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Environment

Land Grabs and Food Sovereignty:

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This is an edited version of a lecture given at the 21st Century Marxism seminar organised by Socialist Resistance at the IIRE Amsterdam in June.

It is generally agreed that the 'global land grab' began around 2007/8 when worldwide interest in the purchasing or leasing of land jumped to approximately 42 million hectares (ha), compared with an average of 2.7 million ha in previous years. [1] The dynamics of this recent trend of global capital reflect the growing strength of newly developed countries: 4 out of 5 of the 'BRICS' are in the top 20 of those investing in land – Brazil has acquired approximately 6.2 million ha; Russia hasn't made the top 20; India are on 4.5 million ha; China, 11.6 million ha; and South Africa approximately 5.1 million ha – alongside countries such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and South Korea.

The predominance of this investment has gone into African countries (Mozambique, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan, DRC, etc.) – known for their weak governance structures and desire for foreign investment regardless of the social and environmental costs – but then a considerable amount has also made its way into South-East Asia, particularly the Philippines, Laos and Indonesia. [2]

Besides the fact that much of this interest is coming from both private and public/state-owned institutions, it is important to note the specific areas of industry that have received the most investment. According to the World Bank, and as one would expect, agriculture is leading the way, taking up approximately 79% of targeted investment – significantly, biofuels, such as bioethanol and biodiesel, made from products like corn, sugar cane, palm oil and jathropa, constitute 21% of this 79%, thus demonstrating their monstrous rise over the past decade (just last year, 11,000 ha were purchased in Isabela, Philippines for purposes of bioethanol production); with the remainder of investment being taken up by forestry and livestock at around 21% of global land investment. [3] However, a large amount of the land purchased during the first wave of investment has remained uncultivated, and here we see a major characteristic of the land grab – that is, the creation of a monopoly on land regardless of whether capital intends to use it for production or not. But why and for what purpose?

Mainstream commentators tend to feed us the story that the surge in 'land acquisitions' (as they so mildly term it) is down to the rise in food prices and hence the rush by countries with the benevolent concern of feeding their populations to secure land for food production – that is, the (at times, Malthusian) food crisis narrative. While this is partly true – there has indeed been a hike in food prices and thus a need to secure a stable supply of arable land for the future production of subsistence commodities (which, of course, has a bearing upon the price of labour) – it does in fact detract from the fundamental capital relations determining such behaviour (which I'll come to in a moment).

Some of the main proponents of the *Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS)*, on the other hand, recently placed the exponential rise in 'land deals' down to six main drivers: global anticipation of food insecurity; new forms of resource extraction for fuel security; new environmental imperatives and tools; extensive infrastructure corridors and Special Economic Zones; creation of new financial instruments; and, finally, rules, regulations and incentives provided by the international community. [4]

While these go a long way in explaining the empirical relations of the land grab phenomenon, I'd like to put forward a thesis based upon the fundamental capital-relations at work and how these are in fact the main drivers behind the global land grab. My argument is that capital, seeing potential for a relatively stable and lucrative return on investment, has been ploughing money into land in order to create a monopoly on natural resources – particularly since the economic crisis hit in 2007/8 (it's not just a coincidence that food prices rose around the same time!) – this has the effect of both ensuring a return on investment in the form of rents and, fundamentally, the propagation of the

capital-relation in the global South and hence the creation of a burgeoning reserve army of labour for large-scale agri-business. [5]

Where do I get my logic for this? Marx, in *Volume One of Capital*, tells us that the fundamental relationship of the capitalist mode of production is that where the capitalist enters the market with his money, purchases labour-power, puts this to work with means of production for a certain period of time and then kindly relieves the worker of the surplus-value the latter has created during the production process – that is, the labour theory of value and the relationship between the two socio-economic classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

This is not all, however: Marx also tells us that for this relationship to exist, the objective conditions need to be just so that the person is compelled to sell their labour in the first place – thus, there needs to be a separation of the worker from the means of production; in other words, the land and the natural resources that nature so graciously provides have to be wrenched away so that the worker has to sell their labour in order to subsist. As Marx himself states: ‘The capital relation presupposes a complete separation between the worker and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of their labour [i.e. their reproduction]’; Marx goes on to suggest that capital must not only maintain this separation, but that it must also: ‘reproduce it on a constantly expanding scale’. [6]

There is thus a drive within the internal logic of capitalism that means it has to constantly expand the wage labour relation by separating the worker from the means of production. As part of this process, however, the land itself, and the natural resources it carries, must also be commoditized and made into capital. In other words, land needs to be enclosed, taken into private ownership and this needs to happen on a ‘constantly expanding scale’.

This tendency within the system is what Marx refers to as ‘primitive accumulation’: ‘...a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers. So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producers from the means of production’. [7] Marx refers to it as a ‘primitive’ mode of accumulation as he was writing within the context of the historical transition of the British mode of production from a feudalist organisation to a capitalist one; he thus believed that it was part of the ‘pre-history’ of capital.

However, as Rosa Luxemburg has argued in her *Accumulation of Capital*: ‘...capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organisations existing side by side with it...Capital needs the means of production and the labour power of the whole globe for untrammelled accumulation; it cannot manage without the natural resources and labour power of all territories’ [8] Indeed, Luxemburg may have been discussing this within the context of colonialism, but there are many contemporary thinkers, notably David Harvey (*The New Imperialism*, 2003) and others, who argue that primitive accumulation is perpetuated today in the multiple forms of neocolonialism that we see, but particularly in that of the enclosure and privatisation of public land.

Fundamentally, the logic behind the drive for monopolisation of land, while acknowledging the fact that the more land is privatised the less it becomes available as a source for the means of subsistence of the worker (thus forcing them to sell their labour), follows the principle that without a monopoly the owner cannot claim ‘absolute rent’. The concept of absolute rent as developed by Marx in *Volume Three of Capital* (1894) basically posits that there must be a monopoly on land in order for proprietors to extract a rent from it – in other words, if there’s land available to farm somewhere else which is in public ownership then people will just go and grow their food on there rather than paying someone for the use of their land.

Furthermore, the productivity of the land must also be taken into consideration – i.e. some land is more productive than others, either naturally or technologically, and so fetches a higher rent; this is what Marx refers to as the ‘differential rent’ that may be extracted from land. In other words, unless there’s a monopoly on land, the required rents cannot be charged by the landowners, hence the need for a monopoly. We thus see how primitive

accumulation and the extraction of rent both drive the monopolisation of land in order to create the conditions necessary for the operation of capital.

The way in which the state grants the rights of the land to capital is of the utmost importance in terms of our analysis of this issue and was in fact highlighted by Marx himself. Ultimately, it involves the state institutionalisation of theft. As Marx states in *Capital: Volume One*: ‘...it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part...the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic’ [9]. The institutionalisation of this robbery, according to Marx, takes the form of a number of legislative mechanisms, but particularly ‘Bills of Inclosure of the Commons’; in other words, the use of the legal system to take public property into private ownership constitutes the main tool of primitive accumulation.

Indeed, it is these same mechanisms that are being applied today in the global South in order to perpetuate primitive accumulation and hence the capital-relation: as Basu, an Indian political economist, notes: ‘...in the present era, laws, regulations, and even principles of jurisprudence are being grossly altered with impunity to facilitate imperialist plunder’; [10] in fact, Basu also notes how the three main International Financial Institutions (IFIs) involved in global development: the World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), ‘play a stellar and crucial role, but [that] it is only through state power, acting at the behest of global capital that the necessary changes can be implemented’. [Ibid]

In other words, the state puts into place the ideal legal structures that facilitate the plundering of land by global capital, and it does this at the advice of the IFIs – indeed, all one has to do is look at the role of the infamous Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s/’90s and their ‘shock therapy’ in the establishment of the right ‘business-friendly’ conditions for capital, as proof of this!

Let me give two empirical examples to illustrate all of this theoretical mumbo-jumbo: first, let’s take rural Orissa in India. Known for its already abject levels of poverty and conflicts over the issue of displacement, Orissa is experiencing the symptoms of a transition to a capitalist mode of production, with the creation of a wage labour force right at the top of the list. According to Deepak Mishra (2011), land acquisitions in Orissa have taken various forms: ‘mining, industrial and military infrastructural projects;...conversion of forest lands into agro-industrial plantations; state-initiated enclosures...Along with the systematic undermining of livelihood resources (such as forests, grazing lands, water bodies); reorganisation of property rights over resources (such as forests, agricultural land, village commons...ponds, lakes and rivers) and [the] exclusion of a sector of the population’ – all of which is aimed at the commoditization of natural resources and creation of a wage labour force. [11]

In Laos, we see much the same story: the granting of land concessions to foreign capital for the creation of large-scale plantations, much to the detriment of local populations, particularly the indigenous, and their access to natural resources. Many of these people have lost access to agricultural and forest lands that provided the means of their subsistence, with the result that they have then gone on to sell their labour to the very companies that displaced them from the land in the first place – that is, we have the creation of a wage labour force due to a separation from the means of (re)production, as well as the putting of that labour-power to work on the newly founded plantations.

Indeed, this is a common scenario in the global South: a subsistence or semi-subsistence farming population, operating small-scale farmlands and surviving by way of a predominantly peasant-based economy, many of whom are indigenous, are wrenched away from the publicly owned lands by way of enclosures and privatisation. This has the effect of the full- or semi-proletarianisation of the people, whereby they are forced to sell their labour in order to subsist; I say semi-proletarianised because some are able to maintain small plots but are still compelled to sell their labour in order to get by. Indeed, according to Baird (2011): ‘...the policy of the government of Laos to ‘turn land into capital’ is crucially intertwined with another important respect, ‘turning people into labour’. [12] We thus see the playing out of the fundamental relations of capital in two very characteristic cases of primitive accumulation.

So, what can food sovereignty offer in opposition to these trends of land grabbing and primitive accumulation? In my view, food sovereignty, the concept and the practice, stands in direct contradiction to the fundamental relation of capital whereby public land is usurped for private gain. How? As Esther Vivas explains: ‘Food sovereignty is defined by the right of communities to decide on their own agricultural and food policies, to protect and to regulate the production and the internal agricultural trading with the aim of achieving a sustainable development and food security’. [13] This means that: ‘Land, seeds, water...have to be returned to farmers so that they can feed themselves and sell their products to local communities...through diversification of crops, care of the land, the use of water, the creation of local markets and community food systems’ [14]

In other words, there needs to be a re-localisation of production! One which sits in direct contradiction to the globalised market of commodity production that exists under capitalism, as embodied by agri-business, and which delivers autonomy and control over production back to the worker. As Basu argues: ‘The project of constructing an alternative path of development must stop rent extraction by the global while respecting the local differences...Cooperative-based production must emerge from the initiative of the labouring people’. [15]

Indeed, for me and for a number of other Marxists, including the Peruvian revolutionary Hugo Blanco, [16] the fight against primitive accumulation is another front in the class war and we comrades need to be supporting those at the vanguard of the struggle, namely the indigenous and small-scale farmers of the global South, who, particularly through forums such as La Via Campesina, are becoming conscious of their common interests in the face of global capitalism. In fact, I believe that this mode of critique, and the strategies of resistance inherent to it, strengthen our ecosocialist position dramatically – it puts us in direct opposition to the predatory tendencies of globalised neoliberal capitalism and its drive to commodify the whole planet (not to mention the explicitly environmental aspects of this debate which I’ve steered away from in order to focus on the capital-labour relation, but which are just as important!).

Take the MST in Brazil, for example. The Landless Workers’ Movement (or Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra - MST), following a mixture of Marxism, liberation theology and Friereian ideologies of education, and through a strategy of occupy and resist, have managed to build communities across Brazil that not only allow workers to recolonise the means of production and work outside of global agribusiness, but are also sustained by radically democratic and agro-ecological structures of production (in fact, academics such as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz refer to such models as ‘indigenous socialism’).

What is more, they have been rather successful. I was at a World Development Movement (WDM) talk last year and a member of the MST, Delwek Mateus, was saying how they’d managed to permanently settle 400,000 families and temporarily settle 100,000. While remaining sceptical of the source, it is still quite clear that the MST have had a massive impact. Politically, however, they lack direction; following a misguided faith in Lula and the Workers’ Party (PT) with their unfulfilled promises of land reform, they have returned to occupy and resist tactics and ultimately working within the system. It would be much more favourable for them if they were to put their wait behind the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) – of which Enlace, our FI section in Brazil, is a member – and to build a party political movement that way.

But then, there’s not just the MST: our comrades of the Revolutionary Workers’ Party of Mindanao (RPM-M) in the Philippines are also practising food sovereignty on their farms, with democratically controlled agro-ecological production and even seed banks to counteract the monopolisation of these particularly important inputs, as enabled by GMO technology and intellectual property law (what could be seen as yet another form of primitive accumulation whereby public resources are usurped for private gain).

Nevertheless, it is clear that primitive accumulation lives on in the phenomenon of land grabbing and that if we are to resist its particularly pernicious side-effects – food shortages, environmental crises, a lack of resources for millions – then we must mobilise in defence of our comrades in the Global South and recognise that this is a strategic front in

the war against capital.

[1] World Bank, 2010, Rising Global Interest in Farming.

[2] International Land Coalition (ILC), 2012, Transnational Land Deals for Agriculture in the Global South.

[3] World Bank, 2010

[4] Ben White, Saturnino M. Boras Jr., Ruth Hall, Ian Scoones and Wendy Wolford, 2012, 'The new enclosures: critical perspectives on corporate land deals', JPS, 39:3-4, pp.619-647

[5] Many of the authors of JPS also recognise the role of wage labour creation in the spread of capital but not the centrality of rent in the creation of a monopoly on land.

[6] Marx, 1976 (1867), Capital: Volume One, p.875

[7] Ibid

[8] Rosa Luxemburg, 1963 (1913), The Accumulation of Capital, p.365 – my emphasis]

[9] Marx, 1976 (1867), Capital: Volume One, p.874.

[10] Pranab Kanti Basu, 'Political Economy of Land Grab', Economic and Political Weekly, April 2007, pp.1281-1282.

[11] Deepak Mishra, 2011, 'Behind Dispossession: State, Land Grabbing and Agrarian Change in Rural Orissa', Paper presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing, 6-8 April 2011

[12] Deepak Mishra, 2011, 'Behind Dispossession: State, Land Grabbing and Agrarian Change in Rural Orissa', Paper presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbing, 6-8 April 2011

[13] See "[Food sovereignty, political objective](#)"

[14] See [Causes, consequences and alternatives](#)

[15] Basu, 2007, p.1285.

[16] See Hugo Blanco, 2010, 'Foreword', in Derek Wall, The Rise of the Green Left, p.xiii.