

# Land Grabbing and International Political Economy: Towards a Critical Neo-Gramscian Theoretical Model of Land Governance in Latin America

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**Abstract:** The vigorous debate on global land grabbing within Critical Agrarian Studies contrasts with the incipient analyses from International Political Economy (IPE). This divergence has overshadowed the multi-scalar nature of the power relations that shape land governance, and consequently its effects on land grabbing. For this reason, this paper provides a critical theoretical model of land governance based on Robert Cox's historical structures approach to understand the causes of land grabbing in Latin American countries. It is argued that this model renders visible the articulation of local and global processes driving land grabbing because it foregrounds the power relations at multiple scales that shape decisions on land access, use and control, as well as the conflicts inherent to them. This demonstrates that, on the one hand, land governance structures in Latin America play a hegemonic role since they express and develop the global agricultural model that promotes land grabbing. On the other hand, social resistance highlights that land governance simultaneously possesses a potential for change. As a result, knowledge about land grabbing is enhanced through a dialogue between the two fields of study.

**Keywords:** land governance; historical structures; land grabbing; International Political Economy; theoretical model.

## Introduction

The multiple crises of 2008—food, energy, finance, and climate—have placed farmland at the centre of interest of financial institutions, transnational corporations, private investors, NGOs, and states. This has given an unprecedented boost to the process of capturing the control of vast tracts of lands by large-scale capitals known as land grabbing (Borras et al 2012). One of its particular features is that it occurs through diverse investment patterns guided by a range of purposes. Primary among them is the maintenance of food

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and energy security through the production of food and biofuels in other territories and speculation motivated by rising land prices (White et al 2012). Other drivers include the control of forest and mineral products, conservation and the demand for natural resources (Toulmin et al 2011; Borras et al 2012).

Land grabbing rapidly reached a global scale, encompassing not only North-South but also South-South dynamics, due to the active quest for land by new poles of global growth, like the BRICS (Brazil, India, Russia, China and South Africa) (Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013). While the lack of transparency in these transactions makes it difficult to obtain accurate figures (Scoones et al 2013), the magnitude of the phenomenon has been acknowledged by different organisations. For example, the Committee on World Food Security reported the negotiation of 50 to 80 million hectares after 2001 (Toulmin et al 2011), and the World Bank (WB) documented the acquisition of 56.6 million hectares in the 2008-9 period (Deininger et al 2011).

Despite the intensity and global scope of the phenomenon as well as its recognition in international forums, the analysis of land grabbing in International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) is still incipient (Cotula 2012; Leite and Lima 2017). In contrast, Critical Agrarian Studies have become the most fertile field for academic discussion, whose main axes are the causes of the process and its governance. The initial oscillation between the search for the roots of land grabbing in specific local contexts (Vermeulen and Cotula 2010; Lavers 2012; Woodhouse 2012) or global economic processes (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012; Hall 2012; White et al 2012; Fairbairn 2014) has been settled by the recognition of its multi-scalar nature (Smalley and Corbera 2012; Wolford 2013; Lu 2021). In contrast, while the complexity of land governance has been demonstrated, the studies privileged its global (Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013; McKeon 2013) or local (Kenney Lazar 2018; Suhardiman, Bright and Palmano 2021; Cai et al 2020) dimension, with only limited attention to their interactions.

It is worth adding that in challenging the conventional ways of representing and legitimising knowledge in agrarian issues (Edelman and Wolford 2017), the aforementioned literature has assumed the political nature of land grabbing since it involves power relations (Borras et al 2012). However, the local-global division in land governance analyses prevents us from noting how these power relations unfold at multiple scales to shape decisions about access, use and control of land. This impediment has overshadowed not only the effects of land governance on land grabbing but also the opportunities for change that the former creates.

This article aims to approach the study of land grabbing from the neo-Gramscian perspective of IPE. Specifically, it proposes a critical theoretical model on land governance based on Robert Cox's historical structures approach to understand the causes of land grabbing in Latin American countries. These countries are the third-largest destination for land deals after Africa and Asia (Nolte, Chamberlain and Giger 2016), which gives centrality to the processes that define modalities of access, use and control of land. These modalities reflect historical struggles for land access and distribution in the region (Teubal 2009), as well as new dynamics of agrarian change—one of which is land grabbing (Borras

et al 2012) — specific to the current intensification of extractivism (Machado Aráoz 2013). A distinguishing mark of this phase is that states actively promote the inflow of investments into their territories. Its counterpart is the politicisation of natural resources and the emergence of a new cycle of resistance in defence of the commons (Saguier 2012; Saguier and Peinado 2016).

This article argues that the understanding of land governance from the historical structures approach renders visible the articulation of the local and global processes that drive land grabbing. It foregrounds the multi-scale power relations that shape decisions about land access, use and control, as well as the conflicts inherent to them. It thus reveals, on the one hand, that land governance structures in Latin America play a hegemonic role that facilitates land grabbing. On the other hand, the struggles that develop within these power relations highlight the potential for change that governance holds.

Inspired by Cox's (1981) proposal for the global analysis of power relations, this theoretical model helps to further enquire into the causes of land grabbing through a dialogue between Critical Agrarian Studies and IPE. At the same time, it contributes to the emerging field of IPE focused on the study of environmental issues and the logics of power that underlie them (Clapp and Dauvergne 2005; Levy and Egan 2003; Newell and Paterson 2010; Saguier and Ghiotto 2018).

The article begins by reviewing the literature on the global origins of land grabbing to highlight certain processes that suggest the need to analyse land from an IPE perspective. This is followed by a description of the weaknesses found in definitions of the term global governance in IR so as to conceptualise land governance. The third section explains the redefinition of this concept through Cox's historical structures approach. To this end, it emphasises the power relations and actors involved in governance and discusses its hegemonic role and potential for change. Finally, the article characterises the land governance structures in Latin American countries by focusing on their interaction with the global agricultural production model, their condition as extractivist regimes and social resistance.

## Land grabbing and its global roots

The pace and dimensions of land grabbing quickly stimulated a first set of publications from 2008 to 2012 to shed light on the phenomenon and explore its causes (Sauer and Borras 2016), which highlighted the food crisis provoked by rising commodity prices (Borras et al 2012). These initial reflections were followed by new waves of research that discussed the theoretical and methodological assumptions used until then and revealed the complex network of actors, interests and local-global dynamics that underlie the phenomenon (Oliveira, McKay and Liu 2021).

Thus, the literature has contributed to giving prominence to the transformations in international political economy that help understand the origins of land grabbing. In this regard, the analysis of these investments within the current trajectories of capitalism through Marxist categories of primitive accumulation (Marx 2014) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004) became central. Hall (2013) identifies three uses of these

concepts in land grabbing studies. First, these notions are used to conceptualise the land rush as a response to the multiple crises of 2008. In this sense, these operations represent a spatio-temporal fix to restore capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2004). Second, they serve to explain how common lands are subsumed into capitalist relations. Third, they stress the role of extra-economic means of accumulation.

As a result, it has been widely recognised that what differentiates current land grab from its antecedents in colonialism and imperialism is the specific context of multiple crises—not only in food—in which this dynamic of accumulation arises (Sauer and Borras 2016). This is why the demand for land has been described as part of a deepening of the current phase of capitalism (Sassen 2013), through processes of privatisation, enclosure and financialisation (White et al 2012; Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012). Similarly, McMichael (2012) considers land grabbing as a symptom of an accumulation crisis provoked by high costs of production and reproduction and the financialisation of food and land.

These statements are based on the attractiveness of land to transnational corporations due to rising global prices and demand for food and biofuels. This is compounded by the desire of certain states to find more stable methods of food supply than markets because of the export restrictions implemented by grain producers during the food crisis. This takes place in a context where the upsurge of discourses of nature conservation or restoration are encouraging the appropriation of land for environmental purposes (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012).

Additionally, the perception of land as a safe and tangible asset to deposit surplus capital and the expectation of profits from its appreciation has reconfigured land as a financial asset (Clapp and Isakson 2018). The weight of financial actors is another particularity of this dynamic (Sauer and Borras 2016). These actors range from hedge funds, pension funds and private equity groups to transnational agricultural real estate companies whose demand stimulates the increase in land prices (Pitta, Boechar and Mendonça 2017). It is worth noting that the profitability of agriculture encourages investors to also attempt to capture income from land as a means of production (Fairbairn 2014).

These analyses have been complemented by insights from globalisation studies. Margulis, Mc Keon and Borras (2013) emphasise that massive changes in the distribution of power and global production and consumption, facilitated by institutions and practices of neoliberal globalisation, are driving land grabbing. Sassen (2013) adds that this context is also characterised by changes in the interstate system originated in structural reforms of the WB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which allowed land to be inserted into global corporate circuits. Furthermore, Cotula (2012) notes that, besides market forces, public policies play a key role both in investor countries, through the explicit support of land acquisitions, and in recipient countries that stimulate these operations.

The understanding that '[l]and grabbing also signals shifts in world order' (Margulis, Mc Keon and Borras 2013:7) has stimulated a series of valuable studies on the global agrarian transformation brought about by the rise of BRICS and the middle-income countries (MICs). These studies point out that their growing international power is linked to their

transformation into key sites of production, circulation and consumption of agricultural commodities, as well as the impetus of their agribusiness, mining, finance and banking enterprises to control natural resources overseas. These practices respond to imperatives of accumulation within these countries and the interest in challenging the old hubs of global capital, and, in turn, these practices are changing regional and global food systems (McKay, Hall and Liu 2016; Cousins et al 2018; McMichael 2020).

In sum, the relevance of global processes is reflected in the definition of land grabbing. Borras et al (2012) explain that the current process of land control exerted through different mechanisms is distinguished by its causes, linked to accumulation dynamics in response to multiple crises and the need for resources of new hubs of capital. Subsequent research has deepened the comprehension of these dynamics by looking at their development in specific contexts. Such research includes studies that place the extractivist model in Latin America under scrutiny (Costantino 2016; Pietilainen and Otero 2019; Rincón and Fernandez 2018). Meanwhile, Edelman and León (2013) provided a historically grounded analysis of land grabbing in Central America, arguing that it occurs in cycles that intersect specific dynamics of global capital accumulation and local processes of resistance and dispossession. Each new cycle is shaped by the particularities and actors of the previous one. Another line of research investigated the processes that render land investable and depend on the interplay of localised socio-political actions and multi-scalar strategies of accumulation (Goldstein and Yates 2017).

Finally, some IR research is starting to engage in these discussions. Lima and Leite (2016) show that land foreignisation is the result of the fact that actors' confidence in the cooperative arrangements that sustained global agri-food trade was undermined by restrictions on food exports in 2008. This reinforces the primacy of national interests in a context of anarchy. Likewise, the special issue of *Estudos Internacionais* on transnational land acquisitions (Leite and Lima 2017) is of primary importance for advancing the debate on land grabbing in IR and IPE and stimulating new research based on their tools. To this end, the articles explore the multiple political and economic forces and transnational dynamics at play and their effects on the national legislation and international instruments that promoted land transactions instead of limiting them. It is noteworthy that by drawing on the notions of market civilisation and neo-constitutionalism, Aragão and Santos (2017) explain that the latter is a result of the context of neoliberal transformation of governance that institutionalises the commoditisation of nature.

By enlightening on the global dynamics driving land grabbing, the mentioned literature points to the relevance that land has acquired for IPE. From being a factor of production minimised by agribusiness in contrast to the role assigned to capital (Gras and Hernández 2013), as a result of the 2008 crises, land turned into an axis of convergence of multiple interests, ranging from food security, business opportunities linked to food and biofuels, speculation and a variety of green agendas. This exposes the transformation of land into a primary need of capitalism (Sassen 2013), and thus into a space of contestation and competition that defines not only who should control land, but also what its uses will be, how humans should interact with it, and even what land is (Li 2014).

At the same time, land grabbing brings the political character of land to the forefront, as it gives rise to new relations and alliances at different levels of state, society and capital that, although marked by resistance, aim to insert land into the global dynamics of accumulation. In addition to shifting power relations at the national level, this dynamics also transforms land into a pillar for the reconfiguration of global power structures in a context of environmental crisis and rising demand for food. This transformation is reinforced by the creation of new forms of regulation, through the incorporation of land as a sphere of global governance. Land had been kept out of these processes because of state sovereignty claims and geopolitical considerations during the Cold War (Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013).

Additionally, the new power relations made possible by land grabbing are built on a reconfiguration of the meanings of land. Land characteristically has a multidimensional character, as actors assign different values to it. Thus, it is more than part of a state's territory (Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013), as it can also be conceived of as a source of food, housing and work, cultural or religious values, and a reservoir of nature and environmental services. However, it can also be considered a resource for global investment, which depends on a set of institutions, discourses, structures and social relations that assemble land as a commodity (Li 2014; Goldstein and Yates 2017).

## **Towards a conceptualisation of land governance**

Despite the centrality of global governance in discourses of world politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Biermann 2006), it has been vaguely defined and there is no consensus on its meaning (Chhotray and Stroker 2009). Dingwerth and Pattberg (2006) identify two prevailing interpretations in academic literature. One view is that governance has been used as an analytical concept to describe a set of observable phenomena. In this view, its emergence is an attempt to construct comprehensive approaches to analysing post-Cold War global changes (Hewson and Sinclair 1999) that the *mainstream* of IR has failed to account for. These include the involvement of sub-state and non-state actors in rule formation, the emergence of spheres of authority beyond the nation-state, as well as the development of institutions outside the system of binding agreements between states.

The other view is that governance has been interpreted in normative terms, as a political project regarding how societies should address global problems. In this way, governance is less concerned with understanding the world than with improving its functioning (Chhotray and Stroker 2009). Because it is perceived positively, as a solution, it proposes the construction of a global governance architecture to counteract the negative consequences of globalisation (Biermann 2006). It should be noted that this position includes another view of governance, according to which, rather than an alternative, it is a discourse that contributes to the sustainability of capitalist globalisation (Brand 2005).

Notwithstanding the value of this distinction, Overbeek (2004) criticises three persisting features in definitions of governance in IR that are important to characterise land governance. First, there is the normative bias of the definitions, which portrays governance

as a consensual and cooperative process of dispute resolution, excluding the possibility of domination or force. Second, the definitions fall into the trap of pluralism, which implies that actors are taken as the neutral essence of governance while ignoring the broader configuration of power in which they operate. Third, they display ahistoricity of conceptualisations, intensified by the propensity to associate governance with problem-solving and the achievement of the common good, which overlooks the underlying interests. There is also an overconcentration on regulation, whereas its absence is side-lined from governance (Dingwerth and Pattberg 2010).

It is worth noting that global land governance has been the subject of interest for the literature focused on the global origins of land grabbing. Since land governance can be seen as a specific sphere of global governance that is concerned with land, it is not surprising that some of the shortcomings outlined above are involved in definitions of global land governance. In this respect, its normative dimension has been emphasised as being 'the set of norms, rules, institutions and practices' (Margulis 2014: 184), as well as international rules to regulate land grabbing (Borras, Franco and Wang 2012:8). In addition, it is framed as a process that emerged in response to land grabbing and involves actors with competing visions and interests about the instruments to be adopted (Margulis, McKeon and Borras 2013; McKeon 2013). This implies that global land governance is perceived as a way to solve the challenges caused by land grabbing through trends ranging from the facilitation of land investments and the mitigation of their negative effects to their halting (Borras, Franco and Wang 2012).

Because of their focus on the global sphere, these articles have insufficiently studied the development of land governance in states and how it interacts with global dynamics. Palmer, Friciska and Wehrmann (2009:1) characterise land governance as 'the rules, processes and structures through which decisions are made about the use of and control over land.' This definition is the foundation for the construction of a new conceptualisation of land governance as an inherently conflictive process of decision and implementation of decisions on access, use and control of land as a result of power relations.

The understanding of land governance proposed is the outcome of a re-interpretation of this notion from Robert Cox's historical structures approach to avoid the conceptual weaknesses mentioned above. In particular, the emphasis on processes makes it possible to avoid an excessive preoccupation with regulatory aspects without excluding them from the analysis. Moreover, it prevents an atomistic view of governance, isolated from the historical context in which it develops. Therefore, the reformulation of the concept would be incomplete without considering the fundamental influence of power relations between different actors on land decision processes. This, in turn, foregrounds conflict as inherent to governance, rather than something to be solved by it.

This definition, which should be used analytically, does not disregard the historical problem related to land access and distribution in Latin America (Dominguez and Sabatino 2008), but rather incorporates it as a crucial aspect for understanding power relations around land. However, the limitation of governance to dimensions of access, use and control of land seeks to emphasise the idea of control inherent to current land grabbing,

which occurs through mechanisms that include but go beyond land property (Borras et al 2012). The next section discusses the critical model of land governance drawing on Cox's framework.

## Governance from the historical structures approach

A pillar of Cox's thought is that actions take place within a framework that changes over time and must be observed in the realm of the conflicts that arise within it and open the possibility of its transformation. These are the historical structures, consisting of 'a picture of a particular configuration of forces' (Cox 1981:135), which imposes pressures and constraints although it does not determine actions directly or mechanically. Material capabilities, ideas and institutions interact in a historical structure. These forces were applied to three levels of activity: social forces generated by the production process, forms of state and world orders<sup>1</sup> (Cox 1981).

This approach enables us to coherently assemble the multiple aspects of land governance, in particular, the presence of power relations and conflicts, which justifies viewing land governance as a historical structure. Since a central cause of ecological problems in Latin America is the establishment of power relations that allow some actors access to natural resources and exclude others (Alimonda 2011), it is appropriate to assume that land governance is shaped by power relations in the material, discursive and institutional spheres.

Inspired by Cox's (1981) conceptualisation, material power comprises accumulated natural resources, including the availability of agricultural land, the role in agricultural activities, as well as the availability of technologies and financial resources. Discursive power is defined by the meanings and ideas regarding society-nature relations. These ideas include intersubjective thoughts that perpetuate behaviours in the historical structure and the various collective images of different groups (Cox 1981). Finally, institutional power, as a reflection of material and discursive power, refers to participation in land decisions in formal or informal spaces. While the former involves the legal frameworks and state policies that regulate the access and use of land, the latter point to practices outside the state sphere, such as unofficial actions and statements by state actors and decisions both by non-state actors and non-governmental institutions (Harsh 2005).

It should be noted that the material dimension of power does not explain the form taken by the other two, because there is no one-way determinism between these forces, but rather, their relations are reciprocal. Besides, it is interpreted that in the power relations that configure land governance, the state interacts with civil society and capitals interested in the land. This implies that power acts across multiple scales, which defy local/global boundaries. Cox's approach makes it possible to examine these dynamics since, as Newell (2008:519) argues, it is 'transnational in scale, able to explore dynamics *within* and *across* the state, within firms, across "levels" and bridging public/private divides, such as they exist.'

One strength of the historical structures approach is that it emphasises that to understand land governance requires looking at the structural context that gives rise to and shapes it (Payne and Philips 2014). The reason for this is that global governance and the specific regimes that comprise it are shaped by micro-processes of bottom-up bargaining and the macro-structures of production relations and ideology (Levy and Newell 2002). It is, therefore, relevant to interpret land governance in states as constitutive and as a product of the broader economic and political structures that encourage land grabbing, which in turn makes it indispensable to introduce a key category of Cox's perspective: hegemony.

Hegemony denotes an order founded on values and understandings perceived as stable and unquestioned by most actors (Cox 1983). Although it may be underpinned by a structure of dominance, this is insufficient to establish hegemony, because ideological and cultural factors are decisive in ensuring acquiescence to the practices and ideas of the dominant forces (Cox 1992). Thus, hegemony depends on a fit between material power, prevailing ideologies and institutions that administer order with a semblance of universality (Cox 1981).

This notion is essential to the proposed interpretation of land governance since Cox (1983) also defines historical structures as how dominant social forces establish hegemony over subordinate ones. However, hegemony not only emerges and functions within a historical structure but also operates through the expansion of a mode of production and the projection of a set of ideas and institutions at the level of the world order (Bieler and Morton 2004). Therefore, as discussed in the next section, hegemony, and especially its manifestation in the global agricultural production model, is central to understanding the land rush.

It is noteworthy that both levels of hegemony are in reciprocal influence, which justifies considering that land governance structures stem from as well as reproduce global hegemony. To clarify this point, it is necessary to refer to Cox's observations on international institutions. In his view, these institutions have the dual purpose of expressing and developing the universal norms and ideology of hegemony (Cox 1983). The main characteristics of international organisations show their hegemonic role because

- (1) they embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders;
- (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order;
- (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order;
- (4) they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries and
- (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas (Cox 1983: 172).

In a similar vein, land governance in Latin America plays a hegemonic function. This means that land decisions reflect the practices, institutions and ideology of the hegemonic agricultural production model, and at the same time, contribute to their development. Nevertheless, land governance is depicted as universal, without revealing that it responds to specific interests that enable the expansion of dominant forces. Yet, besides its hegemonic role, it must be recognised that land governance can be an active force (Cox 1992), with the potential to affect and modify the order. Precisely, Cox remarks that structures

change over time, since '[w]here a structure is hegemonic, critical theory leads one to look for a counter-structure, even a latent one' (Cox 1981:144). Hence, it is important to understand land governance as a process of struggle to define access, use and control of land.

These tensions manifest as socio-environmental conflicts, which are the focal points of political disputes that question not only environmental impacts but also the power relations that determine appropriation, production, and distribution of natural resources (Merlinsky 2013). As a result, conflicts highlight that land governance is dynamic, susceptible to being challenged by changes in power relations or interactions between state, capital and civil society that enable new forms of governance (Newell 2008).

## **The structure of land governance in Latin American countries**

The historical structures approach makes it evident that to characterise land governance structures in Latin American countries, it is fundamental to simultaneously address two dimensions in interaction. On the one hand, global hegemony, especially its manifestation in the current model of agricultural production, reveals certain practices and ideas that underlie global land grabbing. On the other hand, power relations take shape in states as a result of their condition as extractivist regimes and the resulting social resistances. These dimensions demonstrate that governance not only plays a hegemonic role but has the potential for change as well.

### *Hegemony and the global model of agricultural production*

Cox (1983) states that global hegemony is not merely inter-state, but an order in a world economy with a dominant mode of production that permeates all countries, as well as a complex of international social relations. For this reason, global hegemony is characterised simultaneously as a social, economic and political structure, which expresses itself in norms, institutions and mechanisms of behaviour for states and forces of civil society that, in addition, sustain the dominant mode of production. It follows that hegemony also projects itself onto the current global agricultural production model, which created the conditions that encourage land grabbing.

Agriculture has not been exempted from the growing power of transnational capital in the organisation of production (Bieler and Morton 2004). This is why the global agricultural production model reflects the primacy acquired by corporate interests in the reorganisation of the world food system (Michael 2009, 2012). The foundation of this process was the neoliberal transformation of ideas about agriculture. Based on the belief in market efficiency to regulate economic relations, agriculture ceased to be conceived of as a source of nutrition and livelihood, to be reduced to imperatives of profit maximisation, while food was assimilated to commodities. This has consolidated the vision of agriculture as agribusiness, which has inscribed the activity in mechanisms of capital accumulation and socio-environmental exclusion and exploitation (Ioris 2018).

Moreover, this vision has been reinforced by a discourse that places biotechnology as a central technological form to increase agricultural efficiency and productivity, thus eliminating world hunger (Otero 2013). This has been crucial to highlight the compatibility of new agricultural practices with the general interests of society while concealing the particular interests that underlie the former.

Consequently, these notions have justified establishing an agricultural production model that rests on several pillars: the intensified use of industrial inputs and biotechnologies for large-scale monoculture production, land grabbing, the prioritisation of global consumer needs, an expanded role of financial capital, and new forms of organisation that empower corporations to determine agrarian processes (Gras and Hernández 2013). It should be noted that these pillars are also products of the historical effort of industrial capital to subdue agriculture by employing two strategies that have led to a continuous restructuring of rural production according to opportunities for accumulation: on the one hand, the appropriation of specific sectors of agricultural activity, their industrial transformation and subsequent reincorporation into the former; on the other, the substitution of agricultural products by industrial inputs or non-agricultural raw materials (Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson 2008).

Since biotechnology exacerbates the effects of the Green Revolution<sup>2</sup> (Otero 2013), it precipitates both strategies, increasing the capacity of capital to manipulate nature. For this reason, it has captured the attention of transnational corporations interested in the commercial potential of these innovations (Goodman, Sorj and Wilkinson 2008). As a result, the concentration of decisions about food has been facilitated in an oligopoly of transnational corporations. These businesses lead different links of the production chain, from the supply of inputs—controlled by DowDuPont, ChemChina Bayer and BASF (Clapp 2018) — to commercialisation. In this sphere, the dominance of the “ABCD” — Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus — is being restructured by other companies, such as China National Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Corporation (COFCO) (McMichael 2020).

Furthermore, supported by the World Trade Organisation’s (WTO) global agricultural liberalisation project (Mc Michael 2012), this model has expanded rapidly in developed and mainly developing countries. The strong acceptance of the discourse that associates large-scale industrial agricultural production with efficiency, economic growth and hunger alleviation (Ioris 2018) proves that this model of agricultural production has become hegemonic. Despite growing questioning (Busscher et al 2020), the ideas that encourage the reconfiguration of agricultural structures in food-producing countries according to corporate interests enjoy broad social support. Meanwhile, not only the impacts of this model on health, the environment and food security but also alternative forms of production are disregarded.

The ideas and practices linked to the ways of doing business in agriculture (Gras and Hernandez 2013) outlined above explain the re-signification of land as a commodity in global markets (Sassen 2013) during the multiple crises of 2008. Contributing to this was the narrative that proposed solving the crises through worldwide investments that take

advantage of the potential of lands classified as marginal, empty, and available (White et al 2012). Behind this discourse, whose promoters include the WB (Deininger et al 2011), lies the assumption that small farmers' land is underutilised and low-yielding, which can be reversed with capitalisation. Therefore, not only does this narrative revitalise the idea that the industrialisation of agriculture is necessary for development, but it also endorses the notion that land grabbing is a form of development, as it is associated with productivity gains, employment, investments and currency inflows (Michael 2012).

The rhetoric around the opportunities generated by land investments has found a high level of support from governments, private investors, banks, and multilateral institutions. The main reason for this consensus is that it depoliticises land grabbing (Margulis, Mc Keon and Borras 2013; Aragão and Santos 2017) because the idea of investing in so-called empty lands ignores the presence of livelihood activities and claims over territories, and in particular, it conceals the interests and power asymmetries that drive these operations. This discourse legitimises land grabbing while leaving out of the discussion the centrality of this process for the stabilisation and creation of new power relations.

### *Land governance and extractivism in Latin America*

An assumption of the historical structures approach of utmost relevance to analyse power relations shaping land governance is the recognition that the state/society complex is the basic entity of world order and that the distinction between them is merely analytical because they are inseparable in reality (Cox 1983). In this recognition, Cox follows Gramsci's (1986) idea of an integral state as political society plus civil society. This means that a state is not only the apparatus of government operating in the public sphere but also part of the private sphere of civil society, where hegemony develops. Additionally, in Gramsci's view, the state is not the instrument of one class but an alliance of a variety of class interests propagated in society (Gill and Law 1989).

This interpretation foregrounds the need to examine the historical construction of state forms according to the configuration of social forces on which its power rests. In turn, this perspective implies that the state is a form of social relation through which capitalism and hegemony are expressed (Bieler and Morton 2004). This statement is crucial for understanding land governance because it shows that, contrary to the presumption of declining state power, all states are capitalist in nature and, furthermore, classes wielding power play a key role in enabling capital to overcome barriers to accumulation (Soederberg 2006). Moreover, capital is not simply an autonomous force, but it is represented by classes and class fractions within the state (Bieler and Morton 2004).

As a consequence, the state should be seen as formal structures behind which there is a complex set of relations between dominant and dependent forces (Cox 1972). As land governance is a multi-scalar process, these considerations are also applicable to sub-national states, which have become increasingly important in the international sphere because they possess a certain degree of autonomy and the ability to mobilise resources and exercise influence to achieve their goals (Russel 2010).

The aforementioned considerations reaffirm that to investigate the specific configuration of land governance, two questions must be prioritised: who are the actors interested in deciding about land? What power do they hold to do so? In Latin American countries, to answer these questions, it is essential to bear in mind their condition of extractivist regimes. This category designates the socio-geo-economic formations in which the intensive exploitation of nature and the export of raw materials, controlled by transnational actors, are the main organising patterns of their economic, socio-territorial and power structures (Machado Araóz 2013). This turns not only the nation-state and sub-national governments but also private actors linked to the extraction and exploitation of nature, into key participants in the material, discursive and institutional power relations that configure land governance.

Beyond its specific modalities, extractivism is also a constitutive dimension of the sociometabolism of capital, and therefore, far from being a new phenomenon, it is born from and with capitalism, whose origins are linked to spoliation and plunder (Machado Araóz 2013). Therefore, extractivism has spread in Latin America for 500 years, with its violent incorporation into the global market as a zone of extraction (Alimonda 2011).

This event also initiated the occupation of land by conquerors, the dispossession of native peoples and the creation of large estates, which turned access and distribution of land into a foundational problem of Latin American countries (Dominguez and Sabatino 2008). Furthermore, the struggle for land had a decisive influence on the socio-economic and political processes of the region and is currently being redefined by incorporating a rejection of the agribusiness model to the demand for land and agrarian reform (Teubal 2009). Accordingly, the power relations that shape land governance in Latin America must be studied within the extractivist regime in which they develop and in reciprocal influence with it. This also requires taking into account the historical roots of these relations and their materialisation in current forms of governance. In turn, these elements are in direct interaction with the global hegemonic agricultural production model.

However, the power relations that define land access and control are marked by social resistances and struggles that reveal the potential for change of land governance and, as a result, its capability to influence and even condition land grabbing. The reason can be found in the dialectic inherent to civil society, which, on the one hand, is the terrain where the existing social order is constructed. On the other, it is the space for the emergence of a new order, where cultural change, the competition of ideas to transform the intersubjective meanings of society and the construction of counter-hegemony take place (Cox 2002).

It should be emphasised that resistance and conflicts operate in the three spheres of power relations that define land governance. While in material terms they may result from the transfer or the threat of transfer of effective control over the power and well-being that land provides (Borras and Franco 2012), they also appeal to languages of valuation distanced from dominant discourses (Martinez Alier 2008). In addition, in order to have an impact on institutions, mobilised groups can resort to mechanisms and procedures stipulated in the national constitution or established by the state, as well as direct actions

outside institutions to make their demands visible and place them on the agenda (Bottaro and Sola Alvaréz 2012). The characteristics and outcomes of social resistance play a decisive role in the configurations of land governance and, consequently, in the possibilities for land grabbing.

## Conclusions

Land governance is a central category to understand land grabbing in Latin American countries. Nevertheless, this notion fulfils its potential to analyse reality through its re-interpretation from the thinking of Robert Cox. The historical structures approach has several strengths that make visible and contribute to grasping the complexity inherent to the current global land rush.

To begin with, the Coxian perspective demonstrates the impossibility to study the local and global logics that shape decisions on land access, use and control in isolation, but rather brings to the fore its multi-scalar nature. Thus, it allows us to observe the interactions and interrelations of the processes that drive land grabbing across local, national, transnational, and global spheres. Therefore, it underlines that this is neither a purely external phenomenon that falls on states nor a process that can be attributed exclusively to domestic factors or characteristics of host states.

In this regard, a relevant contribution of the proposed model is the centrality given to power relations and the recognition of their intrinsic character to land decision processes. This perspective helps to shift power from the assumption of land grabbing to the core of the analysis. Accordingly, it makes it possible to trace the origins of these power relations, rescuing the influence of the historical Latin American struggle for land on the phenomenon. By arguing that these relations unfold in the material, discursive and institutional spheres and involve multiple actors, it also avoids falling into single-causal explanations, such as those focused on regulatory aspects, as well as state-centric views, which underestimate the crucial role that society plays in these power relations.

Specifically, Cox's approach brings to light the inherently conflictive nature of power relations that define land governance. This means that decisions on land access and control are not linear but dynamic because they are a terrain of contestation between state, society, and capital. They are, therefore, liable to change according to power relations and the interaction between actors. In short, assuming the presence of conflicts opens up the opportunity to track the possibilities for change that arise from them.

The perspective outlined above has the virtue of capturing the dialectic present in governance, which plays a hegemonic role but, at the same time, has the potential to transform the order. This conceptualisation helps to illuminate the current competing forces shaping land governance structures in Latin America. These confront tendencies towards the deepening of extractivism with the proliferation of social resistance that proposes alternative practices and discourses around land access, use and control. The outcome of this tension is crucial for the possibilities of land grabbing, and with it, the consolidation or emergence of new power relations.

In sum, the reformulation of land governance from Cox's thought provides an opportunity to establish a dialogue between the neo-Gramscian approach of IPE and Critical Agrarian Studies. This not only enriches the fundamental contributions made by the second tradition to the understanding of land grabbing but also places this phenomenon at the centre of EPI's interest in order to bring new perspectives to the study of socio-environmental issues. In this sense, the challenge to the prevailing ways of thinking and knowing and the concern with change and the emergence of alternatives shared by both fields is a space that facilitates the location of convergences.

## Notes

- 1 The term world order designates a historically specific configuration of power (Cox 1992). It thus differs from the emphasis on states implicit in the notion of international relations, which minimises other forms of power interacting at the global level. It should be added that the idea of order does not imply stability but refers to how things normally happen (Cox 1981).
- 2 The Green Revolution comprises the package of hybrid plants, mechanisation, pesticides, agrochemical fertilisers and irrigation exported by the United States to developing countries in the middle of the 20th century (Otero 2013).

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# Apropriação de terra e Economia Política Internacional: Rumo a um modelo teórico Neo-Gramsciano crítico de governança da terra na América Latina

**Resumo:** O debate vigoroso sobre a apropriação global de terras no âmbito dos Estudos Agrários Críticos contrasta com as análises incipientes da Economia Política Internacional (IPE). Esta divergência ofuscou a natureza multiescalar das relações de poder que moldam a governança da terra e, consequentemente, seus efeitos sobre a apropriação de terras. Por esta razão, este artigo fornece um modelo teórico crítico de governança da terra baseado na abordagem das estruturas históricas de Robert Cox para entender as causas da apropriação de terras nos países latino-americanos. Argumenta-se que este modelo torna visível a articulação dos processos locais e globais que impulsionam a apropriação de terras, pois ele evidencia as relações de poder em múltiplas escalas que moldam as decisões sobre acesso, uso e controle da terra, assim como os conflitos inerentes a elas. Isto demonstra que, por um lado, as estruturas de governança da terra na América Latina desempenham um papel hegemônico, pois expressam e desenvolvem o modelo agrícola global que promove a apropriação da terra. Por outro lado, a resistência social destaca que a governança da terra possui, simultaneamente, um potencial de mudança. Como resultado, o conhecimento sobre a apropriação da terra é aprimorado através do diálogo entre os dois campos de estudo.

**Palavras-chave:** governança fundiária; estruturas históricas; apropriação de terras; Economia Política Internacional; modelo teórico.

*Received on 15 August 2020 and approved for publication on 13 April 2021.*



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