

Thesis title: The contemporary land rush in the *Altillanura*, Colombia

Abstract

Contemporary commodity rushes have severely impacted communities and natural ecosystems worldwide. The rush for land alone — one of the major instances of recent commodity rushes — has led to an increasing reconfiguration of land use and ownership, subsequently altering territories and ways of living. The aim of this thesis is to examine these dynamics in the context of Colombia. It investigates the interconnections between the recent land rush in the country and key spheres of social life: labour/social reproduction and state-citizenship relations, and looks at the possible implications of these interactions for social structures, institutions and politics nation-wide. In this light, the central research questions are: How do contemporary commodity and land rushes shape, and are reshaped by, the politics of labour and state-citizen relations in Colombia? What are the implications of such changes in terms of structural, institutional, and political shifts?

The analysis focuses on the Altillanura region or ‘high plains’ — a vast area of the tropical plains in the east of Colombia, and discusses the ways in which it became one key hotspot of the recent rush for land in the country. I trace the complex role of the state in this process, at the national and regional level, and discuss elements of spectacle and spectacularization that were an important part of the massive scramble for land in the region. Here I consider land deals pursued by foreign and domestic corporations and that turned operational; as well as other currents of the land rush such as: land investments abandoned halfway or those that remained as announcements, resulting in non-operational land deals; and everyday forms of land accumulation or the ‘pin prick’ type. This makes it possible to generate new insights into the global land rush, where different currents interact.

The analysis shows that the recent land rush in the Altillanura led to drastic changes in the land access of different rural communities, particularly that of several Indigenous peoples. These changes, in turn, impacted their productive and reproductive labor, as well as the ways in which they relate to the state. I also expose the attempts to recast the country’s institutional landscape to make way for land investment, and, conversely, the political opposition that this triggered among opposition parties, the media and civil society organizations.

Studies surveying the global land rush have typically centered on specific ‘land deals’, most of which become operational. This research, by contrast, puts the rush at the centre. Building on critical agrarian political economy and a historical approach, and the application of both ethnography and quantitative research methods, the study favors a system-wide perspective that can shed light on the varied currents, and the complex and far-reaching implications of the recent land rush, beyond particular land deal cases. By considering the broader interconnections between the contemporary land rush and different spheres of social life — and their effects — in relation to the country, this research contributes to a wider understanding on the impacts of the contemporary land rush more generally and generates new research questions.