

Bray, D. B. 2020. *Mexico's community forest enterprises: success on the commons and the seeds of a good Anthropocene*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. ISBN 978-0-8165-4112-6; US\$49.95

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In *Mexico's community forest enterprises: success on the commons and the seeds of a good Anthropocene*, Bray provides a detailed analysis of the role Mexico's forest bureaucracy plays in facilitating desirable social-ecological systems. Drawing from three decades of research, Bray argues that "Mexican community forest enterprises are the best evidence globally that local control of forests can result in quite positive consequences", serving to maintain forest biodiversity, store carbon, and reduce rural poverty, while also producing financial profits (p. 4). In Bray's framing, local control of forests does not imply a passive role for the state or a rejection of capitalist markets. On the contrary, drawing from common property and resilience theories, Bray demonstrates that the success of Mexico's commons emerges at the ever-shifting intersections of national policy, markets, and collective action.

In Chapter One, Bray introduces the social-ecological systems of Mexico, lays out his theoretical engagements, and outlines the upcoming chapters. The significance of Mexico's community forest system becomes clear in the first few pages. While Mexico holds some of the most biologically diverse regions on Earth, approximately sixty percent of Mexico's forests are community owned and managed. After deftly dismissing Hardin's classic *Tragedy of the Commons*, Bray argues that common property does not produce an anarchy of resource use; rather, it allows communities to produce norms that reinforce collective action (p. 13). Following this vein, while most commons research has framed local collective action as inherently antagonistic to capitalist relations, Bray argues that this framing cannot adequately account for the empirical reality of Mexico's commons. Throughout the past century, Mexico's national government has implemented policies that create space for territorial governance institutions to form, while capitalist markets have actually incentivized the localized collective action central to the success of Mexico's community forest enterprises.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide historical context, focusing on the development of forest governance institutions in Mexico from the 19th century to 2018. Chapter 2 shows that the turning point for community land tenure came in the decades following the Mexican revolution, a time when land was not only redistributed, but clear rules were established to facilitate multiple institutional levels of forest governance. Bray argues that the forest policies established between 1930 and 1988 created a foundation for the development of resilient community forest enterprises. Following 1988, these enterprises entered a period in which they were firmly established and could begin focusing their efforts on improving business operations.

In Chapter 4, Bray briefly departs from his broad institutional analysis to home-in on two community case studies. These case studies represent the diverse origins of community forest enterprises. The first, San Pedro, is a community in Oaxaca with roots pre-dating the Spanish colonial period. Bray traces the historical process in which, over the course of the 20th century, San Pedro transformed from a "company town" into a "village level collectivist economy" centered around sustainable logging (Garibay Orozco 2008, 195; quoted in Bray 2020, 105). The second, El Balcón, is a community in Guerrero that represents "the other end of a continuum", having formed in response to state policy in 1970 (p. 111). The purpose of these examples is to demonstrate that Mexico's forest policies don't merely create space for communities that are already organized with historical roots in an area, but rather can also incentivize groups of people to form new communities to receive land rights (p. 119).

In Chapter 5, Bray analyzes some difficulties facing Mexico's community forest enterprises, while Chapter 6, written in collaboration with Juan Manuel Torres-Rojo, provides a broad view of the economics of this system. The enterprises often struggle with significant internal and external pressures, from elite capture to corruption and violence, and, in some regions, organized crime. The enterprises, however, have proved remarkably resilient to this turbulence, bolstered by a multilevel governance system that has evolved over decades. It is inextricable from the economic nuances discussed in Chapter 6, in which the authors reinforce the argument that Mexico's forest enterprises emerge at the ever-fluctuating intersection of collective action, public policies, and market incentives.

Chapter 7 reviews the ecological dimensions of Mexico's community forest enterprises, arguing that they often preserve biodiversity more effectively than publicly protected areas. For example, while the state of Quintana Roo lacks any official protection zones, it has a significant number of community forest enterprises that prevent deforestation more effectively than neighboring regions with more conservation areas. Similarly, in Oaxaca, communities partnered to develop a system of coffee agroforestry, honey production, bean cultivation, and *mezcal* cultivation, while also receiving state payments for conserving 56% of the total territory. While these arrangements may not produce the primeval forests of the settler-colonial imagination, they often foster diverse, productive, and regenerative landscapes.

To conclude the book, Chapter 8 summarizes the theoretical contributions while also attaching the significance of Mexico's community forest enterprises to climate change issues and the Anthropocene. While the Anthropocene is often discussed in a negative light, Bray suggests that the particular social-ecological systems of Mexico can help us envision a "good Anthropocene" in which the expansion of forest communities around the world could sustainably connect people with nature (p. 219). Furthermore, while community forestry can slow global warming by keeping carbon-capturing ecosystems intact, the resiliency of these social-ecological systems can also help communities around the world "weather the political, economic, and meteorological storms of the future" (p. 219).

Overall, the power of this book lies in its empirical details, which complicate and will contribute to research specific to Mexico, as well as more general research on topics of the commons, conservation, and social-ecological systems. For me, Bray's most important arguments included:

- 1) Under certain conditions, states can function as "facilitative regimes", producing national template forest policies that provide institutional space for local collective action (p. 224).
- 2) These template policies have allowed communities to not just resist "the capitalist world system", but to channel their energies towards administering community forest enterprises in ways that are both profitable and sustainable (p. 223).
- 3) These enterprises can be the most effective means of simultaneously preserving biological diversity and fostering autonomous community wellbeing.

However, in a book with "Anthropocene" in its title, I had expected to encounter an engagement with discussions and debates surrounding this contested concept. Instead, when Bray briefly mentions the Anthropocene, he takes the concept for granted, uncritically presenting the Anthropocene as the paradigm encompassing Mexico's social-ecological systems. He takes a similarly uncritical approach to the framing of Mexico as a "developing" country that can serve as a model for other parts of the "developing" world. While this may seem like a superficial critique, a more robust engagement with ideas of geological paradigms and development theory could have substantially improved the framework that Bray's empirical arguments were embedded within. For example, instead of framing Mexico as "developing" towards some abstract goal, Bray could have integrated development theory into his historical analyses to highlight the unique ways Mexico and its forest communities have emerged from, perpetuate, resist, and transform global political economies. This discussion would interface well with a more critical approach to the Anthropocene, creating space to understand the positions Mexico's forest communities occupy within the emerging geological epoch, whether that be the "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene", or perhaps another "cene" that fits Mexican foresters' own views of their place in the world (Haraway 2015).

Anticipating these critiques, Bray recognizes that an interdisciplinary endeavor of this scale and ambition will necessarily fail to engage with every theoretical trend it contacts (p. 6). With this in mind, Bray humbly "forged ahead and attempted to cobble together" an understanding of "the largest and most commercially successful common property regime that exists globally" (pp. 6, 18). Far from "cobbled together", what emerged was a sophisticated examination of Mexico's system of forest governance that will prove valuable to graduate students, researchers, and ethnographers whose work converge with the topic. Moreover, within the evidence, between the lines, and through the five-page list of acronyms, Bray implies something less tangible,

but equally important: hope that possible futures exist beyond the cascading social-ecological impoverishment that often seems increasingly imminent.

References

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