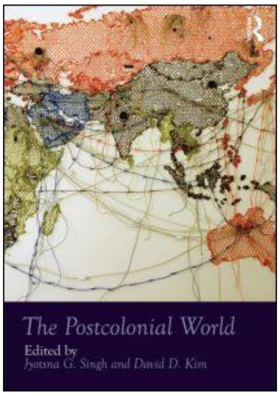

The Postcolonial World

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Neoliberal Colonialism?

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CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

NEOLIBERAL COLONIALISM?
A postcolonial reading of "land grabbing" in Africa

Kate Manzo and Rory Padfield

INTRODUCTION

> Over the last twelve months, large-scale acquisitions of farmland in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia and Southeast Asia have made headlines in a flurry of media reports across the world. [. . .] This is rightly a hot issue because land is so central to identity, livelihoods and food security.[1]
>
> Much scholarly analysis has so far linked this land rush to a more general crisis of neoliberal capitalism, unleashing capital's appetite for new sources of accumulation.[2]

Evidence of an expanding web of transnational land deals and corporate investments in Africa continues to grow in light of a recent report into this phenomenon. Launched in 2012, the Land Matrix Global Observatory database shows that six of the top ten countries targeted for investment are located in Africa. Furthermore, the top two investor countries are the USA and Malaysia, and not – as one might expect – the USA and China.[3]

The aim of this essay is to ask critically to what extent these headline-making acquisitions are merely colonialism by another name. The question is relevant because large-scale land deals "raise the spectre of the 'bad old days' of colonialism and exploitative plantations."[4] The spectre of colonialism haunts charges of neo-colonial "land grabbing"[5] and a "new scramble for Africa."[6] These charges are unsurprising given the centrality of well-documented land acquisition to colonialism in the past. Philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* associates colonial power with three key processes, namely the acquisition and exploitation of land, the domestication of colonized peoples, and the institution of new modes of production.[7] In *Culture and Imperialism*, cultural and literary scholar Edward Said similarly suggests that "the actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about."[8] Since then, geographer Cole Harris has argued that "a fuller understanding of colonial powers is achieved by explaining colonialism's basic geographical dispossessions of the colonised."[9]

In this essay, we wish to explore the question of land grabbing through the postcolonial lens exemplified by Said's classic *Orientalism* and postcolonial writings in

African studies. As the term *postcolonialism* means different things to different people, we briefly elucidate here what we mean by that term. Firstly, following Rita Abrahamsen's call for a more constructive dialogue between African studies and postcolonial thought, we understand postcolonialism as "a deep engagement with the role of power in the formation of identity and subjectivity and the relationship between knowledge and political practices."[10] Practices such as contemporary land grabbing are therefore culture and political economy, narrative and policy; they are the product of interactions "between power, discourse and political institutions and practices."[11]

Our conception of power as productive of identity and subjectivity mirrors the Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge employed in the aforementioned writings of Said and Mudimbe. Their work suggest that places in the world are both real and imagined, i.e. empirical territories and cultural inventions. Under colonialism, the African continent produced a range of raw materials such as gold, diamonds, cotton, and coffee for export mainly to imperial centers. But this place called Africa was also an "idea" for European colonizers. As Mudimbe argues in *The Idea of Africa*, "Africa (as well as Asia and Europe) is represented in Western scholarship by 'fantasies' and 'constructs' made up by scholars and writers since Greek times."[12] Colonialism in Africa depended for its legitimacy on key binary constructs of self/other, civilized/barbaric, advanced/primitive, developed/undeveloped, and productive/unproductive. It also depended on a particular fable – a "circular discourse about . . . nothingness."[13] The place called Africa was not only scripted as bestial, strange, monstrous, even childlike; an imaginary Africa also "served as a metaphor of absence – a 'dark continent' against which the lightness and whiteness of 'Western civilisation' can be pictured."[14]

Postcolonial analysis, although concerned with contemporary issues and themes, frequently involves "looking back to see forward"[15] in order to identify patterns of continuity and change in colonial power relations over time. This essay does likewise, thereby contributing a postcolonial perspective to the growing body of scholarship on contemporary land grabbing.

The essay is divided into the following three sections. Part Two explores the drivers (or causes) of corporate land acquisitions in Africa and it includes a case study on palm oil investments by foreign-owned firms. Part Three discusses the means by which these acquisitions occur. Part Four analyzes the accompanying narratives that seek to explain and legitimize increasingly contested land deals. In each part, we recognize the value of differentiating between "the immediate and the more fundamental dynamics at work."[16] Immediate triggers are the food and fuel price hikes of 2007–2008. The more fundamental dynamics associated with global capitalism, statehood, and relations of power concern commodity markets, capital penetration, and land rights within a context of neoliberal restructuring.

Neoliberal actors such as multinational corporations are arguably the new colonial forces: "transnational companies today do what European empires did in the last century – exploit natural resources and take advantage of low-cost labour – but without needing to take over and govern the entire country."[17] This raises significant questions about *who* (which actors), *what* (is being exploited), *why* (for what end-use) and *how* (is the exploitation legitimized and maintained). Recent land acquirers are demonstrably global and diverse; their exploitation is of agricultural land as well as petroleum-rich areas and mines; and their interests are in biofuels production for energy markets as well as foodstuffs. To illustrate these trends, we focus both empirically and historically on corporate land acquisitions for palm oil – a crop with agro-industrial as well as biofuel market potential. These draw together and overlap the twin production categories of food and energy while highlighting emergent patterns of intercontinental (Asia to Africa) corporate investments and capital transfers such as Malaysian and Singaporean palm oil investments in Liberia.

In addressing the *how* question, we show how colonial binaries and imaginaries underpin the conceptions of progress, production, and property at work in current land deals and development policies. There are clear echoes of the colonial concept of *terra nullius* in stakeholder references to acquired lands as being "empty" and "idle." The rights of traditional (untitled) users of these lands are still largely unrecognized. Physical violence and the acquisition of lands for colonial settlement have diminished in significance, whereas "the inevitable striving of finance capital to extend its economic territory" as capitalism develops[18] continues apace. Furthermore, the central role of foreign direct investment (FDI) in land deals in Africa does not equate to foreign purchase of ownership rights as the rights acquired are mostly use rights in the form of leases and concessions. Legal ownership of land still resides primarily with the postcolonial African state (as it did previously with colonial sovereigns). The postcolonial shift in the world economy from foreign ownership to possession and control of strategic assets such as land and labor is still apparent. Transnational actors remain able to acquire and exploit land without the need for legal ownership.

These continuities are doubly significant. They not only justify capitalist modes of production on lands still utilized and occupied by African peoples, but they also reinvent "Africa" as a place in the world defined by absence and lack – one that cannot progress and develop without foreign interventions and modes of production.

DRIVERS: AFRICA IN THE WORLD ECONOMY: COMMODITY MARKETS AND PRICES

FDI in African land is certainly not new. Plantation economies producing relatively low value commodities such as cocoa and cotton in exchange for finished manufactures was a feature of colonial production and unequal exchange. A forced labor system for the production of agricultural commodities was also a key feature of the colonial political economy.

Forced labor and the production of primary commodities such as cocoa on small family farms continue to define outward-oriented development in countries such as Cote d'Ivoire.[19] A "notable development since 1980" however has been the expansion of cultivated areas in Africa for "higher-value crops such as fresh vegetables, cut flowers, citrus and grapes."[20] In *Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Security*, Lester Brown argues that world food price increases, depleting global food reserves, and the continuing population boom has ushered in a new geopolitics of food – with much attention focused on a scramble for land in Africa.[21] The issues raised there are graphically illustrated in Figure 29.1.

In a World Bank report detailing 465 land acquisition deals in various stages of development between October 2008 and August 2009, nearly half of the deals and some two-thirds of the land area were located in sub-Saharan Africa. Such deals are

Figure 29.1 *Timar, France*. Earthworks competition cartoon.
Source: Used with kind permission of the Ken Sprague Fund.

increasing in frequency, as countries outside of Africa with mounting domestic food security challenges of their own aim to secure large areas of land for food production means. A recent example includes the acquisition of 250,000 acres in Sudan in 2012 by a food company based in the United Arab Emirates to grow wheat, other grains, and soya beans. The plan is that the harvests will return to UAE and the Gulf States. As Brown notes, many of the countries with the largest land deals to overseas investors in sub-Saharan Africa are also where millions of people are being sustained with food donations from the United Nations World Food Programme.[22]

Most reported international land deals involve the private sector – not only speculative investors but also global food production companies and biofuels developers. The majority of those documented "continue to be run as large plantations based on concessions or leases,"[23] which raises the possibility of a return to exploitative plantations under foreign control. It also signals both continuities and changes in African experiences of globalization and the narratives that surround it. James Ferguson's *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* argues that a "combination of privately secured mineral-extraction enclaves and weakly governed humanitarian hinterlands" defines neoliberal globalization on the African continent. Global capital connects "usable" parts of the continent to the world economy while "hopping" over "'unusable Africa.'"[24] The disconnection of "unusable" places from the world economy has fueled conceptions of Africa as a marginalized continent and reinvented it as a purely negative case – a "featureless void defined only by its exclusion from the benefits of global capitalism."[25]

Ferguson's analysis – his distinction between usable/unusable places and argument that "Africa is inevitably characterised by reference to a series of lacks, failures, problems, and crises"[26] – raises the issue of why capital would ever invest there at all. Our palm oil case study shows how Africa has been made attractive to investors by African state policies and not simply exogenous forces.

PALM OIL CASE STUDY: POLICIES OF ATTRACTION AND PROMOTION

Most countries in tropical Africa are open to FDI transactions, whether via the requirements of international lending programs (i.e. SAPs) or driven by their own development strategies. The efforts made by a number of states to secure business by offering long-term palm oil concessions at low costs has made Africa an attractive business venture.[27] Indeed, the Nigerian Institute for Oil Palm Research admits that the "promotion of private sector participation in oil palm plantation holds the ace in *effective revival* of the produce business in the country" (emphasis added).[28] The increase of foreign private firms in Nigeria (five contracts awarded since 2002 at a total of 250,000 hectares) and across many countries in tropical Africa thus supports the notion that foreign owned palm oil plantations – with superior access to financial and human resources, as opposed to local agencies (whether private sector or government funded) – are perceived by the recipient countries as central to "modernizing" their agricultural economies.

The case of foreign palm oil investment in Africa illustrates the scale and globalization of the recent postcolonial "land grab" phenomenon. Data from the Land Matrix Global Observatory shows that since the mid-2000s the number of palm oil concessions to foreign firms in tropical Africa (i.e. West, Central and parts of Southern Africa) has increased over ten-fold – from only four concessions between 2000 and 2006 to 47 by 2013 (see Figure 29.2). While there is a degree of uncertainty in terms of the amount of land allocated within a concession/lease and that is actually taken up for production, it is estimated that the intended allocation of land for palm oil plantations from these 47 concessions is in the region of two million hectares.

As shown in Figure 29.2, there was a rapid rise in concessions awarded to foreign firms from all four geographic regions after 2006 followed by a decline after 2012. The rise in palm oil concessions after 2006 can be explained by three key drivers. Firstly, as we have mentioned earlier, the global food price hike in 2006/7 led to improved profitability for food commodity growers, including palm oil cultivators. The spike in prices immediately improved the economic case for large-scale plantations by reducing considerably the payback time for potential investors. Secondly, compared with other crops such as vegetables, cereals, and fruits, palm oil is regarded as a relatively lucrative crop due in part to the steady increase in global demand for vegetable oils. Palm oil also has the added potential for biofuel production – this is significant in light of international policy initiatives, such as the EU's Renewable Energy Directive, which requires 20 percent of the energy consumed within the European Union to be from renewable sources by 2020.

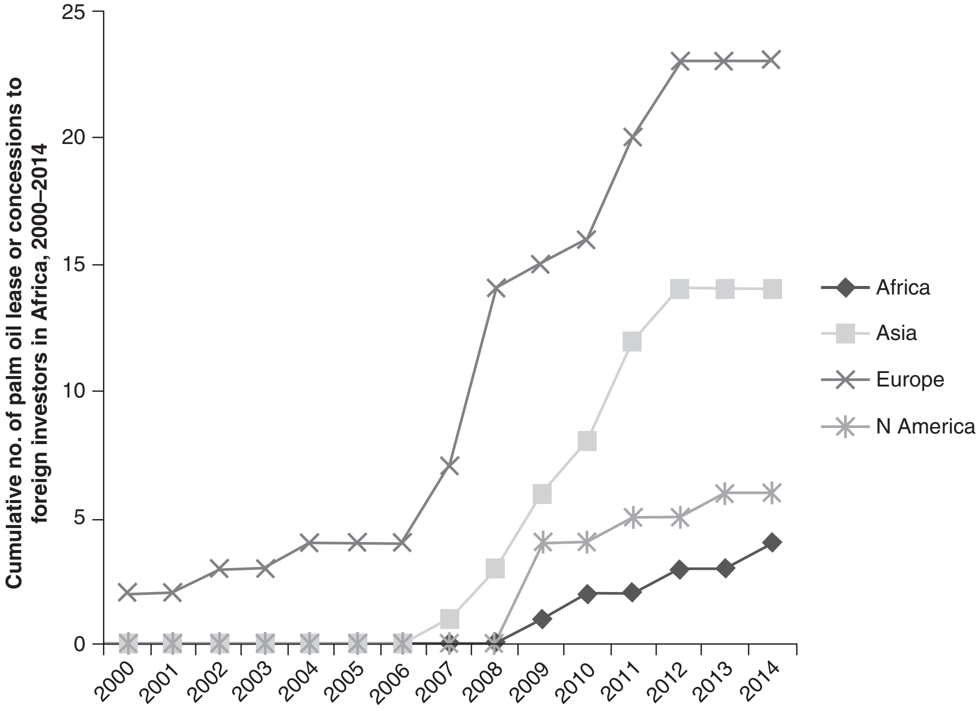

Figure 29.2 Palm oil concession and leases in Africa to foreign investors as categorized by region of investor, 2000–2014.
Source: Adapted from *Land Matrix Global Observatory Data* (2014).

Thirdly, countries in tropical Africa have vast areas of available land as well as the necessary climate (high rainfall and consistently high temperatures) and soil type for palm oil cultivation. Interestingly, the corporate land acquisition trend for oil palm expansion in Africa exhibits traditional and less traditional patterns in terms of the origin of the foreign investors. In line with aforementioned concerns about neo-colonialism, foreign firms with European origins are the largest group to take up concessions and leases. Leveraging historic connections to former colonial territories (i.e. UK–Nigeria, UK–Sierra Leone, France–Cameroon, Portugal–Angola), firms with origins in UK, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Belgium dominate palm oil concessions from Europe. One of the single largest investors from Europe is an Italian company, Fri-El Green Power, who has an 11,000-hectare concession exclusively for palm oil cultivation in the Abia region of Nigeria. Fri-El Green power reportedly have the option to expand their production to a maximum of 100,000 hectares and plan to use the palm oil processed in Nigeria as a biofuel for export to Europe.[29]

The second largest investor region is Asia, specifically China, Iran, India, Malaysia, and Singapore. In terms of the history of African land acquisition, Malaysia and Singapore are relatively new players. The increasing number and scale of overseas ventures in the past ten years reflects the expanding commercial priorities of Southeast Asian homegrown companies (see Table 29.1). Malaysia has a history of commercial

Table 29.1 Summary of Southeast Asian oil palm companies' existing and planned investment activities in tropical Africa.

Palm oil companies by country of origin	*Location of investments by Southeast Asian palm oil countries*						
	Uganda	*Nigeria*	*Liberia*	*Gabon*	*Cameroon*	*Cote d'Ivoire*	*Ghana*
Malaysia – Sime Darby – Felda			EP		PP		
Singapore – Olam International – Wilmar International – GAR	EP	EP, PP	EP, PP	EP		EP	EP
Indonesia – Bakrie Sumatera Plantations			PP			PP	

Key: EP = existing plantations, PP = planned plantations

Source: Adapted from Penikett and Park (2013).

palm oil cultivation and processing and industry personnel and consultants are prominent figures in the emerging palm oil geographies of tropical Africa. The Malaysian firm Sime Darby, for example, has one of the largest single concessions, having acquired over 300,000 hectares in Liberia in 2009. A Singaporean company, Golden Agri-Resources, also acquired a similar size plantation (300,000 hectares) in Liberia in 2010. In both cases, the intended use of the palm oil is food as well as biofuel production.

Table 29.1 reflects the geographical spread of investment by Southeast Asian palm oil companies in tropical Africa. Singaporean companies are the most active in terms of existing and planned plantations (operative in six countries) as well as the number of companies (three) engaged in palm oil business in the region. Whilst Malaysian and Indonesian firms have existing and/or planned plantations in two countries, it is notable that Liberia is a recipient of investment from companies with origins in all three Southeast Asian countries (including some of the largest single land acquisition deals, as mentioned above). Recent media reports suggest that despite the lack of investments by Asian palm oil companies in Africa since 2012 (as shown in Figure 29.2), there are still considerable prospects for palm oil companies in the region.[30]

With regard to biofuels production, climate change mitigation and energy security motivate a number of actors. As noted in *Forbes* magazine, rising oil prices "thrust bio-fuels into the spotlight as an antidote to energy insecurity."[31] None more so than palm oil, which compared with other oil crops such as rapeseed and soya is more productive in terms of the amount of oil produced per area of cultivated land[32] and thus regarded as a valuable oil crop to potential investors and growers. Target countries pursuing policies of outward-oriented agricultural development see opportunities in "large-scale plantations run by conglomerates of multinational companies in alliance with national governments. Yet there are also many small-scale operations, involving NGOs responding to climate change targets."[33]

There is a seeming paradox here. The so-called food vs. fuel debate since 2008 was sparked by the description of biofuels as a "crime against humanity" by Jean Ziegler, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.[34] A major concern is the long-term impact of export-led biofuel expansion on food availability and security of production – as graphically demonstrated earlier in Figure 29.1.

Lowered oil prices may help dampen enthusiasm for biofuels production. A reported "shift away from conventional bio-fuels in favour of next generation alternatives derived from non-food commodity crops"[35] suggests furthermore that the issue is not simply food vs. fuel (production and prices), but also the relative value of different commodities. Palm oil prices more than tripled between 2000 and 2008 thanks to increased global demand for vegetable oils. At the same time, palm oil itself is one of the cheaper biofuels to produce.[36] Biofuels in general and palm oil in particular are therefore likely to "remain and increase as an option in the longer term."[37]

MEANS

In addition to fluctuating commodity prices, drives into Africa are fueled by widespread perceptions that land on the continent is quite literally freely available as well as abundant. Documented land deals in Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, and Sudan "involved no or minimal land fees."[38] The financial value of land transfers is generally low "and an unimportant component of negotiations."[39]

The question of why African governments willingly broker land deals in exchange for so little short-term gain is addressed later in the essay in regard to development agendas. The more immediate question is how states legally claim ownership of the lands they turn over. To answer this, we explore the narrative of property rights embedded in colonial and postcolonial systems of law.

ACCESS TO LAND: LAWS, PROPERTY RIGHTS, AND THE ALLOCATION OF LEASES

The "first land grab in Africa" apparently dates from 1885 to 1915.[40] European interest in acquiring lands and resources both legally and cheaply increased during this time with the rise of anti-slavery and humanist movements at home. Access to coastal lands for trading and other purposes had already been negotiated with local chiefs. Accompanying recognition of "peaceful native occupancy" of settled areas facilitated land deals such as those between the British Royal Niger Company and West African chiefs for access to land for palm oil plantations.[41] However, recognition of customary tenure did not include legal recognition of ownership rights. Nor did it cover "the several billion hectares of unfarmed lands" occupying most of the continent. These lands were defined in European feudal terms as vacant "wastes" and untitled "commons." When feudal law became colonial law, the legal dispossession of Africans by newly established colonial states became "more or less total."[42]

The outright sale of large tracts of land by colonial powers "was often prohibited or limited by later colonial legislation so that long, renewable leases became the norm."[43] As mentioned already, "land leases, rather than purchases, are predominant in Africa, and host country governments tend to play a key role in allocating them."[44] With formal decolonization, ultimate title and controlling authority in land changed hands from colonial states to newly independent governments. Recognition of native title was generally minimal thanks to "the restricted definition of 'property' in the colonial construction – and the postcolonial reproduction – of 'customary' tenure."[45]

Across Africa, "post-independence land laws confirm that untilled lands are therefore lands without owners or even lawful occupants."[46] Newly independent governments did not consider land rights as absolute, but as "contingent upon the priorities of development."[47] Limited native land rights – such as recognition of customary tenure as possession rather than property ownership – were therefore sometimes reduced further by policies of land reform, land nationalization, and/or outward-oriented agricultural development.

The contemporary upshot is that "lands being sold or mainly leased are lands or land types which governments claim as their own, and/or as rightfully theirs to dispose of."[48] Such claims serve to consolidate state power as well as enhance economic performance. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe argues that postcolonial governance, i.e. political "control of people and allocation of goods, benefits and percentages" has been underpinned by force "but also involved transfers, reciprocity, and obligations."[49] When a state loses the capacity "to regulate and arbitrate that enabled it to construct its legitimacy," then arguably "all it has left is control of the forces of coercion."[50]

Loss of state economic capacity was precisely the point of the neoliberal, World Bank-led structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the 1990s. The three components of rationalization, liberalization, and privatization were designed to reduce state control of production and exchange in order to facilitate the global movement of goods and capital. The African state was perceived by the World Bank in the 1980s as "an irrational and/or hapless obstacle to the neo-liberal economic agenda of unleashing market forces."[51] But however sound in theoretical terms, the intention to weaken the state meant that SAPs were a political contradiction in terms: "the adjustment reforms were to be implemented by the very state which was intended to be 'reduced.' "[52]

State reduction – or rationalization – was to be achieved through financial order and fiscal restraint, which entailed shrinking the size of the public sector through drastic cuts in employment. The typical economic adjustment package entailed "a 'one-size-fits-all' programme of currency devaluation, liberalization of prices and interest rates, fiscal restraint and austerity (i.e. cuts in state expenditure) and trade liberalisation."[53] Concerning land, the plan was to free up markets and facilitate private investment in existing farmland as well as in vast reserves perceived as "pristine" and "awaiting exploitation."[54]

Structural adjustment inevitably posed a political challenge to African regimes heavily dependent on financial aid. The combined promise of capital inflows, investor demand for land, and renewed interest in agricultural development meant that "with very few exceptions, all African regimes would in the end comply with structural adjustment."[55] By 2005, most African governments had moved to privatize state-owned farms as well as enacted "foreign investment-friendly promotion laws modelled by international agencies."[56]

The effects of neoliberal readjustment of the African state have been uneven at best. The results of several decades of SAPs have been described as "a diminution of state capacity, the privatisation of previously public assets and the financialisation of economic networks, linked to a new form of global capitalism."[57] Mbembe goes further to suggest a complete realignment of postcolonial government. He argues that SAPs produced a situation of "fractionated sovereignty" and subjected African states to a neo-colonial form of "tutelary government" exercised by international forces.[58]

And yet, African state power has arguably ameliorated in the wake of structural adjustment. Capital-poor governments have managed to turn SAPs to their advantage despite the political challenges. African political elites have benefited from financial injections while playing the neo-colonialism card. Structural adjustment provided them "with a new external cause, or scapegoat, for the economic crisis which their countries suffer."[59] Furthermore, African states have drawn succor from a key remaining strategic asset, namely ownership and control of untilled land. By extending the reach of the state as well as capital into "weakly governed humanitarian hinterlands," international land deals enable an extension of state power and control. They are a "partial refusal of the more doctrinaire propositions of the neoliberal globalisers" and "an accommodation between the developmentalist state and the neoliberal orientation of the multilateral institutions."[60]

In sum, African governments maintain ownership rights over vast tracts of land once controlled by European colonial powers. When leasehold expires, whatever land rights have been granted revert to the state. The perception that targeted land is both state-owned and abundant is rooted in the fact that most of this land is untitled. Untitled does not, however, mean unused or unclaimed. Users such as herders and hunters "commonly draw on unwritten tenure systems founding their legitimacy on 'tradition' – though in practice they have changed profoundly over time."[61]

The next part explores the ways in which both states and investors evoke colonial fantasies and imaginaries in response to untitled land claims.

NARRATIVES: *TERRA NULLIUS* AND NON-RECOGNITION: "WASTE" LANDS AS "EMPTY" AND "IDLE"

If "existing land uses and claims go unrecognised" it is "because land users are marginalised from formal land rights and access to the law and institutions."[62] Arguably, "the assumption that much land in sub-Saharan Africa is indeed 'idle' land, which if exploited could potentially solve several problems, has been exposed with some authority."[63] Yet, the common lands used by many rural households are "still deemed in most state laws to be unowned, vacant and available."[64] Current FDI flows and land acquisitions are thus "taking place in contexts where many people have only insecure land rights – which makes them vulnerable to dispossession."[65]

The preconditions for settler colonialism in British colonies were not only coercive but also discursive. Physical violence took place within a colonial state framework drawn around transplanted property law (as mentioned before) and a European cultural distinction between civilization and savagery. Traceable in the early modern period to the writings of John Locke (his labor theory of value, in particular), the distinction was "powerfully reinforced by an increasingly strident racism and the achievements of industrial production," i.e. by dichotomies of machine power/manual labor, progress/stagnation, and science/superstition.[66]

If the ability to dominate nature was a marker of progress, then "people who marked the land lightly and lived within the rhythms of nature were obviously unprogressive and backward."[67] Crucial to this particular narrative was a conception of property as "exchange value." The imagined transition from savagery to civilization entailed an evolution from customary rights in common land to proprietary rights in private property, and from land as a public good to land as a saleable commodity with commercial value. As Harris argues, "a discourse that treated colonial land as waste awaiting development and its inhabitants as backward and lazy was exceedingly serviceable" for both capital and settlers attracted by the prospect of unused land.[68]

The legal concept of *terra nullius*, meaning empty land, was a shorthand expression of that geographic imagination. It differed conceptually from the later colonial doctrine of trusteeship although "both instituted a moral justification for the appropriation of native land, and of empire itself."[69] *Terra nullius* provided a "conceptual link between property rights and the moral obligation to prosper"; by extension it offered a moral justification for appropriating "waste" and uncultivated land. Whereas trusteeship signaled a duty to civilize, *terra nullius* expressed "the duty to make the earth bountiful and productive."[70]

Colonial concepts such as "idle" and "empty" that are "used to justify land allocations to investors . . . feature quite prominently in some of the country reports" studied by Cotula et al.[71] Even those that treat "land grab" analysis as too simplistic, such as the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED; a London-based think-tank), understand that such terms do not reflect a lack of occupation or usage of land.[72] They refer instead "to lands used in ways that are not perceived as 'productive' by government."[73] Likewise, in the context of palm oil expansion in Africa, industry analysts refer to the "availability of vast tracks of arable land";[74] such language implies the palm oil industry can facilitate agricultural development via the cultivation of existing "unproductive land."

As well as harking back to early colonialism and early modernity, virtual notions of *terra nullius* evoke modernization theory's underlying distinction between modern and traditional spaces. The latter were conceived as ripe for "improvement" and transformation: "a terra nullius zone outside the invigorating dynamics of capitalist modernity."[75] *Terra nullius* is thus a classic discourse of modernization as well as a moral justification for land appropriation, which is why Fouad Makki associates its usage in contemporary Ethiopia with "development by dispossession."[76]

OPPORTUNITY OR CATASTROPHE? DEVELOPMENT MODELS AND PROMISES

Those who equate corporate land acquisitions with opportunities for economic development include think-tanks like the IIED as well as international lending institutions such as the World Bank. They also include African governments willing to donate land to investors in expectation (or hope) of rural modernization and development. A "recurring theme" in many country reports "is the relatively low importance and value of financial transfers compared to the expected broader economic benefits such as employment generation and infrastructure development."[77] FDI "is seen as capable of bringing new technologies, developing productive potential, facilitating infrastructure development, and creating employment and supply of food to local markets."[78]

In this context a polarized policy debate – one fueled in part by renewed arguments for the comparative advantage of a large farm model – is apparent between supporters and opponents of large-scale corporate land deals. Although it may be too soon to predict "what paths and types of development, if any, might result from the current phase" the underlying "convergence of different global crises" combined with an ongoing impasse in rural development suggest that "a crisis of neoliberal capitalism has encountered one of neoliberal development."[79]

The aforementioned accommodation between developmentalist states and other stakeholders in land deals has been described as a form of "embedded liberalism," whereby "economic 'multilateralism' is predicated on 'domestic intervention.' "[80] Where such intervention entails the allocation of land to large-scale investors (either domestic or foreign) for the production of marketable commodities, then crisis resolution would seem to rest on the very same market forces and prices responsible for crisis in the first place. In this context, there is no guarantee of employment generation – the claims for which are often over-stated. The extent to which "commitments on investment, jobs and infrastructure are legally enforceable in the same way as government commitments to provide and maintain access to land" is also debatable.[81]

CONCLUSION

This essay has explored the ongoing connection between colonial relations of power and territoriality (notably land dispossession) via analysis of contemporary "land grabbing" in Africa. As noted in the introduction, the twenty-first century land deals attracting media and academic attention have been linked not only to claims of neo-colonialism but also to a more general crisis of neoliberal capitalism. We situated current events in historical context in order to address the *why* (key drivers) and the *how* (means and narratives) of land deals in Africa. This approach was consistent with our postcolonial theoretical framework, which aims to identify patterns of continuity and change in colonial power relations over time. It was also necessary to answer our main question, which was the extent to which headline-making land acquisitions are merely colonialism by another name.

In terms of drivers, our findings suggest the importance of distinguishing fundamental dynamics of global capitalism – notably finance capital's inevitable striving for new economic territories and sources of accumulation – and more proximate factors associated with neoliberal restructuring. The latter are those processes promoted by structural adjustment policies in Africa, notably state rationalization, economic liberalization, and privatization of assets and resources.

Our palm oil case study in part one demonstrates both the changing character and ongoing logic of capital investments in Africa. Many "land grabs" are a mirror of colonial patterns of acquisition in that Europeans firms with origins in imperial heartlands such as the UK, France, and Portugal are leveraging historic connections to former colonial territories. At the same time, Asia is becoming a major investor region in tropical Africa. Palm oil cultivation through African-Asian and African-European partnerships is seen as a win-win situation for African governments in search of FDI as well as for foreign private corporations, such as the Malaysian investor Sime Darby.

The remainder of the essay has explored the mechanisms by which land deals are orchestrated and rationalized. The combination of legal, cultural, economic, and political means deployed by postcolonial African states to secure investments in land demonstrates strong links to the colonial past as well as the significance of more recent neoliberal development agendas. Control over land via state ownership rights in untitled land is a key strategic resource for postcolonial African states, as it was for their colonial predecessors, which is why the land rights acquired by foreign corporations are mostly use rights in the form of leases and concessions. It is too soon to say whether this lack of ownership rights in land will prove a blessing or a burden for would-be producers. However, broader changes in the world economy, such as the shift from ownership to control of strategic assets such as land and labor, suggest that capital expansion into once "unusable Africa" is destined to remain an attractive option for investors.

ENDNOTES

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