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‘Foreword’

Saturnino M. Borras Jr.

In *Land Grabs, Environment and Migration in a Changing Climate*, Sara Vigil shows how environmental and migration narratives have been evolved and used to justify land grabs – resulting in policy interventions that heighten the very pressures that they purportedly aspire to address. Based on careful empirical investigation of experiences in Senegal and Cambodia, framed globally, Vigil reminds us that three of the defining global issues of today are climate change, migration and global land enclosures. What makes the book compelling is that it demonstrates that these three burning issues occur simultaneously not by mere coincidence, but are rather mutually constitutive of one another. What makes the book truly trail-blazing is its persuasive argument that it is important to study these three interrelated spheres as a single unit of inquiry, and thus, the unit of policy and political intervention. The scientific and political relevance of this book can be seen partly in one of the arguments by the author where she explains that despite the dominant contradictory assumptions that underpin the ‘migration as adaptation’ or ‘migration as security threat’ narratives, both perspectives can interact with the politics of climate change in ways that generate ‘self-fulfilling risks,’ which ‘make insecurity and maladaptation a reality that extends well beyond the landscapes where land grabs directly unfold.’

The importance of Vigil’s argument can be appreciated further when we take a look at a number of relevant key issues, where each is a contemporary reality that is dynamically changing quite fast, putting academic research always in a catch-up mode. What we will realize is that these are not random social spheres and phenomena, but rather are parts of a whole, which is exactly one of Vigil’s key points.

First, the global land rush was real, and not a pure hype by national governments and corporate investors. It could be that the period marked by the most intense investment dynamics when national governments wanting large-scale land investments have sought or received potential and actual investors – foreign and domestic corporations as well as foreign governments – and enticed them with attractive packages of incentives (tax holidays, token land rental fees, etc.) was around five years before and five years after the 2008 report on land grabs by the non-governmental organization GRAIN. This period is marked by a major global conjuncture: neoliberalism’s jobless economic growth was starting to generate mass frustration from the working people globally (which would later and in part take a concrete expression in their consequent mass support to right-wing populists), the politics around climate change have taken greater momentum inside and outside the UNFCCC’s Conference of the Parties (COP) platform and the build-up toward the 2015 Paris Agreement, as well as the shock of the 2007-2008 explosive converging multiple crises in finance, food and fuel. The complicated issue of land has been deeply implicated in each of these social processes, and such has been exponentially made even more complicated when the global land rush kicked in and spotlighted by international media. The world witnessed the great spectacle of the land rush – investors’ hyperbolic claims; the proliferation of land brokers, scammers, and swindlers; governments of investing corporations signing MOUs left and right. Today, such spectacle is generally gone. The media frenzy in reporting about land grabs was over. But all these do not mean that land grabs have stopped. In fact, land grabs related to climate change

mitigation and adaptation (big nature conservation projects, hydropower, and so on) may very well just be starting to gain momentum. In many places, these have continued, but do not generate so much controversies like a decade ago, except for the local communities directly affected. Land grabs have become ‘normalized’, and thus, invisibilized.

Second, land grabs have generated extensive scholarly literature and provoked political debates. One of the contentious issues is on how to quantify land grabs. International NGOs have been reporting big numbers, between 50 million and 200 million ha of land having been grabbed. This has been critiqued harshly by some academics as necessarily inflating the number of land grabs largely because many of these land deals were later withdrawn or canceled, and yet remain included in database tallies. If our aim is to count the extent of land grabs that involved corporate land deals that were pursued and are operational, such a critique is accurate.

However, this line of debate misses an important dimension of the land rush, namely, that it is important to take as unit of inquiry the land rush itself, and when we do, it means tracking three distinct but mutually constituted types of land deals. The three types are: corporate land deals that have been pursued and are fully operational, corporate land deals that were cancelled, scaled down or are still under negotiation, and non-corporate everyday forms of land accumulation, whether by individual rich farmers or a paramilitary or a land broker and swindler where such transactions usually occur under the radar of formal institutional monitors. Land deals that are not (yet) concluded, pursued and operational are assumed to have done no impacts (whether on local communities or broader institutions relevant to land, etc.), and so seem to be implicitly treated as irrelevant to any further research or political debates. But if we take a closer look at many of this type of land deals, in fact there were and are impacts – e.g. local communities could not return to their land or that their land was not returned to them anyway, or that the central state continues to claim the contested land and is looking for a new investors. Finally, the everyday forms of land accumulation that occur below formal institutional radar are just as an important component of the land rush, and in some places might be just as widespread as the other two types of corporate land deals. All commodity rushes – the California gold rush of the 1850s, the guano rush during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Oklahoma land run, and so on – had as key feature the spontaneous frenzy that involved a bewildering array of actors – brokers, speculators, scammers, swindlers and thieves, and not just the formal big corporations and their banks. If we take land grabs from the perspective of these three types, then it is most likely that the extent of land grabs during the past decade or so might have been far more extensive than previous estimates.

Third, the phenomena of global neoliberal capitalism’s jobless hyper economic growth rates that massively expanded the number of working people who were completely separated from their means of production and social reproduction (that is, land) and those who were not (yet) divorced from the land but have to combine multiple sources of income and livelihood strategies often within the rural-urban, agricultural-industrial corridor or continuum. They have different labels: precariat, footloose labour, informal workers, semi-proletariat, ‘working people’, or ‘classes of labour’.<sup>1</sup> We should also include here the ever presence of a significant number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) worldwide. Many of these working people ended up pursuing migrant wage work under a variety of conditions and

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<sup>1</sup> See Standing (2014), Breman (1996), Davis (2006), Moyo (2005), Shivji (2017) and Bernstein (2006), respectively.

institutional arrangements. For many of them, land grabs, past and present, have either caused their becoming a precariat, or that land grabs might have shut down for them any window of possibilities for a positive future different from their current condition, or both.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, often land grabs result in the establishment of a large-scale monoculture that relies heavily on machineries and chemicals for greater extent of production and greater degree of productivity. In itself, the expansion of large-scale industrial monocultures has direct implications for climate change because they cause so much greenhouse gas emissions. For instance, Liao and colleagues (2021, 15) studied 36.7 million hectares of large-scale land deals and found that, “clearing lands transacted between 2000 and 2016 (36.7 Mha) could have emitted ~2.26 GtC, but constraining land clearing to historical deforestation rates would reduce emissions related to large-scale land transactions to ~0.81 GtC”.

The four issues around land grabs discussed briefly above boil down to two dominant narratives that are at the heart of Vigil’s argument. On the one hand, there is the narrative that some agrarian systems have land uses and users that are *economically inefficient*, and therefore, it is justified on the basis of economic efficiency to take away the scarce land resources from such land use and users. The concept of ‘yield gap’ – that is, the level at which scarce land resources ought to generate economic production versus its actual production performance – is so central in the narrative of mainstream institutions such as the World Bank and is the principal justification for supporting and promoting large-scale land acquisitions. On the other hand, there is the long-standing narrative that disparages some agrarian systems, especially swidden agriculture and mobile pastoralism, as *ecologically destructive*. There has been a protracted campaign by international organizations and central governments for the sedentarization of such agrarian systems. Sedentarization of production necessarily frees up vast spaces needed in a mobile system. In turn, these freed up lands can then be reallocated to more modern way of production. Each of these two narratives has been powerful enough to radically recast land resource allocation and use. The era of climate change – or rather, the era of the particular kind of politics around climate change that we have today has transformed these narratives: these two narratives are increasing being deployed together – facilitating a deeper, wider, and faster penetration by capitalism of the rural communities of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The key issues raised above unfold in the changed global political climate, that is, amid the rise of right-wing populism. Many of these right-wing populists, whether in formal state power or are wielding enough power to pressure those who are in formal state power, are for further facilitating land grabs, are into all sorts of climate change denial, and disparage migrants<sup>4</sup> – putting a final touch to a full circle of the logic of a thread that strings together the three issues tackled in Vigil’s book. Each of the issues above is quite challenging to study, and deserves a full attention in scholarly studies. What Vigil did in her brilliant book is to study these together, and take as a unit of inquiry the very convergence of climate change, migration and land grabs. The result is a trail-blazing work that opens up a huge new frontier in scholarly work.

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<sup>2</sup> See discussion in Borras et al., (Forthcoming, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> The discussion on these two narratives are drawn from Borras and Franco (2018) and Franco and Borras (2019).

<sup>4</sup> See McCarthy (2019) and Scoones et al. (2021).

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