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**LAND GRAB, THE VALUES OF LAND: NEW
AND OLD PATTERNS OF LAND APPROPRIATION**
University of Milan-Bicocca (Italy)
April 2013

Mauro VAN AKEN*

In April 2013 an international workshop on « Land grab: the *values* of land. New and old patterns of land appropriation » took place at the University of Milan-Bicocca (Italy). The seminar was one of three workshops on Land Grab coordinated by SIII, an interdisciplinary network of several universities in Milan organizing research activities in relation to EXPO 2015. This international event will focus on « Feeding the planet », therefore tackling food issues, sustainability in agriculture and resource management. Within this framework, the anthropological group at the University of Milano-Bicocca devoted to environmental research has focused on contemporary dynamics of land grab within three main frames, from which it is often disconnected. First, the *values* of land: different cultural, social and political representations of land are at stake, which cannot be detached from the economic processes of contemporary land grab.

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Secondly, understanding present days patterns of land grab is connected to the historical and cultural patterns of land and resource appropriation, starting from the colonial encounter and the political dynamics involved in land contestation. Thirdly, a crucial relationship is at the centre between « grabbing the land » and other patterns of resource privatisation, as water, or the interconnected change of labour conditions and dependencies and of the rural livelihoods. Privileged attention was accorded to case studies, as local focus of global dynamics: since many territories are facing increasing tensions around land and water in the South as much as in the North of the world, anthropology offers important tools in grasping these dynamics that are taking place at the heart of many rural regions.

Mauro Van Aken, coordinator of the workshop with the local group of Anthropology and Environment (A. Rossi, L. D'Angelo, M. Tassan), introduced the seminar tackling what often remains invisible in debates on land grab, the « values » of land: not only its economic value, but the embeddedness in cultural values, knowledge systems, perceptions of the environment, ecological contexts in which they are embedded. Besides, it is impossible to speak of land appropriation without looking at water, the most relational resource and the context of wider resources. Land grab has a long history, a colonial genealogy and a postcolonial intensification. It is not new if not in scale, in the intensity of capitalism incorporation of lands, of devaluation of local management patterns and opens up new questions on the role of the expert systems and on the local patterns of populations in facing intensive change and inequalities around land issues.

In relation to this, Ray Bush (University of Leeds, Thimar Network) presented a wide perspective on « Land grabs and (under)development: the struggles of small farming in the context of neo-liberalism ». Bush stressed how land grabs should be put in the broader context of small farmer futures' in capitalism. This means asking why small farmers persist in the context of land grabs in the Global South at a time of ecological and financial crisis, an issue he

dealt by examining patterns of capitalist incorporation and rural transformation in Egypt. He thus contributed to the debate on rural transformation during the contemporary phase of crisis capitalism that seeks to promote increased productivity and global competitiveness. This leads to the need to understand the complexity of small farming and advance the case of how it can be a vehicle for food security and sovereignty: the global pressure for accumulation through encroachment promotes persistent inequality at an international level and accelerated inequality at a local level. This means focusing on farming livelihoods, on labour in contemporary farming in Egypt, this issue being often neglected in land grab debate.

Amalia Rossi (University of Milano-Bicocca) focused on a contemporary case of « Farming forests of fuel. Energy crops, environmental imageries and new values of the land in contemporary Thailand ». She showed how the global process of land grabbing is nowadays accelerated by the boom of bio-fuels, considered as an ecologically sound alternative to fossil fuels. During the decade 2000-2010 the boom of energy-crops, from which bio-fuels derive (oil palm, maize, cassava and others) had an immediate impact on global agrarian markets. Recently Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand got in competition to gain regional supremacy in the sectors of bio-mass production and transformation. Stealing land to forest and to food crops to « farm fuel » has consequently produced a global rising of the value of the land and the prices of food commodities. In the case of Thailand, in the 1980s, thousands of acres of forest and rice fields have been converted into « corn forests » as food-stock for animals. Since the year 2000 part of this corn started to be sold outside the country for ethanol production. Until 2007 the demand for corn as bio-mass exploded, bitterly impacting on the rich bio-diversity of the national tropical forests. In Thailand, the land (*thi din*) is a focus of old contentions that the agro-energy revolution tends to exacerbate rather than to calm. The farmers' up-rise in the Autumn 2008 was an historical event that dramatically showed the proportions of this transition.

Manuela Tassan (University of Milano-Bicocca) presented her work on « Whose land? Socio-environmental conflicts over land appropriation in contemporary Brazil ». In the history of Brazil the land grabbing process has deep roots. In 1982 Victor Asselin, reflecting on the longstanding land issue in Amazonia, wrote that the *grilagem* – Portuguese word used to refer to the violent appropriation of the public land by powerful landowners – was a « structural » problem in the macro-region known as « Legal Amazon ». The *grilagem* showed the aftermath of an ambiguous collusion, during the dictatorial period, between public powers and private interests. Today, it is still possible to find this controversial connection between the State, federal policies and private interests. This happens in the uncontrolled erosion of forest areas – which aren't *vazia* (empty, uninhabited) at all, as developmentalist rhetoric would assert – to make space for soya plantations and large scale animal farms. It also happens in the variations introduced in the New Forest Code – that became slacker in time – or in the construction of pharaonic public works characterized by a strong social impact as, for instance, the hydroelectric power plant in Belo Monte. Since the democratic Constitution of 1988, the visibility and political agency of local collective subjects has grown and developed in the form of real social movements. These subjects claim for the acknowledgment of the right to access their *terras tradicionalmente ocupadas* (traditionally occupied lands).

Alfredo Alietti (University of Ferrara) presented a research conducted with Dario Padovan (University of Torino) on « The disputed territory and environmental conflict: the case of TAV in Val di Susa ». The decades-long conflict opened in Val di Susa by the implementation of a high-speed rail line (TAV) is a paradigmatic case: it involves the analysis of the relationship between land and nature and between institutions, movements and local inhabitants. At the centre of the dispute stands the opposition between two main perspectives: on one hand, the inhabitants, who claim the right to decide the destiny of their own eco-system, on the other hand, the view of the administrative and economic apparatus defending the

abstract idea of a « general interest ». Within this exemplary framework of environmental conflict emerges the role of the expert, a point of reference to support or resist particular logics. The expert knowledge becomes the foundation of discourses by which the non-human actors (technology, nature) play a decisive role in legitimizing their positions.

Within a focus on the histories of land appropriation, Lorenzo D'Angelo (University of Milano-Bicocca) tackled « The art of dispossession. Mining and colonial genealogy of "theft" of land in Sierra Leone », dealing with mining and the history of a theft that continues with the use of economic and extra-economic means. In Sierra Leone, land appropriation starts with the recent investments of agro-energy industry but it is rooted in the process of accumulation by dispossession triggered in the 1920s and 1930s by the colonial « discovery » of minerals (i.e. iron, platinum, gold and diamonds). In both historical contexts, several specific and yet implicit meanings about property and land value emerge: *terra nullius*, « under-utilized land », « unproductive land », in general, land that needs to be valued, enhanced, or made economically productive to address the poverty and the development issues. Departing from this vocabulary and rhetoric of exploitation, the dispossession of common goods has taken place. This paradoxical and contradictory process is evident in the case of extraction of diamonds, a resource that was « re-invented » as a property belonging to the British Royal Crown through a legal process of « de-naturalization » of the stones themselves. The current proposals to « enhance » the « waste » or « under-utilized » land come into conflict with the rights and local customary practices.

Martha Mundy (London School of Economics, Thimar Network) traced back the notion of land appropriation to « Property and value in land: from agrarian to rural history in *bilad as-sham* and *bilad al-yaman* ». In the attempt to understand the restructuring of property in the late Ottoman Empire she analysed the process in terms of the meeting of three « moments »: law, administration and production. The very possibility of such a difference in the « value

of land » reflects the existence of real differences in village agrarian organization, that is, the organizational centrality of domains of production/reproduction outside a unified valuation by money under global capitalist production/ circulation.

Marco Gardini (University of Milano-Bicocca) focused on « Conflicts and Land Appropriation in Togo. From cash crops to the registration of land titles ». In Togo, land conflicts and frauds concerning land sold twice are steadily increasing, as many *chefferies* (whose legitimacy is based also on their role of mediators of land issues) can testify. It is often stated, even in official speeches that, after malaria and AIDS, conflicts over land are the leading cause of death. Land tenure in Togo is characterized by complex « bundles of rights » through which different subjects in asymmetrical power relationships (men and women, migrants and « first comers », elders and young people) claim different rights on the same parcel. Opposing the representations of « traditional » land tenure regimes as unchanging, chaotic and unproductive, the research has shown how fundamental the historical impact of cash crops had been in changing the local forms of land access, as well as the impact of State projects to improve land privatization through the registration of property titles.

The debate was challenged by the documentary film of Habib Ayebe and Nadia Kamel: « Green Mirages » (2012), focused on Demmer village and the semi-arid region of the oasis of Gabes in the south of Tunisia, which faces desertification, depopulation and food crisis as the result of « modern successful development » policies although it constituted a rare living trace of the « genius of management of resources ».

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