Christopher R. Boyer has written an empirically rich, conceptually sophisticated, and analytically sharp history of Mexico’s forests from the era of Porfirian development to the neoliberal present. Boyer combed over an extraordinary number of archival documents at local, state, and national levels as well as extensive published primary sources to produce an outstanding narrative tracing a century of dynamic and complex state-community relations in the forests of Michoacán and Chihuahua, his two case studies. Two central arguments run through the book. First, during the twentieth century, Mexico’s forests became political landscapes in which communities, state authorities, and private interests vied for access to and control over woodlands. Politicization occurred either when local conflicts provoked government intervention or when forest technocrats, generally from Mexico City, enacted unwanted regulations or changed existing ones, resulting in confusion and uncertainty over access and use. Second, politicization, according to Boyer, represented “one of the greatest threats to [forests’] ecological integrity” (pp. 10-11). Corrupt technocrats often in cahoots with developers, social dispute, and ever-changing policies and regulations brought about much ecological degradation and determined the fate of forests more than market forces or population pressures (p. 4).

Boyer excels at grounding these arguments in the ebbs and flows of twentieth-century Mexico. The book is divided into two parts. Part I “The Making of Revolutionary Forestry,” tracks the evolution of forest conservation amid the Porfirian development paradigm at the turn of the century, culminating in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the radical experiment in state-directed community forestry under Lázaro Cárdenas during the 1930s. In this section, Boyer weaves together international scientific trends, national political and economic forces, and local land and resource disputes in the Purépecha communities of forested Michoacán and the Rarámuri communities of highland Chihuahua to paint the contours of early Mexican forestry. Indigenous
communities were increasingly drawn into a world of timber interests and bureaucratic codes, regulations, and procedures. Postrevolutionary leadership aimed to modernize peasant production and bring rural people into the state apparatus, and forestry was no exception. A class of forestry experts organized village forest cooperatives in many parts of Mexico, but foresters’ capacity to nurture and enforce community forestry and native communities’ ability to participate in it varied across space, a point Boyer makes clear through his comparisons of Michoacán and Chihuahua. Just when rural people began to understand how to navigate within the emerging forest bureaucracy to promote community production, the state turned its back on them, embracing, instead, the industrialized forestry of ISI economics and implementing bans across wide swaths of woodlands at great cost to ecosystems.

This transition is Boyer’s segue into Part II “The Development Imperative,” which scrutinizes the PRI’s multiple development projects in Mexico’s forests and constitutes an important contribution to a growing body of work on the nature of PRI rule across diverse landscapes. Mid-century developmentalists often held intentions of uplifting native communities, but they also created irreparable rifts inside communities that undermined their projects and, more often than not, allowed outsiders to control resources and impose exploitative labor relations in sawmills. Nonetheless, Boyer locates the origins of the much-celebrated contemporary community forestry model in the experiments of the 1930s, the aims of development projects during the 1950s, and the populist-inspired forestry under Luis Echeverría in the early 1970s that imparted onto campesinos the skills necessary to run their own forests profitably. Pressure from rural people and the onset of neoliberalism disposed of state-based development and handed communities control of their own woodlands, but the retreat of government was a double-edged sword that subjected villagers to private lumber interests without public recourse. Boyer thus identifies the problem of Mexico’s forests not in their politicization per se but in the misuse and abuse of political power on the part of state functionaries (pp. 256-7).

Political Landscapes weds two periods of time that most historians of Mexico have preferred to write about separately: the dynamic period of revolution and its aftermath (1910-1940) and the ossification of party rule (1940-2000). It also covers two
regions, drawing apt comparisons that illustrate the larger picture of Mexican forestry. Although non-human nature rarely appears as an actor itself in this narrative starred by state bureaucracies and community leadership, Boyer’s work stands to be a major contribution to the history of Mexico and the environmental history of Latin America.

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