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## Section I

State of the World Food System

*Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape*

# **Governing land and landscapes: Political ecology of enclosures and commons**

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Most of the world's food is still produced by small farmers, many of whom remain organized through customary land tenure. Customary tenure is a general term for specific cultural ways in which farmers embedded in ecological contexts allocate rights and obligations to use land, including cultivation, forest, grazing, and water. These are always unique, but they share the quality of not being centrally based on the kinds of land markets created in so-called advanced economies. An important feature at the present moment is direct appropriation of land and conversion of customary land use into private titles to specific plots of land. These include major deals with national governments in Africa and throughout the world to make huge areas of land (or water necessary to use the land) available to national elites, foreign governments, or large corporations. They also include international aid policies which, in trying to encourage small farmers to participate more directly in world markets, encourage a shift to individual titles. These actions threaten to dissolve the capacity of communities to govern the land as social and ecological conditions change (Tran, Provost, & Ford, 2014).

In response to these dynamics, new politics of resistance and of ways to transform customary tenure into formal law have arisen. As farmers' knowledge and seed sharing networks become more conscious, new institutions and ways of being are emerging (Provost, 2014). National laws integrating customary land tenure are increasingly recognized at the international level (Knox et al., 2012). It is useful, I think, to connect these changes with the history of land *enclosure* and with new theories about governing the *commons*. I will explore this approach in three sections: the return of "land" as a key investment; the very different idea of "landscape" as

the joint creation of nature and culture (which does not easily correspond to either property or national borders); and the new approaches by Ostrom (1990) and others which see “governing the commons” as a way to shift practices and perceptions to move towards culturally and ecologically sound ways for human communities to steward each place in the earth, and the earth as a whole.

## Land

Farmland has come to the centre of conflicts across the world. This is an ancient story of class and conquest, but it is in our lifetime something quite new. Perhaps uniquely in history, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, land for both export crops and domestic food production was at the margins of capital accumulation and state policy. Although large firms captured ever more value through selling machines and chemicals, and through buying crops as raw materials for animal feed and processed foods, land itself and all the risks associated with it was mostly left to farmers.<sup>1</sup> For at least the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, farmers in all regions of the world (outside the Soviet and Chinese spheres) were sometimes subsidized, sometimes neglected, often squeezed by corporations upstream and downstream, and encouraged to migrate to cities and to modernize at the expense of their neighbours—but rarely dispossessed.<sup>2</sup>

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, industrial transformation of the food system squeezed agriculture between corporations selling machines and chemicals and increasingly seeds on one side, and food manufacturers (and eventually supermarkets) buying crops as raw materials on the other. Especially in the context of government supports and bank loans to keep farmers on the land, profits were better captured by manufacturers upstream and downstream of agriculture. Farmland was cheap enough for those who could buy more; and those who sold were not, as today, trying to “cash out” in a hot real estate market, but were finding their way into labour markets and cities.

The shift in land investments accompanies another change in profitable investments: industrial crops called “food” in the “world food crisis” of 2008 (soy, maize, rice and wheat) are now included in financial portfolios to a new degree (Clapp, 2014). The crops anticipated to be

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<sup>1</sup> Except for plantation crops inherited from the colonial era. Even some of those, such as bananas in the Americas, devolved land ownership and the risk that comes with it, to smallholders.

<sup>2</sup> This return of land to the centre of power and accumulation is of course also new. It is worth recalling that structural adjustment of agriculture in the past quarter century specifically undoes all the institutions created in the quarter century before, what Philip McMichael and I have described as the food regime defined by national regulation of agricultural production and trade. The list of “austerity measures” includes convertibility of national currencies, reducing government subsidies to food for consumers and to government credit and infrastructure for farmers, abolishing marketing boards, removing import controls and duties, and turning all possible land and labour towards exports. Each one of these institutions being taken apart in the 1980s and after—first in the global South and now also under pressure from deficit politics in the North—was created or deepened in the food regime begun in 1947. In that regime, national regulation was supported by a series of international rules, including most importantly the exclusion of agriculture from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

grown on land investments promise huge returns to capital investors, whether for food, animal feed, or fuel. The list of inputs which must be purchased by industrial farmers has grown, for instance, to include patented seeds and computerized equipment, but now land itself has become central as an investment. Of course, these speculative investments in land, as in the past, can involve big failures.

Today's land investments can be seen as new enclosures of land long farmed by people in their specific ecological settings. Both the enclosures and responses to them, such as farmer movements and creation of alternative ways of farming, once again link specific places with global movements of money and people.<sup>3</sup> By viewing the cyclical importance of land to capital historically, we can bring into focus the institutions defining property and markets in land, the products that humans create by interacting with the flows of soils, waters and species, and the inter-relationships among all organisms large and small in each place.

## Landscapes

We have to change how we understand agriculture as it becomes more clearly central to “environmental” issues. First, climate stabilization and species protection—the two issues named in Rio in 1992—must be addressed at multiple scales at once, from individual farms and villages to nations and the whole earth. Second, ecology invites us to think about “scales” in new ways. Every carbon atom is released or sequestered in a particular place, and every being inhabits at a single time a particular place, even as those atoms and species are part of wider processes. These culminate ultimately in the atmosphere and biosphere, both cycles intimately connected to flows of water through the hydrosphere.

Understanding the correspondence or divergence between ecological and social-political organization is what I mean by *political ecology*. Ecological praxis makes sense through *landscapes*, a concept linking human institutions to particular places and to the complicated and contradictory relations among places. Landscapes are the joint creation of encultured humans and nature. Like seeds, and in intimate relationship with seeds, humans use land to get what we need for food, clothing, shelter and fuel—and of course all the multiplying needs of civilizations, now in free-fall with late capitalism. The ways that humans use land shapes and is shaped by cultures, in all senses of that word (Davis, 2009; Netting, 1993; 1986; Zimmerer & Bassett, 2003; Robbins, 2004).

How landscapes are shaped is, I think, the principal contest of our time. The recent UN Climate Conference included “climate smart agriculture” with its instant acronym, CSA (FAO, 2014).<sup>4</sup> Beyond claiming that being “smart” about climate means improving industrial methods

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<sup>3</sup> Fantasies of returning to a golden age ignore the cyclical history that brought us to this moment (Friedmann, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the initials CSA also stand for something very different: Community Supported Agriculture. It is possible that the two could be combined, but they must not be confused.

rather than working with natural cycles and flows, the acronym CSA confuses those who are used to these initials referring to Community Supported Agriculture. This is one of a bewildering array of ideas and language appropriated from advocates of socially and ecologically embedded food system, all of which point in one way or another to closing on-farm material cycles. It is part of a corporate move to “green” industrial agriculture by becoming more efficient at using nitrogen and water, slowing the pace of ecosystem degradation, but accepting its inevitability. The discourses and practices could go many ways.

The contested discourses mark divergent trajectories, which are unfolding in ways difficult to untangle in specific instances. A useful rule of thumb, I suggest, is the balance between economy and ecology, between prices and real flows of materials and energy, and between focus on natural systems, rather than naturalized human institutions such as markets.

I mark a turning point in 2008, not only for grain’s embedding in finance and energy speculation, but also for discourse about agricultural sustainability. The simultaneous appearance of the World Bank Development report on agriculture and the International Assessment of Agriculture Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report on knowledge, science and technology launched two distinct yet interwoven discourses about agricultural sustainability, which have evolved with lightning speed. They both emphasized the importance of small-scale farmers for both economy and environmental sustainability, launching a deadly serious discursive game over defining both terms.

For the World Bank, the key is to support farmers to integrate into markets, which by now means supply chains dominated by capitals—and increasingly, for the global South, into monocultures of horticulture, fruits, fish, and of course, classical tropical exports like coffee. The emphasis on economy leads to land titling—as important as “land grabs” in enclosing lands held in various forms of customary tenure (O’Laughlin, Bernstein, Cousins, & Peters, 2013).

The IAASTD report, as many activists and food sovereignty advocates know, grew out of an environmental policy agenda from the IPCC through the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment to considering the role of agriculture in ecosystem management. It wisely included rural livelihoods and food security in its mandate. It implicitly recovers wisdom of growing food as part of living with forests, water cycles, and interaction of living organisms. The implications for land tenure (as well as knowledge, science and technology), were suggested by the former UN Special Rapporteur, Olivier de Schutter, who included it in the Right to Food and the right to a sustainable ecosystem, and who advocated agro-ecology and food sovereignty approaches to farming, food security, and ecosystem management (de Schutter 2010).

Now the game of appropriation of language and adaptation of practices is fully engaged. As quickly as creative initiatives come from below, their language and practices are cherry-picked by ruling institutions to define “climate ready” along with “biofortified” crops, in pursuit of what is now widely called “sustainable” or even “ecological intensification.” From the complementary direction, conservationists who understandably view industrial agriculture as a threat to species preservation support intensification in order to reduce land use destructive to biodiversity.

Of course, from another perspective, nothing is more intensive than permaculture. Ecology is a science and set of practices relying on cycles of material and energy flows rather than maximizing specific, market-oriented outputs and relative to specific market-defined inputs. Markets must be part of any complex system as far as I can see, but they can be either a goal, so that buying and selling are celebrated as they increase in scope and depth, or markets can be instruments to engage with people and places beyond our immediate ken. To define efficiency as a single crop measured either in yield per land unit or cash income per farm is part of a linear system that ignores natural cycles and creates ever more problems; solving each problem as it arises offers yet another profit opportunity, but generates an endless treadmill of new problems.

As farming becomes more deeply part of contested land use, knowledge becomes more clearly contested too. Partly, as the IAASTD concluded, the shift to ecological farming is about collaboration between formal scientists and farmers. A landscape perspective brings into play policy scientists whose mandate to protect forests and waters, for example, require that they work with farmers. From their side, farmers can benefit from the kinds of environmental scientists who discover that collaboration with inhabitants of places they work is their best hope of preserving forests, waters, and, of course, the soils and living things within and around them. In contrast to the extension model of knowledge transfer from experts to farmers (now mostly extinct or captured by input corporations), farmers are experts in knowing the ecosystem in which they work and live, and can collaborate with scientists who are experts in ecosystem analysis. By sharing knowledge and expertise, mutual learning and collaboration happens in both directions between scientists and farmers-as-experts.

Landscapes, of course, require coordinated stewardship. So it is useful to see institutional science as having its own history, for instance, to note that after half a century at least of promoting industrial methods, agronomists may be caught in industrial-chemical-biochemical trajectories through career incentives and penalties. On the other hand, natural resource scientists, wherever they are situated, are often becoming allies of ecological agriculture, along with entomologists, anthropologists, and a few other disciplines so far at the margins of agricultural science.

## Governing like an ecosystem: The map is not the commons

*Enclosures and commons*, like all historical concepts, require specification for each place in our own time. Customary tenure exists in practice everywhere that neighbours work out how to live together in shared landscapes, even in urban neighbourhoods and export zones, where land conflicts can be intense. If enclosures threaten landscape stewardship, as seems to be the case in the current financial and military frenzies of resource grabs,<sup>5</sup> then the task before us is to find

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<sup>5</sup> “Resources” is a word that invites careful use: it is the language through which gifts of nature are imagined to be solely for human use. It usually requires extra thought to imagine using resources responsibly.

ways to institutionalize commons as formal legal systems. Fortunately, this task has begun with the research of Elinor Ostrom (1990), who won the Nobel Prize in Economics, yet whose work is too little known and cited.

What might adaptive, resilient human institutions look like? Just when our species needs it, the outlines of a landscape perspective, including governance, are emerging rapidly (Kozar et al., 2014).

The starting point is twofold, namely,

1. that ecological boundaries rarely correspond to political boundaries, and landscapes are the outcome of both; and
2. that landscape approaches, which integrate human habitation with natural systems, include knowledge systems and practices that cross all the sectors, disciplines, and categories with which we habitually divide our thoughts and institutions.

*Ecologically*, what is needed can be described as farming designed to be a “matrix for nature” (Perfecto et al., 2010). Landscape *mosaics*, in which cultivation is integrated with natural systems, have been part of most farming systems devised by human cultures.<sup>6</sup> For example, environmental historians and anthropologists show how First Nations managed landscapes on a scale and in ways that European eyes have rarely been able to perceive (Cronon, 2003; Pyne, 2001).

But again, it is not a matter of returning to any time before humans so drastically altered populations of all species and all earthly systems to suit the requirements of industrial agriculture and accumulation. Many disciplines now give us the tools to enhance the ability of humans to live well in our habitats, that is, to steward landscapes—including even the urban regions that have now become the dominant human habitat (ICLEI, 2014; IUFN, 2014; Walton, 2012).

Landscape governance, if it succeeds, will have to move towards discovering ecological boundaries. These are different from the present political boundaries, usually created through wars and treaties, and still reshaped by wars of conquest or secession. Ecological boundaries are not clear borders where passports and customs can try to manage movements of people and goods. Instead, they are nested and overlapping, often fractal. Watersheds, for instance, which connect the smallest stream to the largest flows through the hydrosphere and atmosphere, are a model.

How can humans move from where we are, with ever increasing wars, to where we need to be if we are to steward the earth? One model proposed is subsidiarity, in which each decision is made at the smallest possible level, and institutions are designed to cross scales as required.

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<sup>6</sup> James Scott is among those, like Wes Jackson, who see plowing and field crops of grain, as original sin; they are as old as civilization but much less ancient than landscape management by peoples moving between foraging and cultivation --- who are also still with us.

Such a move needs all the knowledge available to humans, including both formal sciences focused on landscapes linked into the biosphere, and the inherited wisdom of all the peoples who have lived in specific places—what Wade Davis (2009) calls the ethnosphere.

## Conclusion

Landscape approaches promise to integrate agriculture with wildlife conservation and climate adaptation and mitigation. Leading from these “environmental” concerns, experiments in landscape governance offer hope to reshape human foodgetting—and with it, human stewardship as part of natural systems. Present enclosure movements, as my colleagues on this panel have suggested in other words, move in the opposite direction. Perhaps the re-emerging language of *commons* and *commoning* helps to name the emergent practices across scales and sectors which appear everywhere in the world, and which could converge into a sustainable future. At present, farmers and their supporters in the global South are leading in proposing ways to formalize customary tenure (Wily 2012, Merlet 2010). Most legal work on commons in the North arises to regulate intellectual property especially in the internet, such as “creative commons” (Benkler 2013, Frischman 2013). These are leads in approaching the urgent task of turning landscapes and the biosphere into instituted commons (Friedmann forthcoming).<sup>7</sup>

Questions arising from this approach include: What types of land tenure exist? Which forms of tenure are most conducive to knowledge-intensive farming in tune with ecosystem dynamics? What rules govern access to common lands—formal and informal—and are they integrated into the legal system for land tenure? What power relations shape existing and possible land use rules? How do struggles over land use manifest, and what languages/discourses do combatants deploy?

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<sup>7</sup> The use of commons in international law, e.g., “common heritage of mankind,” has been a recipe for plunder by state and private powers. This is why it is so important to adopt Ostrom’s institutional approach to commons, which departs from a critique of Harding’s famous “tragedy of the commons” argument.

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