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# Review of Instituting Nature: Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests by Andrew S. Mathews

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This brings me to my final comments on this excellent and intriguing book. The afterword brings into play a range of more inclined ethnographic, anthropological and sociological studies and perspectives on the commission. Cole discusses authors who have analyzed the everyday work of the staff of the commission in contrast to the genre's usual focus on celebrities like Tutu, and the detailed theoretical and methodological implications of the various truth and reconciliation techniques and traditions at work in the commission, as well as the human rights discursive work of the commission. Cole may not have wanted to overdo the referencing in order to make the book unnecessarily heavy to read, while simultaneously wanting to add more perspectives. Yet I wonder if the ethnographic and anthropological authorships included as an afterthought would have changed her perspective and celebration of contested concepts like Ubuntu (reified notion of people's allegiances and relations with each other) and encouraged her to show a greater attentiveness to the *a priori* structuring of the performance or performativity of the Commission.

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***Instituting Nature: Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests***

Andrew S. Mathews (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011)

Much ethnography since the mid-1980s has been dedicated to the careful study of how knowledge-making necessarily entails power struggles in everyday encounters: the power to name, to enunciate official discourses, and to privilege or occlude phenomena as the sites of knowledge. This important work has relied on the assumption that knowing institutions—organizations such as states or regimes of scientific authority—go about their work with a determined confidence, and that the power of these institutions corresponds to their ability to construct the grids of intelligibility through which the subjects of knowledge will come to know themselves. While Andrew Mathews' *Instituting Nature: Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests* contributes to this rich line of research, he turns the baseline assumptions of ethnographies of power and knowledge on their heads. At the heart of this compelling account of the arrival of forestry science in Mexico and its subsequent transformation into community forestry, Mathews is exploring the conceit that perhaps it is *ignorance*, rather than knowledge, that is the most important feature in how bureaucracies work and how authoritative discourses come to travel.

Based on careful oral histories, archival research, and accompanying officials and locals as they move through Oaxaca's forests, Mathews shows how various communities are induced to "institute nature" for their own motives. The text proceeds in nine chapters, though it can be more usefully thought of as having three sections. In the first section, Mathews outlines his principal argument—that collusion and complicity between experts and their publics is crucial to how state authority becomes effective. Mathews contends that moments of confusion, dissimulation, and official reversals have marked the construction of nature/culture binaries within official Mexican forestry discourse and practice, and that would-be subjects of rule have actively undermined, remade, or evaded these binaries. Mathews lays out the theoretical foundations of his work, which includes nods to science studies scholars Sheila Jasanoff, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour, and charts a fresh approach to James Scott's (and by extension Foucault's) framing of state power as *vision*. Mathews insists that state's ability to see is itself the result of socially-situated dramas,

encounters between officials, communities, and ecosystems that are messy and indeterminate. These encounters have to be produced as seemingly transparent ligatures of power/knowledge after the fact. Between forest communities and the official reports that pin them as “known” is a rich terrain of trial-and-error, miscommunication, and willful ignorance that Mathews argues is the halting and fallible site for the construction of state power and popular accession to rule.

Mathews next explores the environmental and political history of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, where he tracks the arrival of forestry practice and knowledge in the early twentieth century. Writing from interviews and archives, Mathews convincingly portrays Oaxacan oak and pine forests as complex environments that had been shaped by indigenous economies, war, and the politics of patronage through the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, forestry science arrived in the region with an explicitly modernist orientation toward rationally managing Mexico’s natural resources and alleviating “rural ignorance” (p. 41). On the heels of the revolution, forestry science and bureaucracy took aim at the *ejido* system and swidden agriculture. Arbor Day celebrations were spectacles which wedded environmental values with citizenship ideals. As readers learn in Mathews’ thorough history, however, the institution of forestry did not unfurl evenly over the Oaxacan landscape: “the state was very good at communicating what it wanted people to do even as it was very rarely able to make them actually obey regulations” (p. 102). From 1920 through the late 1950s, indigenous Oaxaqueños learned the script of forestry regulations and began to adjust their practices to fit with the emerging regime of power/knowledge. While firewood harvesters and charcoal producers learned approved techniques to continue exploiting the forest, they also learned how to evade surveillance and to influence the exercise of rule. In the latter half of the 20th century, the focus of forestry in Sierra Juarez shifted toward large-scale industrial logging. Though state- and corporate-sponsored ideologies of environmental management circulated widely in the region, Mathews contends that these were never imposed on indigenous communities. To the contrary, Mathews explains that the rise of community forestry in Oaxaca—where it is a model of rationality, profitability, and local sovereignty—is due to “creative reworking(s) of official discourse and history . . . into an environmental history that justifies community ownership of the forest” (p. 140).

So how did this work? In the third section—by far the most ethnographically rich and useful to scholars interested in the methodological challenges of studying bureaucracies—Mathews details how documents and official encounters provide the theatre for effective power. In the final chapters, we learn how local forestry officials are under pressure to report only certain kinds of knowledge to Mexico City; how indigenous participation in forestry bureaucracy gets enmeshed in the community *cargo* system; and how paperworkers and loggers “skillfully translate foresters’ theories into local practice” (p. 229). The community’s success in laying claim to forestry resources emerges as a result of local foresters’ skillful participation in the dramas of public knowledge and authority. To a certain extent, the *comuneros* of Sierra Juarez learn to become petty bureaucrats by shuffling papers and mastering the art of dissimulation, but as Mathews reminds us “public assent to forestry was not produced by the imposition of a state project . . . but by the ability of a well-organized and powerful community to collaborate in making knowledge that would inhabit national timber production statistics and official reports” (p. 232).

*Instituting Nature* may prove challenging to undergraduates, but the weaving of detailed ethnographic description into sophisticated arguments can serve as a model for advanced seminars in science studies and the anthropology of the state. By taking a novel approach to state power, Mathews is clearly hoping to reach an audience beyond scholars of Mexico and Latin America, though the book is also replete with careful research and thoughtful passages that will delight regional specialists as well.

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