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Section VII
Land grabs and agrarian reform
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Land grabbing: New actors in a longstanding process—Synthesis paper

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Land is a complex component of the global food system. There is no one definitive function of *land*; we can stand on it, build on it, grow food on it, extract from it, divide it, and identify with it. Not surprisingly, rising investment in farmland in the wake of the 2007–08 food crisis—popularly referred to as the global "land grab"—has been a contentious issue in the global politics of food and agriculture. There has been no shortage of exchange between scholars, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society on the issue. The preceding papers in this section by Akram-Lodhi, Brent, and Wolford covered, among other things, three distinct issues within the ongoing discussion of global land grabs: dispossession, the agrarian question(s), and access to and control over resources. They also discussed some possible paths forward.

This synthesis will consider how these contributions can address a common question about the global land grab: If land enclosure and land dispossession have been longstanding historical processes, why then has the global land grab become so topical now? This synthesis will be divided into two main sections to consider this question. First, I will reflect on why it is important to ask this question and aim to rationalize the new drive that has been given to the global land grab debate. Second, the distinct ways that the papers by Akram-Lodhi, Brent, and Wolford on this theme can assist in answering the question will be discussed. Third, I will conclude by discussing some issues that are raised within the larger land grab literature and point to several recommendations for further research.

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The global land grab in context

An important theme surrounding the global land grab is the question of what parallels exist between the current global land grab and colonialism. This question invariably leads to further inquiry about the significance of the global land grab as a contemporary topic in food studies. From the ancient Egyptians, to Christopher Columbus, to modern day, history has been marked by enclosures of land. Why then are we discussing the topic again with such vigour? The term "land grabbing" itself is not new; it was coined in 1867 by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* and then re-emerged in 2008 in reference to a seemingly orchestrated spate of land deals in the global south.[1] To address what is different about the contemporary land grab, we need to look at how we conceptualize the division of land at the global scale (also see Friedmann, this issue).

Internationally, land is divided into countries, or nation-states. The divisions that separate the land into countries sometimes run parallel to geophysical features, which create natural borders, and this often has the effect of distinguishing groups of people by cultures, languages, livelihoods, and identities. For example, some portions of the China-India border are divided by the Himalayas; Chile and Argentina are separated by the Andes; and Australia is surrounded by "not land". But for each border defined by a natural geographic feature, there will be an example where land has been divided along seemingly arbitrary lines; roughly eight countries have borders in the middle of the Sahara Desert and Canada and the U.S. are separated by the 49th parallel, which bisects the North American plains. Yet, when looking at the state borders in these regions, the countries fit together like rigid puzzle pieces.

Attempting to explain these "lines in the sand" is where we can begin to question why the current discussion on land grabs is so distinct. Instilling the notion that borders ought to exist where geophysical barriers do not has required a long history of both territorial, and ideological enclosure. Consider the borders on the African continent. By-and-large these borders are the product of a bout of colonial hysteria, that is often referred to as the scramble for Africa, and were formalized at the 1884-85 Berlin Conference (Chamberlain, 2013; Herbst, 1989). Neither the colonialism that divided Africa, nor the notion of a Westphalian state system resonated very deeply with the diverse livelihoods that spanned across the continent at the time. Rather, the entire state system itself is an imposition of an ideology that enclosed on all land across the globe. In light of this, one could argue that the borders reflected on a world map are as much a visualization of geopolitics as they are a chronicle of land grabs. The way that we understand the world and the countries within it draws on a history of what could conceivably be explained as the greatest of all land grabs; it is a challenge to find land anywhere that was not seized at some point.

Considering these points, let us return to the question posed at the beginning of this section: why has the debate on land grabs (re)emerged and even inspired the title of books such

[1] In chapter 15 of *Das Kapital's* English translation, Marx referred to the phenomenon of labourers in the English countryside being driven from their land to make room for agriculture as "land grabbing" (Marx, 1959).

as, for example, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Carmody, 2011). In examining the papers by Akram-Lodhi, Brent, and Wolford on this theme, we can see that the operative word for this discussion, in fact, does not appear to be "land", "grab", or "agrarian reforms"; rather, the operative word in the land grab debate is "new". The global land grab, as we know it, is significant because there are new non-state and private actors who are using land as gateway for territorial and ideological expansion. The discussion below summarizes how each author analyzed the contribution of these new private actors in changing the dynamics of the global relationship with land, and how together they rationalize a discussion on the global land grab as a distinct phenomenon.

What distinguishes the global land grab as a new phenomenon?

All three articles on the theme of land provide a discussion on the new actors that are driving the global rush for land. Akram-Lodhi discusses the global land grab as a type of counter-reform, and argues that the global land grab is a symptom of the corporate food regime. He indicates that global agri-food corporations are using land purchases to increase the global ratio of capital stock to agricultural land. This trend reflects the expansion of private actors, and the land grab can be understood as a form of primitive accumulation by dispossession that is perpetuated by corporations. Akram-Lodhi also emphasized the need to look carefully at claims that try to quantify the extent of the global land grab. Many land deals happen behind closed doors, and as Wolford points out, many land deals exist in name only, but are yet to have materialized. This makes it tremendously difficult to visualize the extent of the global land grab. The rise of private actors investing in land creates abstraction in the scale of phenomenon. Thus, many agree that there is no absolute and reliable index of land grabs.

Wolford compliments Akram-Lodhi's points regarding the counter-reform process of land grabs by arguing that land grabs can be used to disseminate scientific expertise, and as a result, land grabs expand on the homogeneity of global agricultural landscapes. Wolford draws on the new role of scientists in legitimizing a technologically driven mode of food production. She argues that while corporations may be purchasing physical land, science has highlighted the notion of a "yield gap"; therefore, science is an important force in enabling the ideological expansion of industrial agriculture. The factors of production for large-scale agriculture in Mozambique are scarce, and as a result, Wolford explains that this is how investors use technological and scientific versions of agricultural expertise to build local dependence on their modes of production.[2] The dissemination of agricultural expertise ought to be situated within the global land grab dialogue in that it modifies the way that land is used in different territories.

[2] Wolford referred to a specific case study in Mozambique in her workshop presentation, an application of the theoretical material in the paper included in this issue.

Moreover, the spatially expansive nature of the global land grab means that technological modes of production are occupying, and enclosing on, vast areas of land.

Brent stresses that there is a new class of investors who have found interest in land, but some of these have little capacity to use the land for agricultural production. For example, she pointed to Harvard University's interest in land in California, as well as financial institutions and large institutional investors who are purchasing land as an asset for speculation. Her work demonstrates that the land grabbing is not a process that is contained to the global south. Brent raised an important point about land reform when she noted that land grabs are not simply about access to land, but about how people can benefit from its usage. Brent's discussion of the role of non-agricultural institutions in land grabs led some conference participants to raise questions about whether or not the land grab dialogue has been constrained by focusing solely on agriculture. For example, oil pipelines, fracking, and mining are ultimately a part of the same process of land enclosure. Brent points out in her article that land grabs reflect a much larger scale of territorial restructuring than land based investments by other industries. The large territorial expansion that characterizes the global land grab brings with it the expansion of scientific ideology—as was argued by Wolford. When vast tracts of land are purchased by a single entity, they can only be brought into production by that single entity through industrial means of production.

Conclusion

All three authors agree that large-scale land acquisitions are inadequate—if not detrimental—to increase the vibrancy of the global food system. However, there is a counter-narrative to this claim, which suggests that land grabs may create opportunities for positive livelihood developments (Cotula, Vermeulen, Leonard, & Keeley, 2009; Ridell, 2013). The claim that land-based investments could lead to positive livelihood developments suggests that as the legacy of colonialism expanded to encapsulate the globe it left many people in a state of permanent marginalization. When colonizers divided the globe, they only left power in the hands of a select few, and merely introduced many rural people to a system for which their livelihood was mismatched. This has left some small-scale producers without the ability to fully embrace either their traditional livelihoods, or a market economy. This narrative, therefore, would suggest that land based investments could be a key component of development in the global south, and that dispossessing people of their land can be rationalized if it creates opportunities for higher waged labor. This narrative further justifies dispossession in that it disagrees that agro-ecology and smallholder agriculture is sufficient to supply the world with adequate quantities of food (Ridell, 2013). However, authors who have argued that land-based investment could be used to better the livelihoods of marginalized farmers acknowledge that their optimism is contingent on an appropriate system of regulation and governance (Cheru & Calais, 2010). While these points are

arguable, they need to be considered when discussing the global land grab, and this conference session did not engage explicitly with this approach to the debate.

The pace with which the theoretical component of the land grab discussion is continuing has far exceeded the case-based component of the dialogue and we should be cautious of this. Theory can create the dominant prism through which we conceptualize a topic, and this could lead research to view land-based investments solely through a "land grabbing" prism. If the theoretical component of the land grab debate, which argues that land grabs are purely focused on capital accumulation, accelerates too quickly without being built on a strong foundation of case based-research, it could find itself relying on false assumptions and producing inaccurate conclusions about global processes. While Wolford and Brent did provide case based studies, future case studies should explicitly ask what it is that those who are dispossessed of their land would prefer: opportunities for waged labour or access and the right to practice smallholder agriculture. Seldom is this question asked in the research methods of existing literature. Explicitly addressing this question will allow the debate to further consider, or put to rest, the notion that land based investments could represent an opportunity to better some rural livelihoods.

To conclude, we should return to a point that was raised by Akram-Lodhi: there is no reliable database, or systematic way to analyze and quantify the scale of the land grab. A characteristic of the global land grab is that we cannot see how land is being used as a new frontier of ideological expansion because the phenomenon cannot yet be reliably mapped. That being said, and considering that multiple narratives need to be taken into account when discussing the land grab, there is need for more case-based empirical research and large number surveys on what has come to be known as "the land grab".

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