

Chapter 4

Land Acquisition and the Semantic Context of Land within the Normative Construction of “Modern Development”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes how, historically, normative interventions on the idea of “development” at the Bretton Woods Institutions have defined a theoretical bias from which land and land acquisition have been represented. On the one hand, the chapter proposes a framework from which representations of land, land acquisition, and land ownership can be contextualized within scholarly literature on the concept of development. The second part of the chapter carries out an empirical case study on linguistic analysis to highlight how increasing levels of land concentration go hand in hand with normative interventions built at the top of the executive bodies of an international architecture. The chapter reveals that rather than a coincidence, policies and recommendations on large-scale land acquisition have made part of a highly institutionalized and ideologically defined discourse that has evolved semantically within selected periods of the history of these institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Large Scale Land Acquisition (LSLA) has become in recent decades a critical issue in political science and postcolonial analysis. While during the 20th century, most part of the phenomena has being linked with international dynamics of

concentration of wealth and therefore of land as a global medium term venture asset, the normative landscape of LSLA has being rather isolated from the political debate. Such background has carried out the legitimation of practices that led to critical arrangements like increasing deforestation, urban encroachment of forest areas, industrial

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development of livestock farm, water sources contamination and depletion, human Diasporas, food insecurity and food prices speculation among others. In such settings, the goal of the present chapter is to argue that rather than a coincidence, the historical representation of LSLA have made part of a highly institutionalized discourse of modern development, ingrained in customary publications of influential organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. The chapter focuses in the role institutional grey literature has had in historically shaping the way land and territory has being understood by global institutions. It makes use of a theoretical approach to the study of land and development, and an empirical case study on linguistic analysis, to demonstrate how increasing levels of land concentration, go hand with hand with normative interventions built at the top of the executive bodies of an international architecture.

THE ROLE OF LAND WITHIN THE IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT

Land acquisition and land ownership concentration has become in recent decades a topic of increasing research in post-colonial studies. This has being often linked with the fact that the phenomena tends to be seen as an arbitrary consequence of modern processes of urbanization, industrial agricultural expansion, commodification of land, and global asymmetries in access to financial capital. These settings have in turn created a historical shift in the quality, conditions and dimensions of acquisition of land, making it part of a subtle reality lead in the backdrop by private investors that aim to acquire low cost physical assets beyond national frontiers.

While during the recent years, research on land acquisition has been increasingly linked to trends of land concentration in capital scarce territories such as “Africa, Asia or Latin America” (Ronald, 2014: 193; De Shutter, 2011 ab)¹, notorious clues show that land ownership concentration

belongs to a global dynamic that in some capital abundant territories reach similar proportions to that of Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines, known as territorially unequal countries. This in turn reveals that rather than a coincidence, land concentration belongs to an international process of commodification and concentration of property, bounded with numerous phenomena of inequality that expose acute trends within the recent decades. While most part of the industrialized world show little concern over foreign processes of Large Scale Land Acquisition, the importance of the topic has being boosted up in capital scarce nations that often rely on the role of land to renew domestic processes of food and water supply, residential autonomy, and defined cultural interests (Meinzen-Dick, 2014). Indeed with a few exceptions and due to the political events of the 20th century, global land distribution by country remained unequal for most of the industrialized territories with the exclusion of the United States and Russia². This in turn, slowly revealed the importance of land as a customary systemic asset for a process of national “development”, boosting up the depletion of domestic natural resources on most of the industrialized world, and therefore increasing the value of land and natural resources in capital scarce areas of the planet.

From an entirely political perspective, degraded forms of land acquisition have been progressively entitled as processes of land grabbing (Cotula et al., 2009; De Schutter, 2011ab; Via, 2011; Berhe, 2014). This phenomenon reveals global disparities and massive arbitrariness on access to land, signaled by large scale international investments in African, Latin - American, Middle Eastern, West European or Asian territories. This has further aggravated the scale of global land concentration, deepening processes of displacement of populations, and facilitating dominance on access to land of influential, extractive, real state and industrial transnational companies. During the recent years this trend have spread globally, and by today just within the borders of the EU, “the large farms (100

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