From Environmentality to Market-Mentality: External Forces and the Creation of the Market Subject in Oaxacan Community Forest Enterprises

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Agrawal’s theory of “environmentality” provides a means by which to understand a transition to decentralized environmental governance in Kumaon, India, in the late 20th century through the formation of “environmental subjects”. But while Agrawal traced the creation of environmental subjects who served as caretakers and guardians of the district’s natural resources, forests in Mexico had already experienced nearly a century of federally recognized communal tenure, with many communities arguably already possessing the “environmental sensibilities” the Indian government sought to create in Kumaon. Our results from a case study of four Oaxacan community forest enterprises (CFEs) demonstrate how external forces continue to shape “environmental sensibilities” long after the establishment of decentralized environmental governance and the creation of environmental subjects. Through approximately 70 semi-structured interviews, and using the lens of Agrawal’s environmentality, we explore the ongoing transformation of governmentalized localities, regulatory communities, and ultimately environmental subjects. In so doing, we document a shift from environmentality toward “market-mentality” in some Oaxacan communities and investigate the forces that drive it, including historical conditions, migratory trends, market demands, special interest groups, and governmental policies and programming. While the Oaxacan communities in our case study are far from the centralized environmental governance that Agrawal once observed in Kumaon, the observed shift toward market-mentality has important implications for environmental governance and participation, particularly as it’s characterized by a transition away from the less centralized, more intimate forms of governance that Agrawal documented as key to the functioning of decentralized environmental governance in India. Our work theoretically employs and expands upon environmentality, while also contributing to a practical understanding of the forces (internal and external) that shape natural resource governance and its subjects. This understanding – including of the shift away from intimate governance in some Oaxacan communities noted here – may help communities and external actors more transparently and deliberately manage resources, as well as predict and potentially mitigate associated issues that arise.