

SOCIOLOGY

Tensions around Land Tenure in Argentina's Agrarian Periphery: Scales and Multiple Temporalities of Capitalism in Santiago del Estero, Argentina

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This article contributes to discussions on capitalist transformation and impact on peripheral agriculture by focusing on the province of Santiago del Estero in northern Argentina. The concept of land grabbing is useful for qualitative analysis of the recent dynamics in the land market in this peripheral territory, where the concentration of land for agrarian use is historical but has accelerated in recent decades with the expansion of soybean cultivation. Tensions between capitalist and noncapitalist actors have been taking place within the current crisis of the world capitalist system and its expansion to marginal lands, often occupied by peasant producers with precarious tenure and different logics to that of market capitalism. The province's history is characterized by processes of different temporalities and scales of limited capitalist transformation, agrarian land concentration, and exploitation of local populations. This article seeks to understand the overlaps and tensions in these processes.

Este artículo contribuye a los debates sobre la transformación capitalista y el impacto en la agricultura periférica, centrándose en la provincia de Santiago del Estero (norte de Argentina). El concepto de acaparamiento de tierras para uso agropecuario es útil para un análisis cualitativo de la dinámica reciente del mercado de tierras en este territorio, aun cuando la concentración de aquellas tierras es anterior y se aceleró en las últimas décadas con el cultivo de soja. Las tensiones entre distintos actores se realizan en el contexto de la crisis del sistema capitalista mundial y su expansión en tierras ocupadas por campesinos con tenencia precaria y con lógicas económicas distintas a las del capitalismo. La historia agraria de la provincia es caracterizada por procesos de distintas temporalidades y escalas. Este artículo busca entender los solapamientos y las tensiones entre estos procesos.

Early notions of land grabbing emphasized a causal link between the 2007–2008 food crisis and the subsequent move by several financially strong countries with net food imports to ensure their own food supply by gaining control over large tracts of land outside their national territories.¹ Thus, underlying a renewed interest in land is “the idea that long-term control of large landholdings beyond states' own national borders is needed to supply the food and energy needed to sustain their population and society into the future” (Borras and Franco 2012, 37).

This view of large land deals around the world, particularly in Africa, has been challenged for its simplistic and narrow focus. It has been argued that land grabs should be embedded within the logics and dynamics of contemporary global capitalism and understood in the context of converging food, energy, climate change, and financial crises (McMichael 2013). Thus, while large-scale land acquisition, especially in the Global South, is not a new phenomenon, in recent years it has picked up again as the result of these multiple crises.

¹ Countries like Argentina or Brazil, which have vast land suitable for cultivation, became attractive to nations with large populations that needed to import food (e.g., China, South Korea).

In 2013, 15,881,069 hectares of land in Argentina were foreign owned.² Of those hectares, more than 30 percent were bought in the past twenty years, which indicates the magnitude of this phenomenon in recent times (Costantino 2016). Initially, a key factor that contributed to the emergence of this process was the financial crisis during the 1990s, when many family farmers—facing low prices for their products—could not repay mounting debts. Many farmers had no choice but to sell their properties. Land purchases by foreigners escalated following the 2002 devaluation of the peso, which made the exportation of agricultural goods more profitable, adding more pressure to further devalue the peso (Wainer and Schorr 2014). Similarly, the increased profitability of export-oriented raw materials prompted the acquisition of land not only for agriculture production but also for real estate speculation.

In Argentina, the dual process of land concentration and foreign holding of land has varied considerably across the country's different regions. While in the Humid Pampas (Central Region) the market largely mediated this process through purchase and lease arrangements, in other parts of the country it was entangled with complex operations of accumulation by dispossession (Cáceres 2014; Harvey 2007). This article focuses on the latter, examining recent dynamic changes to the agrarian structure in Santiago del Estero, a peripheral province in the north of Argentina. This examination is framed within the diverse and sometimes contested concept of land grabbing. This article investigates the scales and temporalities of unrest in the province's agrarian environment. A question that cuts across the discussion is how do the recent dynamics of a worldwide land market reconfigure and transform long-standing local land conflicts?

In this vein, the main argument put forward in this article is that, although foreign land ownership in Santiago del Estero is quantitatively less than in other places, and large tracts of land are still in the hands of domestic businesspersons, from a qualitative perspective, land grabbing is useful for analyzing the recent dynamics in the land market in the context of the current crisis of the world capitalist system. That is, there is some indication of foreign governments and companies acquiring large tracts of lands in the province, but to date these acquisitions relative to total share have been relatively small. Nevertheless, the qualitative characteristics underpinning land grabbing render it a useful concept for analyzing agrarian changes in this territory.

For Akram-Lodhi (2012, 125), *land grabbing* refers to land deals that comprise “large-scale acquisition through buying, leasing or otherwise accessing productively used or potentially arable farmland by corporate investors to produce food and non-food crops, in order either to boost supply for domestic and/or world markets or obtain a favourable financial return on an investment.” Although there is no consensus on what land grabbing is, the use of this concept entails important political functions inasmuch as it connotes power relations and historical substance to current disputes over land. Effectively, it is a concept in evolution (Borras et al. 2012).

To further this debate, we distinguish between what we perceive as the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of land grabbing. The quantitative dimensions of large-scale land deals are easier to assess—if the information is available of course—referring to parcel or acquisition size and/or amount of capital involved. In contrast, the qualitative dimension has to do with changes in land use and property relations. This distinction allows for a more nuanced analysis, as a particular instance fit only some aspects of land grabbing but not all. In this way, the direction of change in land use permits careful identification of the social relations that arise from that change. However, without incorporating into the analysis the multiscale and multitemporal dimensions of a specific case study, it is difficult to prove the nature of such social relations and the variations on dynamics of accumulation, dispossession, or differentiation.

First, we examine the agrarian structure of Santiago del Estero from a historical perspective, taking into account long-term variables that provide an understanding of continuity and rupture. This gives an impression of the processes that underpin the capitalist restructuring of global agriculture. Second, we use census data to take a panoramic view of the agrarian structure of Santiago del Estero. This allows us to account for the quantitative importance of the peasant as a specific agrarian subject, especially those peasants who live on farms without defined boundaries. Third, we examine recent processes such as “foreignization” (*extranjerización*) and their impacts on Santiago del Estero. We conclude by examining how

² Regarding the process of foreignization in Argentina, in December 2011 the National Congress approved Law 26,737 that institutes the National Domain Protection Scheme over the Ownership, Possession or Occupation of Rural Lands. By Decree 820/2016 the president Mauricio Macri eased the controls imposed by the Land Law on the sale of rural property to foreigners. The measure did not change the limits for foreign ownership, such as the ceiling of 15 percent and the maximum of 1000 hectares in core zones, but it removed several requirements foreign investors had previously needed to meet in order to own land.

the concentration of these processes generates myriad conflicts, with those involving the Argentine State being of particular importance.

The Agrarian Structure of Santiago del Estero from a Historical Perspective

The agrarian structure of Santiago del Estero must be examined over the long term because it is shaped by power relations in a geographical space that contain gaps and continuities in relation to land tenure and use. Such a view facilitates the examination of production conditions as well as policies and economics that enabled and favored land grabbing in the province in recent years. It is a multitemporal path analysis that selectively identifies past events and processes and, by doing so, helps in analysis of current social phenomena (Mahoney 2000; Wald 2016).

Santiago del Estero is a province located in northwestern Argentina (**Figure 1**), with an area of 136,351 square kilometers. According to the National Census of 2010, the province has 874,006 inhabitants. Of that total, 273,577 people, or 31.3 percent, are classified as “rural,” giving the province one of the highest proportions of rural population in this predominantly urban country (INDEC 2010).

The agroecological conditions in the province are characterized by a predominantly semiarid environment: in summer extreme temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius are common and in winter temperatures can drop below freezing. In addition, rains are concentrated in the summer months and scarce in the winter season, causing severe droughts. The province has an irrigation system connected to its two main rivers (Dulce and Salado). The area within the irrigation scheme has better conditions for agricultural development and is where land ownership is well regulated from a legal standpoint. In contrast, a vast area of semiarid land exists, characterized by the existence of precarious land tenure (peasants who live and work in these largely forested lands but without holding title to the land)—this is where conflicts over land usually take place.

For purposes of our analysis we have distinguished five periods of land tenure and use. They allow for the identification of transformations in the modes of concentration and foreignization of natural goods, with their continuities and discontinuities in the agrarian environment, where certain productive activities persist and others appear, reconfiguring relationships in the rural society, but they do not denote drastic ruptures.

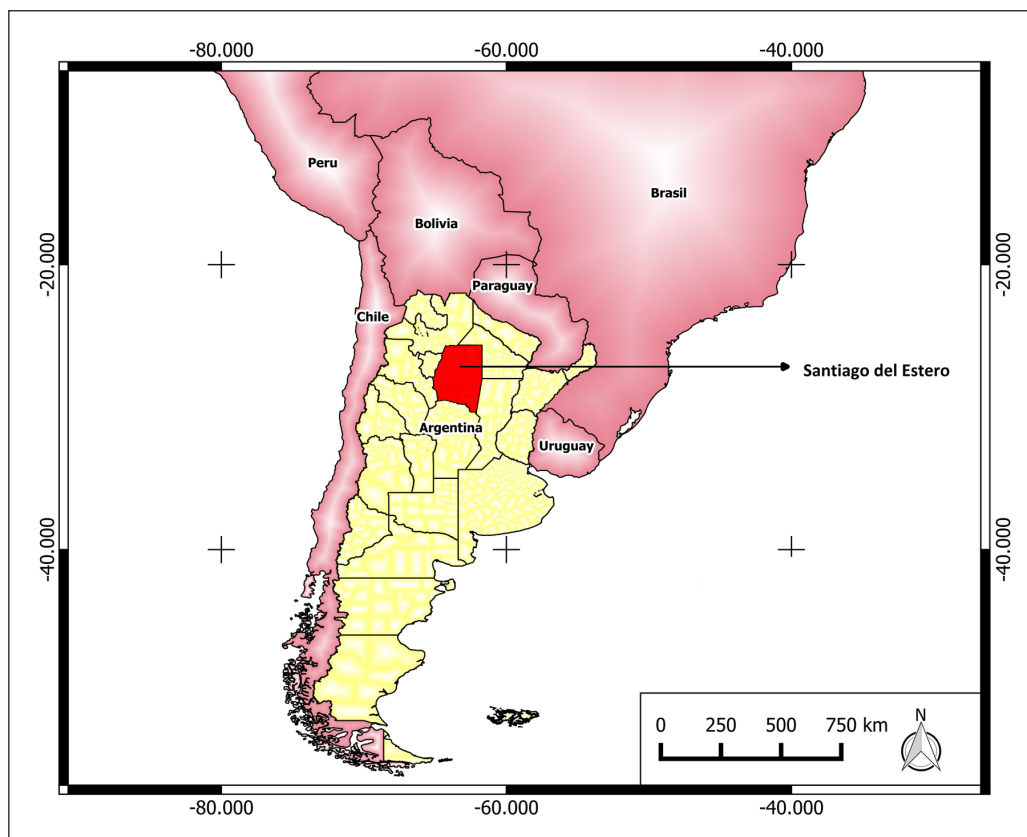


Figure 1: Province of Santiago del Estero. Map prepared by Paola Marozzi (UNSE).

The first period is the colonial period and the expansion of large estates (known as *estancias*). With the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century,³ human settlements changed substantially in Santiago del Estero. The land, regarded as communal by indigenous peoples, became privately owned under different legal forms, such as *mercedes reales*.⁴ In turn, the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries at the end of the eighteenth century meant that the lands they occupied came under the control of the colonizers. In this way, a system of *estancias* was created under private ownership, occupying increasingly large tracts but often without precise boundaries (Rossi 2007; Farberman 2016).

In the mid-nineteenth century, a second period is demarcated by the simultaneous formation of the provincial state and the local land market. In the context of national incorporation, new spaces east of the Salado River were explored. During the 1850s, there was an important sale of public lands. Extensive areas inhabited by indigenous peoples, some still unexplored by new arrivals, became private property, thus consolidating the power of landlords, who were local elites with Spanish lineage. The enclosure of land (privatization of lands previously considered communal) and the dispossession of inhabitants were made with the active presence of the state in a process marked by violence toward indigenous and mestizo peoples (Banzato and Rossi 2010).

The third period is characterized by the *quebracho* cycle. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, agrarian colonization of the national territory began. This colonization is understood as the occupation of land by foreign immigrants. This process was significant in provinces such as Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Santa Fe. However, in Santiago del Estero it was limited to specific initiatives with very restricted geographical coverage. In contrast, in the forested plains of the province, another kind of production and territorial occupation—the *obraje* (timber yard)—was prevalent.⁵ These capitalist entities exploited native timberlands, especially the *quebracho colorado* (of the *Schinopsis* genus), in response to increasing domestic demand for timber products. The main reason for this demand was the construction of railroads, designed to connect the peripheral provinces with the port of Buenos Aires. The emergence of this industry led to the sale of state land suitable for forestry exploitation, previously deemed unproductive and assumed vacant, which in effect constituted land privatization on a massive scale (Dargoltz 2003).

In addition to demand for loggers, the timber yards also required a large workforce for manual labor. Attracted by promises of decent wages, thousands of families left their domestic subsistence production and migrated to the forested regions of the province in search of better opportunities. Not only were these promises never fulfilled; the *obrajes'* owners heavily exploited the workforce, working conditions were dreadful, and poverty was extreme. The extractive nature of this industry and the systematic exploitation of the loggers had disastrous socioeconomic and ecological ramifications (Dargoltz 2003).

According to Tasso (2006, 126), the *estancias*, like the *obrajes*, generated “a rigid social regime which strengthened the historical vassalage under capitalist forms and consolidated political structures of patronage” (our translation). Under this configuration, social systems of servitude became enmeshed with primary production in the market economy. Consequently, this formed the basis of the agrarian structure of Santiago del Estero.

The fourth period is described by the “cotton cycle.” By the middle of the twentieth century, forestry lost profitability, and *obrajes* gradually disintegrated and withdrew from the province. Many former loggers, now without means of subsistence, remained on the land but without regularized tenure, which meant

³ When the Spanish conquest began in 1536 this territory was inhabited by a number of different indigenous groups. The Tonocotés' main territory was a depression parallel to the Dulce River, which they cultivated using flood water from the river. The north and west of the province were the territories of the Lules; southwest was the territory of the Quechua; east of the Vilela and Mocovíes, and south of the Sanavirones. The present territory of Santiago del Estero was first under the jurisdiction of the Viceroyalty of Peru (in 1543), and subsequently it became part of the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata (in 1776).

⁴ The Royal Land Grant (*mercedes reales*) was a legal Iberian institution that arose between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Usually, this alluded to a royal “donation” (by the Crown) of real-estate and titles in exchange for a service. During the first decades of the American Conquest, the kings made such land grants in order to stimulate the effective occupation of territories by the conquerors, founders or settlers. In general, each settler received an urban section and a plot of land of greater size on the outskirts of the town for breeding cattle or crops.

⁵ The *obraje* is a production system of the Gran Chaco region during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The *obrajes* consisted of facilities for large-scale logging of *quebracho colorado* forests. One distinguishing characteristic of the *obrajes* was their temporality, where the permanence in a particular site depended on the abundance and quality of the *quebracho*. This economic activity was a form of production that was well integrated into global capitalism and was based on a system of recruitment and retention of a highly vulnerable workforce. The fate of the workers was at the mercy of the contractor, the foreman or the employer. This work involved the entire family, where the children and the women helped the men loggers in cleaning tasks, and other activities of the household, such as laundry, caring for young children and selling food. The workers' dependency on the employer for the supply of goods created a captive market where workers were permanently indebted.

precarious land possession for those peasant producers. The vulnerability of peasants without land titles intensified during the 1960s, when large investors purchased public lands in the Chaco forest of Santiago del Estero and evicted many peasant producers. This period was marked by a renewed impulse to expand the agricultural frontier, with cotton as the main cash crop (Dargoltz 2003). This expansion was assisted by investments in irrigation infrastructure and a limited degree of modernization in the agrarian sector, which resulted in an increase of agriculture output in the province and in the number of farms of more than one thousand hectares (Barbetta 2009).⁶

The last period is the soybean cycle. The 1980s marked a new period of expansion of the province's agricultural frontier through the introduction of export-oriented crops. The expanding production of export crops and bovine livestock replaced traditional activities such as goat herding and charcoal production, and reduced cultivation of maize, cotton, and alfalfa. The expanding cultivation of soy accelerated these dynamics. The National Agricultural Census of 1988 had already signaled the growing importance of soybean cultivation in the province (**Figure 2**). This substantial growth was made possible by replacing more traditional crops (e.g., cotton, maize) and bringing new land under commercial production through deforestation. By 2011–2012, the area planted with soybeans in the province had reached approximately 1.1 million hectares, or about 5 percent of total cultivated surface in Argentina (SIIA n.d.).

To a substantial degree, this expansion of agriculture through deforestation and the use of advanced technologies has entailed the enclosure and destruction of the commons on which many peasant producers depend. In this process, there has clearly been appropriation and concentration of land in the hands of agribusiness producers, who took advantage of the precarious land tenure of peasant families. As in other countries, these processes created difficulties for the formal registration of properties. The rights of indigenous and peasant inhabitants have been diluted, and the state has often declared their land possession as “nonlegal” and the land as “public,” thus bringing the lands under state control. This tendency to ignore existing rights usually derives from a legal framework inherited from the colonial era and reinforced after independence in which unregistered land was considered “empty” and therefore available for transfer (Deininger 2011).

Santiago del Estero is a peripheral province in a peripheral country that has also been governed by the rules of colonialism and international capitalism. These aspects were instrumental in shaping a muddled regime of land possession and ownership, which has always been problematic and controversial, and has involved a diversity of actors tangled with land issues.

Concentration of Land and Holdings without Defined Boundaries

The current agrarian structure is the result of the historical processes briefly outlined in the previous section. The latest statistics show that there are 20,948 farms in the province. Of these, farms with fewer than 100 hectares represent just over 62 percent of all agricultural producers but account for only 3.5 percent of the land. Meanwhile, farms with more than 100 hectares constitute nearly 38 percent of total

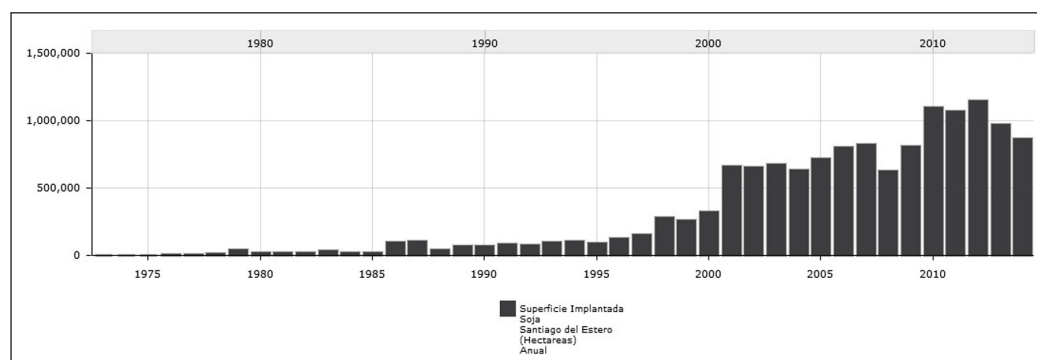


Figure 2: Hectares of cultivated soybeans, Santiago del Estero, 1970–2014.

Source: SIIA (n.d.).

⁶ It is worth mentioning that the growth in agricultural production was not linear but had several periods of ups and downs due to multiple reasons (weather, pests, economic crises, and problems of commercialization among others). This can be exemplified by the surface planted with cotton, which in 1969 was 45,300 hectares and in 1972 reached 65,100 hectares. However, by 1981 the area sown with cotton dropped to 8,400 hectares. Then in the second half of the 1990s, the cultivation of cotton had a temporary recovery, reaching 253,700 hectares in 1997. However, as stated above, this crop is yielding place to, mainly, soybean (SIIA, n.d.).

producers and 96.5 percent of the land (Paz et al. 2014). This regime of land possession and ownership not only shows high concentration and polarization of property but also reflects conflict between peasant and businessmen, low investment, weak and uncertain property rights and informal markets, among other things.

Statistics show that, moreover, 10,830 farms have legally defined boundaries and occupy an area of 5,393,632 hectares. The other 10,119 farms are holdings without defined boundaries and are distributed sparsely and in isolation within an area of approximately 7 million hectares (INDEC 2007).⁷

The phenomenon of farms without defined boundaries is important and requires further analysis. These farms are characterized by having either ill-defined boundaries or no boundaries at all, and they are typically located in *secanos* (rain-fed areas with no irrigation infrastructure). Traditionally, occupiers of this type of farm cultivate a small enclosure of land while their animals graze in the forest alongside the herds of neighboring families. In effect, they use the forest, which is often on public land, as a common good. Land use in these instances reflects the precarious position of smallholders without legal title. One of the most serious consequences of this situation is that in places where the agricultural boundaries move and expand, these public lands become disputed and severe conflicts arise between agricultural, livestock, or forestry companies and the traditional occupants (Slutzky 2008).

Thus, the emergent land use pattern is characterized by large tracts of marginal lands with irregular legal status, the predominance of forms of tenure that are not private ownership, labor markets with a deeply rooted culture of feudal patronage, the presence of an informal commercialization system, the dominance of subsistence farming and networks of solidarity among peasant producers, and extensive traditional production processes with low technological input. One aspect that has begun to be acknowledged in recent years and that complicates the land tenure issue even further is the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples (article 75 of the National Constitution of 1994 recognizes the “ethnic and cultural pre-existence of Argentine indigenous peoples”). In many places these communities fight for their territories to be recognized as common property.

Lack of access to land and the regularity of the titles are aspects that are strongly associated with rural poverty (Akram-Lodhi, Borras, and Kay 2007). Another ramification of this precarious land use is lack of accuracy in quantitative characterizations of the agrarian structure.⁸ It is important to note, however, that calculating an average size for peasant farms of this kind is misleading for two reasons. First, most of the land is used communally by numerous families. Second, seven million hectares for just over ten thousand farms may seem like a substantial amount of land per farm, but without knowledge of local conditions of agriculture production, this figure reveals very little. For example, the climate across the province is fairly uniform. Precipitation levels gradually decrease from 750 millimeters annually in eastern parts of the province to 500 millimeters in the west. However, rainfall is very uneven across the year, and most precipitation occurs during the summer months. Water shortages, including for human consumption, during winter can be severe. These inhospitable climatic conditions—lack of precipitation and winter frosts—restrict peasant production to mainly subsistence farming of very small parcels of land and livestock breeding for the local market.

These geographic and productive conditions mean that rather than being fairly large farms, those farms without defined boundaries consist of mainly communal grazing lands with very limited productive capacity. Moreover, many elements that perpetuate the cycle of poverty converge in these farms, including lack of basic infrastructure (e.g., water, health, housing, education, infrastructure) and degraded resources and insecure land tenure for occupants (de Dios 2010). In contrast, large farms with defined boundaries are concentrated mainly in the southeastern and northeastern parts of the province. Production on this type of farm is usually done by farm machinery contractors, who are paid in percentage of harvest and services. There are also landowners who rotate with cattle and plant sorghum for harvest and grazing. These

⁷ Holdings without defined or precise boundaries are census units where the land area per farm cannot be determined. These farms are usually located within larger areas characterized by their legal system. For census purposes, these large areas containing farms without defined boundaries are called ‘large units’ and are communal lands, lands belonging to indigenous communities, national parks and reserves, other public lands or private lands (INDEC 1992).

⁸ Notwithstanding this difficulty, it is possible to have estimates of the extent of this phenomenon, both in terms of population and land size. Interpretation of aerial images aiming to provide data for land use management in Santiago del Estero suggests an estimated area of around 7 million hectares occupied by 10,000 farms without defined boundaries (Mariot 2005). Importantly, it is a very rough approximation, but nevertheless the only existing estimate to date. This figure was reached by subtracting from the total provincial surface area (13,674,665 hectares) the area occupied by farms with defined boundaries (5,393,633 hectares), the area occupied by water, urban areas and infrastructure (roads, railways, etc.).

extensive production models imply limited investments in property and constant conflicts with peasants and indigenous people. These models also represent a short-term approach that results in dependence on the commodity market and reliance on an accelerated rate of deforestation, which reveals their lack of sustainability (Paz et al. 2014).

Since the 1970s, Argentina has implemented national policies that gave renewed impetus to agricultural exports. This context enabled and facilitated the gradual and ongoing soybean production boom, which has continued to increase since the introduction of genetically modified soybean seeds, no-tillage agriculture, agrochemicals, and machinery. In some regions this has stimulated an accelerated process of deforestation. In 2002, the province of Santiago del Estero had 7,687,986 hectares of forest. By 2006 that forest cover had fallen by more than a quarter to 5,678,608 hectares, a process that has continued even further in recent years (Consejo Provincial de Bosques 2008).

Simultaneously, the hegemonic agriculture model is committed to intensive breeding of livestock, which in the past was limited mainly to the Pampas region. In recent years, this began to shift toward the north of the country, driven by low land prices and higher domestic meat prices. These agrarian changes, more recent than those analyzed in the previous section, also facilitated land concentration and foreignization.

Land-Grab Dynamics in Santiago del Estero

The global financial crisis of 2008, the search for new investment on a global scale, climate change, and the demand for resources from new centers of global capital have driven the land-market dynamics at the global level (Akram-Lodhi 2012; McMichael 2013; Soto Baquero and Gómez 2012).

As mentioned earlier, land grabbing initially was intended to capture processes of large dealings of land for food production with the involvement of at least one foreign government. Subsequently, this concept has been expanded to denote large land purchases, with restrictions neither on intended productive use nor on the origin of the buyers (whether companies or investment funds).

In Santiago del Estero, of approximately 13 million hectares, only 2 percent (267,684 hectares) are in foreign hands.⁹ However, the purchase of land by foreigners has accelerated in recent years. Thus, the concept of land grabbing is useful from a qualitative perspective, as it embodies significant political and historical events and trajectories. To reveal the meanings of land grabbing in the context of the agrarian structure, it must be examined at multiple scales (global and local) and times. It is difficult, then, to interpret the processes of land grabbing without a deeper understanding of the agrarian structure itself in all its dimensions. Next, we provide some illustrative cases from the province.

In 2011 the business magnate George Soros bought land around the town of Bandera, in one of the most fertile and productive areas of the province. That acquisition was made through the investment fund Adecoagro, which holds agricultural enterprises in several South American countries.¹⁰ Adecoagro holds in Santiago del Estero three farms, which exceed twenty thousand hectares devoted to the cultivation of soybeans, wheat, corn, and sunflowers as well as livestock farming.¹¹

Moreover, the provincial newspaper *El Liberal* published an article on the wave of Chinese investment in Latin America and its impact on Santiago del Estero.¹² These investments are directed toward not only the purchase of supermarkets but also the productive sector through the acquisition of natural resources. The consulting firm Deloitte reported on several important business transactions during 2011, including the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's agreement to purchase Standard Bank, and the purchase of agricultural lands by the Chinese state-owned company Chongqing Grain in Santiago del Estero. At the same time, official visits, such as that by the Chinese ambassador in Argentina to the province and by the province's Governor Gerardo Zamora to China, have increased in frequency and importance. These acts reflect a global trend of appreciation in land prices and concentration, from which Santiago del Estero is not exempt.

⁹ "En Santiago del Estero, de un total de aproximadamente 13 millones de hectáreas, sólo un 2% (267.684 hectáreas) están en manos extranjeras," *El Liberal*, December 2, 2012, <http://www.elliberal.com.ar/noticia/69247/extranjeros-poseen-tierras-santiago-equivalentes-8-embalses-rio-hondo>.

¹⁰ "El millonario George Soros compró tierras en zona productiva de Bandera y Los Jurés," *El Liberal*, December 23, 2011, <http://www.elliberal.com.ar/ampliada.php?ID=23688>.

¹¹ According to an auction website (www.narvaezbid.com), it can be derived that Adecoagro sold lands in Santiago del Estero between 2016 and 2017. However, the transactions involved the sale of relatively small areas (11 hectares in La Guarida and 14 hectares in Santa Lucia) in relation to the total.

¹² "Una empresa china compró extensos campos al norte de la provincia," *El Liberal*, May 4, 2012, <http://www.elliberal.com.ar/ampliada.php?ID=40880>.

Both of these cases of foreignization are minor in quantitative terms relative to the immense portion of Santiago del Estero lands that are in the hands of companies, investors, and politicians from other parts of Argentina. However, the domestic capital of national and local investors has been a protagonist in land grabbing in peripheral areas. This is the case in Santiago del Estero, where domestic capital has long triggered processes of dispossession and depeasantization.

Generally, land grabbing involves large-scale investments. Those investments provide a powerful incentive for the development of a land market and land rights, which are central for assuring the security of tenure for investors (De Schutter 2011). The large-scale investments and the social, economic, and productive dynamic they establish in the territory create a difficult relationship between small producers and the possibility of their integration with this type of farming. Increasingly dominant in Santiago del Estero are speculative land deals, a consequence of the profound commodification of this resource and its economic appreciation because of demand for large-scale ventures in agriculture.

The process of land concentration by different means uncovers the mechanisms and logics of contemporary global capitalism (Borras et al. 2012). The notion of land grabbing arises from political struggles echoed in the reports of the High Level Panel of Experts of the UN Committee on Food Security and from the documents of La Via Campesina and its allies (who organized the first International Conference on Land Grabbing in Mali during 2011). Hence, the criticism of the capitalist model constitutes a central pillar of peasant movements, which object to it for its adverse environmental, social, and economic effects.

Land Conflicts and the Role of the State

It is often assumed that large-scale land deals are tainted by a lack of transparency and facilitated by corrupt governments or administrators, resulting in the expulsion of local communities that live on their own land (Borras et al. 2012). In Argentina, and particularly in the northern provinces, there are still spaces where titles of large tracts of land are not regularized and cadastres only partially developed. In this context, the state often reveals serious flaws in fulfilling its own obligations, including observing violations of laws that regulate the appropriation of spaces in the public domain, the ancestral possession of lands, the concession of public land, and the control of deforestation (Murmis and Murmis 2012).

The characteristics of land conflicts in Argentina are of considerable complexity, going beyond a particular government or particular events, given that the causes of land conflicts are rooted in the colonial era; nor can the conflicts be explained only by the corruption that permeates the state apparatus, as participating actors are numerous and varied. Again, the temporal and scalar lens seems appropriate for interpreting land grabbing in Argentina, especially when looking to explain the intensification of land concentration as a result of lack of institutional capacity and transparency (White et al. 2012).

Understanding the agrarian struggles in Santiago del Estero requires an analysis that begins in the colonial era, which reveals coercive displacement of the peasantry to be a long-standing phenomenon. In recent years, unrest has intensified because of the peasantry's resistance to agrarian capitalism, accompanied by new processes of expansion of the agricultural frontier. As already mentioned, many peasant families occupy land as if they owned it but without having title to it. Therefore, the lack of regularization of land ownership has given rise to successive conflicts in which evictions have been an unresolved issue until today.

At the same time, there are other factors to consider in relation to land conflicts: dominance of tenure forms other than private appropriation, lack of access to necessary technical and economic resources for regularizing land status before the law, and lack of knowledge about rights of possession protected by the National Civil Code. According to a survey conducted by the Law Observatory of Peasant Communities in Santiago del Estero, 422 cases of land conflicts were registered between 2004 and 2010, involving a total of 6,747 families and 465,427 hectares (Subsecretaría de Derechos Humanos 2012).

There are mechanisms by which businesspeople appropriate land. In some cases, they acquired inexpensive land from local landed families who, despite holding title, did not utilize their land. In other instances, peasants were persuaded to sell by businesspersons, even if the lands were held in common with neighbors. Another way is the offer of extrajudicial agreements with the promise of obtaining title. In exchange for ceding rights of possession, possessors are often offered work, home improvements, or contributions to local schools. However, the plots of land they are offered are often too small and in the worst possible locations, preventing them from becoming profitable economic units. Similarly, businesspersons often opt for means of intimidation, by hiring armed personnel, entering the forest with bulldozers, and fencing land to prevent access to homes, schools, and to wells (de Dios 2010).

In this context, one widespread method of land takeover is the forging of official documents: written protocols from fake notaries, signatures of deceased people, notaries attesting to properties, and consistent “reappearances” of books and records previously reported lost.¹³ Consequently, several actors have been implicated in these fraudulent activities, including locals responsible for identifying prosperous land, potential businesspersons eager to buy at a low cost, and notaries willing to falsify documentation.¹⁴

In the peasant sector, the judicial procedures to obtain title under the Twenty-Year Law are very difficult because of the economic resources needed to hire an engineer surveyor and have plans approved by the provincial cadastre—a rather onerous process. With the lack of regulation of rights of possession, there are frequent episodes of violence, such as the 2013 Cade conflict in the Alberdi department. A dispute arose when a Chinese agricultural company wanted to plant soybeans in an area peasants had inhabited for decades. The company Oro Esperanza Agro, from Córdoba but with Chinese capital, was formed in June 2012 and subcontracted other companies to fence off and deforest the land. These actions were met with resistance from local peasants, who claimed fourteen thousand hectares as their own. One of the most intense moments of the conflict occurred in November 2013, when a representative of Mayo Investment SA (a partner of Oro Esperanza Agro) filed suit against the rural population in the justice system for the crimes of property theft, damage, threats, use of weapons, and attempted murder. As reported by the community, the police and judges never addressed the community’s claims (REDAF 2013).

In rethinking the role of the state in land conflicts, it should be noted that the state apparatus is a contested space where power relations concentrate and those who occupy the space can transform their interests into laws and build an institutional framework to ensure the stability of their conquests (Borón 2003). Despite the limitations imposed by neoliberalism, the state continues to be the locus for implementing public policies. Therefore, the possibility of the different actors (e.g., notaries, businesspersons, peasant movements) to influence those processes is of strategic importance. In this attempt to revert the relations of power, the peasant movements of Santiago del Estero have had to contest and capture a space within the state.

The creation of the Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero (MOCASE) in 1990 is rooted in the shift from what is locally known as “silent evictions” (evictions experienced as a private affair) to a collective defense of land. Peasants resisted evictions by physically defending their lands against attempts to violently evict them and through judicial avenues. Members of the Catholic Church and nongovernmental organizations working in the field played a central role in accompanying the organizational process of the peasantry. The division of the movement in 2001 led to the consolidation of two separate organizations with the same name—MOCASE and MOCASE–Via Campesina. Whereas the former maintained the original organizational structure and kept its links with the provincial office of the Agricultural Social Program of the National Government, the latter has worked to enhance its relations with other activist civil society organizations in Argentina and abroad; it also is affiliated with La Via Campesina, the transnational movement of peasants and small farmers.¹⁵

Historically, the peasants’ struggle for land has occurred in a hostile political context that included, among other actions, refusal to grant the movement a legal status. Since 2005, the provincial government opened a forum for dialogue with peasant organizations. The Registry of Candidates to the Regularization of Land Tenure was created, with the aim of providing the necessary conditions for reaching a legal solution to the problem of land tenure. Subsequently, in 2007, the Emergency Committee was formed to offer an immediate action against conflict (de Dios 2010).

¹³ “Los escribanos, una pieza clave en las denuncias sobre usurpaciones de tierras,” *El Liberal*, February 12, 2012. One typical example is a complaint involving eight Brazilian real estate properties that were given in exchange for land in the province, which turned out to be public land. As it transpired, one of the first vendors, from Las Termas, had died in 1956. In turn, the notary from Las Termas who registered the transaction had also died several years earlier.

¹⁴ Falsification of real-estate title deeds is widespread in Latin America, and Brazil is illustrative. The term *grileiro* (from *grilho*, Portuguese for “cricket”) is used for those who falsify documents to illegally take possession of land, public or private. The term *grilhagem* comes from the technique used to make documents look older than they really are by putting them in a box of crickets, whose droppings yellow the paper, giving documents an antique look and consequently more credibility.

¹⁵ Initially, the MOCASE-VC has maintained a more antagonist position and has favored having a greater distance from the state. Both organizations keep a dialogue with Zamora’s government, though they remain critical of the relations between the provincial authorities and agribusinesses, but values the political opportunity to engage directly with drafting development policies for the peasant sector.

However, the underlying problem affecting the agrarian structure of Santiago del Estero—lack of regularization and inequality in land ownership—stays unresolved. A political decision is needed to reorganize the territory, which will necessarily affect the interests of powerful economic groups.

Conclusion

In Santiago del Estero, statistics show that 2 percent of land is in foreign hands and also that, consistently and over time, there is unequal access to natural resources, as 62 percent of producers hold 3.5 percent of the land. Changes to the agrarian structure in recent years strongly suggest that the concept of land grabbing is a useful qualitative hermeneutic for analyzing the specificity of the current process of concentration of land and natural resources. The explanatory utility of land grabbing lies in its ability to examine concentration from multiple scales. Beyond specifying who the landowners are (domestic or foreign) in formal or legal terms, this concept enables us to ask who has effective control over land and how that control is exercised, and particularly whether the use of land is oriented toward production or speculation.

Santiago del Estero presents a complex agrarian structure, not only for its modern agribusiness production and small-scale peasant producers but also for its unclear, irregular land titles. This complexity, resulting from a historical process rooted in colonialism and the evolution of the global capitalist system, generates constant conflicts due to restrictive, inequitable access to land and resources. These land struggles are inherent to the unfolding confrontations between models of rural territorial development, where capitalist enterprises strive for new spaces and displace the peasant sector, which is also seeking autonomy through productive land use (Fernandes Mançano 2004).

It is evident throughout the history of Santiago del Estero that economic models have continuously modified its territory. Indeed, changes in land use allow for inferring changes in social relations that derive from it, and it is difficult to understand the dynamics of accumulation, dispossession, or differentiation that lead to the phenomenon of global land grabbing without incorporating into the analysis multiscale and multitemporal dimensions. The conflict over land is an essential dimension of this process, which takes different forms depending on land tenure arrangements as well as the degree of organization and strength of the actors involved.

Land grabbing in Santiago del Estero is well documented in academic and popular media.¹⁶ There is no doubt that the state has had an impact on the land market dynamics, especially in regard to large-scale deals that date back to the early nineteenth century. As a supplier of institutional, administrative, and regulatory frameworks, the state was unable to offer a favorable solution to the peasant sector. However, we cannot conclude that large-scale land deals were reached by corruption on the part of the current government or its officials. By incorporating the temporal scale with the evolution of the land market, it is evident that a complex web of confusing, historical contingent relationships has prevented more effective territorial arrangements that would serve the interests of the peasantry. Successful intervention in the land problem in Santiago del Estero, as in much of the provinces that constitute the north of Argentina, appears to be beyond the capacity of a particular government. In effect, the continuation of inequality around land tenure is but one of the multiple faces of inequalities throughout Latin America (Oxhorn and Jouve-Martín 2017), which results in the violation of the most vulnerable rural populations' other fundamental rights, such as access to adequate housing and the right to work.

Although there is political will to resolve these issues, technical problems complicate their legibility: outdated cadastral maps, absence of regularized large land extensions and especially of communal and *mercedes reales* lands, duplicate property titles, and so on. These are even worse in the case of farms without defined boundaries.

However, as a popular proverb goes, "Troubled water, a fisherman's gain." Nonstate actors (e.g., lawyers, public notaries, traders, surveyors, entrepreneurs) have been involved in land deals with little clarity and much corruption, at times colluding with the state. This is manifested in the presence of conflicts that are

¹⁶ "Sources in the agricultural sector confirmed the visit of two groups of Chinese investors that took place last year in Santiago included the areas of Nueva Esperanza, Pozo Hondo, Campo Gallo y Tintina, in the northern departments of: Alberdi, Pellegrini and Moreno. A few weeks ago, Jicong Zheng, General Secretary of the Chamber of Self-Service Supermarkets of Chinese Residents in Argentina (Casrech), reported that there are negotiations over the purchase of fields in Cordoba, Mendoza and Catamarca to ensure their own provision of oils and vegetables". "Una empresa china compró extensos campos al norte de la provincia," *El Liberal*, May 4, 2012, <http://www.elliberal.com.ar/ampliada.php?ID=40880>.

not necessarily between agribusiness and peasants but between agribusiness actors themselves and always in complicity with other civil society actors.

The analysis of the characteristics of the agricultural structure in Santiago del Estero that we offer here is of importance to the social sciences because it will lead to a better understanding of the continuities and transformations (temporal dimension) and the particularities and common features (spatial dimension) of land conflicts in Latin America.

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How to cite this article: Paz, Raúl, Cristian Jara, and Navé Wald. 2019. Tensions around Land Tenure in Argentina's Agrarian Periphery: Scales and Multiple Temporalities of Capitalism in Santiago del Estero, Argentina. *Latin American Research Review* 54(3), pp. 694–706. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.483>

Submitted: 08 December 2016

Accepted: 30 March 2018

Published: 17 September 2019

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