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ABSTRACT



Studies and debates on the issue of land grabs have generated multiple terms and concepts that are used loosely and interchangeably, such as large-scale land acquisitions, land grab, land deals, land enclosure, and land rush, among others. Explanations and critiques of such terms have built and enriched our knowledge. Yet, there is one term that has been under-explored: land rush. Here, we offer our own definition of a 'land rush', which has a different meaning from the other commonly used terms. These differences have important theoretical, methodological and political extensions and implications. Applying the lens of 'land rush' requires us to adjust our focus, and shows that the literature and public debates have focused on 'concluded, operational land acquisitions'; they have tended to be dismissive of 'failed land deals', blind to 'pin prick' types of land accumulation, and have rarely taken the 'land rush' itself as the unit of inquiry and subject of public debate in any systematic way. This has led to a fragmented knowledge. Using the concept of the 'land rush' enables us to connect the issue of land grabs to broader global social life more effectively. As such, it is a key concept in Critical Agrarian Studies.

KEYWORDS

Land rush; land grabbing; land deals; large-scale land acquisitions; land investments; land boom

Situating 'land rushes' in the land grabs literature

Global land grabbing has become a significant agenda point in political and policy debates and scholarly research during the past couple of decades. Multiple terms have been used, either interchangeably or in an overlapping manner, to refer to the phenomenon and its associated processes: these include land grabbing, land enclosures, resource grabbing, land deals, large-scale land acquisitions, large-scale land transactions, land investments, crop boom, commodity boom, commodity rush and land rush. These are not politically neutral terms.¹ Activists, policymakers and scholars have spoken of,

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¹There is no consensus when it comes to definition of these terms. For example, what does 'large-scale' mean (land-centric notion of scale? minimum of 200, 500, 1000 hectares?), or indeed, what does 'land grab' mean? As land grabbing is central to the conversation even about land rushes, it is important to clarify our own understanding of the term, which is,

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explained or defended their use of particular terms, and their eschewing of others. Explanations and critiques of terms often serve to clarify some lines of argument, frameworks of research and subjects of public debates, while simultaneously making others more confusing, partly through the conflation of terms and concepts. As a result, there remain a number of grey areas and under-explored aspects to these concepts, separately and collectively. This paper re-examines some of these interrelated concepts, and attempts to make sense of where these concepts stand and why it is important to offer definitional clarification. We do this by looking into the umbrella concept of the 'land rush', exploring what it is and why it is a key concept in contemporary Critical Agrarian Studies (we offer our definition further below). The 'land rush' concept is being constructed here in its multi-dimensional forms. While this concept serves as unit of inquiry, the concept note is written to exemplify this methodological suggestion, rather than to detail land rushes, land grabs, or land acquisitions as such.

One problem in the literature and public debates is the tendency to use different terms interchangeably, when these terms actually have competing connotations.² For example, if we refer to Indian company Karuturi's acquisition of 100,000 hectares of land in Ethiopia as 'land grabbing', this suggests something deeply political and unjust; if we use the term 'large-scale land acquisition' instead, this suggests a more technical approach, focusing on such aspects as the size of the land and the administrative process of acquiring it. The problem around terms also applies at another level: when one term such as large-scale land acquisition or land grab is used to refer both to the process of acquiring and reallocating *a specific block of land* or space in a specific moment, on the one hand, and to the generalized land fever and mad *scramble for land* in its amorphous form on the other hand. There is a conjunctural dimension in the meanings of terms, as for example, the term 'land grabbing' can be used to refer to a specific form of land grab of a demarcated space and such is generally understood and accepted as such in one moment in time, while exactly the same act of grabbing a space may no longer be considered as land grabbing in another moment. In the same manner, a concluded, operational land deal in the Land Matrix database could very well become a 'failed land deal' the following year; or, a failed land deal today could become a concluded, operational land deal a couple of years from now. These categories are social and political, and as such are dynamically changing. Conjunctures give meanings to terms, at least in the context discussed here. We will elaborate on this later. A third problem occurs when the politics of land control is conflated with the status of the capitalist enterprises planned for the land. For example, 'successful large-scale land acquisition' is the term used to refer to land acquisitions in which the promised capitalist enterprise actually materializes, while 'failed land acquisitions' refers to land acquisitions in which the planned productive enterprises do not materialize, even when the control of land actually changes hands.

The problems highlighted here are not trivial or semantic in nature, but are rather substantive in character and have theoretical, methodological, political and policy

the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms that involve large-scale capital that often shifts resource use orientation into extractive character, whether for international or domestic purposes, as capital's response to the convergence of food, energy and financial crises, climate change mitigation imperatives, and demands for resources from newer hubs of global capital. (Borras et al. 2012, 851)

²A similar observation was made recently by Liao and Agrawal (2024).

implications. This has relevance, for example, in defining the scope and extent of the phenomenon, and therefore what we want or ought to study. If we use three terms, namely, (i) concluded, operational land deals, (ii) failed land deals, and (iii) land rush, then we will see significant differences not only in land area and number of land transactions, but also in terms of social dynamics that matter and should be inquired into. More concretely, in a November 2020 tally in the Land Matrix (the world's largest database on land deals), 'concluded land deals' that are in various stages of operation amounted to a total of 137.1 million hectares, while 'failed and abandoned land deals' accounted for a total of 26.5 million ha. Taking these two categories, plus other categories in the database ('no information', 'contract expired', 'changed ownership'), the total tally of the database was 193 million hectares of land. Following the logic of the concept of the 'land rush', this means that it is the 193 million hectares figure that is more useful (but which has to be paired with other land areas covered by land transactions but not captured by databases). We contend that there are many important land rush-related land transactions that cannot be captured by data-gathering techniques of big databases like the Land Matrix; furthermore, the Land Matrix has deliberately excluded some categories of land transactions.³ It means too that the unit of inquiry – if we want to understand the wider meanings of the phenomenon – ought to be all the categories and how they shape one another, as well as other land transactions outside the categories of databases like Land Matrix. The literature and public debates have focused on 'concluded, operational land acquisitions' that are usually corporate-driven. But as we will demonstrate in this concept note, there are other categories of land transactions that are equally important. The 'land rush' itself has not been seen as the unit of inquiry and subject of public debate, at least not in any systematic way. This has led to a fragmented knowledge.

Naming a phenomenon and explaining the rationale behind the name will help us to study that phenomenon. In this concept note, we will focus on the social phenomenon of the spectacular competition to take control of land, that is, the concept of the land rush. We define a *land rush* as denoting a chaotic, relatively short-lived, historical juncture marked by a sudden surge in demand for land, accompanied by an extremely speculative and competitive, often violent and convulsive transition from one set of rules on commodity and land politics to another. More narrowly, it refers to that insurgent moment when the prevailing 'land regime' is seriously challenged but not yet fully replaced by a new regime. A land rush encompasses various elements, namely, land enclosures, land grabs, land deals, land acquisitions, commodity booms – small, medium and large – and multiple actors (state, non-state, corporate and non-corporate), and has distinctive socio-political features, namely, wild speculations, hyperbolic claims, fantastic spectacles, and a convulsive atmosphere. We draw inspiration from some of the compelling accounts of commodity rushes in history, including Tsing (2000), Mountford and Tuffnell (2018) and Ngai (2021) on gold rushes in the second half of the nineteenth century; Clark and Foster (2009) and Cushman (2013) on guano rushes of the nineteenth century; and Bohanon and Coelho (1998) and Hightower (2018) on the Oklahoma land rush of 1889, among others.

³For a progression of how the Land Matrix database has evolved – and been 'officially' (re)interpreted – over time, see Anseeuw et al. (2013), Nolte, Chamberlain, and Giger (2016), Lay et al. (2021). For a critical re-reading of the Land Matrix, see Edelman (2013), Oya (2013), Scoones et al. (2013); and for a more recent perspective, see Borrás et al. (2022).

Land rushes tend to have a wider scope in terms of land area and affected population than land grabs because these necessarily include land transactions that, for various reasons, are not and cannot be captured by databanking initiatives as explained elsewhere in this concept note. Thus, in our estimate, the contemporary land rushes are likely to have wider scope than the 193 million hectares accounted by the Land Matrix databank. This means not only that global land rushes are more extensive than previously thought; it also suggests that contemporary phenomena are far more complex and far-reaching than those we have seen before, requiring new thinking and practice in order to respond to unprecedented challenges.

During the past decade, multiple global crises involving food, fuel, energy, the environment, climate, finance, labour mobility and migration and governance have unfolded from and converged in a common logic: the crisis of large-scale, fossil-based, financialized capitalist industrial development. The symptoms of the crises include the chronic hunger of close to a billion people, although the global supply of food is more than enough to feed everyone; the continuing dependence on fossil-based energy which aggravates climate crises; the increasing role of global finance capital and indebtedness in everyday life (Fairbairn 2014; Gerber 2014; Isakson 2014; Visser, Clapp, and Isakson 2015); the rise of jobless economic growth, inequality, rural social decay, and mass discontent of citizens with their conditions (Davis 2006; Edelman 2021; Patel and Moore 2017; Scoones et al. 2018).

Under contemporary capitalist conditions and assumptions, state and corporate responses to these crises have largely been based on the assumption and justification that, worldwide, there are marginal, under-utilized, empty and available lands that can be put to efficient use to produce more food and other commodities as well as renewable energy. It is assumed and justified that this land can open investment frontiers, generate employment and lead to economic development. This is hailed as a 'quadruple win' for the state, corporations, citizens and the environment (Deininger and Byerlee 2011). This assumption facilitated the recent global commodity rushes for food, feed, fuel, renewable energy and carbon through nature conservation. All these require a supply of biomass such as soya, sugarcane, corn, palm oil or trees, and gave rise to flex crops and commodities (Borras et al. 2016). The commodity rushes required abrupt and extensive changes in land use and 'land politics', or the process of determining who gets what land and how, how much they get, for what purposes and with what implications. Coinciding with unprecedented urban expansion, and thus the capital's requirement to convert land uses from agriculture to non-agriculture, the commodity rushes have unfolded in ways that included a component of 'global land grabbing',⁴ or have unleashed a broader social phenomenon, the global 'land rush'.

Land rush, land boom and land regime

An analysis of land rushes cannot be separated from our understanding of the concept of 'land regime'. Land regimes – established patterns of rules on how to govern access, use,

⁴See, among others, von Braun and Meinzen-Dick (2009), Cotula (2009), Zoomers (2010), Peluso and Lund (2011), White et al. (2012), Dell'Angelo et al. (2017), Levien (2018), Andreas et al. (2020), Grajales (2021), Neef et al. (2021). Contemporary struggles over land are necessarily fought in rural-urban continuum in both Global South and North (Borras and Franco 2023, Ch. 2).

control, and ownership of land across sectors and in the rural–urban continuum – are thus questioned, reinterpreted, recast, or disregarded amid increasing unruliness causing, and at the same time an outcome of, wild speculation and the spectacularization of potential fortunes that can be derived from seizing blocks of land or territories. This can happen either physically or through a variety of mechanisms of land control grabbing, directly or indirectly, especially in the era of financialization and digitization when effective control of land may well be seized by distant, depersonalized finance capital (Clapp and Isakson 2018; Fairbairn 2020; Fraser 2019; Ouma 2016; Salerno 2017), prompting Ashwood and colleagues to ask ‘what owns the land?’ (Ashwood et al. 2022). This is all part of a process of ‘rendering land investible’, in the words of Tania Li (2017), and usually occurs quickly, within a particular historical juncture.

A land rush can emerge from any one – or a combination – of three broad possibilities: (a) there is a sudden massive speculative demand for land but no clear set of rules on how to effectively respond to such a demand; (b) there is a clear existing set of rules on (re)allocating land control and use but this does not allow the surging speculative demand for land to be met; or (c) there is a new set of rules on land (re)allocation and land use change and a push by some to get ahead of the rest in taking advantage of such rule changes. In all cases, a land rush has the element of extreme urgency and is relational. The sense of urgency is due to the desire to be ahead of others; a land rush is thus extremely time-sensitive. The land rush is centrally about changes over a timeline, whether it is about how land prospectors and investment prospectors are able to take advantage of new rules in investing in land, or are able to push for changes from old rules to new rules. It is about the changing correlation of state and social forces drawn to the land rush, and the alteration of the structure of political opportunities for such forces. Its relational character can be seen in at least two ways. First, the actions of any one player can only be calculated in relation to those of others, whether one is offering land or wanting to grab land. Second, the rush is inherently multi-sited geographically, spurred on by wild projections about how much land is required by land prospectors and the desire of investment prospectors to offer as much land as possible, where comparative features of these offerings can make a huge difference in the outcomes of the land rush. Here, the geographical spread in land rushes is taken in relative terms: it can be bounded within a national territory, a transnational regional area, or global. This geographically multi-sited characteristic also contributes to a temporal unevenness, and the combination of the two means that any major land rush is actually plural and diverse, and is more precisely referred to as ‘land rushes’ (Messerli et al. 2014). Moreover, we take land and land control here as something that have multiple meanings: land control to shape food and agricultural production systems; land control to capture carbon in forestry conservation projects; land control to allow for the capture of hydropower in a mega dam project; land control to capture subsoil minerals; and so on. This allows for broader meanings of land control and land grabbing to include ‘green grabbing’ and ‘water grabbing’ (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Franco and Borras 2019; Mehta, Veldwisch, and Franco 2012; Ojeda 2012). Holliday (1999) used the term ‘(world) contagion’ in his descriptions of the California gold rushes in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As indicated above, we understand *land regime* as the routinized, relatively stable pattern of state and non-state, formal and informal institutional rules that govern the claims over ownership, control, distribution, valorization and use of land in relation to

capitalism. We say that land regimes exist in relation to capitalism because, although the latter is not the only global variable that shapes land politics, it is certainly the most crucial one today (Moore 2015). The concept of 'land regime' builds on scholarship which broadly advocates the importance of examining co-existing land-based social relations, or 'landscapes', 'land tenure systems' or 'land tenure regimes', usually in relation to something wider.⁵

We differentiate between a land rush and a land boom. For us, a *land boom* is dynamic and energized, but at the same time regularized, normalized and routinized and accommodated within existing or newly emerged sets of rules and procedures governing its transactions. A schema can be a useful heuristic tool, and in this context we suggest locating the land boom as a category between '(large-scale) land acquisitions' and 'land rushes'. It shares the element of relatively routinized, regularized and legitimized processes with the former but, like the latter, it also has some elements of being insurgent – challenging pre-existing limits of procedures – although not to the extent that it generates a convulsive land fever in a generalized atmosphere of irrationality, and driven primarily by spectacle and spectacularization.⁶ Land rushes generally cover a much shorter time period than land booms.

Land enclosures, land deals, land grabs, large-scale acquisitions – and whatever other terms we might use to describe land transaction processes – necessarily continue to occur after a land rush. The waning of land rushes is linked to the routinization of new aspects of the old land regime, or the building of emerging commodity and land regimes. It involves the routinization of surging land acquisitions without the spectacle, hyperbolic spectacularization and frenzy of a land rush. This transforms meanings discursively and practically, so that what were once considered irregular, scandalous and illegitimate land grabs become regular, normal and legitimate land transactions. When this happens, the gathering of data for databases that are dependent on public information about land transactions (media coverage, etc.) are necessarily impacted: key monitoring and measuring mechanisms that depend on media coverage will be weakened because many transactions no longer attract media interest. We believe that what we now see globally is a relatively stable pattern of rules on commodity and land frontier making which is post-land rushes but a continuing land boom. Meanwhile, land grabs go on all the time, with or without land rushes. This requires the study of land rushes themselves, and the study of the relationship between (large-scale) land acquisitions/accumulation, land booms and land rushes, to be at least historical in method (Bloch 1954; Edelman and León 2013; Hobsbawm 1972), and preferably comparative.

Land rush and spectacle

The land rush itself has an element of what Tsing (2000, 118) calls an 'economy of appearances', i.e. 'the self-conscious making of a spectacle [that] is a necessary aid to gathering

⁵There are several excellent studies upon which we build our understanding of the concept of land regime, including: Lowe et al. (1993), Mitchell (1996), Blomley (2003), Ribot and Peluso (2003), Lund (2006), Guyer et al. (2007), Jepson, Brannstrom, and Filippi (2010), Boone (2013).

⁶Our idea of the schema on 'land acquisition/land boom/land rushes' draws on work by Derek Hall on the relationship between land grabs and crop booms (Hall 2011).

investment funds [...] It is a regular feature of the search for financial capital'. She elaborates:

In speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy. (Tsing 2000)

Moreover, prospecting is a two-way process, with effort emanating from both investors and hosts: 'Nor are companies alone in the conjuring business in these times. In order to attract companies, countries, regions, and towns must dramatize their potential as places for investment. Dramatic performance is the prerequisite of their economic performance' (Tsing 2000). Tsing thus advances the notion of 'spectacular accumulation', which

occurs when investors speculate on a product that may or may not exist. Investors are looking for the appearance of success. They cannot afford to find out if the product is solid; by then their chances for profit will be gone. (Tsing 2000: 141–142)

Using Tsing's concept to look at the land rushes during the land two decades, we see that the conjuring, spectacle and frenzy are far greater than the actual, localized gold rush that Tsing was studying in Indonesia in the 1990s. The land rushes represent a feverish global convergence of old and new actors and forces, driven by hyperbolic projections and perceptions of potential windfalls, and resulting in a convulsion of the existing order amidst fundamental contradictions, uncontrollable urges and insurgent attempts to rapidly recast or reinterpret the institutional rules in the belief that this is necessary to realize the promised windfalls.

We contend that in land rushes the number of actors drawn in by the seduction of a potential windfall ends up far exceeding the probable optimum number of investors, and the amount of land that is implicated far exceeds the amount that is realistically required. No one knows exactly how many investors and how much land are required to reach the optimum point of supply and demand (of commodity and money); this creates an atmosphere of extreme competitiveness in terms of speed and timing, which in turn creates an incentive for competitors to shirk the rules in order to 'get ahead', like the 'sooners' who surreptitiously moved to stake their claim on a prime plot before the official start of the homesteading run during the Oklahoma land rush of the late nineteenth century. Contributing to this febrile, 'get ahead' atmosphere is the fact that most land rushes have elements of extractivism, which in turn entails the issue of the potential exhaustion of what is being extracted, not just in terms of land area, but also of water, subsoil minerals, timber, and so on, especially in the era of global extractivism (Alonso-Fradejas 2021; McKay, Alonso-Fradejas, and Ezquerro-Cañete 2021; Ye et al. 2020).

In the commodity and land rushes of the early twenty-first century, the frenzy developed through two parallel sets of prospecting: by those engaged in *land prospecting* (potential investors, brokers) and those engaged in *investment prospecting* (investment hosts, usually nation-states), as exemplified by white South African farmers and several African governments, respectively (R. Hall 2011; Lavers 2012; Rahmato 2011). The intensity of the frenzy spirals upward, creating a supercharged

bandwagon effect in both land and investment prospecting. The bewildering array of actors implicated includes the media; in a mutually reinforcing cycle, media exposure can generate a spectacle, while reporting on a spectacle can boost the media's profile and popularity.

Forms, currents and extent of land rush

The dominant scholarship has consistently taken land transactions and land acquisitions as the units of inquiry – often in a plot by plot, company case by case method – and not *land rushes*. A few studies have flagged the notion of land rush (e.g. Arezki, Deininger, and Selod 2015; Wolford et al. 2013; Zoomers 2010; Zoomers, Gekker, and Schäfer 2016), although they do not go so far as to identify the land rush *as the unit of inquiry*, nor do they define it systematically. We build on and extend this initial body of knowledge by highlighting three currents of the land rush and the interactions between them: Current 1 pertains to operational land deals; Current 2 refers to non-operational land deals; Current 3 comprises land deals outside the spotlight. Here, being out of the spotlight means that these land transactions are either not officially or publicly sanctioned and advertised and/or the individual land plots involved are too tiny to draw the public attention to them. One outcome of this is that policy observers and academic researchers do not accord the same degree of attention to these process as compared to big land deals (usually corporate) that get the attention of the media and the general public. The latter category mostly consists of 'pin prick' types of everyday land accumulation, often by stealth; these are cases in which land use and control are changed extensively often without the direct involvement of corporations, most commonly driven by powerful individuals or non-corporate groups seeking to exploit ongoing commodity and land rushes. This category often involves relatively small individual plots of lands, but it happens in a widespread manner so that their aggregated extent in terms of land area can be quite extensive. In many communities where this category unfolded, the agrarian and ecological transformations that it caused to happen were be far-reaching, as for example transforming customary swidden agriculture-based communities into a monotonous monoculture based on individual property and farm operation. In a way, it represents a death of agrarian communities through a thousand and one cuts (Borras, Franco, and Nam 2020). Current 3 transactions include distress sales, land brokering, theft, coercion, swindling, contract grower arrangements, etc., and are a key element of the frenzied land rush, yet they have rarely been examined in that context.⁷ Meanwhile, with a small number of exceptions in the 2010s,⁸ Current 2 cases have been largely understudied despite their profound social, political and environmental impacts – although there has been a perceptible recent rise in interest in this phenomenon.⁹

The literature has predominantly focused on Current 1. Yet, Currents 2 and 3 combined are likely to be more widespread than Current 1. Moreover, even within the dominant

⁷The few exceptions include Hilhorst, Nelen, and Traoré (2011), Kandel (2015), Friis and Nielsen (2016), Beban and Gorman (2017), Xu (2018), Borras, Franco, and Nam (2020), Woods (2020).

⁸Among the early publications that flagged this issue are Hunsberger (2010), Kaag and Zoomers (2014), Schönweger and Messerli (2015).

⁹Among the key works are Baird (2020), Borras et al. (2022), Broegaard, Vongvisouk, and Mertz (2022), Cochrane et al. (2023).

Current 1-oriented perspective, much of the literature has failed to consider the unfolding of the land rush in important thematic undertakings, including: (1) nature conservation (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Brockington and Igoe 2006; Büscher et al. 2012), (2) industrial tree plantations (Gerber 2011; Kröger 2014); (3) extractive industries (Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington 2011; Peluso 2017); (4) state territorialization agenda (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995); and (5) a bewildering array of climate change mitigation and adaptation projects such as hydropower projects and wind farms (Dunlap and Arce 2022; Hunsberger et al. 2017; Stock 2023).

Current 1-centred analyses and databases seem to have blinkers, which result in inadvertently downgrading the other two currents, if not actually rendering them invisible. Delineating all three currents, how they differ, and why and how they are linked, is central to the understanding of land rushes. To illustrate: land deals that are not pursued are not always 'failed' land deals. They can still have an impact in at least three ways: (1) they play a deliberate role in conjuring a spectacle that is necessary to generate finance capital more generally; (2) they play a role in establishing the optimal point of land investment (extent of capital, amount of land); and (3) they can have unsettling impacts on affected communities and ecologies (Borras et al. 2022). Tsing (2000) highlights three key narratives, and the actors behind them, that underpin the 'economy of appearances': (a) the globalist dream of omnipresent capital; (b) the nationalist aspiration of the nation-state charting its own development trajectory; and (c) a sub-national regional frontier dream of breaking free from past cycles of marginalization. It is these processes that contribute to the production of the *co-constitutive* categories of 'concluded and operational land deals', 'failed and non-operational land deals', and the pin prick type of land accumulation.

The Land Matrix, the world's largest database on recent global land grabbing, indicates that as of late 2020 the scope of what it calls 'concluded large-scale land acquisitions' amounted to 137.1 million hectares – well down on Oxfam's much higher 2011 estimate of 229 million hectares (Zagema 2011). The two reasons for this lower figure were: (1) many planned and/or allocated land deals were later withdrawn, cancelled, or scaled down; and (2) the current Land Matrix definition excludes several types of investments including mining and nature conservation. The data on cancelled land deals have at times been used to suggest that land grabs were not as widespread as assumed, and that no further investigation was necessary on such cancelled deals.

In contrast, we argue that the scope of land grabs, especially operational land deals, is different from the *scope of the land rush*. In accounting for the scope of land grabs, the general focus, understandably, is on the extent of operational land deals (land deals that were formalized and finalized, and in which capitalist enterprises emerged). Different researchers suggest different categories that should be included or excluded in database building. Some track both operational and failed, non-operational land deals, but then go on to focus their analysis only on operational land deals. This is fine if we are tracking the actual extent of land deals that have become operational, and what impact they have, but this does not bring us close to a full understanding of the global land grabbing phenomenon, or the global land rushes, and their role in the contemporary dynamics of global capitalism.

Concluded and operational land deals are clearly central in the study of global land grabs and land rushes, but they are not the only important phenomena to be counted.

When we see the phenomenon through the lens of land rushes, as defined here, then the scope in terms of land area involved and people impacted and implicated is significantly bigger and wider. The scope of land rushes has to include – with equal importance – the land and people implicated through operational land deals, non-operational land deals, and the pinprick type of land accumulation, as we have explained above. Going further than these three types, it must also include the land acquisition and investment plans of governments and companies, even when these do not graduate to become real contracts involving land reallocation. For example, around 2008 the Mozambican government declared that millions of hectares of land were to be allocated for land investments under the ProSavana megaproject (Monjane and Bruna 2019); although this mega plan did not materialize, its ‘failure’ to date does not negate the existence of a government plan to acquire and reallocate use for these millions of hectares of land. Today, the ProSavana land is being eyed by the state for another approach to commercial land investors (Borras et al. 2022). The three types of land grabs, and the often hyperbolic projections given in press conferences, are all essential elements in the making of the global land rushes. Each of these elements deserves close examination and analysis in its own right. Taken together, the ways they co-constitute one another are key to our understanding of the meanings and implications of land rushes in relation to the crisis of global capitalism and capitalism’s attempts to tackle that crisis, as well as to our understanding of how to address such a phenomenon in the interest of social justice.

Concluding notes

A plot by plot, case by case approach to studying land deals, especially when aggregated at a sectoral (e.g. agriculture-related land deals), institutional (buying, renting, voluntary, coercive, and so on), and/or national scale is very useful in our understanding of global land grabs. The bulk of the literature on contemporary land grabbing has been pursued in this manner, and it has radically stretched the boundaries of knowledge on land grabs. In this concept note, we argue that the concept of the land rush is a useful complementary concept and approach in accounting for the social processes implicated in global land grabs. It builds on the previous and dominant approach that is largely case-oriented and/or sectoral, and aims to account for a wider range of actors, social processes, outcomes and impacts – direct and indirect, formal and informal, intended and unintended, expected and unexpected. Studies about large-scale land acquisitions, land grabbing and land booms are important and urgent, and lead to an understanding of specific spatial and sectoral impacts of such land transactions; they require us to study mechanisms of various cases, impacts on social relations (land and livelihoods, etc.) and socio-ecological entanglements (environmental impact, contribution to climate crisis, etc.), as well as looking at implicated actors and aspects: land grabbers, land grabbed, employed or displaced labour, profits and incomes of land investors and workers or contracted farmers, and tax incomes of governments, among others. Studies about land rushes will lead us to the same mechanisms and actors, but will include many more: distant and not immediately related sectors (e.g. effect on the real estate sector more generally, service sector more widely), and a bewildering array of actors, from construction workers to mechanics, from food peddlers to all sorts of shop owners and shop workers (pawnshops, money transfer outfits, telecommunications, etc.), bankers and money lenders,

tailors and dressmakers, carpenters and lawyers, advertisers and bounty hunters, hostels and brothels, transport providers, and all sorts of hawkers, scammers, brokers and swindlers (Levien 2021; Sud 2014). The impact of large-scale land acquisitions and land grabs is huge but relatively limited in space and time, and restricted to some aspects of social life; the impact of land rushes is far wider spatially, temporally and in terms of social relations, in the context of how land rushes disturb, recast and reshape broader spheres of global social life – food, labour, climate change, citizenship and geopolitics, among others. It is not a matter of which is the more important lens – either large-scale land acquisitions/land grabs or land rushes. Rather, it is vital that we understand both of these from a relational, multi-scale and multi-sited perspective, and see how they co-constitute one another in particular historical conjunctures. This makes the challenge of studying land grabs and land rushes more complicated and difficult, but ultimately far more rewarding for Critical Agrarian Studies.

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