Illegal Logging and its Dynamics of Violence Within the P'urhépecha Plateau

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Illegal Logging and its Dynamics of Violence Within the P’urhépecha Plateau

Abstract
Mexico currently occupies the fifth place in deforestation worldwide. Within this trade 60,000 hectares of both forest and rainforest are lost on a yearly basis through illegal logging. This situation has been the reality for the people in the P’urhépecha plateau of Michoacán, where, thanks to a series of legal vacuums, organized crime has found in illegal logging an additional trade to drug trafficking. Nevertheless, through the implementation of an autonomous government based on the P’urhépecha uses and customs, the municipality of Cherán is developing novel political and social strategies to control this situation.

Keywords
P’urhépecha, illegal logging, deforestation, drug trafficking, Cherán, violence

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Author Biography
Ana Del Conde is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her work explores the social structures in which indigenous social movements take place, concentrating in the correlation between identity, space and violence. Currently her research is focused in the P’urhépecha plateau, in Michoacan, Mexico

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Mexico currently occupies fifth place in deforestation worldwide\(^1\). Within this trade, 60,000 hectares of both forest and rainforest are lost on a yearly basis through illegal logging, a business that has a greater presence in the states of Morelos, Michoacán, Estado de México, Puebla, and Veracruz. Thanks to this activity, 70 percent of Mexico’s wood market comes from illegal sources. According to a recent report by the World Bank\(^2\), organized crime groups mainly control the money earned through this illicit activity. These groups do not pay taxes and use part of these resources to bribe government employees at all levels. The forested area of Cherán, in the state of Michoacán, has witnessed these activities, while being the object of plundering and devastation throughout the past few decades.

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The exploitation of the wooded areas in the region has long been an important element for local economy, including the changes in forestry policies that occurred throughout the 20th century—more specifically, under the 1990s neoliberal regimes—when an exorbitant use of the local resources boosted clandestine logging. Additionally, the use of the forest for products such as firewood and beams within the indigenous communities makes it difficult to have control over what is known as clandestinaje hormiga³, which is usually executed by the illegal outsourcing of foreigners⁴. This has resulted in a series of legal vacuums, which have allowed the participation of criminal groups that engage in illegal logging as well as drug trafficking.

³ This works similar to a petty-thief, stealing from one same place and at a constant rate.
Cherán: Municipal offices for communal government

Cherán: Local street art

Photo credit: Ana Del Conde 2012
This situation has been Cherán’s reality for the past decade. As a result, the P’urhépecha community has faced a new way of life governed by two oppressive groups: first, La Familia Michoacana and, later, Los Caballeros Templarios. Within this context, the p’urhépecha community of Cherán has lost power and control over its own territory, facing an everyday life of violence and destruction. Through this reality, a relationship of subordination-domain emerged within the municipality. Few people tried to resist this new situation, and the ones that did were repressed through threats, abductions, enforced disappearances, and murders. In this way, the power structures that were formed through this apparatus of oppression worked to generate instability within the community, and through this instability a domination system was established; the violence, the murders, the menaces, and disappearances worked as the framework of repression. Consequently, the community was subjugated both by the presence of organized crime groups within the region and by the absence of security provided by the local government.

These conditions were accepted by the community for some period of time. However, when the loggers began to devastate the region of La Cofradía hill– a local area where one of the main water-springs is– a group of women within the community began to organize and join forces against the devastation of their territory. In that sense, Cherán’s uprising took place when its people could no longer resist its everyday life of oppression and violence. On the 15th of April 2011 the community of Cherán experienced its first insurrection against both illegal logging and the criminal groups, and thus confronted the structures of domain. It was thanks to this reaction that Cherán’s fight became a greater endeavor, which culminated in the establishment of an autonomous government based on a system of uses and customs. Today, this effort works not only towards the recovery of the territory and forest but also in reestablishing the local community identity and tradition.
Mist at the P’urhépecha plateau
Photo credit: Ana Del Conde 2012