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The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, a Decade after the Spike

edited by Logan Cochrane and Nathan Andrews. International Political Economy Series. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, xxv + 286pp., € 99.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-60788-3.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, a Decade after the Spike, edited by Logan Cochrane and Nathan Andrews. International Political Economy Series. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, xxv + 286pp., € 99.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-60788-3.

The Transnational Land Rush in Africa, a Decade after the Spike presents a multi-country analysis that documents and discusses the effects of land grabs in Sub-Saharan Africa, ten years after the beginning of the so-called land rush. Adopting a critical stance towards the eurocentrism of International Political Economy (IPE) as a discipline, it argues that multi-scalar and multi-perspective assessments are key to understand land grabbing processes and to capture the significance of land in this essentially “glocal” land governmentality. Through an assemblage of nine detailed empirical studies, the book compares land grabs’ politics and patterns at the local level. Such a transversal overview is a great and much-needed addition to the literature, which tends to focus either on specific case studies or countries. Each chapter illustrates how global processes connect with local dynamics supporting the book’s main argument that extractive capitalism and global dynamics are deeply entangled within national political economies, spurring the involvement of multiple actors, from both public and private sectors, at multiple and overlapping levels, in investment-related contingent, complex and uneven relations of power. The book is thus of great relevance to a wide audience interested in land issues, including academics, development practitioners, international organisations, donors, decision-makers and public servants. Critical thinking and evidence presented here may constitute a nice starting point to rethink investment, development models, land reforms and, more generally, how we think about agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Through this comparison of processes and outcomes in a variety of countries, the book highlights clear general trends associated with the political economy of land investments. Although many scholars had pointed to similar trends in specific case studies, this book innovates by providing a comparative overview that allows a certain generalisation of these observations. Four key findings deserve to be highlighted. First, the expansion of the capitalist frontier tends to exacerbate social inequalities and environmental degradation, disrupt food systems, create land conflicts, and dispossess peasants without much development. Second, processes associated with land commodification and formalisation, although praised by the international community and donors, are inherently political and plagued with numerous implementation problems, leading to the emergence of new land tenure landscapes but not necessarily to peasants’ increased land tenure security. They also trigger patterns of wider agrarian change, depriving many peasants of their access to land and forcing them to increasingly rely on casual work to survive. Third, government officials, political figures and elites play a pivotal role in almost all contexts: not only do they justify those land investments and their consequences, but they also often seize the new investment-related opportunities to enrich themselves at peasants’ expense. Fourth, the book also highlights that this “glocal” land governmentality is grounded in the imposition of a Western ideational model that is not necessarily adapted to many local realities. In every country studied, we find this common belief guiding policies and politics: Africa would get out of poverty only through private investments, land commodification and mechanistic agriculture. A paternalistic vision that depicts African peasantry as somehow “backward” and in need of guidance is

still shaping land initiatives, investments and reforms and the way we think about development. As many chapters show, this prevailing ideational model has very pervasive local effects. For instance, it may lead the government to invest massively in unproductive foreign investors rather than in its own indigenous farmers (*Nigeria*, 125). Or it may lead local communities to adopt Western models and concerns regarding environmental preservation even though it deprives them from their own access to forests and to its resources (*Liberia*, 165).



Interestingly, such beliefs are seldom questioned by leaders, governments, international organisations, or donors even when facts are clear: many of these investments fell short of expectations, failed, or were even never launched. This issue could have been more explored by the editors and constitutes an interesting avenue for future research. What are the emerging trends regarding failed or partially implemented investments in Sub-Saharan Africa? What explains such high rates of failure? In which contexts are investors more successful? And why? And what is the impact of Covid-19 on those already existing dynamics?

This also relates to the issue of investors' motivations, a question that has not been sufficiently tackled in this book, and, more generally, by the scholarship on land grabs. Indeed, the focus on the political economy surrounding these projects and their outcomes tends to overlook and oversimplify investors' interests and agency. In many cases, investors' motives in developing large-scale agricultural production in Africa remain puzzling: they tend to face important political and infrastructural challenges that reduce their productivity potential in the short run and appear to offset the advantages of acquiring cheap land in developing countries. These observations run against conventional wisdom: a common premise of the literature on FDI is that investors try to mitigate risks and reduce costs when they invest. Then, why do political risks, corruption and weak infrastructure do not systematically deter farmland investments? Which investors are more attracted by weak states and regulations, and why? And what are investors' motivations if not agricultural production? What is the role played by funding in those investment dynamics?

In sum, this book contributes to take stock of dominant trends and will be of great interest to students, scholars and development practitioners working on investment, land, and political economy issues in Africa. It stands out not only because of the great diversity of the cases presented but also by offering a holistic perspective that allows us to better connect international processes to local dynamics. To my knowledge, it is the first book published that provides such a detailed transnational overview of the effects of the land rush in Africa. Although it highlights common issues and outcomes and provides a much-needed critical analysis of the political economy surrounding land and investments, many issues are yet to be further explored. As the editors highlight in the conclusion, one thing is certain: the effects and outcomes of this transnational land rush in Africa are far from over, even a decade after the spike.

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