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Bringing the ‘rush’ to the center of the land grab debate: Insights from Colombia

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Abstract

Most studies about the ‘global land rush’ have tended to focus on specific land deal cases, and usually on those land deals that are actually pursued by corporations. Often, land deals that were later scaled down or ultimately abandoned have been used as evidence to suggest that the contemporary land rush was not as far-reaching as previously assumed. A further implication of such line of thinking is to implicitly suggest that these non-pursued land deals have no significance in reality, and thus do not merit further attention in research. Moreover, the land rush also resulted in a more spontaneous participation of diverse actors (e.g., informal land brokers, scammers, etc.) who joined the bandwagon but in less formal ways than high profile companies. These instances of land accumulation frequently done by stealth have never been studied in the context of the land rush, and yet its effects may be as pervasive as those resulting from land deals that have been pursued by corporations. My aim in this exploratory paper is to suggest a *wider* framework for the study of the contemporary land rush by paying attention to the character of, and the possible interactions between, three currents of the phenomenon, namely: i) pursued corporate land deals, ii) unpursued corporate land deals, and iii) everyday, ‘below the radar’ land accumulation. Following the starting assumptions of the RRUSHES-5 research project (<https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/commodity-land-rushes-and-regimes>), in which my own research is a part of, I argue that, notwithstanding the massive amount of research, key aspects of the land rush remain largely underexplored. A better understanding of the phenomenon must consider the significance of currents two and three, besides current one, as resulting from the same hype and frenzy for land and its resources i.e., the *rush*. My argument comes in the form of questions; in what ways are the different currents of the land rush related? What are their impacts? Furthermore, what can the three currents tell us about the reach of the land rush? Drawing on the case of Colombia, I attempt to underscore the limitations of the dominant literature, and the need to bring in the ‘rush’ as part of our analytical tools to research land grabbing.

1. Introduction

Contemporary commodity rushes have impacted communities and natural ecosystems worldwide in significant ways. The rush for *land* — one of the major instances of recent commodity rushes — may have resulted in an increasing reconfiguration of land use and ownership, subsequently altering territories and ways of living to an extent not previously known, especially because most studies on the impact of land deals tend to be focused on the immediately affected local communities. A sudden spike in global food prices around 2007-08, to a large extent, animated a quick and unprecedented interest in land. Foreign and domestic companies, national governments, state-owned enterprises, as well as different types of financial investors, e.g., hedge funds, university endowments, pension funds, all *rushed* to secure a piece of land the world over (Fairbairn 2014, 2020; Wolford et al. 2013; Zoomers 2010).

Land's renewed attractiveness was in part based on a premise that vast tracts of land assumed to be 'empty' and 'underutilized' exists worldwide, and that this could be, or rather, should be, turned into efficient and productive partly with the use of modern technology and large-scale capital (Deininger and Byerlee 2011, 2012). It is further assumed that there is an immense gap between the potential of land in terms of economic production, on the one hand, and the actual level of production in the current use; and this is referred to as the 'yield gap'. This seeming notorious 'yield gap' had to be closed — so the imaginary goes — and, as a result, suddenly land was made available for the taking — or at least the yield gap has become the blanket justification for reallocating land control away from the so-called inefficient uses and users, usually peasants and pastoralists. Because these tracts of land were supposed to achieve high productivity and large investment returns, investors felt the urge to come first and sign land deals quickly. It was this unexpected and "hyped interest" for *land* that precipitated the recent *rush* (Li 2014:595).

As the rush proceeded, several land deals materialized while others were cancelled at early stages of implementation, and yet many remained as 'mere' announcements. It might very well be that these latter cases contributed to expand the reach of the land rush by encouraging the participation of other actors seeking to take advantage of it — i.e., powerful individuals, swindlers, local land brokers and more who typically accumulate land, often by stealth. In the broader research project, RRUSHES-5, in which this present working paper is part of, we refer to each of these as the currents in which the contemporary land rush unfolded, namely i) *pursued corporate land deals*, ii) *unpursued corporate land deals* and iii) *everyday, 'below the radar' land accumulation*, respectively.

To date, however, studies surveying the global land rush have largely focused on specific 'land deals', while less so the discussion has dealt with the *rush* in its own right — that ultimately animated different investments in land. Within this literature, only corporate land deals that are pursued are at the center of the analysis. Where cancelled deals have been mentioned, they are generally framed as "failed" cases that do not merit further attention (but see Visser 2017:197). Most notably, instances of land accumulation frequently done below the radar of formal state regulation — e.g., distress sales, swindling, land brokering — have not been studied in the context of the land rush, and yet its effects may be as pervasive as those resulting from pursued corporate land deals.

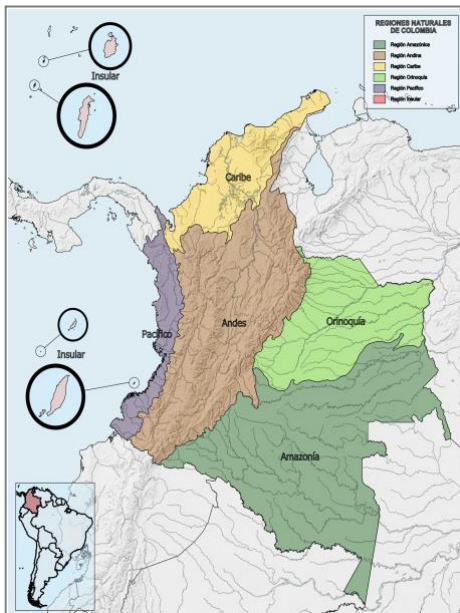
My purpose here is to suggest a *wider* framework for the study of the contemporary land rush by paying attention to the character of, and the possible interactions between, the three currents of the phenomenon. I argue that, notwithstanding the massive amount of research, key aspects of the land rush remain largely underexplored. A better understanding of the phenomenon must consider the significance of currents two and three (often sidelined), besides current one, all of which are the result of the same hype and frenzy for land and its resources i.e., the *rush*. In what ways are the different currents of the land rush related? What are their impacts? Moreover, what can the three currents tell us about the reach of the land rush? Despite of the huge body of literature on the

global land grabs, I feel that there is still much to explore about the character and implications of the recent land *rush*. Drawing on examples from the Colombian case, I hope to provide an illustration as to why.

In Colombia, the area known as *Altiplanura* or ‘high plains’ serves as a case in point to explore the extent of the contemporary land rush. *Altiplanura* corresponds to a vast, plain area to the east of the country comprising the province of Vichada and parts of Meta — the municipalities of Puerto Gaitán, Puerto López and Mapiripán (DNP 2014:7) (Figure 2). It is one of different areas representing *Orinoquía* (also known as *Llanos Orientales* or eastern plains), a natural geographical region of Colombia, according to the state’s land classification (Figure 1). Framed as the “last agricultural frontier” of the country, successive governments have aspired to turn *Altiplanura* into a key hub of agro-industrial development — following the experience of the Brazilian *cerrado* (Dinero 2011). Oil and mining extraction, as well as industrial plantation projects, have also been part of the aspirations to “develop the potential” of the area (GOC 2014b:865–88). According to one estimate, only during 2008-2011, in Vichada alone there presented circa 3,000 land transfers, majority of which were related to national and international business people and corporations (El Tiempo 2011b). As we shall see below, in the following years several of these corporate investments in land were developed while others resulted in abandoned projects just within months after implementation, and yet many were dismissed before they have landed and effectively remained as announcements. In addition, interest in land also came from a less known set of actors, including local brokers and mid-range politicians. All three currents are expressions of the recent rush for land in the area. Certainly, this is not the only case in which the argument of this paper applies. I hope this contribution would animate others to explore on, and in more depth, the land *rush* in Colombia and elsewhere.

The next section presents an overview of some of the main themes in the literature surrounding the land rush. In doing so, it argues for the need of a wider framing to analyze the extent and implications of the phenomenon. Subsequent sections explore this idea in light of the Colombian case.

Figure 1. Geographical regions of Colombia



Source: IGAC (2013).

Figure 2. *Altiplanura* region



Source: DNP (2014a).

2. The land rush in the literature

In 2007-8, a major increase in global food prices raised concerns around a potential food insecurity crisis worldwide. An extraordinary interest in land followed during that period, often building on the idea that control of new landholdings was necessary to increase food production and, therefore, secure growing food demands. The world food price crisis had also converged with a situation of high oil prices that contributed likewise to a rush for land (see GRAIN 2008). Civil society organizations were among the first to report on the rapid increase in ‘land grabbing’ associated to food for export and biofuel production. Early NGO reports, together with preliminary policy papers and academic articles, resulted in an *initial characterization* of the recent land rush as, precisely, an outcome of the global food and energy crises (Borras et al. 2012:845) — in what came to be known as the “initial ‘making sense’ period” of the land-grab debate (Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013:1520). The rush for land was also characterized as primarily driven by foreign actors (with a particular emphasis on the renovated role of China, India, South Korea and the Gulf States). In addition, it was suggested that many of the land deals taking place in that time often lacked transparency and had led to dispossession, especially in the absence of clearly defined property rights. Investments in land were also thought as mostly located in Africa — in which an apparent combination of land abundance and weak governance had turned the continent into the primary site of new waves of capital accumulation (Oxfam International 2011) (see Borras and Franco 2012 for a critical review of these assumptions). These reports were accompanied by an emerging set of global data-bases on ‘large-scale land deals’, such as that produced by GRAIN and the now familiar Land Matrix. The data sets aimed at providing a “quick” picture of the phenomenon and to raise awareness, by compiling information readily available in media outlets and different types of crowdsourcing. This initial search mainly focused on the amount of hectareage involved (Oya 2013:507).

Subsequent efforts to analyze the recent land rush have contributed to expand the debate in various ways. By 2012, the introduction of different nuances to the original NGO narrative had marked a *new phase of inquiry* in studies of land grabbing (Scoones et al. 2013:478). In essence, later contributions have argued for the need to insert the debate into broader discussions by, for instance, interrogating on the different drivers of land grabbing today (see White et al. 2012); its “historical antecedents and legal contexts” (see Alden Wily 2012; Edelman and León 2013; Edelman et al. 2013:1517); the impacts of the land rush on labour (see Li 2011) and nature (see Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Ojeda 2012), as well as the role of finance in it (see Fairbairn 2015; Ouma 2014); and the various forms the land rush had taken place in locations beyond Africa, such as Southeast Asia (Schoenberger, Hall, and Vandergeest 2017), Latin America (Borras et al. 2012) and Eastern Europe (Visser and Spoor 2011). Further analyses have also problematized the role of the state in the recent land rush (see Burnod, Gingembre, and Ratsialonana 2013; Levien 2013; Wolford et al. 2013) and have called for new methodologies to analyse the phenomenon (see Edelman 2013; Oya 2013; Scoones et al. 2013). But, *what were the mechanisms through which land was made an attractive investment in the first place? How were the many actors involved in the recent land rush persuaded to take part in?* I explore these questions below.

‘Spectacle’ and finance

In 1990s, anthropologist Anna Tsing (2000) investigated the role of ‘spectacle’ in the context of a localized gold rush that had just taken place in Indonesia (see Li 2014:595). The announcement of a fantastic gold find in Borneo Island attracted the attention of many — including, mining companies, regular and nascent investors, pensioners, ordinary people — seeking a place in the bid. For years, the prospects around gold reserves only grew until it became “the biggest gold strike in the world” (2000:116). Wide and recurrent media coverage only lifted the passions around the gold strike further, adding to the capitalization of the company (Bre-X). All of a sudden, the disappointment was massive when, amidst the “fevered pitch”, the gold find was reported as fake (2000:117).

For Tsing (2000), the significance of this case lies less on it being a scam, but on what it can tell us about the functioning of finance capital more generally. The fact that a large set of actors had thought of investing in the gold mine as reasonable enough might be better understood as part of *conjuring a spectacle* (see Li 2014:595). Put differently, it was “a dramatic exposition of the possibilities of gold” that attracted investment funds. For the author, companies are often dependent on the “self-conscious making of a spectacle (...) [as] a *regular feature* of the search for financial capital” (emphasis added) (2000:118). Driven by an imperative of maximization, companies *perform* an act of promoting the potential benefits of their activities seeking the attention of the greatest possible number of investors. And given that several investors are being seduced by the same performing act, simultaneously, there is arguably no time to verify whether the alleged benefits resulting from joining the push have indeed an element of feasibility or truth; “by then their chances for profit will be gone”. As Tsing indicates, “the more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment *frenzy*” (emphasis added) (2000:118,141). The matter thus becomes one of ‘appearances’ and less of tangibility. This type of accumulation, characterized by a clearly speculative character, is termed by Tsing as “spectacular accumulation” (2000:138).

Importantly, companies are not the only actors conjuring a spectacle. Countries themselves “must dramatize their potential as places for investment” (2000:118). Indonesia’s authoritarian regime, for instance, had long promoted foreign investment to fund their own nation-making agenda. As part of the conjuring, Kalimantan also had to be imagined as a “remote jungle”, almost deserted. Nowhere in the media reports there appears the complete landscape comprising Kalimantan, as to include its residents and their daily routines, or references to the mining tradition in the area, let alone the challenges faced by their inhabitants. Kalimantan was purposefully painted as an “empty, wild landscape”. This representation was a lucrative discursive construct. It animated the interest of US-based investors that, touched by stories of remoteness, quickly added to the capitalization of the company. In Canada, a similar sentiment was experienced. Investing in mining in Indonesia became an extension of the mining tradition that have accompanied Canada since long, but that was becoming more difficult to practice within their own boundaries due to higher regulations (2000:118, 129, 130–31). Looking at the recent global rush for land, I contend that the spectacle and frenzy involved arguably reached greater proportions than those Tsing (2000) analysed. In the former, attracting investors demanded of a *performance* in which land was presented as the best possible investment. In the Colombian *Altillanura*, as we shall see below, a similar process of spectacle-making, largely commanded by the state, played a major role in the direction of the recent land rush in the country.

* * *

Arguably, the outcomes of the spectacle varied: land deals might indeed be i) pursued (see Vidal 2011) or result in (ii) abandoned projects just within months after implementation (see Katz and Robinson 2011) or even be cancelled before they have landed and therefore remained as mere announcements (see Burnod et al. 2013) — as indicated in the introduction section. The reasons for the latter vary. For some observers, for instance, although in the recent rush land was increasingly targeted as a key “financial asset” (Fairbairn 2014), the real possibilities of turning land into such were lower than popular investment discourse might be ready to accept (Visser 2017). The specific material conditions of land and the (moral) values attached to it make it that substantially different that, contrary to investors’ desire, land is *not* “like any other financial investment” (Fairbairn 2020:105). These characteristics, or what Li (2014:600) refers to as “land’s life-giving affordances”, represented one challenge for intentions and announcements of land deals to actually ‘land’ on the ground. Often these data on cancelled deals or ‘mere’ announcements were overlooked, implying that the recent rush for land had not been as far-reaching as assumed. For some, it was even regarded as polluted information or as an indicator of a lack of methodological rigor. Ideally, following this line of thought, the entries in the global data sets on land grabbing should correspond to verifiable cases (‘facts’) in which “the acreage of land [is] actually sold or leased (and confirmed) and put to use [...]”. However, following their argument — due to the difficulties of verifying this information — in reality the entries are a combination of “perceptions, intentions, rumours, guesstimates” (Oya 2013:506). Seen from this

perspective, research on the land rush was yet to be supported by better quality evidence, and many have argued for the need of improved methodologies (Edelman 2013; Oya 2013).

I maintain, however, that the land rush is *real* and that it evolved into different forms. Land deals that remain as “intentions” — in Oya’s (2013) terms — might still have implications for people and the environment that are worth taking into consideration. As noted by Visser (2017:197), cancelled deals “can leave local people worse off than if they had not entered or, instead, had undergone their full-scale, ongoing investment”. Similarly, they can serve as important indicators of the “spectacle” and “frenzy” that accompany a rush for land — as elaborated above. Moreover, announcements of investments might have led to the intensification of everyday, below the radar land accumulation (i.e., current three). Consider the dynamics involving other — albeit less explored — set of actors implicated in the rush for land: the middlemen, or those who participate in the searching for, and eventual control over, land precisely “on the ground” (Sud 2014:594). According to Sud (2014), the focus on “high profile actors”, namely the state and big capital, has often played into disregarding the role of middleman in land appropriation by capital. These are most typically characterised as mere “instruments” or “passive recipients” at the service of higher ranks of the market or state power. The picture is, however, more complex (2014:594). Consequently, a fixation with ‘facts’ can divert attention away from what are vital aspects of the contemporary land *rush*, i.e., currents two and three. Building on Tsing’s (2000) conceptualization of ‘spectacle’, in what follows I explore aspects of the spectacle-making process that precipitated the recent rush in Colombia, attending to all three currents of the phenomenon.

3. The contemporary land *rush* in Colombia

(...) the Colombian Government, under the direct inspiration and personal leadership of President Álvaro Uribe, the guidance from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (...) submits to the international community, and its private and public sectors, the most important project for the recovery of the world's tropical rainforest.

It is a 20-year agri-environmental reconversion program to be carried out in the **high plains** [*Altiplanura*] of the Colombian *Orinoquía*. It will cover an area of 6,3 million hectares of unused and almost unpopulated land, equivalent to one fifth of Japan's total land area and twice the area of Belgium. The estimated investment is about US \$15,000 million for the agricultural component alone, plus the cost of physical and social infrastructure and public utilities required by the new human settlements estimated in 5 million people by the end of the period, supported by the generation of 1,5 million jobs.

—**Ministry of Agriculture (2004:10). *The Renaissance of the Orinoco River savannahs: A Colombian mega project for the world.***

Recent interest in land in Colombia might as well be understood as part of the contemporary ‘global land rush’. Historically, control over land has been central to the political economy of land in Colombia, closely related to the country’s protracted armed conflict and its origin in agrarian struggles (Fajardo 1983; Grajales 2015; Thomson 2011). In recent years, however, the scale and character of the rush for land has arguably reached new proportions, e.g., by encompassing areas frequently categorized as the “last agricultural frontier”, and by involving even more diversified sources of capital and actors (see below). In this sense, while numerous cases of land grabbing can still be framed as part of the violence-related dynamics of the country, many other instances may surpass this framework. In the rush for land of the past decade, the armed conflict was one important enabling factor of the rush (see Ballvé 2013; Grajales 2011, 2013; Gutiérrez and Vargas 2016), but certainly not the only one. Government legislation and varied other official initiatives were said to be an essential component in the direction of the recent land rush in the country. As I will attempt to describe below, just as the land deals pursued worldwide — and the announcements of several others — were triggered by a performance (see above), in Colombia the rush for land also necessitated of the *conjuring of a spectacle*.

The statement above succinctly describes key aspects of the conjuring. Recall that *Altillanura* or ‘high plains’ is one of different areas in which the *Orinoquía* or *Llanos* is divided. The former comprises the entire province of Vichada, and parts of Meta (the municipalities of Puerto Gaitán, Puerto López and Mapiripán) (DNP 2014:7) (Figure 2). “Every now and then this region has taken away the sleep of several presidents”, a report notes (Semana 2007b). Prior to Álvaro Uribe’s plan to transform the *Altillanura* into a key hub of agri-industrial development, other country leaders had dreamed too with the promises of this area. For example, during the 1980s the *Altillanura* was intended to be the setting of a futuristic city by the name of *Marandúa* (see Figure 3). Then president Belisario Betancur aimed at building the capital of what he referred to as “The New Colombia”, an area over 1,5 million hectares to be destined for several activities, including agriculture, industry, and commerce. Marandúa was imagined following the example of Brasilia, Brazil’s current capital — a city inaugurated in 1960, planned from its inception, and characterized by its modern architecture and planning. At that time, Marandúa remained on paper, so as the massive transformation envisioned for the surrounding area (Rutas del Conflicto 2017; Semana 2007b).

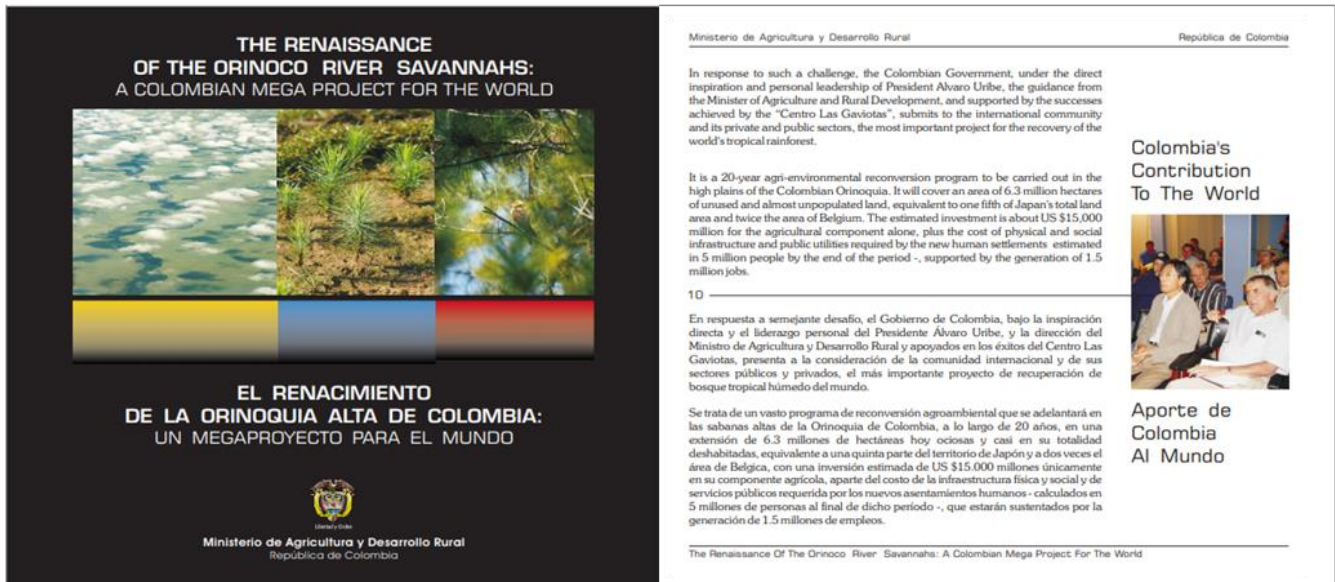
Figure 3. Stamp of the imagined city of Marandúa



Source: Rutas del conflicto (2017).

It was not until the early 2000s that the *Altillanura* was brought back into the centre of the political agenda — only this time the making of the spectacle stretched quite further. The plans for a “reconversion program” of over 6 million hectares of land in the area, noted above, are fragments of a government strategy to attract investors willing to make these plans a reality, entitled “*The Renaissance of the Orinoco River savannahs: A Colombian mega project for the world*” (Ministry of Agriculture 2004). The strategy was presented in the form of a light document (20-pages length), with short paragraphs accompanied by photographs and translated into English. It resembled a brochure more than anything (see Figure 4). It starts with a brief context of the alleged challenges faced by traditional agriculture in an era of climate change and high population growth. Nonetheless, even in these acute circumstances, notes the document, voluntary targets for reducing GHG emissions by countries like Japan and the UK are far from implemented. It was in that context that Colombia was offering “a unique opportunity for a sustainable systemic rural development (...) both to the world and to its own people” (Ministry of Agriculture 2004:11). Later pages point at existing projects on agriculture and commercial reforestation in the area from which to draw useful lessons, and next it outlines what would be the different stages of the strategy — starting from 150,000 planted hectares until gradually covering the total area targeted (2004:17–21).

Figure 4. Government initiative ‘The Renaissance of the Orinoco River Savannahs: A Colombian mega-project for the World’



Source: screenshot by the author of the original document available online by the Ministry of Agriculture (2004).

As a build up to the 2004’s brochure, former president Álvaro Uribe had made explicit his plans for the region on several other occasions. Early that year, at the installation of the National Congress, Uribe revealed:

We are exploring a special project for Vichada, *for its definitive conquest*. President Betancur conceived Marandúa, where today the Air Force has 64,000 hectares. There would be the beginning of an agri-environmental development with African palm, rubber, Caribbean pine, and other species. The project will seek international investment financed by green markets (emphasis added) (Uribe 2004).

In late 2003 — one year after his inauguration — at a regular communal council in *Orinoquía*, he expressed to local authorities:

(...) I see that *Orinoquía* has an already immediate future in agriculture. In those 600 thousand square kilometers we could say that there are 350 thousand of jungle and 250 thousand of Orinoquía without savannas. Do you know how important is it for the agricultural world to have 250 thousand square kilometers flat, without stone, ready to cultivate and without the ecological obstacle that you must reach there *with the ax*?

We have great faith in the growth of the African palm, [and on] the vision that biodiesel will be produced. We have a lot of faith in rubber, a lot of faith in timber. I see that you have great possibilities (...). Work with them [the banks] (...), *attract investors to these departments*. Today perennial crops are exempt from taxes in Colombia (emphasis added) (Uribe 2003).

The later publication of the ‘brochure’ the following year (2004) only sealed the conjuring. Uribe’s call to attract investors escalated. The idea of *Altillanura* as a plain area, without dense vegetation, that was allegedly easy to reach without “the ax” played an important part in attracting investors. The region was presented as a contrast to the Amazon where large agricultural investments (as well as mining, oil exploitation and others) had been necessarily carried out at the expense of the natural ecosystem. But perhaps “the most spectacular mode of

enrolment” (term borrowed from Li 2014) was the appeal to the productive potential of the region — until then ‘unused’ — on the verge of becoming the “Colombian *cerrado*” (Semana 2010a). Historically land in *Altillanura* had been regarded as highly acidic and therefore not readily apt for agriculture. There was a need to sufficiently improve the quality of the soil, as well as to develop road infrastructure for transport, before one could anticipate any positive investment return. In neighbouring Brazil, the *cerrado* — a huge region in the centre of the country with similar characteristics to the *Altillanura* (i.e., vast plain landscape, acidic soil) — had just proven that quality of soil was apparently no obstacle to reach high levels of productivity and efficiency. It was “the miracle of the *cerrado*”, as reported by *The Economist* (The Economist 2010). Through vast injections of lime and fertilisers, the development of genetically modified variants of staple crops, and the support to industrial mechanised agriculture, the Brazilian *cerrado* had apparently become an “attractive model” to emulate. An astonishing farm production, on the way to surpass that of the so-called “big five grain exporters” seemed to attest to the promises of this model (The Economist 2010). In the following years, many ranging from top national Colombian officers to businesspeople and magazines of national circulation, replicated the idea of turning the *Altillanura* into the next “agricultural miracle” (see Dinero 2011; El Tiempo 2011a; Semana 2007b, 2010a); and suddenly the “Colombian *cerrado*” was made plausible. A myriad of corporate and non-corporate actors quickly rushed to secure a place in the miracle. As one businessman put forward: “The example is the Brazilian *cerrado* (...). If we want to be self-sufficient we will have to grow in the high plains [*Altillanura*] and only with agricultural entrepreneurs” (Portafolio 2008b).

*¡Al Llano!*¹

Once the brochure was made public, the making of the spectacle moved into the next phase: wide promotion and advertisement. In 2005 Uribe’s Minister of Agriculture visited Japan with the sole purpose of introducing the plans for the “Renaissance of the Orinoco” to both government authorities and businesspeople (GOC 2014a). For several days Japanese television stations traveled across the *Altillanura* delivering reports on the area to its audience in Asia. It was the president himself who later presented the initiative in the US, as part of a diplomatic visit to the country. He also took the opportunity to meet with Bill Gates— US-billionaire, business magnate and today’s “biggest private owner of farmland” in that country (Estes 2021)— and invited him to invest in biofuel projects in the *Altillanura* (Semana 2007b). These touring events and promotions soon attracted the attention of other actors such as J.P Morgan Chase — a US-based multinational investment bank. Members of the bank were reported to have traveled to *Altillanura* at least a dozen times to finalize a major investment in the area, with a seed capital of US\$ 325 million. Meetings were also held in London with Uribe’s vice-president to best align J.P Morgan’s plans with those envisioned by the government, one report says (Semana 2007b). The renovated interest for the *Altillanura* also called the attention of the Norwegian-based shipping company, Siem — registered in the Cayman Islands. Some of its members were also reported to have met the Colombian government to discuss its investment plans (*ibid*).

Perhaps one of the soundest announcements of possible investments came from the Chinese ambassador to Colombia at the time, who together with a group of Chinese investors declare their interest in acquiring over 400,000 hectares of land in the region. Former president of Colombia’s agricultural guild, who was reported to hold several meetings with them, indicated: “They only wanted to buy it [land], as they would bring along the necessary labour force, supplies and machinery, while all the grain production would be exported to their country” (Portafolio 2010a). Part of that interest was picked up by the Chinese company Tianshi (the apparent largest private Chinese company at the time) years later; in 2011, it announced their intention to establish a mining-energy company with a starting capital of US\$ 1,000 millions. Other investments in the sector of agriculture and food processing by the company were publicised too (El Espectador 2011).

¹ Alfredo Molano, “¡Al Llano!”, *El Espectador*, 21 May 2011.

Interest in the making of the “Colombian *cerrado*” also came from Latin America, as well as from within the country. “¡Al Llano! The *Llano* is the new fashion”, reported with irony Colombian journalist and sociologist Alfredo Molano, in reference to the sudden fever for investing in the *Altiplanura*. Those concerned were not regular actors —he emphasised; these were corporations and individuals with ties to New York or Tokyo for whom the *Llano* “is half the country. A half that is savage, virgin and at hand” (2011). Following the announcements made by foreign players, key actors at the regional level quickly joined the hurry. Early in 2008, the Grupo Maggi — property of Brazilian businessman Blairo Maggi, also known as “the king of soy” — paid several visits to the *Altiplanura*. “The intention of Maggi is big, and it has big numbers”, one report claimed (El Tiempo 2008). Already in the Brazilian *cerrado* Maggi owned circa 400,000 hectares to produce soy and maize. In the *Altiplanura*, it appeared, the potential for achieving high productivity was even larger than in his country due to excellent rainfall. “Grupo Maggi flirts with the *Altiplanura*” headlined the newspaper at the time. The relationship between Maggi and the region remained close for several years in which top executives travelled back and forth trying to seal the land deal (Semana 2008). In the meantime, another ‘king’ would soon enter the competition. It was Gustavo Grobocopatel, nicknamed “Argentina’s king of soy”, who in 2010 announced the intentions of his company — Los Grobo — to invest in the development of the *Altiplanura* as well (Finagro 2010). Uribe’s successor in the presidency, Juan Manuel Santos (2010 -2018), just inaugurated that year, followed with vigor the legacy on the transformation of the region. For Gustavo Grobocopatel then: “What is interesting is the concern of President Santos and his cabinet for the issue of agribusiness development in Colombia, because they have quite an important and still unexplored potential, and that is a priority” (Portafolio 2010b). With the president on his side the investment could not go wrong.

For some of the major Colombian players in the agri-food sector, Uribe’s initial invitation to “develop” the *Altiplanura* also came as a unique opportunity to expand their existing operations — competition for land and related resources was thus increasing at a rapid pace. That was the case for the owners of *La Fazenda*, a group of businesspeople from across the country, assembled in the corporate group Aliar-Contegral. *Fazenda* is a term in Portuguese that stands for large landholding (or *hacienda*). In Colombia, *La Fazenda* evolved into a mega pig farm comprising 16,000 hectares of land in *Altiplanura*, according to recent estimates (La República 2017). While the company had started operations around 2002, it was at the highest of the recent rush for land that Aliar-Contegral infused the project with more capital for its final consolidation. As it turned out, the Portuguese term (*fazenda*) was not the only resemblance with Brazil. Owners of *La Fazenda* also had large plans for the land in the region and with “big numbers”. In 2008 Aliar was reported to “be in the process of carrying out a four-year investment plan of US\$ 130 millions in Puerto Gaitán, Meta” — the location of the farm (Portafolio 2008a).

But not only long-time rural entrepreneurs — as they prefer to be called (*empresarios del campo*) — rushed to the *Altiplanura* amidst this recent interest for land. National bankers and financial investors, many of which were part of the spectacle-making process in the first place, actively participated in the rush as well. Through Sugranel, a subsidiary company of Valorem — the major holding of Colombia’s leading businessmen, the Santo Domingo — in 2009 the Santo Domingo family invested in soil preparation in an area of nearly 65,000 hectares of land in the region. They hired a subsidiary of the Brazilian company Embrapa, authors of “the miracle of *cerrado*” in Brazil (Dinero 2011). It was their purpose to emulate all the stages that had allegedly led the Brazilian *cerrado* to the top of the global agri-food market. The holding started a pilot project of maize cultivation in some 800 hectares, as well as the construction of piers, roads, grain silos and landing strips. Millionaire agreements with providers of tractors and agricultural tools were also signed around that year — with an investment totalling circa US\$ 300 million (El Tiempo 2013; Semana 2014b, 2014a). Both Aliar-Contegral, owners of *La Fazenda*, and the Santo Domingo are some of the leading characters of a 2011-suggestive editorial entitled “*Los nuevos llaneros*” (or “The new men of the eastern plains”) (see Dinero 2011). The term ‘new *llaneros*’ was a euphemism of the otherwise massive transformation of the land use and ownership that was resulting from the investment frenzy in the region.

The editorial detailed several other announcements of investments, as well as newly started land deals, and made a vehement call: “(...) we must be prepared to make large investments and abandon old paradigms”. It further noted:

We need visionary entrepreneurs and leaders that will be up to the challenge. The sustainable exploitation of the *Llano* is a unique opportunity for Colombia, which would have an extraordinary impact on the income and well-being of the population. One cannot think small or act with individualism. It is a country challenge (Dinero 2011).

The rush for land was thus simultaneously producing a rush of newspaper editorials that contributed to push the spectacle further. In 2012, *Semana* — the largest weekly magazine in the country — launched an extensive special series on the potential of the Colombian Orinoquía: “The New Colombia: Between *Orinoquía* and the Amazon the future of the country’s next 50 years is in play. Will we rise to the challenge?” (see *Semana* 2012). Note that the special’s title, “The new Colombia”, is the same that three decades ago former President Betancur had chosen as the name for its massive plans of turning the *Atillanura* into Colombia’s new hub of industry and commerce (see above). This special was followed by another one in 2013. In alliance with the National Association of Enterprises — or ANDI, the largest and most important private guild in the country — *Semana* published a special issue entitled “*Tierra a la vista*” (“Land in sight”). The purpose was said to be “stressing the natural, social and economic qualities that make it [Orinoquía] the future and the gate of progress of Colombia”. The magazine’s first edition about *Orinoquía* was presented at a conference set up by *Semana* in the province of Meta, with over 200 hundred guests — including regional leaders and businesspeople, one report noted (*Semana* 2010b) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Special issues on Orinoquía by *Semana* magazine



Source: images retrieved from *Semana* (2010b) and Martínez (2013).

The three currents of the land rush

As time went by — and despite the media hype — however, only a handful of the announced investments in land appeared to be promising in reality. To start with, the government of Japan expressed concerns around the security conditions of the country and pulled back from their interest to invest in the region within months. J.P Morgan Chase’s chairman was reported to have met President Uribe at the presidential house with a concrete plan of investment for the *Atillanura*, but it seemed it was not a free-flowing conversation. Uribe was said to refuse the assistance of a translator, while rumors also pointed at difficulties to understand the technicality of the financial plan designed by Morgan’s, that resulted in several participants not being able to follow the discussion. Yet others expressed that what really happened was that the government refused to accept the conditions set by the bank, that

asked for a land concession and the provision of several guarantees on the part of the government before they invest in the region (Semana 2007b). But that was not the plan envisioned by Uribe for the “renaissance of the Orinoco” (see Ministry of Agriculture 2004). Meanwhile, there was no sign that the Norwegian-based Siem had developed any concrete projects for the *Altillanura* (Semana 2007b). As for the keen interest of the Chinese, it was the director of Colombia’s agricultural guild that himself acknowledged the lack of 400,000 hectares of aggregated land readily available to “offer” (Portafolio 2010a). The Chinese-based company Tianshi was reported to be active in Colombia in the areas of health services and cosmetics (see Las empresas 2021) but there is no conclusive evidence of it having established a mining-energy company in the country following their announcement in 2011.

“Illusions about *Altillanura* ‘deflated’”, one report noted (see Portafolio 2008b). Interest in land from Latin America players was also falling precipitously. After the multiple visits to the *Altillanura* by members of the Brazilian-based Grupo Maggi, it seemed they have found a good place to settle; however, when the company was ready to seal the deal, there was no land titles documentation upon which back the agreement — the company’s spokesperson highlighted, and they ultimately withdrew from the project (*ibid*). “Argentina’s king of soy” (Gustavo Grobocopatel) did not find it easy to land its plans in *Altillanura* either, although he was arguably more persistent than his Brazilian competitor. While there is no evidence that Los Grobo is running a project of its own in the region, Grobocopatel remained a top guest in Juan Manuel Santos’s (Uribe’s successor)² events on — and prospects for — the *Altillanura*. For instance, at a conference with local authorities of the region in 2016, Santos expressed:

When Mr. Grobo -who is with us today- (...) saw Colombia’s potential he approached us, not in search of money, not in search of contracts, but in search simply of the opportunity to use his experience to put all of the *Altillanura* into production (...) he has been designing a very interesting scheme that tells us; look, if Argentina today is an agricultural power, Colombia can be equal or superior because you have the potential if you do things well (Lewin 2016).

Even key Colombian players were reported to face “obstacles” to “develop” the *Altillanura* at their will. In 2013, some four years after the Santo Domingo family invested in the region through Sugranel (belonging to Valorem — the family’s major investment holding), they cancelled operations. “Goodbye to the *Llano*”; “*Altillanura*: A missed opportunity?”³, newspapers reported (see Semana 2014b, 2014a). Translating the written plans into the ground reality was turning into an enormous challenge. Note that a majority of the so-called “underutilized land” in *Altillanura* constitute *baldíos* or state lands, subject to specific government regulation⁴. *Baldíos* are conceived as a tool to enforce the “social function” of property, through which land must be distributed among the maximum possible number of people to sustain life. Arguably, this regulation contrasts with the plans for the transformation of *Altillanura*, which implies the aggregation of vast tracts of land to develop economies of scale. The Santo

² The succeeding presidency, by Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), likewise stressed the aim of facilitating private investment in agriculture, as well as in mega-mining. While the Santos administration led the negotiations resulting in the signature of the Peace Agreement with the long-time FARC guerrilla (2016), other set of legislation attempted competing aims. For instance, one key pillar of the Peace Accord was the implementation of a comprehensive rural reform that could contribute to reverse the trend of land concentration in the country. At the same time, however, — in the context of the recent land rush — the government promoted a number of initiatives aimed at, for instance, facilitating the acquisition of large swathes of previously *baldío* lands — as part of its National Development Plan (see: Arias 2011). Although some of these latter initiatives spawned ample debate and were dropped at the time, the government continued to push through similar reforms.

³ *Semana*, “¡Adiós al Llano!”, 19 February 2014; *Semana*, “*Altillanura*: ¿una oportunidad perdida?”, 18 April 2014.

⁴ *Baldíos* should only be allocated to landless peasants or those in need of more and better quality of land to improve their livelihoods. To prevent from land concentration, Law 160 of 1994 specifically mandated that allocation of *baldíos* could not exceed the UAF (*Unidad Agrícola Familiar* or Agricultural Family Unit). UAF refers to an area large enough to provide peasant families with adequate living conditions and it is different for every region of the country, according to agri-ecological characteristics. The law also prohibits any individual or corporation from accumulating lands that were previously *baldíos* exceeding one UAF (GOC 1994).

Domingo, for instance, referred to this aspect of the land legislation as one “obstacle” that “limits the possibilities for large national or foreign investors to access arable areas that can generate acceptable profitability levels for agro-industrial projects”. The losses resulting from closing down the project were running into millions, they concluded. From the cases presented above — this is by no means an exhaustive list — only *La Fazenda* seemed ahead of the rest of the participants in the rush for land. By May 2021, the business was still running (El Espectador 2021) — not without difficulties⁵. But, should cancelled deals really be considered as failed ones? Is it safe to assume that land investments that were later dismissed did not cause any significant impact on people’s livelihoods and ecosystems?

One cancellation after another, it appeared that the frenzy was slowly waning. But in the following years (2011 onwards), the frenzy only grew — to include even more of the so-called “new *llaneros*”. Foreign-based companies were back in the forefront of the spectacle around the making of the “Colombian *cerrado*”, arguably this time determined to ‘land’ their deals at all costs. Consider the case of Timberland Holdings — a US-based manufacturer and retailer. Timberland’s is one in a longer list of land deals effected during the 2010s in *Altillanura*. In 2011, the company took control of 12,000 hectares of land in the area to produce timber for export. To turn their plans of investment a reality, however, they needed a good dosage of imagination, and the enlargement of the cast of characters to include important supporting actors; ‘acquiring’ land in the region is not a straightforward task. As noted above, most lands in *Altillanura* are classified as *baldíos* and they have a special regulation. It is precisely this regulation that *should have* prevented the large amassing of *baldío* lands by Timberland (and others). How was the contrary made possible? Timberland requested the help of a leading Colombian law firm to help them circumvent this “investment obstacle”. Following a sophisticated judicial and administrative scheme to gain land control, Timberland was advised to create X number of ‘paper companies’ for each to purchase different land plots at a time, just below the land size ceiling for the region (see footnote 1); companies were registered in the Virgin Islands — an archipelago located in the Caribbean Sea, popularly known as a tax haven. A total of 10 different land plots — that had been *baldíos* allocated to landless peasants between 1998 and 2003— were later aggregated and planted with timber, totalling 12,000 hectares (La Silla Vacía 2013). Today they remain as property of Timberland Holdings.

⁵ Most lands today property of *La Fazenda* were reported to belong to large paramilitary groups in early 2000s. These serve as one of several paramilitary training bases in the region. Aliar-Contegral have denied any connection with paramilitaries and argued that land purchase was done within the law. Investigative journalists have argued the contrary (see Verdad Abierta 2013b).

Table 1. Sample of cases related to the contemporary land rush in the Colombian *Altillanura*

Source: Own elaboration based on press review (sources for each case are noted in the main text).

Year	Name	Actor			Land investment			Status
		Origin	Main sector/ activity	Location	Area (hectares)	Land use	Capital	
2005	Government of Japan	Japan	National government	Altillanura	-		-	Announcements
2006	J.P Morgan Chase	United States	Investment bank	Altillanura	-		US\$ 325 million	
2006	Siem	Norway (Cayman Islands)	Shipping	Altillanura	-		-	
2012	Chinese Ambassador to Colombia + Businesspeople	China	Public servant/ Private business	Altillanura	400,000		-	
2011	Tianshi	China	Cosmetics; health services	Altillanura	-	Mining, energy, agro- industrial	US\$ 1,000 millions	
2011	Los Grobo (Gustavo Grobocopatel)	Argentina	Agro-industrial	Altillanura	-	Soy, maize	-	
2007	Grupo Maggi (Blairo Maggi)	Brazil	Agro-industrial	Altillanura	100,000		-	Cancelled
2009	Valorem (Santo Domingo family)	Colombia	Financial intermediation	Altillanura - Meta province (Puerto Gaitán), Vichada province (La Primavera)	65,000	Soy and maize	US\$ 300 million	
2007	Aliar-Contegral (La Fazenda)	Colombia	Agro-industrial	Altillanura – Meta province	16,350	Maize, soy for pig-feeding	US\$ 130 millions	
2011	Timberland Holdings Limited	United States	Logging	Altillanura - Vichada province (La Primavera)	11,494	Timber	-	Pursued corporate land deals
2010-12	Cargill	United States	Agro-industrial	Altillanura - Vichada province (Cumaribo, La Primavera, Santa Rosalía)	62,000	Soy, maize	-	
2006	Habib Merheg	Colombia	Former congressman	Altillanura - Vichada province	38,144	-	-	Land accumulation below the radar
2007-08	<i>Los intermediarios del Valle</i>	Colombia	-	Altillanura - Vichada province	-	-	-	

Let us pause the illustration of different cases in here to inquire around the possible ground-level impacts of this recent rush for land in Colombia. Recall that, in discussing the act of conjuring a spectacle, Tsing (2000) argues that often this process is about making some aspects more visible than others. And certainly, those that are thought as potentially more attractive come front in the spectacle-making. In Colombia, those attractive aspects were related to the sudden enhanced value of lands in *Altillanura* — potentially high productive land that was lying there, awaiting for the right investment. Seldom in this narrative there were references to the actual inhabitants of the region and/or the existing uses of land — many of which do not correspond to agri-industrial developments, commercial reforestation or extractive-industries’ related activities. It appeared that land in *Altillanura* was indeed “almost unpopulated” — as noted in the opening quote to this section. With time, however, the act of rendering traditional *llaneros* invisible demanded more effort. A flurry of investigative media outlets started to seriously put into question the deliberate promotion of *baldeo* lands that contradicted the core principles of agrarian law (see El País 2013; Semana 2017; Verdad Abierta 2013b). Congresspeople from the opposition party held a number of congressional hearings around the effects of the recent land rush for peoples and the environment in *Altillanura* (see Arias 2018; Robledo 2013). These concerns were later taken up by the National Comptroller’s Office that advanced investigations of “unlawful acquisition of [presumable] state lands”, including the case of Timberland Holdings (Contraloría 2012, 2014, 2017). Additionally, in one case (*La Fazenda*), air pollution resulting from agri-industrial activities was said to play a part in the death of several indigenous in the area (Molano 2013).

All in all, the underlying concerns related to the impacts of the rush on the possibilities for access to land and related resources by the actual *llaneros* — mainly comprised by peasant settlers and indigenous communities. The pursuit for the “Reinassance of the Orinoco” was now open to scrutiny. In a desperate — and for many, cynical — attempt at restating the plausibility of a large business-led development in *Altillanura*, at a university conference a leading businessman noted:

(...) there are no small proprietors there. The owners of the land were people from Boyacá (...) many of these people traded with emeralds and had it [the land] as a refuge for their money. Much of the land that has been bought is from groups like them. There are no small proprietors (...) there that land is totally useless (...) you must put lime, fertilizers plus five million pesos on top. There are no small proprietors there, we are not buying from anyone or dispossessing anyone (...) Everyone has from 1,000 or 1,500 hectares upwards (cited in Arias 2013).

Importantly, the impacts of the land rush were not resulting solely from corporate-related deals. When in 2004 Álvaro Uribe openly invited to invest in the *Altillanura*, it was not only foreign and domestic companies who took the call. Land brokers, former paramilitary commanders, emerald traders, large landowners and even mid-range politicians were drawn in by the spectacle too. These fall within the third current of the land rush, described above. While some of them attempted at acquiring land and keep it for their own, others rushed to take control of land only to sell it within months, benefitting from a substantial land value appreciation. “Land in the *Llano* rises up to 400%”, titled one report at the time (Portafolio 2013). Another source expressed: “In this area, in early January this year [2008], the price of one hectare was 600,000 COP [US\$ 150], today, as if by magic, you cannot get it for less than 2,5 million COP [US\$ 650]” (Portafolio 2008b). What is the significance of everyday land accumulation to our understanding of the recent land rush? How does it relate to other currents of the phenomenon?

Here, I refer to only two cases — in a longer list — to illustrate my point. In 2007 Congressman Habib Merheg was the protagonist of a new land grab scandal; he was reported to have taken control of over 16,000 hectares of

land (*baldío*) in *Altillanura* (province of Vichada). The actual amount of land in the hands of Merheg was probably higher: in *Altillanura*, “(...) with the announcement of possible foreign millionaire investments, the plots for which no one gave anything before are now highly valued”, one report suggested (Semana 2007a). When he was asked for the reasons behind the ‘land acquisition’ in the area, senator Merheg recalled he had ventured to invest in *Altillanura* soon after he had met with Norwegian businessman some four years before, as they were looking for a site to invest. Was he referring to the Norwegian-based Siem that rushed to the region after Uribe’s first call for investors in 2004? (see above). It remains unknown, but the coincidences are striking. After he met with the Norwegians, he brought friends and family to *Altillanura* so they could see first-hand the “opportunities of the region”. “I am thrilled with Vichada”, said Merheg. He added: “Everything has been done under a legitimate business interest to bring development to the region”. Lands were acquired by Merheg himself, but friends, acquaintances, former employees and colleagues participated too. The case was later investigated by judicial authorities (*ibid*).

Another case involves land brokers that arrive in *Altillanura* from the south-west of the country, also attracted by the same land fever that inspired senator Merheg and others. In 2007-08 — in the peak of the global rush for land — there was reported the arrival of several individuals connected to business groups in Valle province (“*Los intermediarios del Valle*”), who took advantage of a new wave of violence in the region to gain control over several thousand hectares of land. They were said to have bought, at fire-sale prices, numerous land plots owned by *campesino* families. “All of a sudden there were many interested in buying thousands of hectares of land that until then had lacked any significant economic value”, one report said (Rutas del Conflicto 2017). A peasant settler whose land was purchased by the Valle land brokers commented: “After they offered to buy, everything was very fast, we didn't think about it much because with that uncertainty [due to violence], what else could we do?” (*ibid*). Land transfers did not end there. Soon after the land brokers had purchased the land, they sold it to Cargill — a US-based top global food corporation — for a price several times exceeding the original one. In one case, brokers bought the land owned by a peasant family at approximately US\$ 13,000, only to transfer it a year after to Cargill for the equivalent of roughly US\$ 260,000. This is the same for several other land plots first acquired by intermediaries, on behalf of influencing individuals from Valle, and later transferred to Cargill. As of 2017, the company had control over circa 50,000 hectares of land in *Altillanura* (Vichada province) (Rutas del Conflicto 2017). Here land brokers indeed gained massive returns from the land appreciation spurred by the land rush (Verdad Abierta 2013a), a case that echoes Sud’s (2014) argument on the complex character of middlemen — often these are not secondary characters but are themselves protagonists in land accumulation.

These types of land accumulation done by stealth were certainly not new, but they arguably gained a new impetus in the context of the recent land rush. Social and economic conditions had been distressing for a large part of the population in *Altillanura*, hardly affected by the violence of the country’s protracted armed conflict (see CNMH 2018; DNP 2014). I tentatively propose, however, that the furious competition for land in the area during the past decade might have led to a further deterioration in people’s livelihoods. Today, in-depth examinations of the impacts of this, and the other currents of the land rush, *as the main unit of inquiry*, are lacking. While the propositions outlined here refer to the Colombian case, these might as well apply to other contexts. Studying the land rush in other territories, by taking into account the three currents of the phenomenon, might help to enrich and verify these propositions, and to better understand the contemporary character of the land *rush*.

Conclusion

The dominant literature around the ‘global land rush’ does not sufficiently account for the character and implications of the phenomenon. Often, cancellations and announcements of land deals that never actually kicked off have been used to argue that the land rush was not as far-reaching as previously assumed, and that these cancelled deals do not merit further attention. Contrary to this assumption, I have argued in this paper that the land rush is *real* and that it unfolded into three ways: i) pursued corporate land deals, ii) unpursued corporate land deals, and iii) everyday, ‘below the radar’ land accumulation. Elaborating on the work of Tsing (2000) and my own findings, I tentatively maintain that the recent rush for land in Colombia was preceded by a “spectacle-making” process that started around 2003, following the plans of then president Álvaro Uribe to transform the *Altiplanura* into a key hub of agro-industrial and mining development. This attracted a tremendous number of domestic and foreign investors seeking to benefit from credits, technical assistance and other perks accompanying the president’s announcement. Importantly, while several announcements of possible land investments were ultimately cancelled, this paper highlighted its significance as an indicator of the frenzy associated to land — hence the *rush*. It also noted the effects of these announcements in expanding the reach of the rush by triggering new waves of already existing individual, below the radar land accumulation. More concerted analysis around the three currents of the land rush, and its interactions, can help to expand the propositions contained here and to better understand the contemporary character of the phenomenon.

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