Towards a More Historicized Understanding of the Transnational Land Rush in Africa

By:

Nisrin Elamin

November 16, 2021

The most recent rush for African land was accompanied by a literature rush on contemporary global land grabs comprised of a fast-growing body of reports, matrices, articles and books. Responding critically to this literature rush, scholars are increasingly calling for a more robust and grounded methodology to link macro-level insights to more local level analyses. The edited volume *The Transnational Land Rush in Africa: A Decade after the Spike* answers these calls by taking a decidedly macro-level approach to the global land rush, without sacrificing nuance and country-specific historical, political and legal context. It does this in part, by investigating the impact of large-scale land investments in various African countries over time, considering not only the decade since their spike, but also the varied colonial and post-colonial histories that have shaped them.

The transnational land rush in Africa is often viewed as a tidal wave that hit the continent on the heels of the food and financial crisis of 2008, pitting powerful transnational land grabbers against dispossessed small-holder farmers, in a binary conflict of opposites. This conception of the land rush leads to several methodological and theoretical oversights. First, it situates the process of land grabbing, within a narrow temporal frame. It also romanticizes and de-historicizes the social relations that have governed access to communal or customary land and water resources. Methodologically, it often leads to scholarly analyses that gloss over a variety of local stakeholders such as pastoralists, agricultural workers, local government officials, domestic investors, NGO leaders and union organizers. The authors of this volume, fill several critical gaps in the scholarly literature on the transnational land rush by situating it within a broader temporal frame and by centering local stakeholders, who are often overlooked.

In their introduction, Cochrane and Andrews take mainstream IPE scholars to task for their Eurocentrism and avoidance of “researching populations that are vulnerable and often marginalized from mainstream discourses” (p.4). They argue that “IPE appears to be dominated by white people and Western perspectives when one investigates who is producing knowledge, where such knowledge comes from, and who has access to it” (p.5). The volume they have curated here, counters this Eurocentrism in part by placing local stakeholders at the center of analysis. The chapters focused on Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Senegal for instance, highlight the various forms local resistance to land dispossession has taken and the ways this ‘push back’ has altered the very nature of the land rush and challenged state policies and practices towards investors.

Several chapters also draw attention to the key role government elites and domestic investors play in driving and facilitating large-scale land investments on the continent. In countries like Ethiopia, for instance, domestic and diaspora investors comprise the majority of investors, but tend to acquire much smaller tracts of land than their foreign counterparts. Foreign investors tend to therefore, be the focus of scholarly analysis because their investments “have a more significant impact on people’s lives, livelihoods and the environment” (p.216). But the role domestic investors play in driving the land rush and in facilitating the investment conditions that make land attractive to foreign

investors, is significant and remains understudied. The volume's focus on domestic elites and on local forms of resistance and protest, nuances our understanding of large-scale land investments by demonstrating that the communities they impact are by no means homogenous or unified in their position towards or stake in these investments. Pastoralists, for instance, may have a very different stake in opposing or in favoring particular kinds of investments than agricultural workers or smallholder farmers. The assumption that local stakeholders and impacted communities are powerless, homogenous and united in their opposition to large-scale land investments is indeed Eurocentric and can lead to misguided policy decisions and advocacy agendas.

Eurocentrism has also shaped which foreign investors become the center of focus in scholarly research. Investors from countries like India, the GCC, South Africa and Malaysia for example, have largely been overlooked in comparison to their European and North American counterparts, despite the fact that they too have acquired large tracts of land in countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria and the DRC. Several authors in this volume examine cases involving Global South investors, thereby enhancing and sharpening our understanding of the transnational dynamics and trends shaping the land rush in Africa.

One of the volume's strengths is that its structure lends itself easily to being used as a teaching tool and resource for a broad audience. Each chapter lays out a theoretical framework, summarizes the methods used and provides important historical and legal context before delving into the case study and analysis. The methodology sections, while short, demonstrate what it means to link macro-level insights to more local-level analyses through grounded and robust methods. It is quite rare to find the theoretical overview of each chapter laid out with such clarity in an edited volume. I found this theoretical overview particularly useful not only in framing the analysis that followed, but in lending the volume coherence and in making its intervention in the literature on the transnational land rush much more explicit.

One critical aspect of challenging Eurocentric scholarship is to center and take seriously the scholarship of intellectuals and scholars from the Global South. The volume accomplishes this in part, through its inclusion of authors and co-authors based on the African continent. The chapters that are authored by those scholars offer important critiques and nuanced contributions to the

growing literature on large-scale land investments, both methodologically and theoretically. With the exception of engagements with Samir Amin and Sam Moyo's work and mentions of Ngugi wa Thiongo, Achille Mbembe and Amilcar Cabral in the concluding chapter, however, I was left wanting a bit more of a thorough engagement with IPE theory that is produced outside of the Northern Academy. Scholars like, Adebayo Adedeji, Issa Shivji and Thandika Mkandawire come to mind because they have produced scholarship and theories broadly relevant to the study of land grabs and to the excellent analysis provided in this volume. This is not a critique of the critical theoretical insights provided in this volume, but a desire to take challenging the Eurocentrism of mainstream IPE theory one step further, by engaging more thoroughly with new genealogies of thought.

The rush for land in Africa is of course not new, as the authors of this volume suggest, but is shaped by a history of extractive practices and racial capitalism. Some of the social dynamics examined in this volume are shaped by specific histories that predate colonial processes of extraction, but unequal landed relations were often reconfigured or exacerbated through these processes. One could argue, therefore, that the forms of land dispossession enabled by the land rush are ongoing and cyclical rather than abrupt and linear. Stratification might be a useful way to think of these historically layered practices and policies. In a sense, even failed land deals fortify the legal frameworks, political relationships and extractive practices that pave the way for future investments in land, sedimenting the inequalities engendered by previous processes of land dispossession. This is another unique strength of this volume. It illustrates the importance of situating the phenomenon of 'transnational land grabs' within a *longue durée* history of colonial and post-colonial land dispossession in African countries in order to better understand what is at stake for those who are directly impacted by them. Considering the rush for African land, a decade after its spike, also lays the foundation for future work that assesses their impact on "biodiversity and water, traditional ecological and indigenous knowledge" (p.263) desertification, food insecurity and climate change. Several chapters in this volume (Chapters 5, 7 and 8) document the short-term effects of extractive practices, but in so doing point to their potential long-term effects as well. In particular, these chapters link large-scale investments in land that concentrate the means of production in fewer hands, to greater social differentiation and

inequality. Growing inequalities and the marginalization of already vulnerable communities, are in turn linked to greater resource depletion and contamination. In another decade or two, the depletion of water and land resources will most certainly exacerbate processes of desertification and environmental degradation. If we consider that the violence of environmental degradation is slow, as Rob Nixon suggests, then it will take decades to fully assess the impact of large-scale land investments on people's livelihoods and their environment. This volume therefore paves the way for future scholarship, linking social inequalities to environmental degradation in more explicit ways.

If the ongoing rush for African land continues at its current pace, we will likely see companies move their operations frequently in search for more fertile land and water resources. It is, therefore, critical that scholars continue paying attention to failed or abandoned projects, long after they have been shut down. This volume also points more broadly to the need for research and qualitative data that assesses the environmental impact of large-scale land investments over time, which could in turn be useful in shaping advocacy agendas and investment laws.

Finally, the editors acknowledge that "the range of experiences related to power, class, ethnicity and livelihoods are sometimes lost in this volume due to its broad scope and macro-level approach" (p.17). They point to the fact that other works already document the differentiated impacts of the land rush and how practices of grabbing replicate or exacerbate existing forms of marginalization. Despite this caveat, several of the chapters analyze how large-scale land investments replicate or exacerbate social inequities particularly along gender and class lines. The chapters that are focused on the DR Congo and Zimbabwe (Chapters 10 and 8), for instance, demonstrate the ways processes of land grabbing are gendered and how this necessitates centering women's voices and decision-making power in crafting policies aimed at reversing the harm these processes have caused. The chapters focused on South Sudan and Nigeria (Chapters 4 and 5) demonstrate in turn how displacement, poverty and newcomer status shape people's access to land and make them more vulnerable to dispossession and exploitation by domestic and transnational elites.

My hope is that this volume inspires more scholars to pursue research that investigates the impact of large-scale land investments in Africa over longer

time spans, with a particular attention towards linking social differentiation *and* climate change. Laura Pulido defines the study of environmental justice as a process of understanding how capitalism, racism and the state shape the environments of racially and economically differentiated populations and how communities mobilize to challenge such structures. Pulido's definition is useful in thinking about those aspects of the transnational land rush in Africa that remain understudied. It challenges us as scholars concerned about the transnational land rush in Africa to ask: How are processes of land dispossession driven by the rush for African land gendered, classed and racialized? How do ongoing and historically layered processes of extraction shape the environments of marginalized communities? How in turn do gender, class, race, age, marital status, ethnicity, enslaved descent etc… shape the different forms resistance to these processes can take? How do we center power in our analysis of the connection between large-scale land investments, social differentiation and climate change? This important volume paves the way for scholarly work that explores these questions within the specific historical, social and political contexts of different communities and countries on the African continent.

View online: Towards a More Historicized Understanding of the Transnational Land Rush in Africa

Provided by Afronomicslaw