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Land grabbing and agribusiness in Argentina: five critical dimensions for analysing corporate strategies and its impacts over unequal actors

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses the complexity of the land grabbing phenomenon in Argentina. We study land grabbing processes linked to the expansion of agribusiness by focusing on corporate regionally extended land grabbers' strategies through five dimensions: (1) forms of control over land (and other resources) are not restricted to the formal acquisition of property, (2) the role of both national and foreign actors are essential in land grabbing dynamics, (3) land grabbing is not expressed exclusively by the scale of the area traded, (4) the current cycle of land grabbing is part of the convergence of multiple crises and (5) forms of political action are complex and involve diverse positioning. We conclude that land grabbing mechanisms unfold differently depending on the diversity of socio-spatial formations they encounter in each territory and that forms of political action “from below” are complex and not restricted to overt conflict.

Keywords Land grabbing · Agribusiness · Social reproduction · Resistance · Argentina

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Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of land grabbing as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (economic, social and political). We have defined land grabbing as “a social process of transfer of control over land in terms of capital accumulation, the scale of which conditions access to land and other associated natural resources and/or control over its uses by other users in each socio-territorial situation” (Ramírez, Sosa Varrotti & Zorzoli, 2021). As other scientific literature has shown, as well as the denunciations of environmentalists, rural producers and indigenous leaders, land grabbing has also implied social impacts, injustices, conflicts and territorial displacement of local communities (Busscher et al., 2020).

Drawing on our previous work (Zorzoli et al., 2021), we delve into different critical dimensions and make conceptual proposals to study this phenomenon. We deploy a broad and comprehensive approach to land grabbing, not only from the review of critical studies but also articulating data obtained during geographically extensive and temporally extended fieldworks. Through the analysis of different cases, territories and actors, we seek to illustrate the diversity of the land grabbing phenomenon in Argentina and the specificities of each territorial response. While focusing on the Argentine variation of this process, we illuminate similar land grabbing phenomena in the Global South, not only for the period before 2010 but also for the less studied following decade.

Methodological approach

This work contrasts three doctoral pieces of research that examined the processes involved in the hegemony of agribusiness.¹Departing from different objects and questions, we operate through a reflexive endeavour to lead to some conclusions about the nature of land grabbers’ strategies and, secondarily, family farmers’

¹ Andrea Sosa’s thesis (2017) studies the role of agricultural mega-companies of Argentine origin in the financialisation of agriculture and analyses the effects of these two facets of financialisation in the processes of concentration of land and production. Through case studies, it shows the transformations in the productive organisation that these companies introduce and/or spread during their cross-border expansion and the territorial implications of these dynamics of accumulation.

“Ethnographing agribusiness. Impacts and consequences of the expansion of forestry plantations in a Piray community”—Delia Ramírez’s thesis (2017a)—addresses the development of forestry agribusiness, starting with the arrival of the multinational company, ARAUCO, in Misiones. This process led to the transformation of land ownership relations, labour regimes and the local population’s forms of access to different resources. Fieldwork lasted from 2014 to 2016 and involved a long-term ethnography in the Piray 18 colony.

From a similar ethnographic approach, Paula Serpe’s doctoral research analyses the emergence of experiences of “transition to agroecology” in areas of agribusiness expansion. This question is investigated in two localities in the northeast of Chaco province: Las Palmas and La Leonesa, the scene of the development of family farmers’ agroecological transition experiences in agribusiness expansion regions. The fieldwork was conducted during a collaborative ethnography between 2016 and 2019 (Hernández, 2019).

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strategies regarding land grabbing processes. One of our fieldworks (2012–2020) had a Mercosur scale (Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil), following the productive and financial strategies of trans-Latin agribusiness actors while also focusing on local derivations of their territorial impacts (in the Argentine Pampean region, the agricultural region of Young in Uruguay and Mato Grosso, in Brazil). The two other fieldworks took place in the Argentine Northeastern region, or NEA, from an ethnographic approach focused on territorial conflicts involving unequal actors (transnational agribusiness companies and local family farmers). While it is unavoidable to consider corporate actors' regional/multinational and constantly changing scale, we focus on analysing land grabbing processes in Argentina.

We recovered the data obtained in the three studies based on the formulation of a cross-cutting research question: what are the land grabbing dynamics linked to agribusiness expansion processes in Argentina? Which are the leading corporate strategies and those of family farming actors involved in these processes?

The corporate agribusiness actors analysed include a wide range of land grabbers: land grabbing processes studied in Misiones province are promoted by the transnational forestry agribusiness company ARAUCO²; the strategies of a national agribusiness rice company (NARC) operating in the Humid Chaco, specifically in the northeastern part of Chaco province, where there are wetlands of international importance recognised by the Ramsar Convention,³ and the strategies of trans-Latin mega-companies of Argentine origin in the Pampean region.⁴ Adecoagro, Los Grobo and El Tejar financialised agricultural mega-companies of Argentine origin currently under foreign control represent some of the strategies trans-Latin corporations deployed during their expansion in the 1990s and 2000s. At the beginning of the 2010s, each of them reached to control over 300,000 hectares in several Mercosur countries, with different combinations of commodities production, agroindustry and real estate business and of land leasing and purchasing strategies (Table 1).

In Argentina and other South American countries, significant land grabbing processes have been associated with (a) agriculture, (b) forestry plantations and (c) mining. According to estimates by Costantino (2019)—using the FAO scale criterion, that is, transactions of 1000 hectares or more—between 2002 and 2013, 56.1% of the land acquired or leased by foreigners in Argentina was for primary production for the market: 57.6% was for agricultural use, 29.5% for mining, and 12.9% for forestry. These numbers are illuminating; even though, as we shall see in the next section, we understand land grabbing as a broader concept exceeding foreignisation.

This paper considers only agribusiness-related land grabbing processes (both in the forestry and agro-industrial sectors), not mining-associated land grabbing or green grabbing. We understand that agribusiness land grabbing has specific characteristics that should be compared and analysed. Therefore, regions such as Patagonia

² Much of the information about ARAUCO we use in this article has been extracted from the company's publications: ARAUCO (2017, 2020).

³ Humedales Chaco, site number: 1366 <https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/1366?language=en>.

⁴ This region, which comprises several provinces (Buenos Aires, the south of Santa Fe, Córdoba, Entre Ríos and the north of La Pampa), is considered one of the most fertile in the world.

Table 1 Description of studied companies involved in land grabbing

Company's name	Main activity	Origin	Productive units present in	Max. hectares they approximately reached to control in Argentina (years)
ARAUCO	Forestry	Chile	Canada, United States, Mexico, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay), Chile	262,000 hectares (2017)
El Tejar	Agricultural commodities production/Real Estate	Argentina	Provinces in Argentina: Misiones, Buenos Aires, Entre Rios, Santa Fe	250,000 hectares (2009–2010)
Adecoagro	Agricultural commodities production/agro-industry/real estate	Argentina	Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay). Regions in Argentina: Pampean region, North of Argentina	200,000 hectares (2008–2009)
Los Grobo	Agricultural commodities production/agro-industry/real estate	Argentina	Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay) Regions in Argentina: Pampean region, North of Argentina	120,000 hectares (2008–2009 and 2012–2013)
NARC	Agro-industry	Argentina	Chaco province (Argentina)	7500 (2017)

Source: own preparation based on the information provided by the companies during interviews, in publications, or provided by newspapers, reports and scientific papers (2022)

are out of the reach of this analysis; even though it is an emblematic region for different types of land grabbing (green grabbing, mining-related land grabbing), it is not a territory in which agribusiness has gained relevance.

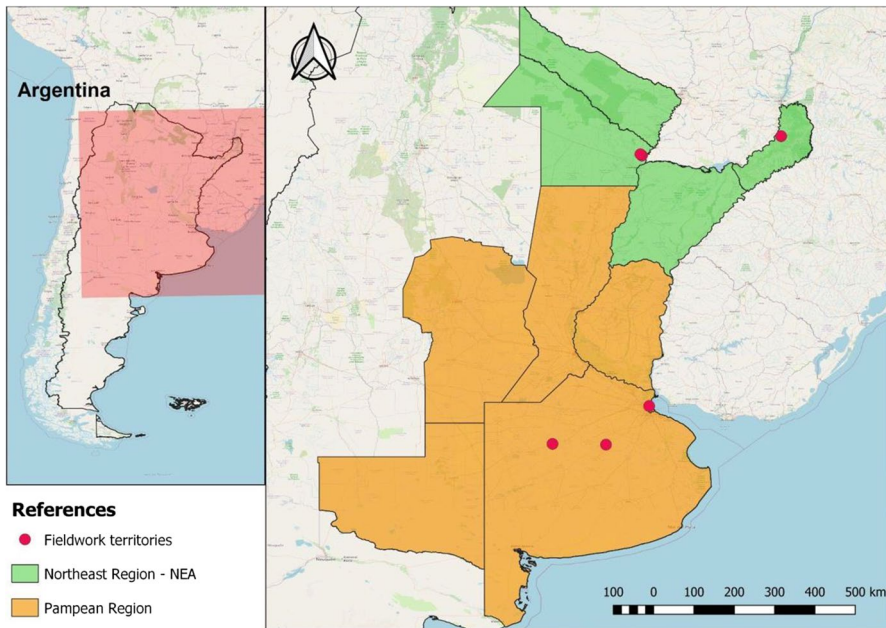
Soybean, maize, sugarcane or rice agribusiness is not identical to forestry agribusiness. The forms and characteristics of each crop's exploitation and their differential relevance regarding the national revenue impose specific characteristics on corporate and family farmers' strategies. Soybean, for example, is an annual crop involving land renting practises, no-till farming techniques, transgenic seeds and rapid capital rotation. In forestry, trees are grown for approximately 15 years using seedlings, and although the first transgenic trees have already appeared in Brazil, there are only exotic species produced in nurseries for forestry companies in Argentina. Furthermore, since these are long- or medium-term investments ("heavy capital" according to business jargon), the land is not commonly rented but mostly owned by corporations. Hence, the concept of forestry agribusiness (Ramirez, 2017a, 2017b) is used as an analytical category that accounts for a productive model based on large-scale production, intense use of capital, and new forms of organisation of production and access to and exploitation of different resources. These dynamic characteristics can be homologated to those of other types of agribusiness. As in Busscher et al. (2020), which studies land grabbing in the provinces of Corrientes (NEA) and Santiago del Estero (NOA), we investigate the impacts of land grabbing related to tree plantations and agriculture (mainly soybeans). For the hypothesis of this paper, the specificities of soybeans and tree plantations are of little importance, but rather the emphasis is on the local vulnerabilities of pre-existing actors, which determine the possibilities and modalities of resistance (Busscher et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2015; Lapegna, 2019; Ramirez, 2019; Serpe & Ramirez, 2021).

To explore the effects of land grabbing, we analyse land disputes in two NEA territories: the Piray kilometre 18 Colony in Misiones (referred to as Piray 18) and the neighbouring localities of Las Palmas and La Leonesa, in the province of Chaco. These experiences show social reproduction and organised resistance strategies of family farmers' who managed to remain in the territory in the face of land grabbing processes (Map 1).

A broad theoretical approach to land grabbing

Since the mid-2000s, social and non-governmental organisations, university researchers in several countries, and journalists have been actively analysing the phenomenon of global land grabbing. The first problematisation associated the phenomenon with the food and financial crisis of 2007–2008. The issues at the core of these early-stage approaches were expensive food, cheap land and the foreignisation of land ownership and use.

Reports produced for multilateral organisations such as the World Bank (Deininger et al., 2011) and the FAO (Cotula et al., 2009; Soto Baquero and Gómez, 2012) in the early 2010s produced and systematised primary data that showed the magnitude of the process identified. Against this background, since 2010, a series of studies have made progress in analysing situations overlooked in those reports: the role of finance



Map 1. Argentine regions under study and fieldwork territories. Source: prepared by the authors based on the Argentine National Geographic Institute of Argentina and Open Street Maps

capital and transnational corporations (Borras & Franco, 2012; Clapp & Isakson, 2018; Ouma, 2020), the role of governments and local private actors (Peters, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013) and alliances between domestic and foreign actors (Edelman, 2016), the relationship of the phenomenon with the crises of capitalism (food, energy, ecological and financial) (Borras et al., 2016), the distinction between “winners” and “losers” and the study of the social, political and ecological consequences of these processes (Edelman, 2016; Li, 2011), particularly in terms of food sovereignty and civil society resistance (Borras et al., 2012; Edelman, 2016). In addition, other studies have explored green grabbing (Fairhead et al., 2012), water grabbing (Mehta et al., 2012) and the singularities of the contemporary cycle of land grabbing in the framework of prolonged historical investigations (Edelman & León, 2014; Li, 2014).

The contributions nurtured a work agenda in which two main approaches can be distinguished: (a) narrow definitions derived from criteria established by the FAO, according to which land grabbing is identified via the foreignisation of land ownership, large land transactions and the quantification of the area traded defined in the abstract, with no relation to the specific nature of land use and (b) broad definitions, in which land grabbing is essentially control over land use and associated resources in terms of the valorisation of the capital that gains access to this control (Borras et al., 2013).

As part of the second trend, we are interested in exploring substantial aspects of contemporary agribusiness-led land grabbing dynamics in Argentina. On many

occasions, this phenomenon has been approached from the perspective of foreign ownership and large land transactions, their historical cycles and dynamic rhythms, their relationship with the financialisation of agriculture and the agribusiness model and their effects on family farming and food security and sovereignty. Reviewing such studies, in Zorzoli, Sosa Varrotti, Serpe and Ramírez (2021), we have outlined five key dimensions: (1) forms of control over land (and other resources) are not restricted to the formal acquisition of property, (2) both national and foreign actors are important in land grabbing dynamics, (3) land grabbing is not expressed exclusively through/by the scale of the area traded; (4) the contemporary cycle of land grabbing is part of the convergence of multiple crises and (5) forms of political action “from below” are complex and not restricted to overt conflict. In this article, we built into these dimensions—and structure the article accordingly—by contrasting in-depth research on these actors in various territories conducted by the authors between 2012 and 2020.

We address the complexity of the phenomenon by considering the strategies of corporate actors (transnational and trans-Latin companies) and, secondarily, some responses to land grabbing of subordinate and subaltern actors in different territories of the NEA region. Regarding the corporate actors, it is crucial to take into account their trajectories and the social and ecological conditions through which they perform capital accumulation strategies. We focus on these strategies’ effects on the practises of social reproduction and the organised resistance of local actors, especially in the family farming sector. We address this point in the last of the five dimensions and conclude that the responses of local actors cannot be reduced to organised resistance alone, but that there is a multiplicity of possibilities to be considered.

The forms of control over land and other resources are not restricted to formal acquisition of land ownership

Land grabbers can exercise control through different modalities and relationships: ownership, rental, concession, contract farming and formal or informal partnerships. Ownership is one of several ways of controlling land use and its resources (Borras et al., 2013; Murmis & Murmis, 2012; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Therefore, it does not necessarily imply dispossession or displacement for those who used the land that these actors now control.

The transnational forestry agribusiness company ARAUCO purchased large tracts of land throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, concentrating 230,000 hectares in a single Argentine province (Misiones). This strategy makes sense for these “heavy capital investments” as production time up to the moment of cutting is between 7 and 15 years (Ramírez, 2017a, 2017b).

Unlike ARAUCO, agricultural mega-companies founded in Argentina as large-scale leaseholders are “light-asset” companies. Most of them have expanded rapidly since the 1990s through a production organisation modality known as the sowing pool, a formal or informal partnership. Their central characteristic is that it does not fix capital in the means of production (land and machinery) and is based on the management of third-party assets. The horizontal expansion strategy that they

trialled, primarily in the Pampean region, had short-term leasing as the essential modality of access to land control.⁵

In many cases, those who rented their land to these companies were small- and medium-sized landowner farmers who became rentiers. It was either because they did not have access to the capital, technology and information needed to enter the agribusiness model (Gras & Hernández, 2014) or due to the rise in land prices driven by sowing pools' competition for land. Nevertheless, as shown in several studies (Craviotti & Gras, 2006; Córdoba et al., *Forthcoming*) and verified during our fieldwork in the province of Buenos Aires (Sosa Varrotti, 2017), many of these rentiers were included in these companies "networks" as beneficiaries of the commodities boom.

In sum, the more flexible mega-companies tended to rent land instead of buying it, outsource agricultural tasks instead of buying machines or permanently contracting labourers and manage third-party capital.

In the 2000s, these companies started renting large land extensions in so-called "marginal" regions, such as the Great Chaco. After they trans-Latinised in the mid-2000s, they also started buying land in other Mercosur countries to comply with their financial investors' requirements, mainly high-risk private equity funds.

Adecoagro had a different strategy regarding land. It emerged from a group of Argentine professionals searching for national and international capital. In 2002, George Soros' fund invested in the company, which allowed it to acquire the assets of PeCom Agropecuaria S.A., gaining control over approximately 70,000 hectares in Argentina, primarily located in the Humid Pampas, Corrientes and northern Santa Fe. The decision to buy rather than lease (a practise initially reserved for rice production) responded to a less flexible accumulation strategy than those deployed by the mega-companies analysed above. By integrating control of land, it owned with upstream agro-industrial linkages (such as milk production and its derivatives in Argentina) and, it fixed capital in the ownership of these assets, seeking to attract institutional investors with more stable and lower-risk business models. Since 2004, it has expanded its grain production to Uruguay and Brazil. In 2011, it opened its capital on the New York Stock Exchange. It was capitalised through the contributions of hedge funds, pension funds and a sovereign wealth fund (Qatar Holding) and intensified its expansion in two major areas of activity: agribusiness (production of sugar, ethanol and electricity in Brazil) and real estate (Almeida & Guida, 2017; Murmis & Murmis, 2012). The real estate business has been a pillar of Adecoagro's model ever since and an essential vector of land use and control transfers associated with the company's territoriality (Sosa Varrotti & Zorzoli, 2021).

Argentine agricultural mega-companies express land grabbing via purchasing and renting at the domestic and regional levels. In other words, the processes of land grabbing and foreign ownership in Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay have as

⁵ The modification in land leasing contracts (Congreso de la Nación Argentina, 1980) allowed the repetition of one-year contracts between the same natural or juridical persons over the same piece of land. These "accidental contracts" became the "contractual matrix of soybean production" (Cloquell, 2010, 186, translation by the authors).

their central actor companies from a country where other foreign capitals have also taken control over land. Thus, transnational and trans-Latin companies' practises show the heterogeneity of forms of control over land and other resources.

In the Humid Chaco (the subtropical and naturally irrigated portion of the Great Chaco), we studied NARC, a 7500 hectares national company dedicated mainly to rice production, in combination with other activities (pisciculture and a cattle breeding herd). It owns 87% of the land it controls and rents some surrounding plots. The expansion of the company was not limited to the global boom in commodity prices (2004–2013), but in that period, it had substantial growth: 40% (3180 ha) of the total area was purchased in 2008 (Hernández et al., 2017).

In addition, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, NARC has developed a series of agreements with the provincial state to finance infrastructure: a system of floodgates and pumping of water from the Paraguay River to fill and drain the different rice plots. This system affects the flood dynamics of Las Palmas and La Leonesa, the localities where NARC's facilities are located (Hernández et al., 2017). When heavy rains occur, rural roads near the rice mill are flooded for much longer than those far away. In this context, NARC is driving a process of water grabbing (Mehta et al., 2012), a discussion that goes beyond agribusiness, but it is an essential phenomenon in several territories (Santos & González Márquez, 2021).

Both national and foreign actors are essential to land grabbing drivers

In Latin America, land grabbing by national capital—associated with local or foreign financial capital or otherwise—is significant. So too is the intra-regional character of the process (combined with foreign ownership) or, in other words, the so-called trans-Latinisation of companies (mega-companies of Argentine origin in Uruguay and Brazil; mega-companies of Brazilian origin in Paraguay and Bolivia).

The Humid Chaco rice company, NARC, is nationally owned. The company expanded as the Las Palmas sugar mill withdrew in the 1900s. It was an Irish-owned agro-industrial complex that operated for more than 100 years (1882–1992) in the area. It came to occupy 100,000 hectares until 1969, when the Argentine state expropriated it, and its surface area was reduced to 60,000 hectares. In this context, in 1978, NARC's founder arrived from the province of Entre Rios to produce rice. First, he rented land from the mill and thus came to control 1100 hectares by 1990. Then, he bought those lands plus others when the mill closed, grabbing 3240 hectares. Finally, in 2008, he acquired 3180 hectares from another rice company, also withdrawing from the area. After that purchase, it was practically the only rice producer left. In short, NARC grew on land previously monopolised by the sugar mill, displacing other rice producers. As a result, rice production in the Humid Chaco became more concentrated.

As mentioned above, ARAUCO in Misiones could be considered a typical case of land grabbing via purchase and foreign ownership. This mega-company arrived in Misiones in 1996, when it acquired Alto Paraná SA—then the largest pulp mill in Argentina—from Citibank. Subsequently, ARAUCO also bought the facilities of the Celulosa Argentina Puerto Piray (CPP) project from Citibank, which had not been

completed because Celulosa went bankrupt in the late 1980s. In 2003, it bought PECOM Energía SA (former PECOM Forestal, the forestry division of the Argentine Perez Companac Group) and incorporated some 58,000 hectares, 23,500 hectares of which were already forested. In 2005, it acquired the forestry division of the Louis Dreyfus group in Argentina, which included a chipboard panel factory in Buenos Aires and a methanol and resins plant in Santa Fe. In approximately 10 years (1996 to 2006) ARAUCO came to own the aforementioned 230,000 hectares, located in Misiones in the departments of Iguazú, Montecarlo, General Manuel Belgrano, Eldorado, San Pedro, Libertador General San Martín, San Ignacio and Candelaria. Approximately 50 percent of this area consists of industrial tree plantations (Ramírez, 2017b).

As we have seen, since the beginning of this century, mega-companies of Argentine origin have extended their operations to other Mercosur countries. On the one hand, international financial capital flows (mainly institutional investors such as private equity funds, hedge funds and pension funds) have leveraged this expansion. On the other hand, to attract this type of capital and increase investment flows, it is necessary to offer a business model with diversified risks: geographical diversification and operation in different countries (climate risks and political risks).

In sum, their horizontal expansion was a vector of both land grabbing via leasing in Argentina and property grabbing and foreign ownership in neighbouring countries, giving a trans-Latin character to both land grabbing and foreign ownership in the region. The trans-Latin expansion strategy developed by these companies is one of the vectors of agricultural land control foreignisation in Uruguay (Figueredo et al., 2019), Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil (Bernardes et al., 2017). Through different combinations of forms of access (mainly rent and purchase), each of these companies came to control more than 200,000 hectares in these Mercosur countries. They have mainly engaged in the production of agricultural commodities and their derivatives, although they have developed other businesses such as meat, dairy, bio-fuels and energy production. Concerning land acquisition the real estate business has also been a vector of land grabbing linked to these actors. Both objectives—primary agricultural production and real estate—are present in decisions regarding the purchase and use of land, which express intertwined productive and financial logics (Sosa Varrotti & Gras, 2021).

Finally, distinguishing and relativising foreignisation as a land grabbing characteristic should not overshadow its importance. Works on this issue allowed us to visualise Argentina as a critical site of this process, raising questions about the forms of governance of local territory. In 2015, 6.09% of Argentina's national territory was in the hands of foreigners. This was most prevalent in Neuquén province, where 53.38% of the land was under foreign ownership. It was not until 2011 that the national government attempted to implement strategies to control this process, passing the law 26.737/2011 "Regime for the Protection of the National Domain on the Ownership, Possession or Tenure of Rural Lands". President M. Macri repealed this by decree in 2016. Argentina thus has some of the most permissive and weakest legislation regarding the protection of natural resources. Indeed, the Land Matrix database shows that Argentina is one of the five countries with the highest number of large land deals in Latin America (Ramírez et al., 2021).

Land grabbing is not exclusively expressed in terms of the scale of the area traded

In addition to the size of the area involved, it is vital to consider two interrelated dimensions in the operational logic of accumulation strategies: the area controlled and the capital involved in the productive operation (Borras et al., 2012; Edelman, 2016). In other words, the scale of the area operated must be related to the type of resource use and the capital involved. For example, 500 hectares of soybean in the Humid Pampas are not equivalent to 500 hectares in the Dry Chaco (Ramírez et al., 2021). In other words, land grabbing involves large scales of capital; in these processes, land control is central to capital accumulation (Borras et al., 2013). Gras and Cáceres argue that “in contrast to the concentration of land ownership, where land use is not a defining feature, in land grabbing phenomena, what and how land grabbers produce becomes central” (Gras & Cáceres, 2017: 168; translation by the authors). Land grabbing is not synonymous with the concentration of land ownership: the latter can express the former, but land grabbing can also find expression in the concentration of land use, production or capital (Ramírez et al., 2021).

In the case of ARAUCO, it is striking that it acquired land before the approval of Law 26.331 on Minimum Standards for the Environmental Protection of Native Forests, better known as the “forest law”, in 2007, which prevented this company from deforesting half of the hectares of land it owns for industrial forestry. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean a loss for the company. On the contrary, since the law was passed, and with greater intensity in recent years, ARAUCO has adopted “environmentalisation” practises (symbolic and material) in line with current globally oriented policies. To this end, in its corporate communications, the company presents itself as a “protector of nature” and its biodiversity by showing that a large part of its property is made up of natural reserves (Ramírez, 2017b).

NARC also had a change of public discourse after a socio-environmental conflict. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, residents of the urban neighbourhoods of Las Palmas and La Leonesa have denounced water contamination and health problems in children caused by aerial spraying during rice production. In 2010, NARC developed a technological response to the complaints: it installed pools with pacu (*Piaractus mesopotamicus*) production in the area adjacent to the village, arguing that the fish are “witnesses to a healthy environment”. The fish lived, and NARC has since developed an “innovative” rotary farming system between rice and pacu. This practise reduced the agrochemicals used in rice production, as the fish fertilise the soil and eat the snails, one of the pests that attack the rice crop. NARC then began to produce pacu for the market, integrating the entire vertical value chain (from fish farming to a private brand for sale to the final consumer). The “rice-pacu” (or “Pacú-arrocero”) thus became the hallmark of NARC, now presented as an environmentally sustainable company (Hernández et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, even though the size of the landholdings they control is a common denominator for mega-companies, recent shifts towards the intensification of capital in agriculture can be observed. However, this does not mean that the contemporary land grabbing process has ended: deceleration and even withdrawal (Gras & Cáceres, 2017) are possible land grabbing dynamics involving a rearrangement of social actors. We will return to this issue in the following section.

Here, we would like to emphasise that land grabbing is not limited to a quantitative measure defined in the abstract. It should not only be read in terms of the scale of the area traded, since different land uses require different capital scales. It is also necessary to relate the scales of land and capital operated at one point to other strategies deployed at other points in time linked to business trajectories.

The current cycle of land grabbing is part of a convergence of multiple crises

Periods of slowdown or withdrawal of processes underpinned mainly by mega-companies highlight the differential effects of the historical confluence of food, financial, energy and ecological crises. This specific feature distinguishes it from other historical cycles of grabbing (Borras et al., 2013). For example, the more flexible mega-companies, such as Los Grobo and El Tejar, have long insisted on calling this way of doing business by minimising fixed assets a “network model” (Sosa Varrotti, 2015). However, since they first incorporated international venture capital (mainly private equity funds) into their structures in the second half of the 2000s, their strategies have progressively shifted from the low fixed-asset business model. They have embarked on processes of acquisitions via buyouts in Mercosur. When analysing the trajectories of these two “network” mega-companies, there are moments of expansion, deceleration and withdrawal (Gras & Cáceres, 2017) in the land grabbing processes they have deployed.

These cases expanded horizontally between 2005 and 2012. After that, they significantly reduced the number of hectares controlled, both in Argentina and in other Mercosur countries. This strategy suggests a correspondence between the contemporary land grabbing cycle and a series of conditions. Globally, this includes fluctuating international commodity prices and, regionally, more restrictive regulations on foreign ownership of land in various countries (CGU/AGU ruling no. 01/2008-RVJ of 2010 in Brazil and Law 26.737 of 2011 in Argentina). This cycle was influenced by rising land prices and public fiscal policies (such as export duties on soybeans in Argentina) at a local level. Finally, at the agribusiness companies’ level, an internal condition was the increasing control of institutional investors over their decisions. Regarding the latter, the slowdown in this cycle of land grabbing expressed the specific dynamics of these financial capitals’ short termism (Sosa Varrotti & Frederico, 2018).

Although the cycle of horizontal expansion via purchase or lease slowed around 2013 for both “network” mega-companies, their business strategies show different logics of accumulation. These can be distinguished according to whether they were controlled by foreign financial capital or by local capital. They both show similar behaviours concerning the slowdown of land acquisition and even the sale or non-renewal of leases (withdrawal) by large landholdings. However, there are differential expressions concerning their deceleration/withdrawal strategies, which in turn respond to their previous business schemes, their respective financial situations, the territories where they were present and the power relations that, in each case, were established with local actors and within their boards of directors.

El Tejar is an example of an unsuccessful exit from the operation. Due to excessive leverage, clashes with the Brazilian agrarian bourgeoisie in the region of Mato

Grosso (Brazil) and poor agronomic and real estate decisions, the founding families lost their majority on the board of directors in 2011, leaving it in the hands of international institutional investors (Sosa Varrotti & Frederico, 2018). The change in the company's management implied a change in strategy. It did not renew land leasing contracts and started selling much of the land acquired in Argentina and Uruguay (withdrawing its operations from those countries). Instead, it focused on its business in Brazil and began to acquire large-scale machinery for the first time.

Unlike El Tejar, at Los Grobo, the valuation and subsequent exit were successful from the holding company's perspective; the founding family still held the majority on the board of directors. The exit from the investment was carried out based on a financial and productive opportunity: it sold the Brazilian operation to the Japanese company Mitsubishi. It then bought Agrofina (an agrochemical plant) in Argentina (Agrositio, 2013), strengthening its vertical integration strategy (which was substantially different from El Tejar's). In 2016, it finally achieved foreignisation by selling 70% of its shares to a private equity company.

The purchase of Agrofina expressed another aspect of the distinctive character of land grabbing concerning the dynamics of capital accumulation. The decision to downsize the area controlled does not respond exclusively to a financial valorisation, nor does it express, necessarily, a deceleration of accumulation. In this case, the expansion towards upstream chains, as Murmis and Murmis (2012: 496) indicate, is part of what seems to be the "evolutionary path" of some sowing pools (the scheme from which the growth of both Los Grobo and El Tejar emerged). This means a shift from land investments (through leasing or purchase) to grabbing different links of the production chain.

Other mega-companies with a less flexible model (working mainly on their own land and owning their facilities and machinery) behave differently from those described so far. A paradigmatic example is Adecoagro, which owns more than 30 dairy plants and controls more than 400,000 hectares in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay (Bertello, 2018, Seeking Alpha, 2020a). A third was leased for sugar production in 2016, and a seventh for soybean production (Oliveira & Hecht, 2016). Analysing its trajectory in terms of the area planted in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay from data provided by the company (Adecoagro, 2020) and Seeking Alpha (2020b), we have seen only a slight slowdown in horizontal expansion since the 2012/13 season. This trend is linked to the end of the extraordinary cycle of international commodity prices (which had been rising consistently since 2002), and the increased restrictions on land purchases for foreigners in Argentina and Brazil mentioned above. More recently, it has expanded the area controlled for its sugar-energy business in Brazil: 125,000 hectares planted with sugar cane in 2017, mainly via leasing, to around 170,000 hectares in 2020 (Adecoagro, 2020).

In short, the acreage did not fall substantially after 2012, and the company focused on its sugar-energy industry. The condition for this has been the strategy of fixing capital in industrial units with flexible production capacity (sugar, ethanol and electricity) in Brazil. As a result, this agro-industrial complex accounted for a more significant proportion of its turnover, and the focus thereby shifted from commodity production to agro-fuel and energy production. Consequently, a higher percentage of the planted area is allocated to sugar as a flex crop.

This process is accompanied by capital reinvestment in the sense of greater vertical integration and business diversification. The multiple and flexible uses of crops also express the accumulation strategies at the convergence of the multiple crises.

This flexibility made it possible to generate higher yields in 2020 than in previous years despite the instability caused by COVID-19. For example, when the pandemic hit during the first quarter of 2020, the ethanol business was affected by lower international oil prices and lower demand for biofuels because people were travelling less. Therefore, the company reduced its crushing rate but accelerated again during the second half of the year, more than compensating for the initial reduction (in July 2020, it crushed a record 1.7 million tonnes of cane). In the last quarter of 2020, sugar production increased to take advantage of higher relative ethanol prices: it diverted 50% of the company's total return to sugar production, compared with 6% in the same period of the previous year (Adecoagro, 2020; Sosa Varrotti & Zorzoli, 2021).

Forms of political action “from below” are complex and not restricted to overt conflict

The territorial inscriptions of the logics of accumulation that have energised land grabbing processes have not been deployed on “empty land” but on territories (Mançano Fernandes, 2005, 2009). In other words, land grabbing processes encounter several kinds of friction, including the practises and strategies of local actors with long trajectories of territorial presence. Disputes over access to land raised by small producers' organisations can reconfigure how the agribusiness model expands.

The dynamics of agricultural globalisation expressed in many parts of the NEA region refer to a recent history of disarticulation of capital–labour relations in agro-industrial complexes. The strategies of social reproduction—understood as the subaltern actors' practical sense of resource management—articulate long- and medium-term historical trajectories with specific situations. In the NEA provinces of Chaco and Misiones, there is a substantial presence of family producers⁶ who have persisted despite the expansion and hegemony of agribusiness (Ramírez, 2019; Serpe & Ramírez, 2021).

In the family farming sector in both provinces, we have observed similar strategies to ensure survival. As part of the household economy, family farmers in Chaco and Misiones have learned to produce within their own families. The domination of capital over rural labour forces has meant that households have developed capacities to guarantee their food supply (Gordillo, 1995; Meillassoux, 1977; Trincherro, 1995). On the one hand, there are similarities in the capital–labour relations that mediated the processes of spatial occupation. On the other hand, there is a substantial divergence in the forms of territorial organisation. These similarities and differences influenced each territory's production of social reproduction strategies (Serpe & Ramírez, 2021).

⁶ The official designations of family farming at the national level refer to a broad spectrum of producers: from impoverished farmers with a certain degree of capitalisation but without the capacity to sustain the accumulation process to peasants who develop economic strategies that minimise their external links. Each province made declinations of the category according to the actors involved in the negotiations (Schiavoni, 2010). In Chaco and Misiones, it refers to peasants who produce mainly for self-consumption with minimal sale of surpluses.

The cases studied showed us that social reproduction strategies in agriculture in the NEA are not entirely new in the repertoires of family producers. Still, they acquire different relevance depending on the moment and activity, allowing family producers to subsist and remain in their land despite adverse contexts, resorting to diversifying sources of income and organisational forms (Serpe & Ramírez, 2021).

Similarly, we observed that collective organisation is a powerful tool for family farmers' land control. It does not imply a permanent state of resistance, nor does it necessarily mean that conflicts are shaped as a manifestation of antagonistic logics. In any case, collective strategies of access to land were activated in specific situations (Serpe & Ramírez, 2021). In Las Palmas and La Leonesa, there was conflict in the mid-1990s. The lands of the sugar mill were auctioned off, and the families of former workers took different actions to prevent the sale of their lands: the indigenous communities sought advice from an NGO and obtained community titles⁷ for more than 6000 ha; the Creole peasants organised themselves in the Union of Small Producers of Chaco (UnPeProCh) and reached agreements with the province to guarantee land for their associates. The lands that remained in irregular situations became the object of conflict in the years of the commodity price boom. Cattle and soybean producers wanted to move in with the support of federal forces, expelling many people. However, the resistance of UnPeProCh and other organisations prevented some violent evictions (Domínguez, 2009). As Busscher et al. (2019) observed in Santiago del Estero, collaborations with NGOs and social organisations are central to asserting land rights. In later work, Busscher et al. (2020), comparing cases from NEA and NOA from an environmental justice perspective, pointed out the importance of paying attention to pre-existing vulnerabilities in land grabbing processes. In this sense, the presence of forestry plantations did not imply a rupture in the life of the Piray 18 rural colony, as the activity had been part of the history of the territory since its foundation. On the other hand, the arrival of the agribusiness company ARAUCO in the Alto Paraná region of Misiones, where the Piray 18 colony is located, fundamentally implied a change in labour and employment conditions. This situation affected the ways of inhabiting the territories (Ramírez, 2019).

Resistance in Piray 18 appeared in 2006 with the formation of the organisation *Productores Independientes de Piray* (PIP) to obtain resources for productive projects. This organisation arose specifically to alleviate economic needs, as precarious land tenure and the small size of the farms hindered the realisation of productive projects. Thus, while interpellating ARAUCO, PIP began to demand from the provincial government the regularisation of land tenure and increase the surface area of family farmers. In 2012, after years of lobbying, it succeeded in getting a provincial law passed to purchase or expropriate 600 hectares of land in ARAUCO's possession. Finally, in 2017, PIP gained access to the land it was entitled to by law (Ramírez, 2019). The case of PIP is symbolic not only for Misiones but also for Argentina, as there are not many experiences of family producers' organisations that managed to expropriate land from an agribusiness transnational for food production (Ramírez, 2021). By 2022, land transfer has not been fully achieved, failing to fulfil the law. Only 166 hectares have been granted, of

⁷ Article 75, paragraph 17, of the National Constitution of Argentina recognises the right to communal ownership of lands traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples.

which only 80 approximately are productive. The change in land ownership is suffering from delays, not being clear who is responsible. However, the lands handed over to PIP have been very important to strengthen the organisational processes, allowing producers to create cooperatives on these bases.

Furthermore, the state is a critical interlocutor subject to pressure and negotiation. In this sense, we have noted the importance of state resources, which often make it possible to guarantee the continuity of the ways of life of subaltern and subordinated actors. Social programmes are fundamental to sustaining the domestic economies of households in the NEA. At the same time, obtaining productive and technical resources from the state has impacted contemporary forms of organisation. It is worth bearing in mind the importance of social organisation, as well as technicians (national and provincial), who act as “translators” or “mediators” of public policies in the territories. Family producers, as beneficiaries, make decisions regarding the projects they are interested in and how to manage them. Given the need to understand how the state influences the contemporary organisational forms of family producers, it will be necessary to delve deeper into the web of social trajectories and relationships between neighbours, relatives and technicians that shape how public policies affect local territories, daily life and specific situations (Serpe & Ramírez, 2021).

Final considerations

This paper analysed the strategies deployed by different actors operating in and from Argentina to contribute to a broad interpretation of contemporary land grabbing processes. It must be stressed that the five dimensions constructed to analyse land grabbing must be thought of as closely related. It is not possible to understand agribusiness companies’ or mega-companies’ strategies without considering the origin of their capital, the area of land they control, the legal forms they use, the cycle of land grabbing, how they relate to other actors in the territory (subaltern and state actors) and what kind of responses are generated by these other non-corporate actors.

The cases we have analysed and used as examples here have shown various ways of controlling land (and other resources) beyond formal ownership. Although access to formal property has been ARAUCO’s primary strategy, both the sowing pools and short-term leasing contracts promoted by the mega-companies are examples of the heterogeneity of controlling land and other resources.

We should also mention the relationship between each agricultural production process (growing trees is not the same as growing grain, for example) and the modes of access to and control over land. In future research, we would also like to explore the specificity of forestry and extensive commodity farming, such as the farming of fruit trees, African palm, and wine production. Is there a relationship between the specificity of land use and the modalities of its control in land grabs?

Second, the horizontal expansion of mega-companies of Argentine origin has been a vector of rent-based land grabbing in Argentina and property grabbing and foreignisation in neighbouring countries, giving a trans-Latin character to both land grabbing and foreignisation in the region. Through the case of ARAUCO, we saw

that there are processes in which property grabbing and foreign ownership are combined. The articulation of financial and productive logics that operate on different scales means that exploring the role of foreign land grabbers in local territories can be an opaque exercise, involving actors with a long local presence financially leveraged by foreign capital, foreign companies operating through local contractors or local legal entities controlled by foreign capital. Therefore, it is necessary to question the close relationship between capitalist globalisation and the financialisation of agriculture (Sosa Varrotti & Gras, 2021) and the complexity of the relationship with national, provincial and municipal states and forms of territorial governance.

Another dimension considered is that the phenomenon is not restricted to an abstractly defined quantitative measure. Land grabbing cannot be understood only in terms of the size of the area traded. On the one hand, different land uses require different scales of capital. On the other hand, it is also necessary to relate the scales of land and capital operated at any given moment to other strategies deployed at other points in time. The integration of ARAUCO's upstream and downstream value chain or the development of new businesses by trans-Latin mega-companies suggests recent shifts towards capital intensification in agriculture rather than the reproduction of logics of accumulation based on horizontal extension. Identifying how slowdown dynamics are expressed and how actors that had previously expanded horizontally are rearranged can be a starting point for asking questions about these issues.

This leads us to the fourth dimension: the current cycle of land and resource grabbing expresses strategies of capital accumulation that are part of the convergence of multiple crises. The periods of slowdown or contraction of the processes underpinned by mega-companies, above all, highlight the differential effects of the historical confluence of food, energy, ecological and financial crises on the strategies this kind of actor uses, some more successfully than others. In these changes in strategies, vertical business integration began to take on greater relevance. The multiple and flexible uses of crops are also an expression of how accumulation strategies operate in the convergence of these crises. Future analyses will need to focus on the effects of the recent increase in commodities prices related to the recent advent of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022.

Finally, we have reflected on the forms of political action from below in the face of land grabbing processes. In this sense, we understand that organising for land is one more aspect of the heterogeneity of strategies developed by these actors to guarantee their social reproduction. The collective actions deployed have encountered and affected actors' plans that dynamise land grabbing processes. We understand that organised resistance action (of the subalterns and subordinates) may be considered when entrepreneurial actors adopt a given strategy, considering that these could potentially impact institutional formulations. However, it will be necessary to carry out further empirical research to effectively assess how important family farmers' strategies of reproduction and political organisation are for the different companies involved.

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