Reflections: Lectio praecursoria

Recognizing the plurality of knowledge, values, and experiences interwoven in Mexican community forestry

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During my doctoral defense at the University of Eastern Finland on January 27th, 2023, I introduced my doctoral research with the present lectio praecursoria. This lectio delves into the plurality of experiences, values and knowledge interwoven in the development of community forestry in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, Mexico. In the last 40 years, Mexico has promoted community forestry as an alternative to forest management directed by the central government or private companies. As an alternative, community forestry is based on social justice and environmental sustainability principles, aiming for communities to use forests for social and economic development while conserving them. The research examines how forest communities have created their paths to achieve these objectives, like creating community forestry companies for wood and non-wood forest products. Based on ethnographic methods and documental analysis in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca state, the research investigated the challenges, paradoxes and changes forest dwellers face when managing and working in their community forestry companies while conserving their forests. Furthermore, this study contributes to understanding how different environmental governing rationalities intersect when 1) socio-territorial conflicts arise, 2) women's access to productive labor is encouraged, and 3) the plural values of the forest are adapted. The lecture addresses one of the critical inquiries of this research: how various environmental governing rationalities intertwine in community forestry to shape and regulate people's behavior and interactions with forests.

Keywords: feminist political ecology, community forestry, environmentality, neoliberalization of nature, environmental justice

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Madam Custos, Honored Opponent, colleagues, friends, and family.

On a November afternoon in 2015, I sat with Mr. Toledo[1] in his front yard to talk about his experiences working for the community forestry enterprise. When I asked him how the timber harvesting started, he told me:

"Every year before the forestry activities begin, we offer a gift to the owner of the forest, of the mountain, *el monte*. When we started our own forestry company, we offered the gift to the place where the first pine fell; it was the first time the rite was performed in this way for that specific purpose. We took a lamb, mezcales, music, the violin, cigarettes, and tortillas as usual. From then on, it became a custom."

The owners of the mountains are mythological beings that inhabit and protect the mountains, the forest, and their animals. They are known in the local Zapotec variant as *wachi* or more commonly called in Nahuatl as *chaneque*. In the Mesoamerican tradition, a gift is offered for cultivating corn and beans, caring for cattle, or asking for the return of someone lost in the forest.

Mr. Toledo is a senior member of a Zapotec community in the municipality of Zimatlán in Oaxaca, Mexico. A community embedded in the mountainous range called Sierra Sur and widely recognized for being one of the leading producers of authorized and certified wood in southeastern Mexico. Like many other ejidos and agrarian communities in the country, its inhabitants have improved their living conditions by collectively using their forests and setting up diverse community-led ventures.

At the same time, these rural communities interweave their own ways of relating to the forest with their contemporary situations. They adapt, rethink and reconfigure their costumes and coexistence with the forest. Today they also offer a gift to the wachi or chaneque when they start a new company or community infrastructure, such as a sawmill or a water bottling plant.

Oaxaca state has an intricate topography due to the union of two major mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre del Sur. Like the forests, cultural and linguistic diversity seems more resistant in these mountains. Specifically, they have been an excellent refuge for the temperate forests, flourishing at altitudes between 2,000 and 3,700 meters above sea level. These forests have a high ecological diversity and are home to 24 species and three varieties of native conifers, and 52 species of oaks. Not to mention emblematic fauna like the puma, the tree ocelot, the opossum, the coatí, and the golden eagle.

Since the late 19th century, illegal logging, fires, and the expansion of farming and cattle ranching have been the most critical factors in the deforestation and degradation of Mexican temperate forests. Yet, Oaxaca is still Mexico's second most forested state. Rural communities in this state own about 80% of forest land through the singular communal system of land tenure, better known as ejidos and agrarian communities. Community forestry has emerged and been promoted as a viable solution to deforestation and poverty in this socio-ecological landscape. But the path to creating community forestry in rural Mexico has been challenging and ever evolving.

In the case of the Sierra Sur and Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, industrial forestry was introduced by the federal government in the 1940s when it granted timber concessions to private and state-owned logging companies. By the early 1980s, the unfair profit-sharing and working conditions led to several communities mobilizing against the logging concessions and managing to stop their renewal. Some forestry officials saw this situation as an opportunity to build another model that could benefit economically the Sierras' poor population. Together with officials and other supporters, many communities started organizing their own community forest management and timber enterprises.

This was a highly significant socio-economic change, as Mr. Toledo recalled. Many rural communities in states like Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Puebla, and Durango began developing their own community forestry plans and enterprises.

The core purposes of community forestry, thus, became three. First, for rural communities to use the benefits of forest resource extraction, like timber production, for economic and social development. Secondly, to support community members' involvement and participation in conserving, managing, and deciding over their forests. And thirdly, to avoid illegal logging by expanding forest management plans approved by forest authorities.

From this perspective, we can affirm that community forestry has brought significant benefits in terms of social and economic development that support the efforts against deforestation. However, following a critical research approach based on political ecology, in my dissertation (Gutiérrez Zamora 2023), I point out that community forestry programs are not flawless. Like all peoples and cultures, forest communities live with their own contradictions and complexities. In this sense, it is crucial to consider the several shades that arise when designing and implementing environmental policies and programs.

For this purpose, I conducted nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in an agrarian community in 2015, 2017 and a short visit in 2019. I also conducted interviews in two neighboring communities that also developed their community forestry enterprises. My ethnographic fieldwork included participant observation, informal conversations, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and collecting public documents and institutional records.

During my fieldwork in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, I was driven by the challenges, paradoxes, and tensions people face when managing, exploiting, and trying to conserve their forests. Notably, the following: 1) socio-territorial conflicts, 2) women's limited access to decision-making and productive labor, and 3) the recognition of plural values of the forest. Such challenges, paradoxes, and tensions led me to consider further the historical context in which community forestry occurs.

When I first arrived at this agrarian community in September 2015, I worked as an assistant researcher for a research project funded by the Academy of Finland. This project aimed to investigate the impacts of the Finnish-Mexican Technical Cooperation in Forestry implemented in some rural communities of Guerrero and Oaxaca between 1988 and 1991. But my study took another direction after we arrived in this Zapotec community.

In our first meeting with the authorities, they asked us to dedicate some of the research to their land conflicts with the neighboring communities. A couple of months earlier, the disputes over forest lands had escalated, leading to fears that clashes and roadblocks would occur again.

The more I learned from their forestry work and community organization, the more I wondered how a community described as a successful model continued to experience many land disputes that resulted in overt violence with other communities. I needed to explore how such communities, their populations, and forests fluctuated between indifference and the interference of the Mexican state and other non-state actors. When analyzing such fluctuation, it became evident that community forestry develops in a particular historical context. A context with a wide diffusion of policies that promote monetary incentives and the efficiency of the free market as central elements for solving our social and environmental problems.

In political ecology, such a process is called the neoliberalization of nature. This concept can be better understood when considering the commodification of land, water, and forests and the deployment of free market mechanisms in conservation strategies. As well as the rapid involvement of private corporations in environmental governance.

In this way, my thesis aims to understand how community forestry operates in relation to the 'neoliberalization of nature.' I wanted to know how communal and neoliberal ways of knowing and being with the forest shape and regulate community forestry. Theoretically, I employed the notion of 'interwoven environmentalities' to achieve this aim (Gutiérrez Zamora 2023).

Let me explain what I mean. By extending Foucault's analysis of governmentality and biopolitics, political ecologists and other scholars (Luke 1995; Agrawal 2005; Ulloa 2005; Fletcher 2010, 2017; Cepek 2011) have used the concept of environmentality or eco-governmentality in studying the current interactions of societies and natures. In such analysis, scholars bear in mind that power is exercised in daily life by individuals and collective actors like companies, non-governmental organizations, and other social institutions that participate in environmental governance. It helps to recognize how individuals, as subjects, participate in their own rule, acting upon themselves. In other words, it allows us to consider how individuals internalize certain environmental practices and discourses as rationalities. The notion of environmentality acquires significant importance when thinking about decentralized power in environmental regulation, that is, beyond a central State. Particularly critical to understanding how these rationalities organize and govern our ecological attitudes, perceptions and conduct.

The plural notion of environmentality permitted me to acknowledge the existence of different environmental rationalities in managing, knowing and being with the environment. It also allowed me to investigate how these rationalities frame the rules and norms we establish to give sense to our relationship with nature.

In this way, I proposed that in community forestry, there are two main rationalities for managing, knowing, and being with the forest, communal and neoliberal (Gutiérrez Zamora 2023). Both are interwoven to regulate and govern people's conduct with their forests. Such an approach allowed me to understand community forestry's contradictions and tensions. But also to look at how different ecological rationalities transform or preserve specific practices and values.

When I focused on the land and territorial conflicts, I followed the marked traces and the absences that various institutions, projects, and political changes left materially in the forests. But also symbolically, in other words, how people give sense to their interactions with forests as territories.

We started using the responsibilization concept to theoretically explore how community forestry policies and programs urged communities to take further responsibilities. For example, in the conservation of forests, wood productivity, poverty alleviation, and conflict resolution.

By responsibilization, I refer to the process of self-regulation in which people are rendered and internalize a sense of responsibility for duties previously considered the obligation of others, like the state or government officials. This concept led me to explore how community forestry as a global and national narrative can also work to transfer the responsibility of 'failures' to community members.

I use the concept of responsibilization in my first article (see Gutiérrez-Zamora & Hernández Estrada 2020). I analyze how state strategies for conflict resolution often neglect their tangible results. They create 'hope' that someday the state could fulfill its security duties and provide legal certainty over the land. But also, they produce a sense of injustice among the rural population, leading to taking justice into their own hands. Such a process permits the reproduction of direct violent clashes in land conflicts.

In the second article included in my dissertation (see Mustalahti *et al*. 2020), we also use the concept of responsibilization and question how state programs in different countries have designed 'targets' for effective timber production. In my contribution, I explore how the state attributes responsibility for their achievements and failures to forest communities' performance and how community members assume it.

Alongside, I started another inquiry from my conversations with female community members in their kitchens, farming plots, and walks. These women gave me tremendous insights into the projects that aim to 'include' women in community forestry and how the gender division of labor has a bearing on the concerns and relationships with the forest and forestry activities. For example, Mrs. Lucrecia frequently recalled how she and the comuneras provided service and work for the community, called tequios. "We also go; we are the ones who cook at festivities. But also there in the mountains when we give the gift to the chaneque and when it is needed. Even when fires or conflicts arise, we give these services."

These conversations made me question how women are represented in the community forestry success stories offered by official literature and male community members. In my third article (see Gutiérrez-Zamora 2021), I critically question how current gender mainstreaming strategies developed in community forestry, how they have been implemented, and their impacts on women's lives. Theoretically, I build upon feminist political ecology and discuss the coloniality that these strategies entail.

Furthermore, the article shows how male labor is pushed to be adjusted to meet the necessities of the timber market and how this adjustment directly impacted women's work and access to forests (Gutiérrez-Zamora 2021). When forest stands are exploited, they become masculine spaces of forestry production, a ground of male labor and skill, heavy lumber, chainsaws, and operations. Women's presence and mobility have been partially restricted in this productive forest. While men work in the woods and obtain salaried employment, women are more in charge of household chores and the cultivation labor that secures the food necessities of the families. The description of such realities let me understand how diverse dispositifs of power operate in the everyday distribution and recognition of labor and influence our understanding of whose knowledge and work are 'valuable.'

Such an approach also supported the analysis of the fourth article (see Gutiérrez-Zamora *et al.* 2023), where we developed what the absence or presence of women meant for recognizing the plural values of the forest. In this last article, I also discuss how monetary incentives and instrumental values remain dominant in decision-making. I show how industrial forestry and the socialization of forestry knowledge introduced a division of the forest into communal and productive spaces that coexist in tension. The forest, as a productive space, has acquired metric and instrumental qualities based on silvicultural and administrative knowledge and values. Still, communities still keep a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of *el monte*, like Mr. Toledo and Mrs. Lucrecia reminded me. The fourth article shows how the forest as a communal space continues to be built as part of the values of reciprocity, spirituality, and territoriality.

Here, I want to point out that these environmental rationalities are interwoven in today's community forestry governance. Based on my findings, I proposed that community forestry cultivates a communal entrepreneurial subjectivity. Such subjectivity in the community has been crucial in gaining some economic and political autonomy for rural communities. Yet, in recent years, it has also functioned as an entry point for policies and principles that encourage community members to be more and more productive and efficient so they can access the free market of wood and other non-wood forest products.

I agree with other scholars on the need to acknowledge how community members creatively embrace, adapt, and reconfigure their specific communal responsibilities and entrepreneurial aspirations by deploying diverse forms of organizing and valuing their interactions with the forests. My dissertation findings will be useful to communities, academics, practitioners, and others involved in financing and planning community forestry initiatives. Particularly for those involved in the complex dynamics and realities of rural 'communities' and who look beyond the well-intentioned discourses of socio-environmental programs.

Recognizing the collective efforts of these rural populations to maintain and manage forests is essential to guide public policies toward environmental justice. But it is also crucial to address the inequalities in the distribution and recognition of responsibilities, work, benefits, and burdens that impact the lives of the different members of these communities.

Notes

[1] To maintain confidentiality, all people's names in this lecture are pseudonyms.

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