

Communities Against Capital? Unravelling the Politics of Resistance to Colombia's Agro-Extractivist project

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Summary

In the past decade, a new project of agrarian capitalism has emerged in the Colombian countryside driven by the expansion of commercial agribusinesses, particularly in palm oil. This process is often referred to as an emergent form of agrarian extractivism or land-grabbing. While for the Colombian government, this agro-extractivist project represents one of the main locomotives driving the economic growth strategy, for peasant, indigenous and afro-Colombian community activists, these rapid changes threaten their ecosystems and ways of life. Indeed, it is clear that the rapid expansion of extractivist agriculture has been contested with a new cycle of resistance from local communities. Yet the emergence and character of this resistance are more diverse and complex than is commonly believed. Taking a comparative case study of two peasant communities in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, this paper explores the divergent class basis, political interventions, strategies and practices conditioning the the political reactions to land-grabbing 'from below'. In one case, the outcome was 'subordinated incorporation' of peasants into the agro-extractivist regime, while in the other the outcome was the formation of a peasant resistance movement. What these cases show is that the common presentation of a homogenous peasant 'way of life' as confronting capitalism can be misleading, and peasant resistance is not the only, or even the most likely political reaction to agro-extractivism. The conclusions of this study are relevant both to our understanding of the political dynamics of land-grabbing as well as discussions related to peasants, class and social movements.

Introduction: the emergence of agro-extractivism in Colombia

In the past decade, a pivotal shift in the world economy has driven a major transformation in land ownership and use in Colombia, which is often referred to as 'agrarian extractivism' or 'land-grabbing'. A number of dynamics are behind these transformations: a crisis of multiple dimensions- finance, food, fuel, energy and climate, the 2003-2012 commodities boom, the growth of China, as well as the mounting power of transnational agribusiness corporations and finance capital as driving forces in the global food economy.

It is clear that the expansion of 'flex crops' is a major force behind these changes emerging in agrarian capitalism in Colombia. New projects mainly consist in such 'flex crops', which includes mostly sugarcane and palm oil, and to a lesser degree corn. These crops are so-named because they have a variety of interchangeable uses (including food, feed, fuel and industrial material). They are valued by investors because they are seen as better able to deal with price volatility in world markets because they do not rely on a single crop. The most important 'flex-crop' in Colombia is oil palm, which expanded almost threefold between 2002 and 2014, from 185,000 to 450,000 hectares. Furthermore, last year the government proposed

an incredible 1 million hectares for the expansion of commercial agriculture, which amounts to 20 percent of agricultural land.

The 'global land grab' is also a major force behind these changes, which refers to a surge in land transactions and land speculation mainly related to large-scale commercial production of agricultural products for export. According to the land matrix, in Colombia there have been land grabs of around 570,000 hectares of land, which amounts to 13 percent of cultivable land in the country. The information from GRAIN and the land matrix suggests that it is foreign investors that have overwhelmingly driven this process, with investments coming from China, the US, Israel and offshore tax havens. In addition, China is currently awaiting a petition for 400,000 hectares in the Orinoquia.

Yet despite the importance of global finance capital and foreign investors, it is nonetheless the case that deals are still being carried out nationally. It is a small group of domestic agrarian, financial, legal and industrial firms that have taken control of large tracts of land for the plantations of sugarcane and palm oil financed by foreign investment. In this sense, it is important to stress that the issue of land-grabbing is better understood using Borras et al's notion of 'control grabbing', which insists on recognizing the relational and political nature of the emergent process, which takes place within the context of socio-political power conflicts. In their formulation, land-grabbing is better conceived as 'grabbing the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control of resources' (2012, 851). Indeed, the process of control grabbing has taken place in Colombia through a series of mechanisms and a complex array of actors.

The impacts of agro-extractivism

This emergent form of agrarian capitalism in Colombia involves the increased deployment of capital in the agricultural production process. In this regard, there are three interrelated dynamics at play:

- 1) The tendency towards the simplification, standardization and mechanization of agriculture as much as possible (Weis, 2010). In turn, this increases the rift between on the one hand the peasant subsector characterized by limited access to land, technologies and capital, and on the other the capitalist subsector reliant on global financial flows, global trade in agricultural commodities, biotechnologies and information technologies. This dynamic has given rise to the critique of agro-extractivism as creating 'un campo sin campesinos' ('land without farmers') in the Colombian countryside.
- 2) The growing metabolic rift between the ecosystem and agricultural production, as flex-crops prevent agro-biodiversity and push beyond nature's limits in the reproduction of soil nutrients and diminish fresh water sources.
- 3) The labour regime associated with palm oil and sugarcane expansion is not only associated with the displacement of peasant farms, but also limited access to work, a living wage and decent working conditions for local workers. Indeed, in contrast to the classic formulation of the agrarian labour question described above whereby 'freed' would go towards the industrial sector, the current process more closely reflects Tania Li's formulation whereby 'their land is needed, but their labour is not' (2011).

The dynamics of agro-extractivism in Colombia

In this paper I emphasize three distinguishing characteristics of the expansion of agro-extractivism in Colombia. The first is the importance of physical violence and corruption, which is accompanied by state intervention in the form of legal frameworks promoting this form of agro-extractive accumulation. As Grajales points out, land-grabbing in Colombia is ‘characterized by a combination of legal and illegal strategies presiding at the distribution of power and resources’ (2015, 542). This is related to the five-decade internal conflict, during which paramilitaries and narco-traffickers used violence and coercion to appropriate lands. The past two decades have seen the displacement of an estimated 6 million people from 10 million hectares of land; moreover, according to one study, two thirds of the displaced persons were small and medium peasant farmers. The clearing of peasant lands from the hands of small and medium farmers in the hands of state forces has been a key driving force behind the current agro-extractive phase, with paramilitary bosses and drugs traffickers (often all working in alliance) working towards a twofold goal of accumulating power and privilege through land acquisition and restructuring these territories to open them up to global circuits of capital accumulation. Countless examples of this process have been documented, often linking US-sponsored counter-insurgency strategies to state and paramilitary violence to the expansion of agro-industrial enterprises (Ballvé, 2012; Grajales, 2015; Thomson, 2011).

Second are the various ways through which the new agro-extractive industries are being implemented (see also Borras Jr, Hall, Scoones, White, & Wolford, 2011). Despite much rhetoric around the notion of ‘land-grabbing’, it is clear that the processes of changing land ownership and use are far more complex, and may involve a number of different mechanisms: 1) The establishment of large agro-extractive enclaves through government-led projects; 2) The conversion of un- or under-used landed estates, often through alliances between landed elites and agri-industrial capital; 3) The expansion of large corporations into new zones of operation, often operating through complex networks of alliances, and 4) The establishment of tenant farming or out-growers arrangements. Under these agreements, large agri-business enterprises establish processing plants, credit schemes and transport and infrastructure facilities, whilst making arrangements with local smallholders to convert their plots from production of traditional foodstuffs to agro-export crops such as palm, cocoa or rubber, known as productive alliances. What this shows is that the details of emergent agro-extractivist projects are more complex than is often portrayed, with new value chains emerging often through the mechanism of family farmers taking up cash crop production. This means that peasants may not only be displaced by agro-extractive projects, but also adversely incorporated.

The third is the strategic role of agro-extractive expansion in the Colombian government’s economic development project, with commercial agriculture representing one of five ‘locomotives’ of economic growth in President Santos’ development plan. The development project provides an importance legitimizing discourse for agro-extraction in three ways: 1) as providing food and energy security, generating green energy and mitigating against climate change; 2) for bringing peace and stability to the countryside in the context of the peace agreement, to be achieved by 3) increasing rural productivity and efficiency. In this sense, the new agrarian regime is justified as a peace-building mechanism, on the grounds that it will provide a replacement for illicit crops, democratization and economic development. Underlying this approach to peace-building is what Bonanno and Wolf describe as the neoliberal notion that the introduction and expansion of market relations- of individuality, private ownership, competition, market discipline and efficiency into the countryside will reduce conflictive relations and bring the most efficient allocation of resources.

We may further note that this use of ‘rural development projects’ as a means to implement market relations and offset or stabilize rural conflict has a long history in Colombia. In the developmental era (1930-1970), against the backdrop growing nationwide peasant mobilization, rural development projects were seen as the most effective means for appeasing the revolutionary fervour amongst peasants and preventing ‘another Cuba’. This was to be achieved through major state intervention in order to break up the backwards (or ‘feudal’) latifundio-minifundio relations in the countryside- thereby increasing the productivity of the countryside- and ‘proletarianizing’ peasants, freeing up rural labour for the nascent industrial sector. While some argued this could only be achieved through major agrarian reform, the eventual outcome was the introduction of ‘green revolution’ technologies for peasants and the conversion of large estates to commercial farms.

In the neoliberal era, the escalating violence was associated with the problems of economic stagnation, and a series of World Bank policy reports recommended that the conflict could be resolved by reducing state intervention and expanding market relations; what they called ‘rapid growth and integration into global markets’ (Collier et al. 2003). Structural adjustment programmes accompanied military aid packages, with policy papers such as the World Bank’s “Colombia: the economic foundations for Peace” pushing for a series of measures to combat rural violence through more efficient production patterns and increased productivity (including the liberalization of trade and tariffs, and privatization of the state institutes that had supported agriculture).

While the current ‘land grab’ clearly takes place within the neoliberal framework, it also contains a number of ‘new’ characteristics distinguishing it from the 1990s, including an array of free trade agreements removing the ‘obstacles’ to foreign investments as well as the introduction of a new legal framework on land seeking clear and secure landownership rights, as well as export processing zones. Santos’ recent enactment in January 2016 of the Zidres law (Zones of Interest for Economic and Social Development in Rural Areas) is another example of a land project granting priority to productivity, efficiency and export-led production in land policy. It removes restrictions on land acquisitions—facilitating land purchases for large corporations— and could lead to the appropriation of land from peasants where it does not meet the criteria of productivity.

The politics of resistance

This scenario has given rise to the argument from activists that the current agrarian regime is generating a new wave of anti-extractivist peasant struggles in Colombia and across Latin America. As Bonanno and Wolfe emphasize, the formation of counter-movements to oppose capitalist development of agriculture has a long history from farmers throughout both the North and the South. Accordingly, activists have commonly presumed that the new agrarian capitalist regime expels peasants from the land and pits ‘communities against capital’ (Petras and Veltmeyer 2014, 133). Rural communities in areas where extractives projects take place are often framed in an uncritical way as engaging in ‘resistance’ or ‘struggles against capital’. Yet this depiction of community struggles fails to capture the diversity and complexity of the ‘political reactions from below’ to land grabbing. Indeed, the evidence from further research would suggest that these rapid changes in rural social relations are in fact characterized by ‘differentiated impacts and variegated political reactions’ (Hall et al. 2015, 468).

Indeed, this methodological error has a long history in studies of peasants and agrarian change. At issue is the assignation of certain homogenous, ‘essentialised’ or static qualities to peasants. In the history

of Latin American peasant studies, this was the case for both the descampesinistas, who saw peasants as a pre-capitalist entity doomed to fade away with the development of capitalism, as well as the campesinistas, who argued that peasants were resilient to capitalist development (see Kay, 1997). In contrast to the common notion of a homogenous peasantry that stands outside of capitalism, I argue for concrete historical analyses for understanding particular processes of change that take place in rural societies with the development of capitalism. In the face of agrarian change, peasants engage in a diverse range of activities in order to maintain their livelihoods, and are also subject to differentiation along lines of class, region, gender and ethnicity. Under this understanding, reference to 'peasants' encompasses a vast set of actors, ranging from small proprietors, to subsistence farmers and semi-proletarianized labourers. These groups not only have different livelihoods, but also different historical traditions of struggle. Rather than simply destroying a 'pre-capitalist' way of life, the expansion of agro-extractivist projects both shapes and is shaped by the different social and political composition of peasant communities. In this sense, the impacts and reactions to agro-extractivism may range from dispossession, migration and, proletarianization, to incorporation and/or co-optation, and only in some cases resistance.

In order to better understand the complexities of the politics of agro-extractivism on the ground, in this paper I propose a framework derived from studies in agrarian political economy for exploring the varied political reactions to agro-extractivism according to four interrelated dimensions:

- 1) The pre-existing **class structures** of the peasants involved in the project, and the differentiated impact of agro-extractivism on various groups. These dynamics can be determined through Bernstein (2010)'s questions: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? and What do they do with it? In line with the agrarian political economy framework, this involves recognizing that 'peasants' are not a homogenous group, with a determined 'way of life' but differentiated long class lines, which includes tenant farmers, smallholders, and landless workers amongst others.
- 2) The different forms of **political intervention** made by a variety of actors, including elites (landlords, merchants, banks and corporations), or para-state institutes (the state, courts, NGOs or armed forces). This is associated with the goals of the agro-extractivist project at hand, depending on whether they are seeking labour and/or land. Moreover, different actors and forms of political intervention will shape the different forms of collective identity that emerge amongst peasants.
- 3) The '**exit options**' (Eckstein, 2001) available to peasants, which in turn shape the decisions and actions of rural inhabitants as they struggle to reproduce themselves in the face of the forces of change and development. These options condition the decision to adopt any number of different livelihood strategies: they may face displacement and migration, or they might be incorporated and/or co-opted within the project.
- 4) Finally, **the forms of agency** that arise, whereby peasants may adopt everyday forms of resistance, or they may form themselves in collective organizations adopting strategies of organization and leadership, or the formation of different types of alliances with class and political actors.

This framework is then applied to an examination of the processes of incorporation and resistance to agro-extractivism driven by palm-oil expansion in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia. A region that has seen a threefold expansion of palm oil between 2002 and 2012, in many ways this case study is emblematic of the various mechanisms of land-grabbing currently taking place in the Colombian countryside, including

the expansion of large plantations, violent displacement, land purchases, as well as contract farming arrangements (known as “alianzas productivas”). It is a region that typifies what is often called the ‘absent’ or ‘failed’ state’ in Colombia (Bejarano and Pizarro 2004), where rural communities receive little or no state support for agriculture. Nonetheless, it is also worth emphasizing the significant presence of armed forces (including paramilitaries, the state, drug traffickers and guerrillas) responsible for displacement of rural communities, in the hands of armed forces. Oftentimes, corporate investment in agriculture is presented as the only option to maintain their livelihoods, which has been facilitated by a series of ‘rural development’ NGOs . In what follows, I use the framework identified above to explore two comparative case studies of reactions of rural communities threatened by agro-extractive projects with different outcomes: the first with the outcome I describe as “subordinated incorporation”, and the second that of resistance.

Case I: San Pablo and Cantagallo

The first case study is based on a series of interviews carried out with peasant and tenant farmers in the San Pablo and Cantagallo regions of the Magdalena Medio. The main characteristics of this case were:

Political interventions

Here, the expansion of palm oil was initiated through the agency of a regional development NGO, which negotiated “productive alliances” with local peasants justified as a means of “empowerment of local communities to take responsibility of local development into their own hands through the creation of small local businesses and the dissemination of entrepreneurship”.

Exit options

Accordingly, the exit option offered to some rural community members was contract farming arrangements— or adverse incorporation. Peasants often found that this source of income was not sufficient to maintain this source of income, especially in the context of manipulation and abrogation of contracts by companies. In this context, they often adopted individualized adaptive strategies, or resorting to other source of labour to find additional income.

Lack of organizational strategy

Finally, there was no collective organizational strategy, or no formation of an collective entity independent of the local NGOs able to represent the interests of peasants in any other way than converting them to market agents. Resistance was neither organized nor long-sighted; with no space for peasant resistance, it was often expressed in an ‘everyday form, through absenteeism or the robbery of tools and equipment. In interviews with these communities, there was a clear sense of alienation from the land, disempowerment vis-a-vis corporations, and often growing debts.

In the words of one farmer: “Before, we used to live from the land. We grew cassava, plantain and fruits, and we kept animals [...] Now the land is all for palm cultivation. What we plant, what we grow, it’s all palm. It all goes to the company”.

Case II: The Cimitarra River Valley

The second case study is based on interviews with peasant subsistence farmers in the Cimitarra valley, who responded with a strategy of collective, organized resistance to the land-grab taking place in the region. The main characteristics of this case are:

State and paramilitary intervention

The introduction of palm production in the region was intended to come from the intervention of violent repression from (para)military attacks, who invaded the region in 2003 with the goal of displacing the communities for the expansion of commercial agriculture

Independent peasant organization

The formation of an independent collective organization resisting this project emerged from the capacities and culture of resistance of the region, emerging from historical ties to guerrilla insurgency, peasant collective action against displacement, as well as organizational strategy that included forms of participatory local democracy (Juntas de acción communal).

Organizational strategy

During interviews, it was clear that relations of solidarity, community and mutual survival strengthened these farmers, encouraged to cope with harsh economic conditions through subsistence farming. There was also a new role of women as leaders and activists in these communities. Peasants kept their ties to land, maintaining human dignity and social reproduction against disempowerment/unemployment of cities, or wage labour

One intervention made by woman leader of the peasant farmer's association of the Cimitarra valley in workshop, 2014 was as follows: "Our struggle is for the land [...], to produce food for our families, to maintain a life of dignity and justice, to enjoy the land we live and work on, to protect our natural resources, our knowledge and our culture for future generations"

Conclusions

To conclude, these cases show that resistance is not the only, or even the most likely political reaction to agro-extractivism, and it is unhelpful to present a homogenous peasant 'way of life' as confronting capitalism. Not all mobilizations and strategies around agro-extractivism are necessarily oppositional, rather some conflicts also surround the terms of inclusion into the deal. In this sense, the outcome of political conflict in agro-extractivist projects is not a pre-given fact, but conditioned by:

1. The pre-existing class relations of rural communities and the way they are restructured under the agro-extractive project. The conditions of integration to agro-extractivist projects were very different depending on class relations- whether tenant farmers or subsistence. While tenant farmers were incorporated on terms of subordinated incorporation, subsistence farmers and semi proletariat were expelled from the land deal. The latter are more likely to mobilize than contract farmers because they

have different types of relation within the peasant community and to the land. In contrast, the contract farmers expressed a sense of alienation from the land and disempowerment.

2. Not only class, but also the intersection of class and gender were important factors shaping political reactions. The empowerment of women both in the household and in the community played an important role in determining whether mobilization would be inclusionary or oppositional. Where women were disempowered the response was only to increase the gendered division of labour in the household, whereas women who became leaders both in the household and the community played an important role in mobilizing oppositional movements.
3. The type of political conflict is dependent upon whether dispossession occurs. This is not a pre-given fact, but depends on 1) the goal of the project- whether labour-seeking and/or land-seeking. When the project is both labour- and land-seeking, peasants are more likely to be 'adversely incorporated' (see Hickey and du Toit 2007) into the project as contract farmers, whereas when it is only the land, they were expelled, and 2) the type of political actors involved- NGOs, state, paramilitary and armed actors. This in turn conditions the type of 'exit option' available to peasants: eg. migration, labour or expulsion.
4. The types of political intervention and strategic alliances that formed. Just as agro-extractivist projects have sought to expand their operations through alliances with a variety of actors, ranging from domestic capital to the state, armed actors and NGOs, so too have peasant communities interacted with these land deals in a variety of ways,
5. The culture of class struggle and the formation of autonomous, collective peasant organizations. Resistance movements were able to form where peasants had a history and culture of class struggle and autonomous organization; where this was absent, it was NGOs that provided this representation. Resistance, then, took the form of 'everyday struggle' - invisible and uncoordinated response.

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