

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Struggles Against Dispossession and the Commodification of Land in Africa**

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Moyo, Sam, Jha, Praveen, and Yeros, Paris (eds.) (2018), *Reclaiming Africa – Scramble and Resistance in the 21st Century*, Springer Singapore, pp. 269, e-book available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5840-0>.

This book analyses the scramble for Africa's resources in the 21st century by investors from "semi-peripheral" countries such as China, Brazil, South Africa, and India, countries which have come to wield considerable importance and power in the region. The issue of land-grab in Africa by private corporations is of tremendous contemporary relevance, and the book undertakes to analyse this issue with a profound understanding not only of local contexts and particularities, but also the theoretical and historical background.

The book is divided into four parts: an introductory analysis (Part I), followed by two major parts comprising several chapters. Part II analyses the semi-peripheral investor countries and Part III the countries that experience land-grabbing. These two sections provide rich empirical material through case studies. Part IV is the concluding section. This review essay follows the structure of the book.

Edited by Sam Moyo, Praveen Jha, and Paris Yeros, the book is dedicated to Sam Moyo who died tragically in a car accident in India in 2015. It is part of a trilogy and comes after *Reclaiming the Land* (2005) and *Reclaiming the Nation* (2011). The book does not shy away from taking a clear political position on the nature of the scramble for African resources, arguing that it was and continues to be one of the most brutal manifestations of primitive accumulation and the proletarianisation of Africa's rural population "fuelled by imperialist interests, and geopolitical and inter-capitalist rivalries" (p. 186).

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In Part I, the editors analyse the current round of land-grab in Africa – the third wave of land alienation as they call it – in its historical dimension and compare it to earlier such waves under direct colonialist rule. The authors argue that the current wave has happened mostly in regions with a history of non-settler colonialism, where substantial areas of fertile lands lie. Such lands are still under the control of the state or the customary authorities. The authors estimate that over 70 per cent of the targeted lands “have entailed ‘fresh’ alienation of customary lands ... which is facilitated by the state and/or the transfer of land which had previously been alienated by the state.” This in turn led to the “intensification of land markets, accompanied by significant use of extra-economic force by the state apparatus to shape the evolution of these land markets” (p. 14).

Using statistical data, the editors deconstruct the oft-heard argument that investors from these countries have become the main actors in the scramble, and that the new threat to Africa’s resources are now China and India. The authors however argue that “a large proportion (47 per cent) of the large-scale land acquisitions in Africa directly involves investors from the key Western nations” (p. 16). The Introduction to the book states: “The primordial menace for the super-exploited working peoples of the South, therefore, including those of the semi-peripheries, remains the collective imperialism of the US-led alliance and its genocidal reflexes” (p. 8).

The semi-peripheral states, though, are important actors in the scramble for land. Notable among them is India, from where private investors held more acreage in 2012 than investors from China, South Africa, or Brazil (p. 19). What is needed, the editors write, is

neither a moralistic condemnation of the contradictions of the semi-peripheries in question, nor a celebration of their participation in the scramble, but the rekindling of the spirit of Non-Alignment and the elaboration of a new positive non-alignment strategy relevant to the systemic transition under way. ( p. 8)

The detailed analysis of the role of the semi-peripheral countries, namely, China, India, South Africa, and Brazil, is one key contribution of the book. Debates on land-grabbing have often made a distinction between Western monopoly finance capital that is needed to develop Africa’s agriculture and is, or at least can be, beneficial, and Chinese investment that is seen as a threat to the receiving countries. By looking closely at major investor countries of the semi-peripheries, the book assesses and analyses the concrete political and economic role of these countries.

Valéria Lopes Ribeiro focusses on the scale of Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa, and particularly on its impact on the macro-economic conditions in the countries of Africa. She concludes that macro-economic conditions have improved as a consequence of Chinese investment, but that the dependency of African economies on the export of primary commodities could not be broken. Therefore,

the impact of Chinese direct investment, though positive, is “timid when compared to the enormous challenges still faced” (p. 47). On South Africa, a country with very large economic and political influence on the continent, William G. Martin asks whether its investment can be understood as sub-imperialism. He concludes that accumulation and state formation processes spreading outward from Asia in recent times have become far more important than before.

In the chapter on Brazil by Paris Yeros, Vitor E. Schincariol, and Thiago Lima da Silva, the authors discuss the history of Brazil’s agricultural development, its relationship with its own African population, and how this relationship influenced the country’s policies towards Africa. As a case study, the authors bring up the well-known and much criticised issue of land-grabbing by Brazilian capital in the ProSavana corridor in Mozambique. Interestingly, they conclude with the following sharp and uncompromising assessment:

The schizophrenic tendencies [of Brazil’s re-encounter with Africa] have manifested themselves as much in support of Zimbabwe’s radical land reform against the settler establishment, as in the direct involvement of Brazil’s own settler capital in massive land-grabbing in Mozambique. (p. 114)

The chapter on India, written by Praveen Jha, Archana Prasad, Santosh Verma, and Nilachala Acharya, shows India’s immense importance in land-based investment in African countries. The authors first discuss the history of Indian investment in Africa and the policies that drove such investment, analysing its impact on the affected population. The focus of the analysis is on countries where Indian investment is most present, namely, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Tanzania. In these countries, with which India has historical ties, Indian investors, in alliance with the African ruling classes, carry considerable power.

The authors come to a clear conclusion with respect to the impact of Indian investment on the affected people. “None of the companies followed the agreed provisions of settling land rights and tenures,” they argue. The promise of creating employment did not materialise because “in many cases the land acquired remained idle” (p. 89). Indian investments intensified the semi-proletarianisation of the small farmers. The authors argue that rather than setting an example in South-South cooperation, the Indian firms “exhibit all the characteristics of predatory transnational companies” (p. 92).

Probably the best-known case of large-scale land-lease by an Indian investor in Africa is the investment by Karuturi Global in Ethiopia, which involved an area of 100,000 ha in the Gambela region in 2010. After local protests, the Ethiopian government did not renew Karuturi’s licence in 2016, and in 2017 the company left the country. However, following Indian diplomatic intervention, the Ethiopian authorities offered a new lease, this time for 15,000 hectares (ASO *et al.* 2019).

The authors end the chapter by quoting from an open letter written by Obang Metho, the leader of the Ethiopian Solidarity Movement, to the people of India in 2011. Obang Metho says

Ethiopians are pro-business and pro-investment ... What we oppose is the daylight robbery of Ethiopia by modern-day bandits who are willing to make secret deals with a corrupt government that would be illegal in India and other more developed countries ... Into this environment have come over 500 Indian companies — more than from any other country in the world — to capitalise on this ‘goldmine of opportunity.’ One Ethiopian from the Oromia region protested: ‘Our land is being given to the Indian companies and anyone who speaks out against it is labelled a terrorist who is not supposed to have any rights or question any actions by the government.’ (p. 92)

The authors of the chapter on Indian investment also state that India Exim Bank has subsidised a large number of such investments in Africa with public money. This is a matter that deserves more attention and analysis. Nearly 40 per cent of the credit volume of India Exim Bank during the period from 2002 to 2019 went to subsidise Indian investments in Africa (Bansal 2020). This chapter would have gained more political relevance had it made a deeper analysis of Indian capital interests and political ties, and the plans behind Indian investments in Africa, particularly in the light of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s renewed interest in and focus on Africa (Venkatachalam and Modi 2019).

The third part of the book consists of case studies of African countries most affected by such land alienation. This part provides rich detail and analysis of individual cases of land investment by companies, as well as of land policies and legislation. The book demonstrates how the trajectories of the many cases of land-grab across the continent are shaped by factors such as the plurality of land governance and legal systems, the concrete actions by investors, and the resistance put up by local communities against such land grab.

Mamadou Goïta discusses the recent land legislation in Mali and the challenges to its implementation, mostly in respect of land privatisation. The new legislation has several progressive aspects. It aims to promote land registration by doing away with public estate land by recognising customary rights and by promoting the decentralisation of land management. Nevertheless, the progressive aim of the new land legislation has been undermined by the pressure on land, owing to its appropriation by private national and international companies. This brings about challenges relating to access to land for smallholder farmers, whose interests need to be defended against companies engaged in a scramble to acquire land for monoculture cultivation.

Abdourahmane Ndiaye discusses the difficulties and ideological confusion around land privatisation and titling in the case of Senegal. In particular, he asks if land

privatisation and private-sector investment could be a lever for development. He focusses on the plurality of legal systems governing land and the resulting conflicts. Using concrete case studies, he shows how foreign investors manage to ally themselves with local private investors, politicians, and religious leaders to influence state policy. Ndiaye concludes that “land privatisation is neither synonymous with security of tenure nor productivity” (p. 147) and that there is no evidence to suggest otherwise.

Another aspect of privatisation is highlighted by Horman Chitonge in the chapter on Zambia. He argues that the conversion of customary land into private land through titling results in a struggle for resources between the state and the customary authorities, which in turn compromises the livelihoods of the rural poor. He concludes that assigning power to one person – be it a head of state or a traditional leader – for the approval for land alienation makes the process of land allocation prone to abuse and corruption. Godfrey Eliseus Massay and Telemu Kassile discuss the interplay between the legal framework and the realities of land-grab in the case of Tanzania. They analyse the many flaws in the process of land allocation (such as with regard to fair monetary compensation to those who lost land) when the government of Tanzania embarked on a broad range of policies that opened the doors for foreign direct investments.

Most interesting from a political perspective is the chapter on Zimbabwe by Sam Moyo, Walter Chambati, and Paris Yeros. They make a passionate plea for redistributive land reforms. With a rich body of data, the authors analyse Zimbabwe’s path of development, its strengths and weaknesses – the latter in part the outcome of domestic power struggles and Western sanctions. From an analysis rich in data and detail, the authors conclude as follows.

While the dominant media and non-governmental organisation (NGO) discourse continue to be narrowly concerned with transparency and accountability issues around the new investment deals facilitated by the state-owned enterprises . . . in a wide historical perspective, this outcome [of land-related policies], despite its contradictions, has placed the brakes on foreign-led land and resource-grabbing, offering some room to re-negotiate Zimbabwe’s integration into world markets and providing scope for further popular struggles towards overcoming the legacies of settler colonialism. (p. 251)

The great strength of this chapter – and indeed of this book as a whole – is the clear political conclusions that follow from detailed and unbiased analysis.

Giuliano Martiniello provides a close analysis of grassroot resistance against land-grabbing in Uganda. He describes the resistance against “attempts by the state and agri-business to transform peasants into landless, underpaid and overexploited agricultural labourers, or as subordinate and dependent out-growers.” These long-term struggles against the commodification of land are combined on the

ground with everyday struggles to maintain autonomy over the mobilisation of family labour and access to community resources. This focus on resistance is an important addition to the book. The question that remains implicit in this analysis is the following: is there any real difference between land-grab by semi-peripheral powers in the contemporary era and land-grab under colonialism?

In conclusion, Issa G. Shivji asks what lessons can be drawn from the past to light the way forward in the current struggles of exploited classes. The 1955 Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries, he notes, was an important step for the founding of not just a non-aligned Movement but a pan-Africanist movement as well. He argues that both the non-aligned movement and pan-Africanism were led by bourgeois forces in Asia and Africa. As both these sections of the bourgeoisie turned comprador, the movements they led failed as peoples' projects. But he goes further, arguing that these projects nevertheless provided vision, hope, and dignity in the countries that adopted them, and spurred a desire for change based on unity and solidarity. "Nations still want liberation and people still want a revolution," he says. "The national question in Africa remains unresolved. The agrarian and social questions in much of the periphery remains unresolved" (p. 267). Therefore, in the spirit of the book, he states that the investments of the semi-peripheral states must not be lauded. Rather, these states must come together to find an alternative to their current approach to investment in Africa.

There are two important limitations to this otherwise vital volume. The first one is that the data stops at 2012, and the situation on the ground has changed quite substantially since. (The importance of agrofuels in the agrarian economy since 2012 is a good case in point.) Nevertheless, for the period it covers, the analyses and conclusions presented in the book remain valid. The second aspect is that the book, although dedicated to the scramble for resources, strongly focusses on land. It fails to include the scramble for the other resources that Africa holds.

As a whole, this book is rich in empirical data and has detailed analyses of the phenomenon of land-grabbing in Africa, both for its implications for the masses and for its politics. It ends on a hopeful note.

For the periphery as a whole, we can certainly say that history has once again put back the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist socialist agenda on the world stage. History thus beckons the working people and nations of the South to the rendezvous of revolution on the long road to socialism. (p. 268)

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