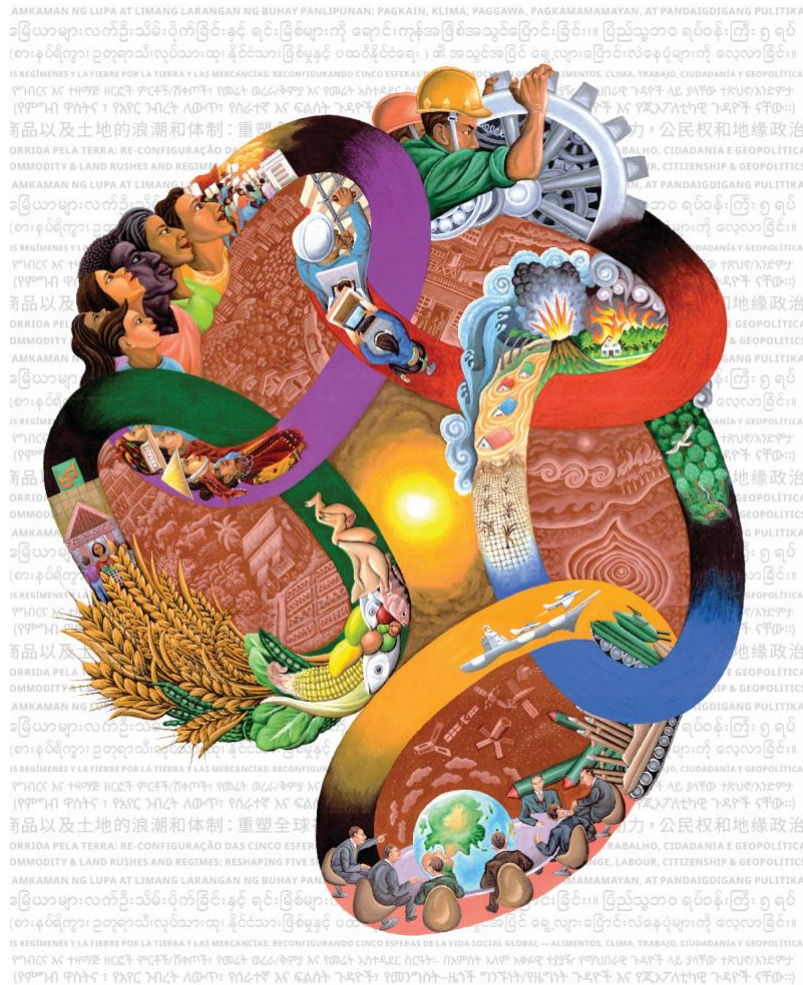


Land Rush Working Paper & Notes

Issue No. 7, October 2023

Limits and possibilities of contemporary land struggles by Indigenous peoples, Black Communities and Campesinos in the Colombian Amazon

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RRUSHES-5 – Commodity & land rushes and regimes: Reshaping five spheres of global social life (food, climate change, labour, citizenship, and geopolitics) is a research project at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands, in collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI), that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834006).

Limits and possibilities of contemporary land struggles by Indigenous peoples, Black Communities and Campesinos in the Colombian Amazon¹

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October 2023

Abstract

Contemporary struggles for land by rural working people in Colombia are pursued distinctly in three social groups, namely, Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, and campesinxs. Each group has formal state institutional platform for land claims. Land-claim making has been pursued sectorally, and the gains in terms of the quantity of formal land titles and the scope in terms of hectares of land have been quite impressive for the Indigenous and Afro-Colombians, especially, but less so for peasants and ex-combatants. While it is important to recognize these gains, it is equally relevant to critically examine the political contradictions and tensions that these sectoral processes, separately and together, have generated – and to be seen from a longer and wider system-wide perspective. When seen from these broader perspectives, what emerges to be at the core of these processes are the attempts by the state and capital to capture land and nature that they require for capitalist accumulation and legitimation done through consent and coercion in the context pursued through a strategy of divide-and-conquer. The overall effect is a fragmented, sectoralized movements and struggles that are ‘merely sectoral’ and struggling to transform into coherent class- and system-wide land struggles. The challenge ahead, both for academic research and practical politics is to confront, and not back away from, complicated political tension especially of the poor-on-poor type in order to construct analytical and political framework that can bypass the trap of being ‘merely sectoral’.

Keywords: Land struggles, land rush, politics of minorization, agrarian climate justice, 5Rs, Colombian Amazon

Introduction

Land is central to the indivisible spheres of production and social reproduction, with the latter broadly cast to include not just labour and inter-generational reproduction but socioecological, sociocultural and sociopolitical reproduction as well (Cousins, 2022; Ojeda, 2022). This is especially important in multi-ethnic societies such as Colombia. In societies that are socially differentiated intersectionally – based on class and other axes of social differences: race/ethnicity, gender and generation – how land is seen and understood to play out in the inseparable spheres of production and social reproduction are necessarily fiercely contested. The axis of conflict is multiple, and not limited to rural working people versus the state or big capital, but could very well be played out as poor-on-poor conflict (Franco & Borrás, 2019). Political reactions that attempt to recast existing land access or possibilities for greater degree of land access are varied in form and ideological meaning, short-term and long-term outcomes, but also temporally and spatially (Borrás & Franco, 2013). Reactions range from resistance

¹ This paper will be presented at the “Critical Agrarian Studies in the 21st Century” international conference co-organized by *Journal of Peasant Studies* at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) of China Agriculture University in Beijing on 10-12 October 2023.

against such political changes in land control to struggles to be incorporated into some of these changes, to acquiescence (Hall et al., 2015). In the study of political economy, within which I locate this paper, the contemporary political situation around land politics and land struggles is captured by Levien, Watts and Yan (2018, p. 816) as follows:

Struggles over means of both production and social reproduction remain as important as ever, but are not playing out in remotely the same way as Marx predicted. Land remains an important focus of such struggles, even if its precise significance remains fiercely debated. Such struggles are also, Marxists increasingly recognize, inextricably bound up with non-class forms of power and domination, whether patriarchy, racism, casteism, or anti-immigrant nativism.

Following Levien et al., (2018), this paper is an attempt makes sense of the significance of land struggles in Colombia which is fiercely debated, as well as to have a better understanding of these land struggles that are indeed inextricably bound up with non-class forms of power and domination. Part of my argument is that land remains central to production and social reproduction of rural working people, but this manifests differently across social groups, especially in multi-ethnic societies where ethnic fault-lines and tensions were shaped historically. In the case of Colombia, we have three main blocks: Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Campesinos. There are historical tensions within and between these social groups around competing and contested claims over land as resource and territory, aggravated by the pervasive and protracted *La Violencia* (Fals Borda, 2009) in the countryside for decades that was also rooted in and sustained through particular configuration of land politics. The already tension-filled land politics has become even more so when in recent years multiple interventions in the name of nature conservation (*Parques Nacionales Naturales* or National Natural Parks), carbon sequestration projects, conservation-cum-tourism projects, and so on), partly as climate change mitigation and adaptation narratives and measures started to gain ground and spread across the country that also competed for land as resource and territory, among other impacts that these generated (Camargo, 2022; Ojeda, 2012). Land-based conflict and political tensions were already quite serious decades back. But the land rush that got unleashed in Colombia roughly 20 years ago pushed the level and character of such land-based tension and conflicts to unprecedented level and to new political dynamics (Arango, 2021; Grajales, 2011, 2021; Rojas, 2022).

There is an important contradiction in land struggles in Colombia, partly influenced by the agrarian social structures that have emerged over time (specifically, the emergence of three distinct social groups of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Campesinx) and the political institutions that endogenously developed within each social group and those framed and deployed by the central state. It is rather positive that state and society recognize the distinct existence and realities of these three social groups and framed laws and policies, including on how to recognize or facilitate recognition of land rights in each of these three domains. These three institutional clusters provided the institutional platform for and route to land rights by local communities in these three categories, which is in itself positive and facilitates mass mobilizing, organizing, demand-making and land claim-making from below. The contradictory process triggered is the inadvertent sectoralization of land struggles, at times playing into the divide-and-conquer scheme of the dominant classes operating within and outside the state. In itself, sectoral struggles are important, but when they block the possibility for intersectional struggles to emerge wherein non-class struggles against oppression interlock with class struggles against exploitation, then it could inadvertently undermine and even cancel out sectoral gains in the long run. Conceptually, this is captured partly in Mamdani's formulation

of the ‘politics of minorization’ that he explored in the context of Africa (Mamdani, 2022), which is explained by him:

A “new kind of political community in which colonized groups were subdivided into territorial homelands and made subject to separate legal regimes. These divisions were drawn along lines of cultural and ethnic distinction, thereby transforming ethnic groups into administrative units... the territorial and legal boundaries created by indirect rule thereby became the basis for postcolonial conflicts over political belonging” (2022, p. 11).

Where this happens, one overall effect of this is it feeds into the ‘divide, weaken, and conquer strategy’ of the state and dominant classes in society, and in Colombia today, these include cattle capital, big capital in the extractive industries, narco-capital, entrepreneurs in carbon trade, tourism, and real estate. I argue that this is one of the reasons of the weakened intersectional, anti-systemic political struggles and the resulting inability of scattered resistance acts against land grabbers where the latter choose to take over land and nature. It is therefore not surprising that we rarely see resistance actions that were able to stop, much more rollback, land grabs where and when they unfold during the peak of contemporary land grabs in period of the past 20 years in Colombia (Rojas, 2022).

Divide-and-conquer strategy of state and capital comes in various institutional forms. One way to have a relevant conceptual handle on this is to have a normative lens as to what ought to be in order to achieve ‘social justice’, that is, a sense of fairness and equity for the rural social groups that we have identified. And here the concept of the indivisible principles or programs of and around recognition, redistribution, restitution, regeneration and representation – or 5Rs – in the context of the politics of land and how it shapes social life, as elaborated in Borras & Franco (2018) and Franco & Borras (2019) is useful. Briefly: recognition is strengthening existing access of rural working people (including Indigenous, Afro-Colombia and Campesinx, women and youth) where they still exist but is politically fragile; redistribution is to provide land to landless and nearlandless who are either in rural or urban areas; restitution is to restore access that were forcibly taken from social groups or that the latter were forced to abandon involuntarily; regeneration pertains to use of land and nature that are regenerative economically and ecologically; and representation refers to securing and promoting political autonomy and rights for rural working people to pursue the first four Rs (Borras & Franco, 2018). The 5Rs are takes agrarian justice (see e.g. Scott, 1976) and environmental justice/climate justice (Newell, 2022) as indivisible agrarian societies In the era of climate change, and is the banner of what Borras and Franco (2018) calls ‘Agrarian Climate Justice’ is a useful political and intellectual normative reference point.

The divide-and-conquer tactics of the state and capital manifest in part by pitting the three groups against each other, or groups within these three categories in direct and indirect ways. Thus, we see variations of ‘recognition without restitution’, ‘regeneration with recognition’, ‘recognition without regeneration’, ‘regeneration without restitution’, and so on, and the widespread phenomena of ‘representation without redistribution, restitution, recognition and regeneration’. The various combinations are almost infinite, but it is always one or two at the expense of the others or so. This happens not only across geographic space, but also especially temporally across cycles of land rush, as Edelman and Leon (2013) observe as is the case in Latin America historically. One effect of this is to weaken across-the-board/across-social groups coherent movements that advance class-wide and system-wide land demands rather than ‘merely sectoral’ ones. As a result, despite impressive quantitative outcomes in terms of

number of formal land titles provided for the three social groups, in reality positive outcomes are limited, and social justice struggles are unable to make progressive structural shifts. However, some movements are beginning to recognize this weakness and are attempting to address it through the concept of ‘Agrarian Climate Justice’ and the 5Rs. Whether these initiatives will gain political traction remains to be seen.

This paper is organized as follows: First, I examine the scene in which land struggles take place, shaped by the historical process through which the Amazon has been integrated into the Colombian and international economy, driven by cycles of booms and busts (Acosta García & Fold, 2022). The next section explores the historical factors contributing to the current land and resource appropriation in the Colombian Amazon. It highlights the role of agrarian and conservation policies and their impact on different rural communities, including indigenous peoples, peasants, and black communities. The next section shows how policies have addressed the land issue for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants and Campesinxs, highlighting its specific implications for land access. Furthermore, this section explains how policies aimed at providing access to land for various groups of rural poor people are embedded in the logic of minority-making and the politics of minorization (Mamdani, 2022). The final section elaborates on the aims and goals of the current land management figures within the framework of agrarian climate justice and the five Rs (Borras & Franco, 2018; Franco & Borras, 2021a).

Land struggles across cycles of land rush in the Colombian Amazon

In the 19th century, Colombia emerged as a significant exporter of tropical agricultural and forestry products on the global stage, which fostered the expansion of the rural economy into the wastelands. This process of integration in the world market unfolded nationwide and was marked by successive booms in commodities like tobacco (1854 – 77), cotton (1862 -70), indigo (1868 – 76) and quinine (1869 – 1882) (LeGrand, 1986). The consequences of this process had deep and enduring impacts on the Colombian economy, extending well into the 20th and 21st centuries. On one hand, this economic shift ushered in a focus on short-term profitability associated with commodity booms, notably coffee (Ocampo & Villar, 1995). On the other, the insertion process into the world market accelerated the transformation of territories and ecosystems, such as the Amazon (Fajardo Montaña, 2022). Not just in the Colombian case, the whole Amazon basin “is but one of the specific environments that have supplied raw materials to changing global markets”(Bunker, 2003, p. 221).

In the Colombian Amazon during the 19th century, both consequences were marked by the extraction of quinine and rubber (Palacio, 2006). From 1850 to 1872, there was a quinine rush in the Colombian Amazon. This was primarily driven by the activities of the company “Casa Elías Reyes y Hermanos,” which operated in the region between the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers. The company employed both migrant workers from the Andes and indigenous people as labourers, and it transported its goods to Brazil using a steamship transport concession. In 1884, as a result of declining international prices, the company ceased its operations. However, it left behind the infrastructure it had established, including trade routes, and a group of workers who opted to remain in anticipation of future opportunities in the forest. Both the infrastructure and these workers were subsequently utilized by the rubber industry (Domínguez & Gómez, 1994; Mongua Calderón, 2018; Pineda, 2003).

The rubber rush in the Colombian Amazon involved internationally denounced exploitative Practices ex: (Casement, 1912). In the Amazonian department of Caquetá, the ‘Casa Arana,’ the largest rubber company, is infamous for exterminating indigenous people and enslaving its

indigenous workers. As Domínguez & Gómez put it “Rubber tappers are often likened to the ruthless conquerors denounced by Bartolomé de Las Casas in the early decades of the Caribbean conquest”(translated from Spanish)(1994, p. 130). Despite the exploitative treatment of both workers and the environment, the environmental impacts of these rushes were limited, as they tended to reverse once the boom subsided, allowing ecosystems to recover in a relatively short time (Palacio, 2006). While the modernization project around quinine and rubber – with the participation of religious missions- failed to transform the territory of the vast basin; however, they did significantly affect the demographic composition of indigenous peoples (Ibid). Furthermore, alongside the demographic impact of the quinine and rubber, they also contributed to the devaluation and erosion of the indigenous peoples’ traditional knowledge regarding forest management, among others.

The rubber boom In the Amazon began to decline largely because rubber plantations in Malaysia and Sri Lanka proved to be more competitive in the market. As international rubber prices plummeted in the 1920s, the government responded by awarding land titles to former rubber entrepreneurs, enabling them to shift their focus to cattle ranching. These land titles came with a requirement for the construction of road infrastructure, which not only set the stage for the rise of the local elite but also facilitated the development of the extensive cattle ranching model that thrived between 1930 and 1940. (Acosta García & Fold, 2022; Domínguez & Gómez, 1994; Molano, 1989a).

In the 20th century, the government maintained a policy of granting concessions for rubber and later oil exploitation in exchange for infrastructure development. Oil extraction projects in the Amazon attracted migrant workers to the region. However, when the boom period came to an end, and the company withdrew from the area, the infrastructure became accessible to settlers. This marked the beginning of the colonization of the Rionegro forest, during which many of the’ company’s facilities were repurposed into settlements (Holmes et al., 2018; Molano, 1989b; Torres, 2018). Over time, these regions became the epicenter of coca production and coca paste processing (Ciro, 2018b; Ramírez, 2011; Torres, 2015). The cultivation of this illicit crop lured migrants in search of quick profits, with many coming from cities, and some even having prior involvement in the illicit trade, stemming from their experience in emerald mining (F. Thoumi, 2003; F. E. Thoumi, 1995). In th^e mid-20th century, the Amazon region gained prominence in development programs, notably those linked to the Alliance for Progress. These initiatives were characterized by extensive infrastructure development and state-led colonization, which I will delve into further in the subsequent section. Infrastructure projects launched in the latter half of the 20th century, such as the construction of the ‘Marginal de ’a Selva’ road and state-led colonization programs, played a pivotal role in adding marijuana and coca in th’ Amazon’s list of commodities during the boom and bust cycles, alongside quinine and rubber (L. M. Dávalos et al., 2016).

Extractive boom economies, religious missions, and colonization policies all contributed to the attraction of peasants from the inter-Andean valleys and Afro-descendants from the Pacific coast to the Colombian Amazon. As early as 1917, the Capuchin monk missions facilitated the migration of black communities to the Amazon, where they eventually integrated into th’ region’s booming economies (Gacha, 2021). In parallel, government-led colonization policies were instrumental in drawing landless peasants to these areas (Molano et al., 1988). These profound transformations reshaped the Amazonian landscape and introduced black communities and peasants alongside the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The participation of rural communities in the Amazon in these economies has been diverse and has significantly shaped their struggles for access to land and natural resources.

In addition to the fluctuating boom and bust cycle economies, the Colombian Amazon has also served as a battleground where armed conflict (*la violencia*) historically unfolded and continues to persist. Over the years, it has been a strategic stronghold for guerrilla groups like the FARC, and in the 1990s (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, 2017; Molano, 1994), it was a contested territory involving paramilitary forces. Regrettably, the region's inhabitants, including indigenous people, black communities, and peasants, have been victims of this protracted armed conflict.

The signing of the 2016 peace agreement raised significant hopes within rural communities in the Amazon, yet these expectations remain largely unfulfilled. Since 2016, the region has witnessed a surge in socio-environmental problems, and it finds itself in the midst of a new cycle of boom and bust economies or as some authors argue a new land rush (Arango, 2021; Grajales, 2013; Ojeda, 2018; Rojas, 2022). This cycle is exemplified by alarmingly high deforestation rates, closely tied to the withdrawal of FARC troops and the evolving dynamics of conflict (Baptiste et al., 2017; Clerici et al., 2020; Prem et al., 2020; Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al., 2021). Initially sparked by the granting of oil extraction licenses (Ciro, 2018a; Diaz, 2019a, 2019b), this new cycle has progressively intertwined with livestock expansion (Murillo-Sandoval et al., 2023) and the emergence of a fresh market for carbon credits (Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al., 2021). These three economic activities now vie for the use of Amazonian land, jeopardizing the land access of indigenous peoples, black communities, and peasants residing in the Amazon region. This contemporary land rush in the Amazon is influenced by five socio-economic and political processes post-2016 peace agreement (Rojas, 2022): (i) Political contestation surrounding the peace agreement between the Colombian state and the former FARC guerrillas; (ii) the reconfiguration of territorial control dynamics following the withdrawal of FARC troops and the reconstitution of dissident armed groups; (iii) the reorganization of illicit economies, including the recent economic crisis related to the coca trade; (iv) fluctuations in deforestation rates in areas previously under FARC control and now ruled by dissident groups; and (v) the diminished institutional capacity to implement the 2016 peace agreement and the recent attempts to seek a political solution that involves dissident armed groups.

The Amazon's enduring process of spatial and territorial reconfiguration driven by cycles of land rush. To best grasp these cycles, we can examine them through the lens of commodity rushes — a phenomenon not new in the annals of capitalism (Borras et al., 2011; Cotula, 2013; Dell'Angelo et al., 2017; Edelman & León, 2013; Grajales, 2021; Sassen, 2013; White et al., 2012). This pattern has been evident in the Latin American region since the days of Spanish conquest and colonialism (Galeano, 2020). Moreover, the contemporary land rush is part of the long history of land-grabbing cycles (Edelman & León, 2013) and commodities booms that this region has experienced. More recently, these trends have manifested in forms like green initiatives, such as carbon offset schemes and conservation programs.

It is in this complex context that rural communities respond and defend their right to land and to remain in their territory for those who have existing access, struggle to gain access to land for those who are landless or near-landless, and struggle to be restituted to their land for those who were involuntarily displaced. Responses from communities affected by the global land rush are varied and far from uniform. In some instances, there is outright opposition and resistance, while in others, there is a move to engage in capitalist enterprises that have emerged from the land rush. For example, certain communities oppose oil extraction and the expansion of cattle ranching in the Amazon but seek participation in green markets and initiatives related

to trading carbon offsets (these aspects will be explored in detail further below). In this regard, the global land rush has reshaped land struggles in the Amazon, which have their specific historical origins and development predating the arrival of the latest cycle of the land rush that is linked to the global land rush that spiked around 2007-2008.

State-led colonization, climate change politics and conservation

Climate change politics dominated by market-based orientation intervention (green economy, greenwashing, etc.) have triggered diverse and multiple ideas about mitigation and adaptation measures that in turn require land, and by implication, the recasting of pre-existing land relations (see e.g. Camargo, 2022). Most of these are squarely within the logic of capitalism, and are mitigation and adaptation measures that seek to continue the processes of expanded reproduction of capitalist, or capitalist accumulation while trying to deploy technical fixes to do deal with climate change. Many of these technical fixes require land: carbon sequestration projects like REDD+ or plain forest conservation projects, variety of renewable energy sources such as hydro power, solar and wind power. Biofuel is another, and it has led to the rise of flex crops and commodities (Borras et al., 2016). Altogether, these require a generally market-oriented recasting of distribution of land control that have partly resulted in the contemporary land rush (Franco & Borras, 2021b). To fully understand the connection between climate change and rural dynamics in specific regions like the Amazon, it is essential to take into account material histories, power dynamics, and the analysis of global environmental change (Borras et al., 2022) shaping the contemporary land rush.

In the case of the Colombian Amazon, two historical factors have led to the current phase of land and resource appropriation. This phase is characterized by the commodification of nature, the emergence of green markets, the implementation of conservation projects, and the rise of carbon offset markets (Arsel & Büscher, 2012; Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Fairhead et al., 2012; Woods, 2019). These two factors are as follows: first, agrarian policies of state-led colonization explaining the migration of peasants and Afro-descendants to this region in the past. The second factor relates to the Amazon's conservation and protected areas policies, which more recently have restricted land use for populations that settled in the area over 50 years ago, partly due to government initiatives. Today, however, these communities face criminalization for their continued presence in this ecosystem. This is explained by a peasant leader of the Guayabero region as it follows:

There is a population that the government itself encouraged to settle in these territories. Then, what the government did was impose protected areas on them. Rather than engaging in conservation efforts in collaboration with these local communities, the government's primary approach has been to expand protected areas and designate them on lands already inhabited by peasants who have played a role in founding and colonizing these regions. The authorities simply inform them, "Neighbor, your farm is now within the park boundaries. You must vacate the area". This has been the government's consistent approach: repressing these communities and expanding protected zones (translated from Spanish) (Peasant Leader, personal communication, January 26, 2022)

State-led colonization replaced land redistribution in the inter-Andean valleys and attracted people from different parts of the country to this region (Fajardo Montaña, 2009). Consequently, in addition to being home to indigenous peoples, the Amazon became a refuge for both peasants and Afro-descendants. The rubber rush in the early 20th century drew Afro-

descendants from Brazil, who arrived in the Colombian Amazon via the Apaporis River. Additionally, black communities from the Pacific coast migrated to the region, largely due to the influence of Catholic missions. Afro-descendant's arrival in this part of the Amazon can be explained by an Afro-descendant leader, who stated, "Black people came here to exploit rubber, take part in various economic booms, engage in labor, and establish their work clans, which consisted of several Afro-descendant families" (translated from Spanish) (Personal communication, March 26, 2022).

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Colombian Amazon gained prominence in development programs due to the influence of guerrilla groups. In the 1960s, the government initiated the National Rehabilitation program, which laid the groundwork for the "Social Agrarian Colonization". This colonization program was overseen by the Agrarian Fund and INCORA (Molano, 1989a). The program delineated three specific zones: Ariari-Güejar, encompassing 631,500 hectares south of the Güejar River and extending toward the foothills of the Macarena mountain range; El Retorno in Vaupés; and the Planas Region in Vichada. The program's objectives included establishing a new colonization hotspot in the Ariari-Guejar region and supporting existing colonization efforts in nearby areas (Ibid). However, an evaluation of the program conducted years later revealed that the principal beneficiaries were not the intended recipients of the directed agrarian colonization and the settled peasants who were facing displacement. Instead, it was medium and large entrepreneurs who reaped the program's benefits (Molano, 1989a). Consequently, peasant colonization served as a foundation for the expansion of large landholdings and latifundia, mirroring a pattern seen in other parts of the country where "a frontier peasant economy based on subsistence crops such as corn and rice was replaced by entrepreneurial agriculture" (Torres, 2018, p. 149). As a result, this region evolved into an open frontier and agro-industrial hub, eventually encircled by illicit coca crops. Agrarian modernization led to the proliferation of the 'coca mestiza' (Torres, 2022). Rice and traditional corn cultivation gave way to mechanized rice plantations, a form of production that *colono* peasants couldn't compete with, pushing them to the outskirts of the agricultural frontier, where coca cultivation became their survival strategy (Ibid).

In addition to the mid-20th-century development programs, Colombia established National Parks in 1948 (Leal, 2019a). The process of administration and conservation started with the establishment of the Biological Reserve of La Macarena in 1948 (Leal, 1995; Molano et al., 1988). This case serves as an emblematic example of the conflicts related to the use, occupation, and land tenure rights of peasants within protected areas. The Sierra de La Macarena Biological Reserve played a pioneering role in Colombia's national park system. It marked the inception of a government approach aimed at preserving specific parts of the national territory in their presumed natural condition. Today, this system encompasses over 14% of the country's total land area (Leal, 2019b). Ten years after, in 1959 the National Congress enacted Law 2, which designated 42% of the national territory as forest reserves. This law also featured a provision allowing the Ministry of Agriculture to declare areas as Natural National Parks if they had previously been approved by the Academy of Sciences (Leal, 2019a).

In the mid-20th century, Colombia began developing its environmental institutions, including the creation of some '*Corporaciones Autonomas Regionales*' in 1960, which aimed to manage natural resources within specific river basins. In 1968, this corporation merged with the Ministry of Agriculture's Division of Natural Resources to form a centralized institution, INDERENA, with national jurisdiction and stronger institutional capacity (Leal, 2019a). The nascent parks office within INDERENA played a crucial role in shifting the agency's focus

from resource development to environmental conservation and protection. Park officials, primarily foresters, promoted a conservationist agenda, even opposing scientific research if it involved collecting specimens. They successfully redirected INDERENA towards environmental care rather than resource exploitation (Ibid). INDERENA's early accomplishments included the drafting of a unified Code of Natural Resources in 1974, which officially established a "System of National Parks". These parks aimed to protect environments close to their natural state, mainly in sparsely populated regions. Peasants living in these areas were considered illegal occupants, while indigenous peoples had the right to reside in the parks (Leal, 2019a). Furthermore, INDERENA took steps to create new protected areas. By the time the code was approved, resolutions had been enacted to establish additional protected areas.

The conservation agenda has faced challenges from various quarters, particularly rural inhabitants, notably peasants. Among their demands for access to land, one of the most significant is the request to exclude certain areas from what are designated as forest reserves under the second law. Simultaneously, they have spearheaded initiatives aimed at reconciling the conservation objectives of Natural Parks with the sustainable utilization of land and resources by peasants (Valencia, 2019). This effort is epitomized by the '*Parques con Campesinos*' (Parks with Peasants) scheme (Salazar, 2021). More recently the Amazon has experienced progressive climate and environmental policies. One example of this is the Amazon's legal recognition as subject of rights by the Supreme Court (Stc 4360-2018, 2018). This sentence has been seen as detrimental to the rights of peasants. A leader and human rights defender from the Amazon has stated that those who promoted it "*did not fully grasp the harm they caused to all the peasants who actually make a living through their work in the field*"(translated from Spanish) (Personal Communication, March 15 2022)

The recognition of the Amazon as subject of rights has not mitigated land and environmental conflicts; instead, it has exacerbated them. One consequence of this legal recognition is that it portrays certain rural communities as defenders of the forest, as seen in the case of indigenous peoples, while labeling others as loggers, as observed in the case of peasant communities. Additionally, it fails to acknowledge the forest rights of communities like black communities and does not consider the historical reasons behind their settlement in the Amazon. In this regard, some rural communities have more flexibility in justifying their continued presence in the territory, thereby maintaining access to land and resources, while others do not have the same advantage. This fragmentation is evident in the various land use instruments applicable to each community, including Indigenous Reserves for Indigenous Peoples, Peasant's Reserve Zones for Campesinxs, and Community Councils for Black Communities.

Agrarian and conservation policies, along with their more recent developments aimed at recognizing the Amazon as a subject of rights, have played a pivotal role in determining rural communities' access to land. These communities arrived in the region either through state action or were drawn by economic opportunities during different boom periods. These local factors have significantly influenced the current land and resource rush. Furthermore, the intersection of climate change politics and the global land rush presents complex and multi-layered connections and interactions. These dynamics have profound implications for rural communities, particularly those residing in areas targeted for environmental and climate initiatives. Firstly, climate change serves as a contextual backdrop for the contemporary land and commodity rush (Borras & Franco, 2018). Secondly, climate change politics and narratives contribute to legitimizing the global land rush. Thirdly, climate change politics can also act as a delegitimizing force for mitigation efforts or potential relevant solutions (Borras et al., 2020). Amid this evolving landscape of land and climate change politics, peasants, indigenous

peoples, and black communities are actively asserting their right to remain in their territories and to secure or maintain access to land.

There are ample examples of various combinations of 5Rs in the context of state and capital's attempt to divide-and-conquer campesinx and other social groups and classes. A few examples of how this unfolds are: '*regeneration without recognition*' -- such as conservation initiatives that not only that they do not recognize land claims by those who have existing access to the space being contested, in fact they diminish or completely ban rural working people from accessing such a space (whether a forest, savannah, or a body of water). The extreme type of this is what is called in conservation literature as "fortress conservation" in the context of Africa in Brockington's work (2002). Another example of problems in conservation or regeneration programs that have become more common the era of climate change is a resettlement site for ex-combatants of FARC in Guaviare who were geographically relocated in the middle of extensive '*fincas*', cattle ranches and conservation parks, and the road to the quite geographically isolated resettlement area was a combination of clay and some thin layer of gravel – and the official reason for this is that it is part of the Amazon and conservation area, and construction of a proper concrete road to connect an isolated settlement area of ex-combatants is not allowed for ecological conservation reasons. Meanwhile the entire area is a patchwork of cattle ranches. So, small municipal concrete roads are not allowed, but deforestation by cattle ranchers are. This contradictory condition can be described as "*regeneration without restitution or redistribution*" or, arguably, it can also be considered as "*representation without redistribution or restitution*". These examples, and many other related manifestations, are far too common and pervasive in the Colombian Amazon, or at least in the general areas where I did my study.

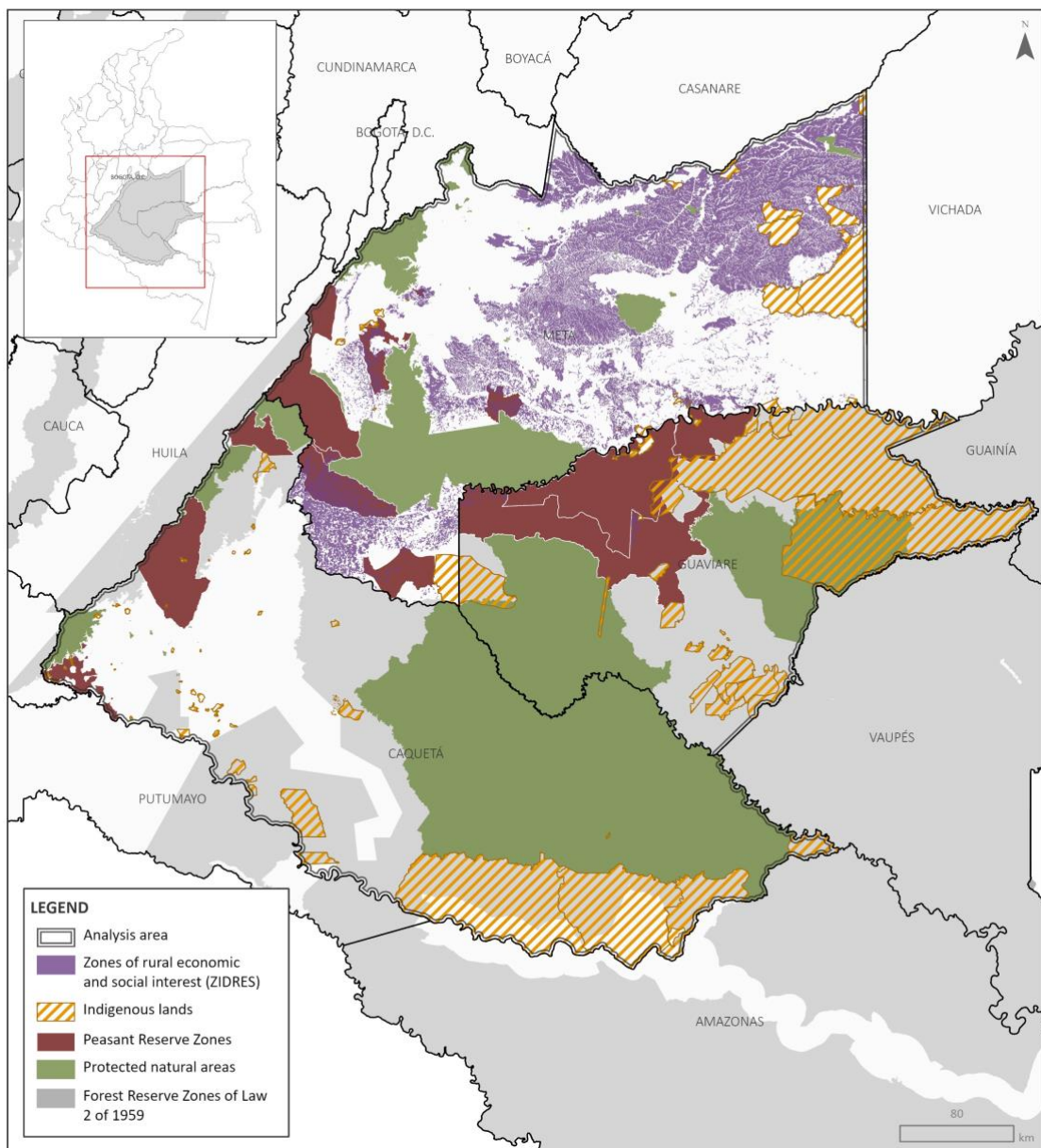
Indigenous Reserves, Community Councils and Peasant's Reserves

Three types of land reserves are prominent in Colombian land politics, namely, Indigenous Reserves, Afro-Colombian Community Councils, and Peasant's Reserves. All of them are key nodes of sectoral land struggles, and have resulted in quite significant allocation of land to these social groups. I will briefly describe these instruments and their outcomes, and examine how the deliberately made incomplete reform processes resulted or might result in contradictory outcomes that generally facilitate state and capital's agenda for expanded capital accumulation while pursuing political legitimacy along the broader analysis by O'Connor, (2002) and Fox (1993) with regards to the two contradictory tasks of the capitalist state.

Colombian state laws recognize three land policy instruments that guarantee group land access to rural communities: Indigenous Reserves ('*Resguardos Indigena*') for indigenous peoples, Community Councils ('*Consejos Comunitario*') for black communities, and Peasant Reserves ('*Zonas de Reserva Campesina*') for peasants. The land individual land rights of campesinx are guaranteed through public lands ('*baldios*') reserved for the sole purpose of giving individual plots to campesinx (LeGrand, 1986). These administrative designations align with the constitutional mandate concerning the acknowledgment of diversity, formal equity, the right to cultural identity, prior consultation with indigenous peoples, and, most importantly, land rights and collective property. Each administrative figure has its own history and is linked to specific territorialities. In the case of indigenous *resguardos*, this concept has its origins in the Spanish Colony, and some of the titles granted by the crown during the colonial period are still part of the demands of indigenous peoples. Community Councils have a more recent history, emerging in the 1990s, as do the Peasant Reserves. Both administrative designations were the result of a significant process of social mobilization, contributing to the enactment of Law 70

for black communities and Law 160 for peasants. As Franco (2008) explains laws are passed but do not self-interpret nor self-implement, and the processes and outcomes of interpretation and implementations of these legal instruments are played out in political contestations among state, capital and rural working people (Coronado, 2021). Each of the three land access instruments, their history, how they are regulated by Colombian law and, most importantly, how each has achieved significant victories in terms of access to land for each community. Despite partial victories, all three have led to bitter struggles within and between communities. And ultimately, legal titles, group or individual are never absolute guarantee against the dispossessing force of commodification and enclosure (Grajales, 2013), or indeed, plain state neglect.

Figure 1 Map of Land-Use Management Figures in the Colombian Amazon



Elaborated by Natalia Caro by author's petition.

Indigenous Reserves

Indigenous territories in Colombia boast a rich history that predates the Conquest, and they have witnessed significant changes owing to Spanish colonization and the formation of the Colombian Republic. During the colonial period, *Resguardos* functioned as tools for organizing and overseeing indigenous populations, primarily to provide labor for Spanish colonist's haciendas (Garzón Zabala, 2017). Following the struggles for independence, influenced by liberal philosophy, the *Resguardo* came to be viewed as an outdated form of land tenure. Despite early Republican laws and reforms aimed at dismantling communal land ownership and assimilating indigenous communities, these systems endured (González Rojas, 2014). However, in the early 21st Century, Indigenous Communities began to reinterpret the significance of *Resguardos*. They started to perceive these territories as crucial for safeguarding and recognizing their ancestral lands, especially in response to the processes of agrarian modernization (Duarte, 2015). Table 1 summarizes the most relevant legal procedures regulating *Resguardos* and land access for indigenous communities from 1820 to 2015.

Table 1 Evolution of the legislation on Indigenous lands

Year	CONTENT AND LEGAL PROCEDURES FOSTERED BY THE STATE	
1820	Decree 20 May	Return of lands to indigenous legitimate owners of the lands that were part of the resguardos.
1905	Law 55	authorization and legalization of the sale of land within resguardos and fractionation of resguardos.
1919	Law 104	reinforcement of the splitting of resguardos and establishment of punishments for those who oppose it.
1930-1940		extinction of resguardos under the excuse that their owners had lost their indigenous identity
1961	Law 161	Allocation of land to indigenous groups in marginal areas, which were later recognized as resguardos.
1991	Law 21	Adoption of the ILO Indigenous Peoples Convention
1994	Law 160	regulation of land legalization for indigenous communities.
1995	Decree 2164	Procedure for the constitution and expansion of resguardos.
2015	Decree 1071	Extension of the decree 2164.

Own-elaboration with data provided by (Garzón Zabala, 2017)

In Colombia there are approximately 1000 Indigenous Resguardos (Ministerio del Interior, 2022), in the Amazon region, as reported by the National Land Agency, there are a total of 222 reserves covering an area equivalent to 26,990,084 hectares. Among these, 211 reserves are entirely located within the region (100%), while 4 have less than 5% of their surface area within the regional territory. Additionally, 7 reserves encompass between 42% and 90% of their surface area within the regional territory (Acosta-Delío, 2019).

The indigenous population of the Colombian Amazon was used as a slave labour force for export economies such as rubber from the late 1^{9th} and early 2^{0th} centuries (Domínguez & Gómez, 1994). In the 2^{0th} century, the situation of the Indians did not improve, they continued to be exploited in other extractive economies such as hunting animals for the fur trade (Castro-Caycedo 2018 [1982]), or collecting coca leaves for the processing of cocaine (Mondragón, 1992).

Table 2 Evolution of the constitution and widening of Resguardos (1960-2022)

Period	Institution	Number constituted resguardos	of	Number Expanded resguardos	of	Area (ha)	Beneficiaries Indigenous Families
1960-2002	INCORA	579		40		29.7 million	50000
2002-2015	INCODER	169		69		2.53 million	23000
2015-2022	ANT	79		36		1.14 million	18000

Own-elaboration with data provided by (Garzón Zabala, 2017) and (ANT 2022, personal communication)

The socioeconomic and political conditions of Indigenous reserves across the country are vastly differentiated. But one thing is certain: most reserves are not like those advertised on big commercial billboards to promote tourism or local culture. Many reserves are not very different from the uneven, contested, neglected, marginal and geographically isolated. The Indigenous reserves I studied in the Amazon region are like that, and similar to what Arango (2023) has observed in Altillanura, or indeed, not very different from what Anthias (2018) described in Bolivia. In a discussion with our research team and the Resguardo residents, the Resguardo leader lamented:

Our Indigenous territory shrunk in size, and the officially constituted resguardo is too small for us to be able to survive by combining chagra with hunting. The territory is not that big anymore for wild animals to thrive, and thus, for us to hunt. The bigger part of our territory was parcelized and given to peasant colonos who established fincas. Our territory that got shrunk is now completely surrounded by fincas, and we do not even have our own road, no right of way to and from our resguardo. We have to travel more distance and at the mercy of finqueros to allow us to pass through their land, now their land, which was our land. These finqueros prohibit us from hunting in their fincas. Moreover, years back, there is a big company that took over a huge area of land, including a significant portion of our territory. It is now completely planted with oil palm. So yes, we have a resguardo officially constituted, but the size and quality of it do not guarantee our ability to survive, and our children will soon lose many of our cultural practices especially hunting skills because we are not able to hunt, or we are not allowed to hunt. There is nothing much productive activities possible inside our resguardo. We are demanding to take back our land taken over by the oil palm company, but nothing is happening. And now, many of our people in the resguardo because of poverty are forced to work in the oil palm plantation that grabbed our land. It is hard for us to swallow, but we have no choice if we have to survive. We rely mainly on the regular food aid from government in order to survive, which is not sufficient (translated from Spanish) (Indigenous Leader, Focus Group Discussion, July 17, 2023)

This short vignette is fully loaded with all the conceptual and political contradictions and challenges that I flagged in the beginning of this paper. If we take the quantity of titles and the hectareage they represent in terms formally constituting *resguardos*, this particular *resguardo* will be added to this census data that is celebrated not only by the Colombian government but even by many advocacy NGOs worldwide today, especially in relation to climate politics. But if we deploy a political economy analysis of what is inside this *resguardo* and the social relations its residents are inserted into, then there are more challenges to confront than accomplishments to celebrate. This case tells us of multiple axes of conflict: between the Indigenous community and big capital (oil palm), but also between the Indigenous community and Campesinxs. Here we see how the concept of ‘*recognition without restitution*’ comes into

play: government recognized part of the Indigenous territory, but facilitated the grabbing of the rest, especially by the oil palm company, and despite repeated demand to take back the land, the land remains in the control of the agribusiness. We also see how ‘*redistribution without recognition*’ could be at play: lands were redistributed to peasant colonos for them to establish their fincas, at the expense of un-recognizing the prior claims to land by the Indigenous. Not only that: the way and the extent to which redistribution was carried out was to the point of undermining the integrity of the *resguardo* in its ability to guarantee social life of the Indigenous. We also see here ‘*recognition without regeneration*’: a *resguardo* was constituted but in a way and to an extent that it cannot guarantee regenerative socioeconomic activities, and not even socioecological reproduction because many of the *chagras* were part of those taken over and destroyed by *finqueros* and the oil palm company.

Community Councils

In Colombia, there are approximately 200 officially constituted Community Councils which corresponds to 8 million Ha. (ANT, 2023a), with the majority of them located along the Pacific Coast. The establishment of community councils was a significant part of the constitutional and legal reform package during the wave of multicultural constitutionalism that swept through Colombia in the 1990s, aimed at safeguarding Afro-descendant communities and their territories (Baquero Melo, 2014). This surge of multicultural constitutionalism also found expression in the constitutional process of 1991 in Colombia, resulting in the recognition of rights and the provision of special protection for ethnic communities, including indigenous and Black communities, within the Colombian Constitution.

The constitutional acknowledgment of the rights of Black communities and the establishment of the principles of inalienability, imprescriptibility, and non-seizability for ethnic collective territories served as the basis for the enactment of Law 70 of 1993. This legislation was designed to govern the demarcation and titling processes for the historically inhabited collective territories of Black Communities (Mogollón & Gómez, 2018). Likewise, within Law 70 the definition of collective occupation is presented as the historical and ancestral settlement of black communities on lands for collective use that constitute their habitat and on which they currently develop their traditional production practices (Ibid). The law became a landmark due to the unprecedented rights it granted to Black communities, the ethnic awareness it generated, and the land reform project it represented (Cárdenas, 2012). This last aspect was characterized as the largest land reform experience in Latin America in the 2000s (Offen, 2003).

In this manner, community councils have become the most effective means for Black communities to secure access to land. The significance of this institution for Black communities is not only derived from the recognition of their ethnic identity but also because it grants them land rights. This aspect can be elucidated by an Afro-descendant leader from the Amazon who stated:

The decree of 1745, which governs community councils, explicitly states that it confers upon us the right to land anywhere in the country. Specifically, we have rights to public lands 'Baldíos' in any part of the country, particularly in regions abundant with such lands. Consequently, when a community council is established, it is founded with the utilization of public lands (Translated from Spanish) (Focus Group Discussion, March 16, 2022)

When asked about the specific criteria for establishing community councils, Afro-descendant leaders, drawing on their extensive knowledge of Law 160 and community council legislation, stress that these councils should be formed on public lands historically inhabited by Black communities. However, this criterion introduces complexity since the historical status is determined by the ancestral use of these lands, specifically the maroon and free territories established by Black communities during the Spanish colonial period. This historical criterion poses a significant challenge to land access for Black communities in regions like the Amazon, where just 5 Community Councils are officially recognized (Comisión de la verdad, 2022) a figure which contrast with the number of Community Councils in other parts of the country. One community leader searching for land explains:

We encounter a challenge here because when the Seventy Law mentions ‘ancestral lands,’ what does that imply? It signifies that these are the lands where Afro-Colombians salves, who arrived directly in these regions, such as in the Pacific, or in the case of the Atlantic Coast, the Palenqueros, and the Cimarrones who refused enslavement, rebelled, and established Palenques. Do you follow? I mean, we, well... I’m not sure if I’m mistaken, but that’s precisely what we’re discussing here. Although it was we who arrived in these places, we were just informed that these lands also provide us refuge, and that’s where I perceive the issue. When they speak of ancestral lands, it directly pertains to these communities—those who have resided in these areas for over 400 years, you see? (Translated from Spanish) (Focus Group Discussion, March 16, 2022)

As shown above, the historical reasons for the presence of black communities in the Amazon date back to the 19th and 20th centuries, a more recent process referred to in Law 70 with the *Cimarrones* and *Palenques*. This process has to do with the religious missions of the 19th century and the boom economies of the 20th century, such as coca. This aspect explains why at the present many of the black communities in the Amazon in search of the constitution of Community Councils were dedicated to coca cultivation before 2016. In fact, many of these communities are beneficiaries of the crop substitution programme of the 2016 peace agreement.

Black communities seeking access to land in the Amazon are aware that their expectations may generate conflicts with other land management figures, such as indigenous *resguardos* and forest reserve zones. However, in their interpretation, if indigenous *resguardos* can be established in forest reserve areas, the same standard should be applied to black communities, who, like indigenous communities, protect the forest. They even believe that in cases where land interests conflict with those of indigenous communities, an agreement should be reached since they have the same right to the land as indigenous peoples do.

Other rural inhabitants of the Amazon are not in favor of establishing community councils because they believe it would limit the amount of land available to other social groups. For instance, certain community action boards consisting of local peasants in this region, who are interested in the land allocation of *baldios* to acquire land, oppose the formalization of community councils. Furthermore, there is a perception that specific environmental protection measures, which are viewed positively by Black communities and negatively by campesinos. For instance, the ruling that grants rights to the Amazon is welcomed by Black communities but met with resistance by peasants.

Peasant Reserves Zones

Peasant reserve zones were established with the primary objective of curbing the expansion of the agricultural frontier, regulating land occupation and utilization, curbing land ownership concentration, and preserving natural resources. At the moment, according to the Land National Agency there are 11 Peasant Reserve Zones officially constituted and accounting of 13 million Ha (ANT, 2023b). Furthermore, this concept was conceived and championed by peasant movements during the 1990s to ensure the involvement of peasant settlers in decisions regarding their territories and to secure the full realization of their rights (Piscal, 2020). The general idea is to identify and demarcate a large area of land, a territory, a zone, where peasants can live, survive and make a living. But a zone needs to be formally constituted. The process towards formal constitution is very much a contested political process.

The Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRC) are regulated by Law 160 of 1994, which established the agrarian reform system. It is paradoxical to find an initiative of this kind amidst a public policy of market-assisted agrarian reform driven by the World Bank, such as Law 160. However, this concept was also a result of peasant mobilization in the 1990s, with one of the strategic objectives of the peasant movement being to halt the expansion of large landownership, ensure the continued presence of rural settlers in the territory, and stabilize the agricultural frontier (Fajardo Montaña, 2014).

ZRCs have made important accomplishments, although the level and extent are far below the original goals and targets. Once the pilot ZRC programs were established, there was strong peasant social mobilization, which was suppressed through the democratic security policy of former President Uribe during the 2000s. In Uribe's government ZRCs were criminalized, their promoters were pursued and imprisoned, and many peasant leaders were eliminated by paramilitary forces. In the Amazon, particularly in the Department of Guaviare a ZRC was established encompassing the municipalities of San José, Calamar, and El Retorno, covering an area of 463,000 hectares (Resolution 0054 of December 18, 1997, by Incora). However, today, within the ZRC, large landholdings predominate, and the land is in the hands of landowners, cattle ranchers, and speculators (peasant leader, personal communication, November 25, 2021). Consequently, the concept of ZRC became blurred due to the 'cycle of violence or pressure—abandonment/forced sale—multiple transactions—final appropriation by paramilitaries or third parties -cattle ranchers, politicians, or others- (Vargas & Barrios, 2016).

In addition to the severe violent and legal persecution of the concept and its advocates, which explains the limited progress in achieving its objectives, ZRCs were designed for colonization areas and areas where vacant land prevailed, as is the case of the Amazon. From the outset, this was a limitation since it was once again an attempt to create escape valves in colonization areas instead of addressing the structural problem, which is large landholdings, as was the case with the timid agrarian reform attempts of the 20th century.

Since December 2022, the National Land Agency has speeded up the process for the constitution of new peasants reserves and approved the establishment of four Peasant Reserve Zones, covering 378,000 hectares in the departments of Cauca, Meta, and Cundinamarca (ANT, 2022). After nearly 30 years since its creation, there is finally political will on the part of the national government to support and develop this concept, a development that has been widely celebrated by the peasants organization but in some cases contested by others rural inhabitants like indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians.

As demonstrated by the case of the Peasant Reserve Zone of Guaviare, its official recognition did not result in more equitable measures for land access by peasants. On the contrary, it continues to be a hotspot for land concentration, the expansion of extensive cattle ranching, and speculation in land prices. What was once a celebration by the peasant movement is now in the hands of landowners linked to the mafia capital. Therefore, in areas like this, 'land reform processes must be undertaken even within the peasant reserve zones' (Mondragón, Personal communication, October 28, 2023). This is an example of recognition without redistribution or regeneration, as despite the official recognition of the peasant reserve zone by the Colombian state, it did not lead to a land redistribution process, and the land remains in the hands of landowners, with the soils in this peasant reserve being heavily affected due to the expansion of extensive cattle ranching.

This situation becomes even more complex in the Colombian Amazon, where, in addition to the peasants interested in the land, there are also signatories of the peace agreement who, after disarmament, were relocated to areas near peasant reserves. This is the case in the department of Caquetá with the El Pato-Balsillas Zone (Officially constituted in August 2023) and in Guaviare, where they now demand to be part of the peasant reserve zone to gain access to land and ensure their sustainability.

While achieving some partial victories, all three approaches have resulted in contentious conflicts among communities. These different mechanisms compete in organizing land use and determining the prevalence of specific land rights. This sets the stage for a 'divide, weaken, and conquer' strategy implemented by both the state and the dominant social classes. Such a strategy falls under the framework of the politics of minorization (Mamdani, 2022), which fragments collective struggles and perpetually creates new minority groups, all while avoiding a critical examination of the structural distribution of land and the dismantling of land inequalities. Furthermore, these minoritization politics extend to other communities, including victims of armed conflict seeking land restitution and ex-combatants.

Concluding discussion: towards Agrarian Climate Justice

There are important gains in terms of land struggles sectorally for Indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, and campesinxs, including ex-combatants needing to be resettled. The quantitative data on accomplishments in terms of number of titles and geographic scope in terms of hectares is impressive for the Indigenous reserves, Afro-Colombian community councils, and peasant reserves. It is tempting to celebrate one on a stand-alone basis, and there is reason to do so especially since such victories were born out of life and death struggles by these local communities. This paper's critical examination of these sectoral land struggles and my attempt at demonstrating the many problems in them is not to de-value the significance of these accomplishment; quite the contrary. My aim is to see how to protect such gains, while exploring which in which such can become building blocks towards constructing an effective shield against the persistent assault done by state and capital through capitalist accumulation drive shrouded with attempts at maintaining a minimum level of political legitimacy. I have demonstrated, using elements of the 5Rs, how the vicious divide-and-conquer strategy of state and capital have created the basis for tensions within and between local communities of Indigenous, Afro-Colombians and campesinxs, and perhaps prevented the emergence of solidarity based on class and non-class politics.

The various problematic combinations of the five elements of 5Rs that have played out in the Amazon region, some of which I briefly discussed earlier, has been picked up by grassroots organizations at the Department level that work simultaneous with all social groups that are the subject of this paper. This allow them to see a broad cross-sectoral picture, and realize the divisive effect of ‘merely sectoral’ approach – again, emphasizing that I am not saying that sectoral work is wrong; what I was arguing is that sectoral work that stops there, and are unable to cross sectors to forge class-wide, across-the-board solidarity and movement building are bound to be weakened and divided by the divided-and-conquer strategy of the state and capital.

One of the grassroots organizations in the Department of Caqueta is CCORDOSAC (*Coordinadora Departamental de Organizaciones Sociales, Ambientales y Campesinas del Caquetá*) – a Department-wide group that is neither a formal member of the main left agrarian movements or Indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements – but tends to work closely with these left agrarian, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements as well as with ex-combatant organizations and coca farmers and farmworkers. They realized the weakening and divisive effect of ‘merely sectoral’ way of mobilizing, organizing and demand-making, and are now trying to frame their work across sectors using the 5Rs as a framework, and bannered as ‘Agrarian Climate Justice’. Whether such will gain traction among the various sectoral groups, and if so, whether it would demonstrate some power to be more effective in both ‘defensive struggles’— struggles that aim to block and unmake the divide-and-conquer strategy of the state and capital and its politics of ‘minorization’ -- and ‘proactive struggles’ -- struggles that attempt not only to dismantle the structures and institutions of exploitation and oppression, but to simultaneously construct the building blocks of a positive future -- is something what is worth not only watching, but also accompanying.

Acknowledgements

I extend my profound gratitude to the brave peasants, indigenous communities, and Afro-descendants who generously shared their invaluable insights, reflections, and life stories, which served as the bedrock for this research. Furthermore, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to the peasant coordination group COORDOSAC, the VISOMUTOP corporation, and the Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz for graciously welcoming me into their communities and facilitating my fieldwork in the Amazon region. In particular, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jun Borrás for his insightful comments and observations on this work, which greatly enriched its quality. Additionally, I am thankful to the entire administrative team of the RRUSHES-5 project—Chaya, Veronika, and Eva—for their indispensable support in managing the administrative and logistical aspects of my research.

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