

J. Kosek: Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico

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The Hispanic population of northern New Mexico has been established in that area for almost 400 years. Their communities are widely known as models of local irrigation management, mixed cropping in harsh environments, and locally adapted resource use. Yet they have tragically high rates of poverty, drug addiction, and out-migration. This is because of a long and bitter history of racist oppression and theft of resources by the wider, Anglo-dominated society.

Jake Kosek's book presents a detailed analysis of certain environmental management rhetorics and ideologies involved in this sorry record. It is written from a position of strong advocacy. Few except the most bigoted would disagree with the advocacy for the Hispano population, especially after reading Kosek's excellent historical summary.

More problematic is Kosek's placement of blame squarely on environmental protection attempts by the U. S. Forest Service and local environmentalists. This conclusion derives from a particular theoretical perspective that limits attention to rhetoric rather than economics. Kosek draws essentially his entire theory and method from a particular reading of Michel Foucault in which objective reality so underdetermines worldview and ideology that it can usually be ignored; people construct their views on the basis of power and prejudice. Feedback from a world-out-there is slight.

This allows some deep, penetrating, and incisive analyses, grounded in excellent knowledge of literatures and histories. Particularly noteworthy is a stunning essay on Smokey the

Bear, who was eventually (*after* the campaign started!) designated as a New Mexican bear. Smokey is cordially hated by the Hispanos (and many others) because he became a symbol of paternalistic fire-suppression in an area where local small-scale burning is necessary to manage the forest. Also excellent is Kosek's account of attitudes in and toward the Los Alamos weapons laboratory.

Still another valuable contribution is an analysis of the way Hispanos are caught between Anglos and Native Americans. Hispanos want to be seen as the victims of invasion and oppression, which they certainly are, but Native Americans then counter that the Spanish invaded the land too, and the Hispanos are no more indigenous than the whites. In fact, the Hispanos have become what Gary Nabhan calls a "culture of habitat". They are not "indigenous" but are thoroughly involved in their immediate environment. Like Creoles, Garifuna, Maroons, and many other such groups, they occupy an anomalous place in current rhetoric and theory.

The main thrust of the book—the attack on the Forest Service (USFS) and the local environmentalists—is on shakier ground. Kosek's thorough, well-documented history of the USFS focuses heavily on the top-down, man-outside-nature ideology of the system with little attention to the facts of forestry. The USFS faced problems of applying "scientific forestry" developed in German tree plantations to the utterly different climate and forest ecology of New Mexico. Kosek is at his best in demonstrating how the USFS has failed to listen to or engage local people—Hispano or otherwise—in management. This has typically meant not only that the local people were excluded and dispossessed, but also that excellent local knowledge was ignored in favor of ecologically ridiculous plans.

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Unfortunately, since Kosek is committed to a view in which all is rhetoric, he does not go into detail either on Hispano land management or on why USFS policies are poor. No factual evidence is presented on when or why those policies failed, or on when or how they were justified.

The attack on environmentalists notes a long history of racist, or at least racially insensitive, environmentalist rhetoric. Kosek seems to argue (in spite of a few thin disclaimers) that environmentalism is nothing but racist bullying. It is true that John Muir and other heroes of the movement were racist, like virtually all white males of their time, but surely there is more to their message than that. Even more problematic is the claim (never quite stated, but certainly strongly implied) that modern environmentalists are from the same cloth. Yet, it seems clear from Kosek's interview data that environmentalists in the area are less racist than plain misguided and pig-headed. (In fact, in America today, there is an almost perfect correlation between active racism and anti-environmentalism.) Kosek properly skewers insensitive environmentalists who should have known better, but to condemn the entire environmental movement as nothing but racism seems a bit overgeneralizing. Here and elsewhere in the book, Kosek's discussion of ideologies is essentializing—summarizing major debates in his own words, or at best providing minimal and highly selected quotes. An example of the strengths and weaknesses of his argument is found on p. 161; he flays “the Sierra Club” for an anti-immigration resolution. He does not note that this and another similar resolution, and candidates-for-office who supported them, were defeated by 10–1 votes, in spite of the fact that many anti-immigrants briefly joined the Club just to vote for them. Clearly, the modern environmental movement has some biased people; clearly they do not dominate the movement.

Kosek argues that the whole idea of “pure wilderness” has been mixed with notions of racial purity. This, again, may have been true once, but its relevance to today's debates seems problematical at best. More valuable is his thoroughly accurate point that New Mexico has had no “pure wilderness” for over 12,000 years. Environmentalists have indeed been “arrogant” in ignoring local uses and management strategies that actually created the so-called “wilderness”.

The real problem with Kosek's book, however, is not in what he says, but in what he does not say. Anyone familiar with northern New Mexico knows that it is dominated by giant corporate logging, mining, grazing, agribusiness, and land development corporations. They are the ones who have actually gotten the resources that formerly belonged to the Hispanos. To be sure, the USFS and the environmentalists have locked up certain key resources, especially in the forests, but the major problems have been from those

corporate interests. Yet Kosek never mentions these giant corporations, or their whole capitalist-political world, complete with whole dynasties of corrupt local politicians. He does not mention the many cases in which Hispanos and environmentalists have attacked such corporate interests.

These omissions appears to be theory-driven. If there is no environmental or economy reality (or at least if it is so underdetermining to belief as to be irrelevant), the actual system of economic exploitation is irrelevant, just as the realities of forest conservation and management are irrelevant. Even the fact that those corporate interests lie behind much of USFS policy rates no mention. For Kosek, USFS' problems come from its beliefs; the economic and political pressures on it are irrelevant. He gives a superb account of Gifford Pinchot's thought, but says not a word about the policies of the Bush administrations.

So a complex problem, in which the real political-economic powers of New Mexico are deeply involved, is reduced to the familiar “jobs vs. spotted owls”. (And the environmentalists were wrong in thinking there were spotted owls there, too.) If rhetorics are essentialized and inevitably biased, there is no way open for government employees or environmentalists to learn better and act reasonably toward local resource-users.

All this stems from a particular reading of Foucault. Foucault adopted from Nietzsche and others a view of knowledge as constructed by the will during competition for power. Foucault's agenda was to attack power in all its forms, and thus he mercilessly analyzed such “power-knowledge”. But doing this requires that one have some sense of a reality that power-knowledge can be tested against. If there is nothing but rhetoric, we are back to Nietzsche and the theory of world as perception constructed by will.

A strong dose of Marxian theory would have been the obvious cure in Kosek's case. Yet, in spite of the fact that some wag has inserted in the index “Marx, Karl, 1–287” (i.e., the entire main text of the book), Marx is not here. (For the record, he is in a footnote on p. 310.) Class, also, is barely mentioned. The realities of production—the means and the relations—are, as noted, absent. Only the most minimal reference is made to the superb work of Devon Peña and others on environmental justice in the area.

Thus a book that started out as a sympathetic critical analysis of the plight of the Hispanic New Mexicans ends squarely in the middle of the right-wing brownlash literature, close to the writings of Richard Pombo and James Watt.

This should be a cautionary note for environmental social scientists. There is a reality out there, however poorly we may know it. It does constrain behavior. Even the best, most solidly grounded, most well-intentioned critique, if

it adopts Nietzschean theory, ends by ignoring the real problems and attacking inept good-doers instead of all too successful evil-doers.

Alas, all these debates over forests have become moot. At the end of the book, Kosek describes the massive forest death that is rapidly wiping out New Mexico's forests. True to form, he quotes many people's ideas on why this is happening, without giving the real explanation. Many

Hispanos blame strictly local causes. Actually, such die-offs are happening all over western North America. They are due to global warming. Hotter, drier weather kills trees outright or allows pine beetles to reach plague proportions. The Hispanos, USFS, and environmentalists will soon be fighting over a vanished resource, while the giant corporations pocket the money and go on about their undescribed business.