

# Everyday political practices, democracy and the environment in a native village in Mexico City

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

Environment  
Deforestation  
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In recent years there has been a debate about the extent to which democratization implies protection of the environment. This article offers an exemplary case of this debate, exploring the theoretical links between democracy and environmental protection advanced by Walker (1999): accountability, development and participation. The site of the study is a Mexican native village, one of many incorporated into the metropolis, Mexico City. The city is faced with the challenge to supply an expanding population of some 20 million with housing, clean water and oxygen. The forest in the common property belonging to the original inhabitants is formally protected with logging bans and a rigorous Land Use Plan, yet illegal sales of this communal land to new settlers result in irregular settlements which now contain one quarter of the village's inhabitants. In 1997 local elections were reinstated in Mexico City, after a suspension of nearly 70 years. Although the governing party in the city promoted the protective Land Use Plan, the party's local politicians promised to regularize the zone in exchange for votes from the irregular settlers. These dynamics are explored in the context of everyday political practices in the village. The struggles over material and symbolic resources are analyzed in terms of force fields with multiple actors, making visible the ways in which democratic elections alone cannot prevent the ongoing deforestation caused by irregular settlements.

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## Introduction

The central issue of this article is to test the premise that liberal democracy will yield positive environmental outcomes. In recent years there has been a debate about the possible congruence between democratic governance and protection of the environment, summarized and referenced, for instance, by Sundberg (2003).

I here offer an exemplary case of this debate, focusing on the deforestation caused by irregular settlements in the periphery of Mexico's Federal District. I explore the case of a *pueblo originario* (native village) called San Lorenzo Acopilco, in the Delegation of Cuajimalpa. The village owns communal land, mostly forest; it is illegal to sell this land, which also is regulated as a zone of Ecological Preservation. Yet land is sold, and houses are built without sanctions by government or communal authorities or members of the community. Constitutional elections are held at the local level, but the elected authority does not take steps to stop deforestation. The forest supplies environmental services that are threatened: sequestering of carbon, retention of rainwater, retention of suspended particles that diminish atmospheric pollution, preservation of biodiversity and recreational

activities (Aguilar, 2008: 136). In this article I try to explain why neither formal protection of the forest, communal ownership nor democratic elections actually protect this resource; I examine how everyday political practices articulate with laws and electoral processes to bring about this failure. Liberal democracy always operates within particular economic and socio-cultural contexts; in this study I explore its involvement in the context of a native village.

## Methods and materials

This article is based on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructive and situated, emerging from a "complex process involving social, situational, cultural and institutional factors" (Arce & Long, 1992: 211). I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in San Lorenzo Acopilco during a total of eleven months in the years 2001, 2003, 2005–2007. The methods comprise semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, lifestories and the study of documents from several archives: Agrarian Archives, the Parochial Archive, the Archive of Communal Good, and some private archives in the village. The backbone of my ethnographic fieldwork, however, is participant observation, which entails "the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies" (Bryman, 2004: 291) (Figs. 1–3).

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Fig. 1. Location of San Lorenzo Acopilco, Delegation Cuajimalpa, Mexico City. Elaborated by Jon Tolgensbakk, University of Oslo.

I participated in the preparation and realization of numerous ritual activities, religious as well as family-based, throughout the year, which gave me insight into ways in which various networks were formed. I lived in the village and gained personal experience of issues like water shortage and traffic congestion, adding to the phenomenological knowledge that I shared with the villagers. Living there also provided me with access to some of the village rumor and gossip. The “firsthand involvement in the relevant activities” (Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, & Turner, 1995: 38) of the villagers also gave me access to implicit knowledge that the villagers took for granted and I would not have thought of asking about. My participation in everyday and ceremonial activities made me a well-known figure, and people got used to talking to me. Most of my sources are oral; in order to protect the identity of my informants I have in many cases altered their names or avoided using names altogether.

#### *Democracy and the environment: the debate*

According to Lafferty and Meadowcroft (1996: 2) there is a strong tendency to assume something of a “natural” congruence between democratic decision procedures and sound substantive environmental policy outcomes.

The authors particularly refer to the documentation issued by international organizations, for instance UNDP and UNESCO.

As several researchers have pointed out, however, it is debatable to what extent democracy, however it is defined, necessarily contributes toward the protection of the environment (see for instance Larson, 2006; Sundberg, 2003; Walker, 1999). First of all, it is questionable whether there is any theoretical link between

democracy and the environment. For instance, Sundberg (2003: 716) cites some theoretical and philosophical sources which refute such linkages (Dobson, 1996; Goodin, 1992: 118; Saward, 1993). The main contention of these authors is that democracy concerns procedure, while environmentalism is about outcomes;



Fig. 2. San Lorenzo Acopilco between Federal Road to Toluca and border to State of Mexico. Air-photo from Google, adapted by Jon Tolgensbakk.

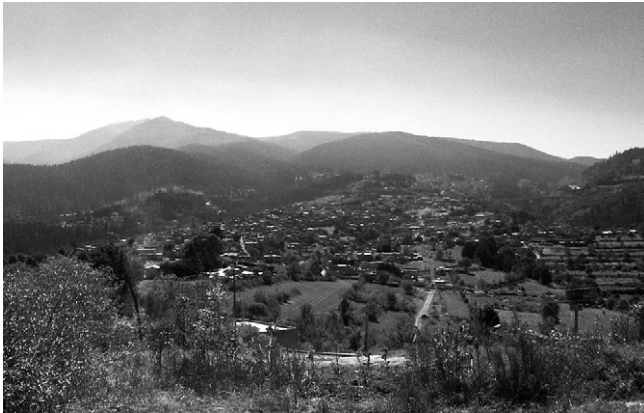


Fig. 3. San Lorenzo Acopilco, the community forest in the background. Photo: Author.

thus it seems odd that one particular procedure should guarantee a specific outcome. Furthermore, Sundberg (2003: 717) suggests that environmentalists privilege results over means and methods. Her focus is on the extent to which projects of environmental protection support or foster democracy. Walker (1999: 263–265) approaches the issue from another perspective, that is, whether democracy promotes environmental protection.

Walker identifies at least three theoretical links between democracy and protection of the environment. First, there is the concept of accountability; when leaders can be held accountable for their actions, citizens are in a better position to prevent them from causing environmental harm. Second, he focuses on the notion of development; political leaders in a democratic society are expected to take more interest in the needs of their constituencies. When rural people have access to adequate economic opportunities, poverty-driven ecocide can be avoided. Third, Walker explores the concept of participation; democratic governments may promote greater respect for local knowledge and skills through participatory conservation approaches. I use the case of Acopilco to test these theoretical links, summarized as accountability, development and participation, by exploring the outcome of democratic elections in Acopilco: how have these three factors fared, and have they contributed toward protection of the environment?

Political geography literature on environmental problems often addresses what appears to be an abstract system far removed from everyday life (Robbins, 2003: 643–644), while conservation policies have tended to overlook the needs of populations that live in the forests (Klooster & Masera, 2000: 259). The true relationship between environmental protection and democracy is an empirical question, and, with Sundberg (2003: 716), I argue that the issue needs geographically situated analyses that are “attentive to social relations and everyday practices”. The present study contributes toward filling this need.

#### *A native village in the megacity*

Mexico City is one of the world's largest megacities, with a population of some 20 million, situated at about 2300 m above sea level, encompassing the Federal District with about 9 million inhabitants distributed among 16 Delegations. The viability of this human conglomeration depends, among other things, on the provision of clean water and air, which constitutes a vast challenge (Tapia Silva & Mora Flores, 2004). At present, contamination levels are high, and the water supply is increasingly insufficient for the population (Castro, 2006). The location of Acopilco within this megacity generates a constant pressure on its forests, as on other forests in the periphery, where houses are built illegally, little by little causing

severe deforestation. The population growth of the city's metropolitan zone from 9.3 million in 1970 to 19.2 million in 2005 has been characterized by uneven development; the Federal District has expelled more than 1 million inhabitants from its center, while the periphery has grown with over 3 million. The remaining growth of over 8 million has taken place in the metropolitan periphery surrounding the Federal District (Aguilar, 2008: 136).

The Mexican government and, consequently, the Constitutional Elections operate at three levels: federal, state and municipal. In the Federal District, however, elections of local authorities were suppressed in the period 1928–1997, allegedly to achieve unity of command after the Revolution (Serrano Salazar, 2001). After 1928 the President appointed a Regent for the Federal District, who again designated Delegates in each Delegation. In 1997 citizens of the Federal District regained the right to elect local authorities parallel to state and municipal levels: one Chief of Government for the Federal District, a Legislative Assembly for the Federal District (ALDF), and one Delegation Chief for each of the 16 Delegations.

Acopilco is situated at 3000 m above sea level and has a population of 21,000 (INEGI, 2005). According to the latest census (INEGI, 2000), only some 100 persons in Acopilco earned a living by cultivating the land or any other primary activity. Only three percent has an income of more than ten times the minimum salary (less than 58 pesos/day in 2010), while the majority earns less than two times the minimum wage (INEGI, 2000). The villagers are divided into two main groups: the natives and the *avecindados* (non-natives). The natives are further sub-divided into those registered with agrarian rights (*comuneros*) and those who are not. There are 2345 *comuneros*; they have the right to participate in the elections of the local agrarian authority, the Commissariat, every three years, and they may also run for office. Today the natives make up over half the population of the village, while the *avecindados* constitute nearly half the population. The latter have come from downtown or neighboring states in search of tranquil, secure and affordable accommodation, clean water and uncontaminated air, and they represent a variety of socio-economic levels. Most of the dwellers in the irregular settlements are *avecindados*. There is a great deal of tension between the two groups.

#### *The liberal state vs. the community*

Indigenous rights and their articulation with liberal institutions and regimes are also involved in this case, even if the natives of Acopilco do not identify themselves as indigenous. The terms ‘indigenous’ and ‘Indian’ have had pejorative connotations in Mexico, where they used to be outright swearwords, and many people still perceive these terms negatively. This might explain why the villagers do not use this expression about themselves, but identify as natives (*nativos*) or original (*originarios*), a usage which I adopt in this article. This transpires even if the forest they own collectively is theirs due to legal recognition of the rights of indigenous communities. From the year 2000 representatives of the native villages in the Federal District began to refer to these as *pueblos originarios* (Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000).

There are at least 150 native villages antedating the colonial period in the Federal District (Mora, Durán, Corona, & Vega, 2004). These villages have been incorporated into the city as part of its expansion. They own collectively more than half the territory of the Federal District (Rivera Olivos, 2003) and large parts of the forests in this area, while they provide some 60 percent of the city's water supply (Aguilar, 2008: 136; Equidad, 2001). These communities uphold a number of social, religious, political and cultural practices which distinguish them from the rest of the city. The villages bear the name of a Catholic saint prefixed to the original Nahuatl name; they feature communitarian organizations, a civic-religious system of cargos (turn-taking offices), a festive calendar, pilgrimages,



defense of their territory and natural resources, a communitarian cemetery, a collective memory and a network of symbolic interchange with other villages (Medina, 2007; Romero Tovar, 2009). Acopilco is among the communities which still own communal land (*bienes comunales*), mostly forest, with several water springs.

Before I go on to explain the property regime which today governs the communal land of this *pueblo originario*, allow me to situate the former in its historical context. The liberal regimes in Mexico from 1856 onwards abolished the right of indigenous communities to own land (Percheron, 2009: 126). The Constitution of 1917, which emerged from the Mexican Revolution, restored this right to the communities (Gobierno Provisional de la República Mexicana, 1917) with a provision in Article 27 prohibiting the sales of communal lands. From early colonial times, the oldest document dating from 1534, the community of Acopilco had formal claim to some 1600 ha, out of which 1400 ha were forest. After the Revolution, the community struggled for decades to have its property rights legally restored. This finally occurred in 1992 in the form of a Presidential Resolution, which spectacularly arrived by helicopter, delivered personally by the then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The natives of Acopilco, nevertheless, had always perceived the forest as belonging to them throughout all the nebulous property regimes.

Little is known about the ways in which the *comuneros* of Acopilco governed their common property before the Revolution, though some traits have been described (Hagene, 2007). The situation, however, is now totally different, primarily as a result of demographic pressure combined with prohibition of productive use of the forest. What, then, is the legal framework that the liberal regime created in order to impose formal social control over Acopilco's common property? There are two forms of common property in Mexico: *bienes comunales* and *ejidos*. According to the 1992 amendments to Article 27 of the Constitution, *ejido* land, but not *bienes comunales*, can now be sold under certain circumstances (Procuraduría Agraria, 1995: 42–67). Acopilco's common property is *bienes comunales*, regulated by the Agrarian Law. Transgressions should be brought before the Agrarian Court by the Commissariat, which does not possess an autonomous authority in these matters.

The liberal authorities have passed a series of laws affecting the relationship between this community and its forest, where many natives made a living producing charcoal, beams, boards, roofing, firewood and the like. The federal authorities elaborated a forestry law in 1926, and subsequent laws during the 1940s imposed logging bans on many forests, although concessions were granted to large firms (Klooster, 2003: 104; Pezzoli, 1998: 222). In Acopilco this law was firmly enforced, causing many families in the community to leave; one informant remembers that his family left the village and went to live in downtown Tacubaya around 1935 because of such prohibitions. In 1997, after the inhabitants of the Federal District had regained the right to elect their own authorities, a Land Use Plan was elaborated (SEDUVI, 1997), categorizing Acopilco's forest as a zone of Ecological Preservation. In 2000 the Legislative Assembly of the Federal District passed an Environmental Law, which made environmental transgressions civil offenses.

These laws and regulations were probably passed according to normal liberal procedures, according to which the common citizen could be said to have had a say by means of democratic elections; Walker's suggestion about the accountability of elected authorities might be a case in point here. Many of the forests concerned, however, were owned by communities like Acopilco, and none of them was consulted; Walker's theoretical link of participation and even development did not apply. The agrarian community of Acopilco had no more influence over its forests than had other citizens of the federation or the Federal District. The community thus faced a paradoxical situation; it was formally and legally the owner of a large forest from which it was not allowed to extract any income.

Even if all *comuneros* should not be assumed to be “norm-free maximizers of immediate gains” (Ostrom, 1999), it is not surprising that some of them have taken the opportunity to sell land.

In 2000 the Commissariat carried out a census of the irregular settlements, registering some 200 illegal sellers (Interview, previous Commissioner, 2003). Till now these illegal sales have not been brought to trial in the Agrarian Court. This is the situation concerning the sellers, whereas the transgressions perpetrated by the buyers against the Environmental Law and the Land Use Plan are now, after 2000, civil offenses. As such they are subject to vigilance and prosecution by the normal public institutions of the attorney-general, the police and the civil courts. The authorities have won about 100 administrative cases against irregular constructions, but the punishment has been limited to gluing posters reading “*Clausurado*” (closed) onto the houses; no demolitions, evictions or relocations have taken place. Most houses in the irregular settlements have obtained public services of water and electricity, but not sewers and garbage collection. What could be termed formal social control thus does not appear to have much effect. The autocratically appointed authorities before 1997 efficiently prevented productive use of the forest after the logging ban was introduced. The authorities that were elected after 1997, however, allowed the illegal sales and constructions in the community's forest to continue undisturbed. So far this case does not indicate any “natural” congruence between liberal democracy and environmental protection.

#### *Multiple actors in force fields*

In order to disentangle the ways in which everyday community political practices interact with the elected authorities and their institutions, and both of them with the environment, I shall have to explore concrete ways in which power is played out. Much of the literature on political practices and power relations in Mexico designates the *cacique*, or political boss, and the centralized state as the power wielders *par excellence* (see for instance Bartra, 1976; Gledhill, 1994; Lomnitz-Adler, 1992; Paré, 1976; de la Peña, 1986; de Vries, 2002; Wolf, 1966). These analyses certainly have merit, but in this study I need an approach which handles “conflict and difference within and among various groups” (Rocheleau, 2008: 722), that is, both within the village and among the state actors. The actors are not unified as “the state” or “the community”, so the lens of resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990) is also misleading. Therefore, I will argue that much of what occurs around the irregular settlements in Acopilco is better understood as struggles carried out by multiple actors in force fields. Pezzoli (1998: 240–243) appears to think in somewhat similar terms with his reference to “relations of forces” and “overall balance of forces” in his study of another area of irregular settlements in the Federal District: Ajusco.

The concept of force fields has been used in various ways by different authors. Nuijten (2003) uses the term to represent wider fields of power without determining beforehand the main actors, arguing that differing dynamics apply to the diverse fields, which cohere around different resources and struggles:

In a force field certain forms of dominance, contention and resistance may develop.... In this view, the patterning of organising practices is not the result of a common understanding or normative agreement, but the forces at play in the field....(W)e can distinguish different social actors with specific roles, different access to resources and differing rights (Nuijten, 2003: 12).

Her concept borrows from Bourdieu's notion of a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 94–115), but is adapted to the study of everyday political and organizing practices. I find her focus on the search for the power wielders very useful when analyzing activities bearing on

the irregular settlements in the village. In my material I encounter struggles in which various types of local actors and state representatives group and regroup in disparate and fluid ways: sometimes as allies, at other times as adversaries. The roles of political parties and politicians, electoral campaigns and elections become visible as they intersect with the issue of irregular settlements.

The force field approach underlines the ways in which power is a process, constantly produced in interaction. Power is an aspect of non-egalitarian relationships everywhere, rather than something which pertains to institutions or statuses, and as such it is not something which can be seized or acquired (Foucault, 1990: 94). Wolf (1990: 586), furthermore, points to power as control of the settings where people interact, for instance the ability “to structure the possible field of action of others”.

Understanding power as process and analyzing power struggles in terms of force fields make it possible to explore struggles in depth: do they reflect the will of political bosses and the state, or are they the ad hoc consequences of the abilities, resources and luck of the various actors engaged in the force field? My concern here is not the nature of the state; it is, however, necessary to make a brief comment on this issue, since both the community and the state in my study turn out to be fragmented, encompassing several actors. As Mountz (2004) reports in her study, state actors also represent different, even opposed, interests and aims. The implicit view of the state as a natural, ahistorical given (Blom Hansen & Stepputat, 2001) is thus challenged, allowing competing notions to emerge. Painter (2006) suggests seeing the state as a social relation, whereas Abrams (1988) and Krohn-Hansen and Nustad (2005: 4–14) invoke the veil covering attempts by government institutions to establish political authority and legitimacy. Thus, the state is more an idea than an object, created through a “broad and continuously shifting field of power relationships, everyday practices and formations of meaning” (Krohn-Hansen & Nustad, 2005: 12).

### Everyday political practices

These practices interest us here because they articulate with electoral and other formal politics in the force fields around the irregular settlements in ways which enable the latter. My concern here is the political practices of the villagers. Politics normally concern control of material and symbolic resources. As I could observe in Acopilco, these practices embraced much more than formal political activities (see for instance González de la Fuente, 2007: 3); thus I use the term ‘everyday political practices’. They comprised, among other things, the widespread practice of private appropriation of communal property, of which the illegal sales of housing plots in irregular settlements is a sub-category. I further wish to illuminate the ways in which local political decisions were seldom made in formal meetings. Instead, informal oral information-sharing and decision-making occupied center stage; in other words, what we often term rumor and gossip (Merry, 1997: 51) operated in the outskirts of the force fields under study.

Acopilco is a densely knit community, at least for the natives. Communitarian practices give rise to a series of networks which facilitate the flow of rumor and gossip. Since the *avecindados* do not participate in the religious and agrarian practices from which these networks develop, they are often excluded from the local everyday political practices.

The territory of the original village of this study constituted both symbolic and material resources; the symbolic aspect was embedded in the sensation of belonging to and owning the place, bearing on identity production among the natives. In the past the material aspect comprised cultivation of edibles and productive activity in the forest. Nowadays, material gains from the forest are limited to illegal activities, mainly irregular sales of housing plots.

### Private appropriation of communal property

During my field visits in Acopilco, I gradually became aware that the practice of privately appropriating communal property was quite widespread. This practice directly concerns gaining control of material resources. I was told that this was the case, for instance, with the Civic Center, the two sports grounds in the village, the Tantoco Bar, the Aztec Cabins, some large canvases which were rented out for big events, and a sizeable piece of land. These cases mostly concerned property that somehow had to be administered; the administrator would pocket the income from the property as some sort of a salary.

The Aztec Cabins are the most lucrative in this group. At one point, the cabins were restituted to the community from an external association, after proceedings initiated by the Commissariat in the Agrarian Court. The Commissioner then handed them over to his brother for administration, and he granted land next to the cabins to a support group of 40 people (Interview, two previous Commissioners, 2003). The administrator, however, has pocketed the income from the cabins as if they were his personal property, thus causing the new Commissariat to demand restitution of the cabins to the community again. Neither the offer of a large sum of money from the Commissariat, nor six years of struggle in the Agrarian Court has succeeded in returning the cabins to the community.

### Irregular settlements

The plots where the irregular settlements were constructed were also communal property; it was, however, not the Commissariat that sold them, but some of the *comuneros*, probably those who had usufruct to these parcels. It was difficult to ascertain who the sellers were, whereas the purchasers would be living on the plots; a visit to the settlements would uncover the buyers' identities. Obviously no official documents were produced, but, if the Agrarian Law had been followed, the identity of the person with usufruct could have been documented in minutes from assemblies where usufruct rights to the parcel had been decided. Such a procedure, however, has never taken place in Acopilco. Usufruct has always been granted by the Commissioner. The issue of the identity of the illegal sellers thus constituted a fertile ground for rumor and gossip. Ultimately many people blamed the Commissioners, since they distributed usufruct and had the power to file restitution lawsuits with the Agrarian Court. Evil tongues, involved in the support group around the Aztec Cabins alleged that the Commissioner took his cut from the illegal sellers in exchange for turning a blind eye. Another plausible reason to refrain from legal action against fellow *comuneros* could be the fear of generating social friction and enemies for those who demanded restitution.

These settlements were irregular in two ways: it was illegal to sell the land, since it was part of *bienes comunales* (Procuraduría Agraria, 1995: 42–67), and it was forbidden to fell trees and build houses, since the zone is defined as Ecological Preservation (SEDUVI, 1997). Even so, a considerable number of houses have sprung up in the community's forest. During the five years between the census of 2000 and the counting of 2005, the population of the locality of Cruz Blanca alone had increased by 424 persons, despite the fact that it is situated entirely within the Acopilco zone of Ecological Preservation. Within the limits of Acopilco, 22 irregular settlements with 1243 houses have been registered, corresponding to approximately 5700 persons (Subdirección de Protección al Medio Ambiente, 2006). Out of a total of 21,000 inhabitants, these represented about one quarter of the population, or half the *avecindados*.

One Commissioner had taken steps against the irregular sales and later had a number of uninhabited cabins demolished; this happened after the Environmental Law had been passed, but before the Delegation had been authorized to execute this law. This action

earned the Commissioner continuous death threats from *comuneros* on the phone and in the streets, but the village gossip still accused him of “selling and stealing” (Interview, previous Commissioner, 2003 and 2006). In the force field around the irregular settlements, the following actors have appeared so far: Commissioners, *comuneros* with and without usufruct rights, wanting to sell or having already sold land, and the *avecindados* who live there.

But there are more actors in this force field; different sources in the Delegation express contradictory views on what should be done with these settlements. Some favor regularization of the irregular settlements, which implies a change in the Land Use Plan from zones of Ecological Preservation to Rural Habitational zones. According to one informant, in previous decades the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), the ruling party in the Federal District and the Delegation, encouraged popular groups to settle in the area, promising them support if they met with difficulties. During his electoral campaign, the previous Delegation Chief, who belongs to this party, had promised the inhabitants of the irregular settlement of Cruz Blanca that he would regularize the zone if he was elected (Interview, Delegation officer, 2008). Today's Delegation Chief is from the same party and appears to have taken steps to fulfill the promise of his predecessor. Ironically, the Environmental Law was passed following an initiative by the PRD; many politicians from this party, however, participated in this force field, undermining environmental protection.

Another position is represented by the Delegation Office for Environmental Protection, which defends the Environmental Law. This office is engaged in preventing new houses from being built in protected areas, and hopes to relocate people living in Cruz Blanca to other areas of Acopilco where the land is already designated for housing. The officer in charge points out that the density of houses in Cruz Blanca is low; thus he reckons it will be possible to demolish the houses and reforest the area. He comments, however, “We are not working in coordination, with a single aim, in the Delegation. There is no unified policy here; there are six general directors, so there are six different goals.... Each one works according to his own judgment” (Interview, Sub-director, 2008). He thus inadvertently confirmed the arguments of those scholars who maintain that the state is a social fact, but not an agent with a will and an aim (e.g. Abrams, 1988: 75). When I mentioned this to him, he laughed in agreement. These officers are also among the actors in the force field around the irregular settlements.

The various positions held by different Delegation officers were linked to electoral democracy in subtle ways; the Delegation Chief appointed the general directors of each area, and the number of jobs under each one of these would influence the vote buying, since more jobs meant the possibility to recruit more votes (see Hagene, 2010). The contradiction between the areas of Urbanization and Environmental Protection consequently was not only about principles and ideologies, but about expanding the domain of influence and number of jobs under one's command. Accountability here acquires a *sui generis* signification, bearing on fulfilling promises of distributing jobs to people who had voted you into office, directly or indirectly (see also Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar Elena, & Adler, 2004).

Actually, although there was much gossiping about the illegal sales, neither the deforestation nor the private appropriation of what belonged to all *comuneros* caused the natives to take steps to stop them. Many natives did, however, blame the *avecindados*.

#### Rumor and gossip

Networks of gossip seemed to represent an important forum for formation of opinion and policies among the natives; this was a medium which could influence others without provoking a negative reaction, as Brison (1992: 23) argues. This activity could

be seen as an extension of the various force fields in the community. Besides, as Lomnitz (1995: 35–36) points out, where open discussion is precluded, rumor dominates, and issues concerning Acopilco's community resources were seldom debated in assemblies. Instead, community matters were resolved through gossip and the practical exercise of power and authority.

Gossip occurs wherever there are close-knit social networks (Merry, 1997: 62); this is definitely the case in Acopilco. Gossip can simply be information-sharing (Hannerz, 1967) or be judgmental, containing information joined with criticisms and evaluations (Merry, 1997: 51). Some scholars have emphasized the functions of gossip for the social structure; for instance, Gluckman (1963) elaborated on this aspect. One of the first critics of this approach was Paine (1967), who privileged the perspective of the actor as someone who would use gossip as an intentional instrument. Following Merry (1997: 50), I suggest both approaches are needed to obtain an understanding of this social phenomenon. Rumor and gossip often concern control of symbolic resources, such as prestige and reputation. Furthermore, as anthropologists have long argued, gossip could represent informal social control, but, on the other hand, abundant gossip does not guarantee that it will achieve this control function (Merry, 1997: 47, 69–70). Did gossip fulfill this function regarding the irregular sales in Acopilco?

It was quite common to spread rumors about persons with access to resources, alleging that they had appropriated them and that they were selling communal land. One informant told me in December 2006 about a hearing in the Agrarian Court where she had been present. The hearing concerned the case of the Aztec Cabins, and she said, “(T)he people of the Commissariat, what can they say if they have sold and stolen?” She was among those who had received usufruct of land close to the cabins, and according to her, they had told the lawyer of the Commissariat, “If we have to hand over the cabins, you will also have to give back the communal land you sold”. The female informant then went into details about the dubious qualities of the Commissioner who had filed the lawsuit against them: he was a lazy, starvation stricken man, who did not know how to work, and who had been living very poorly. “But look at him now, after he has been Commissioner for three years; he has a solid house and his construction business, all of it stolen”. She used gossip to detract from the prestige of this Commissioner. Her argument was that the Commissariats did not have sufficient moral qualities to pursue legal processes against others, since allegedly also they had helped themselves to the community's property.

I was puzzled for some time about the gossip about sale of communal land; it did not seem so interesting to talk about, since it was so common and people were not scandalized. Then one man explained to me that other people might be waiting their turn to do the same; rumor and gossip about other people's crookedness and misappropriation might serve as an excuse for the gossipers to follow suit, which in fact might be a main motivation for the gossip. Clearly, gossip did not fulfill its function of informal social control in Acopilco (see Hagene, ms.), but it seemed to represent a way to be an actor in the outskirts of local force fields.

#### Networks

Gossip, information, and policy formation flowed through native networks, which constituted a major channel for political influence. The natives participated widely in communitarian practices in which reciprocity was a basic value (Hernández-Díaz & Juan Martínez, 2007; Medina, 2007; Romero Tovar, 2009), giving rise to various networks. One type of network was generated by communitarian religious practices, while another type was embedded in family practices and celebrations. Since the *avecindados* did not participate in these practices, they were not part of the networks

and were consequently excluded from significant parts of local political practices.

There was, however, one group of networks in which also the *avecindados* could participate, although not to the same extent or in the same ways as the natives. I refer here to networks which spring from the activities of political parties and social programs or the service and control functions managed by state actors at various levels. These are commonly termed clientelist networks and have long been common in Mexico. They are widely covered in literature concerned with Mexican political practices (see for instance Adler Lomnitz, 1988; Braig, 1997; Fox, 1994; González de la Fuente, 2007; Tosoni, 2007; Ward, 1993). There is an extensive exchange of favors at election times, in the form of vote buying and mobilization of voters (see for instance Cornelius, 2004: 48); after the elections favors are repaid in the form of jobs, permits, services and the like (Hagene, 2009, 2010). This system operates on the basis of personal relationships and reciprocity. These networks intersect with the different levels of formal power; in the case of Acopilco the corresponding level would be that of the Delegation Chief, who is elected every three years, and the middle-level officers; these represent continuity, know “everybody”, and know whom to invite or mobilize, and whom to repay. Typically, many *avecindados* are included here.

Clientelist networks may be visualized as networks of pyramids of great flexibility. Depending on the resources under debate and the political context, different force fields form and attract pyramids of actors. This is one of the main ways in which everyday political practices interact with the elections of liberal democracy. Walker's theoretical links of accountability, development and participation presuppose individual actors in liberal democracy; the clientelist pyramids alter the meanings of these links.

#### *Importance of controlling the commissariat*

The Commissariat is elected every three years and is in charge of agrarian issues and relations; it negotiates economic and judicial matters with the authorities and with neighboring communities, and it has access to information and personal relations in ways which generate prestige and probably economic resources. The Commissariat also controls documents and other artifacts, and traditionally the Commissioners have distributed usufruct to communal land. There is, consequently, considerable competition to win a leadership position in the Commissariat elections.

The force field around the Aztec Cabins is a case in point: if a competing slate should win the next Commissariat election, the entire case might be dropped, and the usurper might be able to keep the property. The reigning group in the community thus could serve the interests of friends and blood or fictitious relations, or, of course, the community. No wonder the power groups in the village struggled to put “their man” in this position.

Toward this end a person's reputation would be important; in fact, material and symbolic resources – for instance prestige – could be made interchangeable by maneuvering in the various force fields at the local level and in collusion with wider political networks. There also used to be a link between agrarian and religious *cargos*; before the 1980s it was required that persons entering the Commissariat must have served in the highest religious *cargo* in the community, to which persons were recruited from among those who had served in lower *cargos*. These are manifold and normally circulate every year. The celebrations involve hundreds of persons who help in the organizing and weekly collection of funds from their neighbors. Both agrarian and religious *cargos* provided some prestige and a certain access to funds; participants always seemed to run the risk of being objects of rumors and gossip that undermined any prestige won through their contributions.

Seeing material and symbolic resources as interchangeable also opens a window onto understanding the extensive gossiping: it represents a force field around symbolic resources, comparable to those that form around material ones. Gossip would be spread that *cargo*-holders (for instance, previous Commissioners), had done nothing for the community or that they had embezzled religious or agrarian funds or stolen and sold communal property. I asked whether it would have been a good idea to make the accounts public. This suggestion was met with incredulous looks, and one man said, “*Si ni el gobierno...*” (Not even the government...). As Adler-Lomnitz et al. (2004: 35) suggest, in Mexican political culture accountability is not such a self-evident value. The opacity surrounding funds gave ample opportunity for accusations and counter accusations, but at the same time for embezzling funds.

The ruling slate in the Commissariat usually collaborated with the party in power in the Delegation, for instance engaging in vote buying for its candidate in the Constitutional elections (Hagene, 2009). At least six different power groups in the village manage to launch slates; one party may be supported by several slates, but these links are fluid and shifting. In return for mobilizing large numbers of votes, the group behind the ruling slate would demand a number of positions in the administration of the Delegation. The force fields which formed around the resources and struggles in the village constituted a complex web of power processes. Sometimes they operated at the level of personal interaction; sometimes they involved certain positions and organizations, and they often interacted with political factions in the Delegation and downtown. People's ability to mobilize networks of friendship, and blood and fictitious kinship was vital in order to gain access to any of the spoils, but, in addition, both individuals and groups had to play their cards well. I suggest seeing the various force fields as sites of articulation between different local actors, *caciques* (political bosses) of various kinds, electoral politics and the like.

#### **Links between democracy and the environment**

In the preceding section I have described some of the villagers' everyday political practices, focusing on those which produce the irregular settlements. These practices must now be related more systematically to Walker's (1999) framework.

#### *Accountability*

The first of the possible links between democracy and the environment that Walker identifies is accountability. The force field in operation around the irregular settlements is exceedingly complex; first of all, the problem is not only that certain *comuneros* pocketed the earnings from selling what was unsalable and belonged collectively to all. An even more serious concern is deforestation, and the subsequent decline in water and oxygen production, in sequestering of carbon and retention of suspended particles. This process constitutes a threat to the environment, and thus to everybody in the capital. The first problem concerning accountability we encounter here, therefore, is one of scale and constituency: Accountable to whom? The environmental problem affects the entire population of the Federal District, while the political position directly concerned with the irregular settlements is the Delegation Chief, who is elected only by the population of the Delegation. In addition, the major electoral influence concerning the irregular settlements apparently resides with the citizens of a few electoral sections of Acopilco, namely those who live in these settlements and for whom this particular issue possesses a singular importance. Let us see how.

Since prices were low on illegal plots, *avecindados* could afford to settle there. Once they had built their houses, they sought assistance



from local leaders and politicians in return for electoral support. This was the backdrop against which the Delegation Chief from the PRD was elected in 2003 (Interview, Delegation officer, 2008). The more *avecindados* who settled, the more votes they represented; this constituted a drive toward regularization of the zone of Ecological Preservation. The settlers could also hope that time would help them regularize their homes, just like what had happened in other Delegations (Aguilar, 2008: 142). By 2005, the inhabitants in the irregular settlements represented approximately one quarter of the population of Acopilco. Democratic accountability in this particular case seems to empower the very group which constitutes a threat to the environment.

Many government institutions are also active in this force field, frequently with different interests or aims: there are environmental secretariats, legislative assemblies, courts, different departments in the Delegation, offices providing public services, the police, the attorney-general; there are laws and official regulations, documents, maps and plans involved. The force field also concerns particular bureaucrats, directors and functionaries; some of these take an interest in fighting for the environment, some for urbanization, and some for their own illegal incomes, while others seem to be more oriented toward winning elections and political positions. Accountability in this case empowers the residents of the irregular settlements more than any other group, since they are the ones to whom the issue has the most tangible importance.

In this context, democracy as procedure and elections reduces the villagers to numbers of votes gained by promises of regularization or environmental protection respectively; consequently, it can be argued that electoral politics form part of this force field. The natives themselves are also divided between the group of actual or would-be sellers, and those who are angered to see their territory transformed from forest and a clean natural environment into building sites, uncontrolled sewers that contaminate the rivers, and uncollected garbage. The sense of belonging to and owning their territory, so fundamental in the process of reproducing their communitarian identity, is thus under hard attack. So far there is no sign of massive resistance in the village against this development; their protests take the form of rejection of the *avecindados* as a group and a verbal designation of them as guilty of ruining the once so beautiful village. Another effect seems to be that the ceremonial practices of the communitarian religion have taken on an increased importance as identity markers. Gossip and rumor, apart from serving as an excuse for more *comuneros* to sell, seem to function as a security valve, substituting for collective organization and action.

### Development

The second theoretical link introduced by Walker (1999) concerns development. In Acopilco, a possible bulwark against continued irregular sales might be that the natives generate alternative income from the forest. After the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 (Kalacska, Sánchez-Azofeifa, Rivard, Calvo-Alvarado, & Quesada, 2008; Smith, Mulongoy, Persson, & Sayer, 2005: 323) payment for environmental services surfaced as one possible source of income for the community. One previous Commissioner brought this to my attention; he explained this mechanism as economic compensation for carbon sequestering. His main complaint against this practice was that the payment was negligible; thus it could in no way compete with the income from irregular sales. The latter is pocketed by a few individual *comuneros*, to whom these sales represent large amounts of money; the rest of the community receives nothing. Payment for environmental services, on the other hand, is considerably smaller, but repeatable every year. This income, however, pertains to the community, is handled by the Commissariat, and may be invested in social benefit

for the community, not just for a few individuals. It seems unlikely that this mechanism could deter future illegal sales.

Acopilco's geographical location is another aspect which detracts from development as a way of stopping illegal sales. The village is situated on the fringe of the megacity of Mexico, which provides many willing buyers to the few individual *comuneros* who sell housing sites illegally. Furthermore, proximity to the city provides jobs outside the community to the villagers, and transport of fellow villagers to these jobs constitutes another important source of employment. There are local bus cooperatives which connect the village with the city at different points, and minibuses that take care of the intra-community transportation. Closeness to the city thus provides both opportunities to continue the practice of illegal sales and alternative employment for village natives who otherwise might have higher stakes in regaining their rights to earn a living from the forest. Another, potentially more lucrative, activity would be the ecotourism project which the Delegation has commissioned from a consultancy firm. This project includes a touristic corridor in the protected areas (González Alvarado, 2008), and it contains a provision that the sub-projects shall provide jobs for the villagers; in this case, the project would count as development (Interview, Delegation officer, 2008). But even if development in this form should materialize, it would hardly provide reasons for stopping the illegal sales.

### Community participation

If the ecotourism project were to bring development to the community, it would still be debatable to what extent the term "democratic participation" could be used about this project; until now the villagers have hardly heard about it. This brings us to the third theoretical link concerning the relationship between democracy and the environment identified by Walker (1999): participation. Klooster and Masera (2000: 262, 267) point out that management and protection of the forests function better with community participation than with any other form of management. The communities' share of the forests in Mexico has grown from 18 percent in 1940 to 80 percent today. However, according to Klooster (2003: 99), this is an unintended consequence of the Agrarian Reform; having failed to fulfill the promises to distribute arable land, forests were endowed instead. Common property forests were also given back to indigenous communities, as in the case of Acopilco. The effect of these restitutions, however, appears to have been very different from one community to the next, depending on the extent to which severe logging bans and other regulations were imposed on these forests (Klooster, 2003: 100ff.). Many communities share the fate of Acopilco, with minimal economic benefit from their forests after around 1935; other communities which were not faced with such obstacles succeeded in developing various types of Community Forest Enterprises (CFEs). In 1970 there were 135 of these, while in 2002 their numbers had grown to 2417 (Bray, Antinori, & Torres-Rojo, 2006: 472). To the extent that these enterprises were profitable, it appears that they helped to curb deforestation (Alix-García, de Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2005: 219).

In the case of the CFEs it could be submitted that democratic governments have developed respect for local knowledge and participation, possibly yielding favorable results for the environment. In other cases, like Acopilco, although forests were endowed or restituted to communities, legislation in the field precluded legal productive use of the same forests. Instead of being involved in management of the forest, those in the community who had lived off it were forced to find other employment and leave the village; only relatively recently has it become possible to commute to the city on a daily basis. Another possibility was to continue forest activities illegally. As we have noted, with the expansion of Mexico



City, the sales of irregular housing sites have become the most lucrative illegal activity for a few individuals.

Deforestation caused by irregular settlements is the environmental matter focused on in this article. The issue appears to be explosive, considering the death threats against the Commissioner who took issue with the problem. Apparently the question is a difficult one to solve for the community alone. Ironically, the community's productive use of the forest was curbed far more efficiently than have been the irregular settlements. Before 1997, however, there was no local democracy in the Federal District, and consequently no accountable politician, since the Delegates in those days were simply appointed by their superior, the Regent. Community participation in the handling of the management of the forest did not imply cooperation to handle the irregular settlements; instead, it meant that the authorities turned a blind eye to the problem of illegal sales.

However, since 2006 the Delegation Office of Environmental Protection has taken steps to stop the growth of irregular settlements by creating a group of vigilantes called *Guardias del Bosque*. This body now consists of 18 persons who patrol the forests of the entire Delegation (6473 ha) 24 h a day. The guardians, according to the officer in charge, are recruited from the four native villages in the Delegation, thus constituting some form of participation and development. Their task is above all to stop new houses from being constructed; they detect preparations for construction and inform people that, if they build the house, most likely it will be demolished (Interview, Delegation officer, 2008). On one hand, employing persons from the villages as guards provides jobs; on the other, it may be difficult for the guardians to carry out their functions, since sometimes it demands they denounce their kin, friends and neighbors. The officer in charge nevertheless calculated that the various preventive and reactive actions they have carried out from 2006 on have impeded the construction or amplification of 300 houses in the protected areas of the four original villages in the Delegation (*Subdirección de Protección al Medio Ambiente*, 2008).

What benefits has democracy brought to the environment in Acopilco? There have been some relatively insignificant cases of development and participation, viz. the establishing of the Forest Guards and the plans for a project of ecotourism. These, however, do not appear to be a response to electoral demands and accountability, but rather the achievement of a somewhat enterprising Delegation officer, who actually is a native of Acopilco. It is likely that he came to his position as a repayment for the Commissariat's vote buying in the previous elections, in other words, the workings of clientelism.

### Concluding remarks

The exploration of democratic procedures and institutions in the Federal District in search of their intersection with protection of the forest in Acopilco has revealed one promising element: the reintroduction of local elections in 1997 has produced instruments for the protection of this forest in the form of a Land Use Plan (1997) and an Environmental Law (2000). Deforestation caused by urban expansion into the forests should now be possible to curb. However, politicians from the same party which adopted these environmental regulations are undermining the very same measures. The supreme duty of a candidate apparently is to get elected, and as irregular settlers grow in numbers, so does the number of votes they represent. Candidates therefore promise regularization rather than protection in these constituencies. To the extent that Walker's theoretical link of accountability applies, it turns out to be to the detriment of the environment.

As to the other two theoretical links, development and participation, the measures I have identified are insufficient to protect the

forest from irregular settlements; furthermore they are more the result of clientelist relations than of liberal democracy. On the other hand, the fact that liberal democracy is incapable of solving the problem of irregular settlements is not an argument against democracy, just an indication that this problem needs specific policy measures.

Here, the approach of the force field and the exploration of everyday political practices help to expose the messiness of the issue; the community is not one unit with a single interest and will, which appears to be a subjacent idea among those who argue the blessings of accountability. The irregular settlements give rise to a force field of great magnitude and complexity where a multitude of actors participate with differing, opposing, and sometimes converging interests. I suggest seeing this force field as a site of articulation between various local actors, political bosses, officers and politicians from various entities in the Delegation, civil courts, agrarian authorities and courts, and electoral politics. Added to this are the relevant everyday political practices; we have primarily looked into those in play in the village, but they have their counterparts among the other actors involved in the force field. In view of the messy reality exposed on these pages, it seems clear that the mere procedures of democratic elections do not stand a chance of cutting this Gordian knot; it is not simply an issue of "getting democracy right", difficult as that might be.

I suggest it is through the scrutiny of these actors and interests that one can hope to get a better grasp of how the problem is constituted and, therefore, how it might be solved. The interests of various actors in this force field converged at this point in time, making the problem of the irregular settlements appear seamless and impossible to eradicate. An attempt to disentangle these actors reveals, however, that these interests might be met in other ways than illegal settlements. Some of these solutions might disintegrate the force field by simply removing one or several actors from it. As an experiment, let us look at the three main actors with somehow converging interests. First, the illegal settlers primarily sought an affordable place to live. If this requirement were met elsewhere, there would be no need to settle in illegal areas. Also relocation of those who were already living in these settlements would be important, as some officers in the Delegation argued. The removal of the irregular settlers from this force field would contribute to its disintegration.

Second, the illegal sellers were interested in quick and substantial incomes; since they appropriated land which was not theirs in order to reach this aim, it would be difficult to meet their expectations in suitable ways. It might help if it became possible to generate alternative income from the forest in amounts large enough to make *comuneros* close ranks against those among them who ruined this possibility. However, my query into the workings of rumor and gossip showed that informal social control did not solve this type of controversy in Acopilco, and local political practices, as explored for instance in Hagene (ms.), were not tailored to handle intra-community conflicts.

Third, the interest of the Delegation actors who favored the irregular settlements – the Delegation Chief and the General Director of Urban Development – was directed toward votes and domain expansion. They would also be the ones responsible for solving the housing problem and sanctioning the transgressions committed, if the two first groups of actors were to be removed from the force field. As things were, these Delegation actors reached their aims without much strain, while taking issue with the housing and transgression problems would demand much effort and resources. So, extraordinary events would be needed to make these actors change strategy.

This experiment suggests ways in which the approach of the force field could come up with ideas about how to solve the problem of the irregular settlements which cause deforestation and

environmental degradation in the community forest. Likewise, it indicates that protection of the environment obviously requires something more than the procedures of liberal democracy. As far as this study is concerned, therefore, it seems timely to conclude that there is no such thing as a “natural congruence” between democracy and sound environmental policy outcomes.

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