone in the burgeoning rural population, much less function as the fulcrums of cultural change or national development.[19] At best, a few mega-ejidos had access to enough timber to keep most or all of their members employed. In most cases, however, more modest projects were the most sustainable, such as the sawmill that provided jobs to a relative handful of people, the logging project that operated seasonally, or the resin-tapping enterprises that supplemented but in most instances did not replace villagers' other sources of income.

One of the greatest shortcomings of state forest policy had less to do with its substantive content than with its inconsistent application and nearly continual revision. The model of management shifted from the revolutionary forestry of the 1930s to the muscular developmentalism of the 1950s and 1960s, to the state forestry model of the 1970s, and finally to the neoliberalism and community forestry of the 1990s and beyond. The unstable regulatory terrain made it difficult for rural leaders to find their footing. It took time for rural people to learn the rules and establish the requisite ejidal institutions and practices associated with each system. Each new change depleted this organizational capital a little bit more and sapped rural people's willingness to comply with the next big plan for the forestlands, no matter how well intentioned. For most of the twentieth century, development-minded politicians and expert foresters tended to interpret rural people's resistance to change as evidence of peasant backwardness and reticence. It may, in fact, have represented an informed response to their precarious legal and institutional circumstances and a prudent strategy for inhabiting a political landscape they could not manage.

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A DEPOLITICIZED LANDSCAPE?

Many factors contribute to deforestation. The construction of railroads and highways makes it cheaper and easier to transport sawlogs from woodlands once considered too remote for commercial use. Settlement and colonization typically place new stress on forest ecosystems, especially if the newcomers elect to clear land for agriculture. Wildfires—whether set intentionally or inadvertently—can take a toll, as can shortsighted development policies that encourage unsustainable logging or fail to stem the collateral damage associated with the extraction of oil and minerals. Official incompetence, ambiguous or impotent land-tenure rights, and official incapacity or unwillingness to enforce regulations can undermine forest ecosystems. Measures intended to protect the woods can also backfire and encourage deforestation if they create incentives for landholders to remove certain species or entire stands of trees in a bid to avoid scrutiny from the authorities.[20]

All these factors have contributed to yet another historical phenomenon in twentieth-century Mexico: the transformation of forests into political landscapes, which I understand as spaces where conflicts over the use of forests both provoke and are provoked by state intervention that historical actors regard as illegitimate. The first hints of this process appeared during the Porfiriato, when authorities made woodlands available to foreign corporations at the expense of local populations The revolution accentuated the political character of forests. The state began to hand woodlands over to ejidos and indigenous communities beginning in 1917 and continued to do so until 1992. At the same time, it severely restricted rural people's ecological and productive autonomy. Lázaro Cárdenas and Miguel Ángel de Quevedo initially finessed this disjuncture in the 1930s, by instituting revolutionary forestry, but the development imperative of the postwar years vitiated many social-justice initiatives, promoted large-scale industry, and further politicized the forest landscape. By the final decades of the twentieth century, an incredible tangle of regulations and institutional forms—many of them blatantly ignored by people who lived and worked in the woods—had converted forests into deeply political spaces whose fate depended on negotiations between stakeholders and the state. In part for this reason, Mexico in the early 1990s was losing a larger annual proportion of its forests than was any other major country in the Americas, and it had the fifth highest absolute rate of deforestation in the world.[21]

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Yet this trend reversed soon thereafter. By most estimates, Mexico's overall rate of deforestation fell from around 1 percent per annum in the mid-1990s, to 0.5 percent between 1997 and 2002, and then to just over 0.2 percent over the next five years.[22] The dramatic turnabout cannot be attributed to a single factor, but migration from some parts of the countryside may have relieved population pressures, while a tenuous economic rebound created alternatives to clandestine logging. Moreover, the expansion of community forestry on a national scale and its increasingly visible success in states such as Oaxaca, Michoacán, Quintana Roo, and Durango helped slow the destruction of temperate forests. For the first time since the 1930s, rural people were in a position to manage (and profit from) their own property using sustained-yield logging techniques. International funding agencies provided working capital and expertise to many of these projects, and communities such as San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro have succeeded in training their own cadres of homegrown experts. Some rural people tentatively accepted those tenets of scientific conservation that made sense in their own lives—a process that the anthropologist Andrew Matthews calls "the uneven, halting, and hesitant journey of forestry science into indigenous forest communities."[23] The community-forestry approach cannot work everywhere and has trouble gaining traction in ecosystems like mangroves and dry tropical forests, where woody species regenerate slowly and have little economic value. But it has thrived in regions with commercially viable temperate pine-oak forests, which are precisely where deforestation has slowed the most.[24]

Another factor has been at work as well. As the state has withdrawn from the countryside, forest landscapes have become less politicized. Neoliberalism has limited the forest service's administrative presence and diminished the government's coercive power in the woodlands. Deregulation has not merely opened a space for community forestry, but has reshaped the orientation of rural people, environmental activists, and other stakeholders toward the woods. As access to forests has grown less contingent on seemingly ad hoc regulations and bureaucratic decisions coming from Mexico City or unresponsive rural institutions such as paraestatales, it has become possible to imagine Mexican forests as natural landscapes, albeit ones that remain threatened by many of the same problems as before, including illegal logging, clearing for agriculture, and, in some instances, unclear ownership. The state has continued to set the rules governing resource management, but it has ceded its role as the sole (and

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Figure C.2. A forest guard in the Cherán community militia, 2011. Getty/AFP.

oftentimes partisan) arbiter of who has access to the woodlands. For better or worse, rural people have learned to rely not only on regulations and bureaucrats to protect their commons, but also on self-help and appeals to sympathetic outsiders such as NGOs, environmentalists, and the media. Nor is it a coincidence that new environmental movements appeared just as forest landscapes grew less politicized, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For the first time, rural people and urbanites have been able to join forces to imagine forest ecosystems whose fate they can influence.

Mexican forests are no longer the highly political landscapes they once were, but that does not mean that deforestation no longer represents a threat. Impoverished rural people must still sustain themselves, and many continue to clear the woods or overtax their commons. Conflicts between neighboring villages still provoke acts of arson and clear-cutting in contested territories. Powerful outsiders like timber companies and narco-loggers exploit resources with impunity in many places. Community forestry projects have provided a partial bulwark against these problems, but they cannot function in a vacuum. In many ways, such projects were better off during the era of revolutionary forestry, in the 1930s, when a robust state enforced policies explicitly meant to empower rural people and promote social justice. Indeed, the experience of Cardenismo suggests that the mere application of state authority is not what politicizes forest

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landscapes; rather, it is the misuse and uneven application of that authority that does so. This may help to explain why many rural people today wish the state would become *more* involved in sustainable-development initiatives. They still need technical assistance, security, and legal protections for their property. Forest management on a regional scale is still required to keep the landscape from becoming a patchwork of ejidal and communal forests.

The people who live in the forestlands and depend on them for material and cultural survival in the early twenty-first century face some of the same challenges as their forebears did in the late nineteenth century. In both historical moments, laissez faire governments turned to private corporations as a means to "develop" the countryside. Both moments were times of personal and collective insecurity made all the more grievous by a mode of economic development that left the rural poor out of the equation. Yet much has changed during the intervening century. Rural people in contemporary Mexico can draw on their own histories of shielding their forest patrimony from the threats posed by outsiders. They can also evoke the best legacies of revolutionary forestry and scientific management. In many places, rural people can draw on practical knowledge built through generations of work in the woodlands, negotiations within their communities, and interaction with professional foresters. This history has made many campesinos skeptical about development projects and "win-win" scenarios that promise to bolster regional economies while changing their own lives for the better. But it has also created a valuable storehouse of knowledge that can help them to balance their needs with the not-so-political landscape they inhabit.

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