

Beyond simplistic narratives: Dynamic farmers, precarity and the politics of agribusiness expansion

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Abstract

Agribusiness expansion is usually framed around two competing narratives. On the one hand, advocates present it as a promising vehicle to modernise agriculture and integrate small farmers into global value chains. On the other hand, critics denounce it as a top-down corporate assault to monopolise agriculture and dispossess peasants of land. Despite their differences, these contrasting narratives tend to share a reductionistic capital-centric bias as they are mainly focused on the alleged benefits/dangers of the ‘arrival’ of agribusiness corporate capital. Although simplistic, these narratives have been politically effective in shaping the public debate and thus should be exposed to critical challenge. Drawing on my ethnographic research in eastern lowland Bolivia, I show how both narratives fail to capture the complexity of an actually existing agribusiness structure. My grounded analysis of the process of agrarian change focuses on the changing labour dynamics among *campesinos* who have striven to become prosperous soy producers. Faced with bleak prospects and structural insecurity, they have been articulating a political practice around the notion of precarity. I argue that this emerging politics from below deserves more attention as an important terrain of political struggles of classes of labour.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal globalisation has transformed agriculture in complex and diverse ways. One of the most significant transformations is the growing power and control of corporate agribusiness¹ over the global agricultural sector. This has led to the proliferation of mega-farms and plantations where so-called ‘flex crops’² are being produced (Borras et al., 2016). In South America, for instance, huge tracks of forest have been replaced with seemingly endless green rows of soy (Oliveira & Hecht, 2016). Between 1990 and 2022, a staggering 45.1 million hectares were converted to soy mono-crop production in this region—that is an area bigger than the size of Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium combined. Oil palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia have also expanded massively over the last decades. There are now more than 20 million hectares of oil palm in these two countries which make up around 82% of the world's production (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2024). Other agribusiness complexes linked to high-demand fruits, vegetables and flowers have been radically transforming landscapes and social relations in other places like Ghana (Ouma, 2015) or Ecuador (Martínez Valle, 2017).

Such impressive agribusiness expansion has generated much controversy. It has triggered rich academic debates regarding its implications for food security/sovereignty (e.g., De Schutter, 2009; Van Westen et al., 2019), geographies of production (e.g., Berndt, 2018; Ouma, 2015) and social mobilisation (Edelman, 1999; Lapegna, 2016). In the public debate, however, the agribusiness question has been largely reduced to two opposing political positionings. On the one hand, advocates have championed agribusiness expansion as an opportunity to connect small farmers with international markets and bring about generalised prosperity. They have presented agribusiness corporate capital as a much-needed asset to develop rural areas by creating jobs and modernising agriculture. On the other hand, critics have vigorously denounced agribusiness as a top-down agrarian model that dispossesses small farmers from their land and destroys local communities. They have portrayed agribusiness corporate capital as a vicious external force that seeks monopoly control and the elimination of the so-called ‘peasant agriculture’.

In this article, I challenge these simplistic narratives that have largely dominated the public debate on the agribusiness question. I contend that, despite their differences, these contrasting narratives tend to share a reductionist capital-centric bias. This is because their attention is largely focused on the alleged benefits/dangers of the ‘arrival’ of corporate agribusiness capital—a narrow and superficial focus that impedes an adequate understanding of commodification processes and related politics. Consequently, both narratives fail to capture the complexity of actually existing agribusiness structures and the role of small farmers within them. I expose them to critical challenge drawing on my field research in eastern lowland Bolivia where an aggressive agribusiness expansion has taken place since the 1990s. My account seeks to destabilise teleological modernisation narratives and populist interpretations as way to open a more fruitful public debate on agribusiness expansion that takes the agency of local people seriously.

My grounded study explores the process of agrarian change in Cuatro Cañadas—an area that has been radically transformed from an isolated land frontier to the country's epicentre of soy agribusiness. It focuses on the changing labour dynamics among *campesinos*. I employ the term ‘campesino’ not simply as Spanish for ‘peasant’ but to capture the subjects' historical specificity as heirs of the country's 1953 Agrarian Reform. As I elaborate in a subsequent section, the campesino label has been an integral part of the state project to modernise agriculture in Bolivia. And it

¹I define ‘agribusiness’ in broad terms to refer to a system of increasing corporate capital concentration in crop cultivation as well as in activities upstream and downstream of farming. I thus use the term agribusiness for both large farms and grain trading companies controlled/operated by transnational corporations.

²These are crops with multiple uses (food, feed, fibre, cosmetics, fuel, etc.) and so can be flexibly interchanged.

can also be used as a context-specific umbrella term for agrarian classes of labour. Bernstein's (2006) concept of 'classes of labour' comprises both landless labourers who own nothing but their labour power and resource-poor small farmers whose access to the means of production is insufficient to guarantee their reproduction. It captures the increasing fragmentation of labour brought about by neoliberal globalisation that forces people 'to pursue their means of livelihood/reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour' (Bernstein, 2006, p. 455).

Contrary to critics of globalisation, my analysis shows that campesino classes of labour eagerly sought to be part of the agribusiness structure and aspired to become soy producers. Yet, despite the legitimating rhetoric of its advocates, the influx of agribusiness capital did not open such opportunity. I delve into the complexities behind campesinos' incorporation into the agribusiness dynamic to reveal how a concrete process of agribusiness expansion played out on the ground. Following Li (2023), I portray campesinos as 'dynamic farmers' who have responded in dynamic ways to carve out livelihoods in the margins of the soy agribusiness economy. Their strong desire to embark into the production of a global market crop was severely restricted by their disadvantageous/precarious position in labour and grain markets. In this sense, I argue that campesinos' incorporation into the agribusiness economy was structurally marked by precarity. I deploy the notion of precarity 'as both a *condition* and a possible point of *mobilisation* among those experiencing precarity' (Waite, 2009, p. 413, emphasis in original). As I will show, precarity as a condition denotes the constant uncertainty and insecurity campesinos faced when confronting agribusiness capital as wage labourers and/or petty commodity producers. As a point of mobilisation, precarity provides a discursive platform that enables the renewed articulation of the political practice of campesinos classes of labour vis-à-vis agribusiness capital. I thus call for more attention to an emerging politics of precarity as an increasingly important terrain of political struggles of classes of labour.

The article will proceed in four sections. The first section describes in more detail the dominant narratives framing the public debate on the agribusiness question. It elaborates on their rationale and capital-centric bias, and comments on how these narratives have been mobilised to promote/oppose the expansion of soy agribusiness in South America. The second section provides essential historical background to the process of agrarian change in eastern lowland Bolivia. Drawing on my ethnographic work, the third section offers a grounded analysis of agribusiness expansion in the study area of Cuatro Cañadas. It explores how campesino classes of labour have been incorporated into the agribusiness dynamic in two different historical conjunctures: the soy boom in the 1990s and the period of renewed state presence under Evo Morales' MAS government. The last section discusses the relevance of precarity as a key terrain of political struggles of classes of labour.

2 | CAPITAL-CENTRIC NARRATIVES: AGRIBUSINESS AS ENABLING/VICIOUS CORPORATE CAPITAL

The term 'agribusiness' was coined to keep up with the changes in Western (especially Northern American) agriculture after the Second World War. The neologism was initially used to denote a system that increasingly linked farming with upstream and downstream specialised activities. Popularised by the Harvard Business School, the concept of agribusiness became commonplace in the training of managers who were expected to be aware of the complexity of the 'seed-to-consumer system' in order to make informed strategic business decisions (Austin, 1974). The term became more ambiguous by the late 1970s when transnational corporations rapidly gained control of the different stages of the agri-food production process. The corporations themselves started to be called agribusiness(es); hence, it became unclear whether the term referred to the overall production system or some of its comprising institutions. Despite the ambiguity, the concept of agribusiness continued gaining ground in business schools, and it was not long until it started to be used by critics of the corporate world. Consequently, two distinct views of the agribusiness model gradually emerged: one focused on the management function that cut across production systems and the other one on the perverse effects of agribusiness expansion (Wallace, 1985). A similar divide can be found in the

contemporary public debate. In broad terms, it is possible to identify two dominant narratives that oppose each other but share, I argue, a capital-centric bias.

The first of these narratives presents agribusiness as corporate capital that enables the modernisation of agriculture via economies of scale, higher productivity and the successful integration of local small farmers into global value chains. If adequate institutions are in place, so the argument goes, agribusiness expansion leads to a win–win scenario of strong economic growth and social inclusion. This position is influentially underpinned by the World Bank and its associated agricultural economists (henceforth, the WB narrative). In its 2008 World Development Report, the World Bank (2007, p. 135) made the case for supporting the private agribusiness sector as a ‘major driver of growth in the agricultural and the rural nonfarm sectors’. The report argued that agribusiness can transfer the benefits of globalisation to the poor, although not without conceding that increasing concentration within value chains may reduce its efficiency to do so (Oya, 2009). A series of other research reports led by its lead agrarian economist, Klaus Deininger, have further advanced the argument that large-scale land acquisitions by agribusiness can foster economic growth and reduce poverty (Daniel Ayalew et al., 2018; Deininger & Byerlee, 2011).³ Advocates have insisted that agribusiness expansion can be compatible with small-scale farming once the right institutional arrangements are installed (Sartorius & Kirsten, 2007; Sjaauw-Koen-Fa et al., 2016) and have gone as far as to framing it as an example of ‘inclusive business’ (Kelly et al., 2015; Woodhill, 2016).

Those who subscribe to this vision of *agribusiness as enabling corporate capital* tend to centre their analysis on the conditions that would allow agribusiness firms to profit and expand. Typically, the complex land and labour dynamics associated with agribusiness expansion are simplistically reduced to ‘contextual/external factors’ that need to be adjusted to ensure a good business climate. This firm-centrism (Selwyn, 2012) is evident even when the inclusion of smallholders into commodity chains is considered. The latter is usually debated as ‘an opportunity to express responsiveness and responsibility to social issues from a business perspective’ (Sjaauw-Koen-Fa et al., 2016, p. 84)—what the firm would gain from such efforts is always at the forefront.⁴

The capital-centric bias of this narrative is based on the entrenched assumptions in (neo)liberal thinking that favour capital. One such assumption is that capital accumulation holds the key to economic development and generalised prosperity. Capital is rendered virtuous and so setting the conditions to attract investments (e.g., permissive labour/environmental laws, secure property rights and tax privileges) becomes the central pillar of policy. Increasing investment flows is expected to bring about both economic growth and poverty reduction—a win–win scenario that downplays, if not wilfully ignores, the contradictory interests and exploitative social relations that are constitutive of these processes. Another assumption that favours capital stems from the teleological belief that developing countries will necessarily experience an agrarian transition such as the one that took place in Europe. Therefore, the expansion of agribusiness capital is treated as a desirable event part of a natural evolution of production systems (Li, 2011).

This pro-capital narrative has been extensively mobilised to legitimise the expansion of soy agribusiness in South America. Landed elites throughout the region have promoted agribusiness expansion as an effective vehicle for sustainable development and poverty reduction. In Argentina, for example, the expansion of genetically modified soy was legitimised by a techno-productivist discourse centred on the notion of sustainability and a moral imperative of assisting the poor via corporate social responsibility (Lapegna, 2016, 2007). In Bolivia, the agribusiness model has been sold as a socially inclusive alternative that allows small producers to prosper. The country's landed elite in the Santa Cruz Department tirelessly promotes this discourse by means of constant dissemination of inflated employment figures and the advertisement of (a few) ‘success stories’ of poor migrants of Indigenous origin turned big wealthy soy producers (Castañón Ballivián, 2015). Given the global notoriety of large-scale deforestation in the Amazon, big soy farmers in Brazil have striven to present themselves as ‘responsible producers’ willing to address the negative environmental and social impacts of their activities (Adams, 2015). Their initiatives such as the Responsible Soy Programme foster the idea that any undesirable effects of agribusiness expansion are caused by the lack of

³For a powerful critique of these World Bank reports see Li (2011).

⁴Agribusiness companies could gain not only a better public image but also access to subsidised credit from development agencies as noted by Oya (2012).

standards and not by the model itself. The move allows the greening of corporate capital while simultaneously deflecting potential challenges to it (Baletti, 2014). Similarly, landed elites in Paraguay have effectively mobilised the Responsible Soy discourse to dissociate soy production from environmental and social problems. They have taken advantage of the predominance of neoliberal values to present agribusiness capital as indispensable to generating economic and social progress (Elgert, 2016).

On the other hand, the second narrative portrays agribusiness as a top-down corporate assault seeking the monopoly control of the food system and the destruction of peasant agriculture. It figures prominently in the campaign of *La Vía Campesina*⁵ (henceforth, the VC narrative). This narrative frames agribusiness expansion as a malevolent force that arrives from the outside to dispossess peasants from the land (McMichael, 2014; Teubal, 2009). In so doing, it reduces agrarian capitalism to a homogenous systemic entity as in McMichael's so-called 'corporate food regime' (McMichael, 2012). Far from being inclusive of smallholders, agribusiness is denounced as a model that—if let to reach its full dispossessory potential—is capable of producing an 'agriculture without farmers' (Santanilla & Castro, 2014; Teubal, 2009). Yet small farmers/peasants are not portrayed only as victims, far from it. Characteristic of this narrative is to situate smallholders in the vanguard of a countermovement that 'expresses a positive antithesis to corporate industrial agriculture' (McMichael, 2014, p. 4). The framing, therefore, invokes a dichotomy of 'vicious corporations' versus 'virtuous peasants' (Bernstein, 2014).

Those conceptualising *agribusiness as vicious corporate capital* tend to depict globalisation as a steamroller advancing corporate interests. It is a capital-centric narrative to the extent that is fundamentally focused on macro-level dispossession and the practices of large capital. Agribusiness expansion is thus organically associated with processes of market predation and land grabbing. The former refers to regimes of tariffs and subsidies that benefit corporations at the expense of small farmers who were left largely exposed to market pressures in the name of trade liberalisation (McMichael, 2012). The latter spotlights the capturing of vast tracks of land by large-scale capital as it responds to crisis, financial and, otherwise, and rising demand for natural resources from newer hubs of global capital (Borras et al., 2012). The outcome, so the argument goes, is a new wave of 'global enclosure' as transnational agribusiness, financial capital and national governments expel peasants from the land. This narrative portrays agribusiness structures as systemic forms of capitalism without reference to the subjects that create them, thus agribusiness capital becomes an external homogenous entity. The only agency that is recognised is that of the 'peasant' who does not want to be part of the structure as noted by Jansen (2015). Indeed, small farmers are largely treated as a homogenous group that ought to reject the agribusiness model (Bernstein, 2014).

This second narrative often informs and delineates discourses against soy agribusiness throughout South America. Social movements, NGOs and activist groups commonly denounce agribusiness as a corporate assault causing land dispossession, environmental destruction and growing inequality. In Bolivia, for instance, the agribusiness model has been portrayed as an 'expansive wave' that gradually 'absorbs and erases peasant and indigenous communities' (Fundación TIERRA, 2021, p. 79). This binary framing of 'agribusiness vs peasants' is a recurring feature of these critical analyses. In line with this, João Pedro Stédile, the leader of the Brazilian MST movement,⁶ has insisted that 'if the peasants are to have a future in Brazil it will be necessary to confront agribusiness' (Stedile, 2008, p. 204). The agribusiness model is thus depicted as a systemic form of capitalism—an external entity that intrudes from the outside constraining and subordinating local livelihoods. A recent resolution of the *Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* [Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin] called for an international mobilisation to 'stop the accelerated agribusiness expansion' because it 'imposes green deserts destroying and polluting life' (COICA, 2018, p. 2). Similarly, in Argentina, social movements and scholar-activists have denounced the 'deterritorialisation' of peasant and Indigenous small farmers by agribusinesses via either a silent market exclusion or explicit violent eviction (Percíncula et al., 2012). While these challenges to agribusiness expansion raise very important issues regarding its social and environmental effects, they focus mostly on the practices of

⁵La Vía Campesina is an international peasant's movement comprising 182 organizations from 81 countries. For a detailed discussion of its origins and political campaigning see Borras (2008).

⁶The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* is arguably one of the most emblematic social movements in Latin America.

large corporate capital. In doing so, these critical voices tend to overlook the microprocesses of dispossession among small-scale farmers (Li, 2010) and disregard smallholders' role in co-producing agribusiness structures (Jansen, 2015).

To be clear, my characterisation of the two capital-centric narratives focuses on their basic tenets and it is not intended to capture the complexity of related scholarly debates. This is because I am interested in the politically important task of revealing the reductionist and unproductive nature of this binary framing of agribusiness expansion that continues dominating the public debate. Arguably, the simplicity of these narratives is instrumental in pushing forward the agendas of their respective supporters. On the one hand, one can see how landed elites and governments benefit from a linear technocratic narrative that presents agribusiness as a trouble-free route to development. On the other hand, activists, social movements and NGOs may claim that a dichotomous narrative with strong antagonistic images is needed to mobilise a broad constituency. Yet both narratives conceal the complex social relations and dynamics that constitute actually existing agribusiness structures. This complexity can be captured by conducting a more grounded analysis of the process of agrarian change with a focus on the changing labour dynamics as I show below.

3 | AGRARIAN CHANGE IN EASTERN LOWLAND BOLIVIA: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The eastern lowland region is located in Santa Cruz, Bolivia's nowadays richest and most populated department.⁷ Santa Cruz's predominant economic and demographic position is a fairly recent phenomenon and cannot be understood without considering its agrarian history. As late as the 1940s, Santa Cruz remained a disconnected region of scarce population and little economic development, an agricultural frontier too far away from the mining centres in the western part of the country. With the victory of the 1952 National Revolution, however, Santa Cruz economic and political isolation abruptly ended. Led by the nationalist party *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR), the government that emerged from the national revolution brought about major reforms. Apart from introducing universal suffrage and nationalising the tin mines, the MNR government implemented a radical process of Agrarian Reform in 1953. More than a governmental initiative, the agrarian reform was the product of pressure from below as highland Indigenous peasants took advantage of the generalised popular insurrection to concretise their historical struggle for land restitution since colonial times. The impact of the 1953 agrarian reform was transformative but highly uneven. In the highlands and valleys, the *hacienda* system⁸ was effectively dismantled. In the lowlands, however, the impact of the agrarian reform was very limited. Agricultural labourers seized only a dozen of haciendas and the MNR expropriated just a few estates owned by political rivals—the vast majority of the haciendas was not affected (Castillo & Ballerstaedt, 1983; Soliz, 2021).

The uneven outcome of the reform was in line with the MNR's agrarian project. To achieve economies of scale in farming, the government proposed different paths for the country's two main regions. In the highlands, existing Indigenous communities were expected to become cooperatives fully incorporated in the economic and political life of the nation (Dunkerley, 1984). Importantly, the ruling elite of the MNR demanded a 'cultural' change as a prerequisite for their incorporation. In particular, rural populations throughout the country were asked to abandon their native ethnic identities which were associated with backwardness. Besides, behind closed doors, the mestizo elite in government stressed this measure as necessary to contain future rebellions along ethnic lines. Therefore, the MNR government systematically sought to replace these ethnic identities with a generalised 'campesino' identity deemed to be in tune with its modernist project. While controversial, the move was embraced by large parts of the rural population:

⁷In Bolivia, a 'department' is the first level of administrative subdivision of the state's territory. It is composed of groups of provinces which in turn are further subdivided into municipalities. In 2019, 29% of the 11.4 million Bolivians lived in the Santa Cruz department and its contribution to the country's GDP was USD 11.8 billion, which is about 29.5% of the total (INE, 2020).

⁸One of the legacies of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America was a system of large landed estates with a feudal-like labour regime called *haciendas*.

Under the legitimate pretext of eliminating racial discrimination against indios, these came to be referred to as just campesinos, and their communal organizations were transformed into peasant unions [emphasis added], even though there were no landlord bosses left, nor any clear demands such as the recovery of lost lands. At least during the early years of the agrarian reform, peasants largely accepted this change—often with pride—even in areas where there had never been landlords or haciendas. They saw it as the way to free themselves from past forms of exploitation and discrimination and become full and modern citizens of the state. (Albó, 2008, p. 20)

In the lowlands, the MNR expected large-scale capitalist farms to emerge from the existing haciendas. In line with the recommendations made by the Bohan commission,⁹ the government's efforts were largely focused on Santa Cruz. It was hoped that the traditional class of hacendados could be transformed into a modern agrarian bourgeoisie. For the MNR, this was the most pragmatic way to integrate Santa Cruz into the nation's economic and social life. It was also regarded as the quickest way to modernise agriculture and substitute agricultural imports, which, in 1952, amounted to 36% of all Bolivian imports (Sandoval Arenas, 2003; United States Aid Mission to Bolivia [USAID], 1974).

To operationalise its project for Santa Cruz, the MNR government carried out two main actions. First, it protected and fostered large-scale estates. Crucially, the government introduced a new type of property in the Law of Agrarian Reform labelled *empresa agrícola* (agricultural enterprise) with the intention of protecting lowlands' haciendas from expropriation. The hacendados were expected to modernise their farms by investing capital, hiring wage labour and adopting modern agricultural techniques. But because the state lacked the capacity to verify these conditions, in practice most hacendados managed to convert their properties into 'agricultural enterprises' without actually fulfilling the requirements despite receiving substantial state support. Second, the government sought to mobilise campesino labour from the highlands to the lowlands. It made campesino colonisation projects a top priority. While efforts to populate the eastern part of the country had been made before, the scale of the demographic movement was unprecedented. This large enterprise was labelled *La Marcha al Oriente* (The March to the East). Given the labour shortage in the lowlands and the increasing demographic pressure in the highlands, the plan was usually portrayed as a win-win solution (Dunkerley, 1984; Eckstein, 1983).

Campesino migration to Santa Cruz constantly increased since the 1960s. When migrating to the lowlands, highland campesinos brought with them their organisational tradition. Forged through centuries of struggle, theirs is a rich and emancipatory tradition that has countered elite rule since colonial times.¹⁰ Particularly important here is their contemporary organisation, the campesino union or *sindicato*. In settlement areas, a *sindicato* typically first occupies an area where it conducts a land survey in order to allocate parcels to its members. The parcels are usually of 50 ha each in compliance with the denomination of 'small property' stipulated in the 1953 Law of Agrarian Reform. *Sindicato* members then elect a *directiva* (small board) initially composed of two to three people who take responsibility for specific tasks (e.g., handling finances and coordinating communal works). As new needs emerge (e.g., a school), new posts in the *directiva* are created. The *sindicato*'s principal authority is conferred to the *compañero ejecutivo* (executive comrade) who, apart from leading the group, goes in a delegation to try to obtain state recognition for the settlement. As part of an organisational hierarchy, *sindicatos* are then grouped in *Centrales* at the zonal level which in turn form *Federaciones* at the regional one (Gill, 1987).

The *sindicato* institution was crucial for campesinos to settle throughout the lowlands. During the initial years, the *sindicato*'s main function was to keep the settlement alive by increasing both the number of affiliates and the extension of cleared land. Land clearing was not only about establishing agriculture, it was also about instituting tenure rights. Each *sindicato* member was required to clear at least two hectares of forest per year to have a legitimate

⁹In the early 1940s, a group of US development experts led by Merwin Bohan arrived at Bolivia to formulate a comprehensive development strategy for the country.

¹⁰For a concise and useful historical account of campesinos struggles in Bolivia, see Rivera Cusicanqui (1985).

claim over the parcel of land. Members were also expected to actively participate in meetings, to engage in collective works (e.g., clearing the access path to the settlement) and to chip in for leaders' expenses when in these were in a delegation. Obligations were strictly controlled, leading on some occasions to the expropriation of land by the sindicato. More commonly, however, settlers unable to comply with the obligations sold their parcels to newcomers who in turn paid compensation for previous works before being admitted into the sindicato. The level of cohesion and control of the campesino sindicatos impressed external observers. In 1985, a team of US-based anthropologists and geographers wrote that '[a] visitor of San Julian ... cannot help but be impressed by the degree to which the power to make meaningful decisions has been vested and maintained at the community level' (Painter et al., 1985, p. 18).

The campesino union allowed for social cohesion and leadership to be put at service of the settlement venture. It became the platform to organise settlement life, establish rights and obligations and mediate internal disputes. It also represented campesinos' interests vis-à-vis the state and other actors, particularly when it came to defending their land claims. The latter became particularly important during the military regimes of the 1970s that used state power to put more land and resources into the hands of Santa Cruz's traditional elite. In parallel, Mennonite¹¹ groups arrived from Mexico, Paraguay and Canada and were settled to the south of Santa Cruz where they became important in the development of cattle rearing (Stearman, 1985).

With the recovery of democracy in 1982, campesino sindicatos quickly articulated regional organisations. As shown by Pacheco (2006), campesino colonisation was a key factor in the expansion of agricultural land in the country's lowland, particularly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. It counted for about half of the total deforestation in the lowlands while large-scale intensive agriculture and cattle ranching were responsible for around 40% and 10%, respectively. However, with the introduction of neoliberal policies in 1985, large-scale agriculture rapidly became the main cause of deforestation in Santa Cruz. A rapid proliferation of big farms came with a major soy boom in the early 1990s. Between 1990 and 1997, Santa Cruz's soy production increased sharply from 249,000 to 1,139,000 tons (World Bank, 1998) while the country's soy exports skyrocketed by 747% (Medeiros, 2008). The boom was triggered by the combined effect of favourable international prices¹² and targeted state support mainly in the form of roads, productive infrastructure and investor-friendly land/trade policies. The area of forest cleared for agriculture increased from 88,000 ha in the mid-1980s to 560,000 ha in the year 2000 (Pacheco, 2006; Pérez, 2007).

The soy boom radically transformed the eastern lowlands. Campesino settlements and Mennonite colonies suddenly found themselves surrounded by big farms as the area became a preferred site for the expansion of soy agribusiness. Santa Cruz's traditional landed elite rushed to take control of the land after an edaphic study found that nearly 96% of the area's soils were suitable for intensive agriculture (Thiele, 1995). Corporate capital followed suit when targeted state support set the conditions of profitability. In May 1990, President Paz Zamora obtained funding for a major World Bank project code-named 'Eastern Lowland Project' that established the material conditions such as roads, silos, credits, technological know-how for soy agribusiness expansion in Santa Cruz (Corporación Regional de Desarrollo de Santa Cruz [CORDECRUZ], 1992a). In parallel, neoliberal governments managed to secure an advantageous market niche for Bolivian soy within the Community of Andean Nations (CAN).¹³ This enabled an extraordinary influx of foreign agribusiness capital that the agrarian elites celebrated as the long-awaited key to the region's development. As a result, a complex agribusiness structure quickly took form in what used to be an isolate frontier of campesino settlements (Pérez, 2007).

¹¹Mennonites are Anabaptist Christian people who embrace a conservative rural life in closed and isolated communities. Mostly of Prussian descent, groups of Mennonites started to migrate to Bolivia in the early 1950s. They gradually controlled significant tracks of land and became a key actor in the country's lowlands. See Kopp (2015) for a comprehensive analysis of Mennonites presence in Bolivia.

¹²The price of soy in the Chicago Stock Market remained high from 1990 to 1997 paying above USD 220 per ton.

¹³Established in 1969, the CAN block is composed of Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Bolivia. This group of Andean countries became a customs union in 1992 and a free trade zone in 1993. Soy producers in Santa Cruz benefited greatly from their market niche within CAN as none of the other countries in the block cultivated soy.

After a series of social uprisings against neoliberal governments, Bolivia's politics veered to the left with the historical electoral victory of Evo Morales' party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), in 2005. Once in power, the MAS government set out to reverse the state's entrenched 'landlord bias' by making changes to the land legislation and targeting campesino small farmers with specific support programmes and policies.¹⁴ Modifications in the land law put pressure on large farmers to use their land productively or else face land expropriation and stipulated that public land can only be redistributed to campesinos and Indigenous peoples. The new legislation marked the return of state oversight not only over land use and redistribution but also over labour conditions within large farms (Colque et al., 2016).

In the eastern lowlands, the state attempted to mediate the process of agrarian change by improving the terms and conditions of campesinos' incorporation into the agribusiness dynamic. Two main interventions stood out. The first was the so-called TCP Programme designed to promote small-scale non-transgenic soy production. This programme stemmed from the *Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos* (TCP) agreement between Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia, hence the name.¹⁵ Funded by Venezuela's petrodollars, the programme had an annual budget of USD 14 million to buy agricultural inputs and made them available to campesino small farmers at reduced prices via low-interest credits. It also included an exclusive market niche in Venezuela for 200,000 tons of soy per year (Catacora, 2007; Ministerio de Producción y Microempresas [MPM], 2007). The second state intervention was the establishment of the *Empresa de Apoyo a la Producción de Alimentos* (EMAPA) in 2008, a state-owned enterprise created to support food production and regulate its commercialisation. EMAPA programmes offered 0% input credits to campesino small farmers and bought their produce at attractive subsidised prices.¹⁶ In modifying the conditions of access to credits and markets, these state interventions established circumstances of greater opportunity for (some) campesino small farmers. In their detailed analysis of EMAPA, Cordoba and Jansen (2013) found that this state-owned enterprise did facilitate the integration of campesino small farmers into the agro-industrial complex but not without reproducing their dependency relations vis-à-vis corporate capital.

4 | AGRIBUSINESS EXPANSION AND CAMPESINO CLASSES OF LABOUR IN CUATRO CAÑADAS

My ethnographic research was conducted at the very heart of the eastern lowlands in what is nowadays the municipality of Cuatro Cañadas (see Figure 1). The campesino settlement in this area was formerly known as San Julián Sur. It was one more of the campesino settlements mushrooming in the colonisation areas throughout Santa Cruz since the 1970s. Up until the mid-1980s, the study area was largely an isolated agricultural frontier where some Mennonite families and groups of migrant campesinos were cultivating small farms. There were 36 campesino communities settled in this area with a total population of about 4000 people (CORDECRUZ, 1992b). As I will explore in the subsequent subsections, the expansion of soy agribusiness radically transformed labour dynamics in Cuatro Cañadas as it led to an increasing fragmentation of labour and campesino class differentiation. I situate my account in two historical conjunctures: the soy boom in the 1990s and the period of renewed state presence under Evo Morales' MAS government. My analysis reveals the inadequacy of the capital-centric narratives outlined above to capture the complexity of this process of agrarian change. It also shows that campesinos' politics of contestation vis-à-vis agribusiness capital have been chiefly articulated around the notion of precarity—the relevance of which I will discuss in the last section of the paper. Before proceeding with my grounded analysis, it is necessary to elaborate briefly on my theoretical framework and data collection methods.

¹⁴Such emancipatory impulse gradually faded away and was replaced with a pact between Santa Cruz's landed elite and the MAS government. See Webber (2017) for a useful analysis of this process.

¹⁵The TCP agreement was meant to become a left-wing popular alternative to the US-backed Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA).

¹⁶In 2015, for instance, EMAPA's price subsidy amounted to Bs. 14.6 million (USD 2 million) and benefited 1076 campesino families (Molina, 2016).

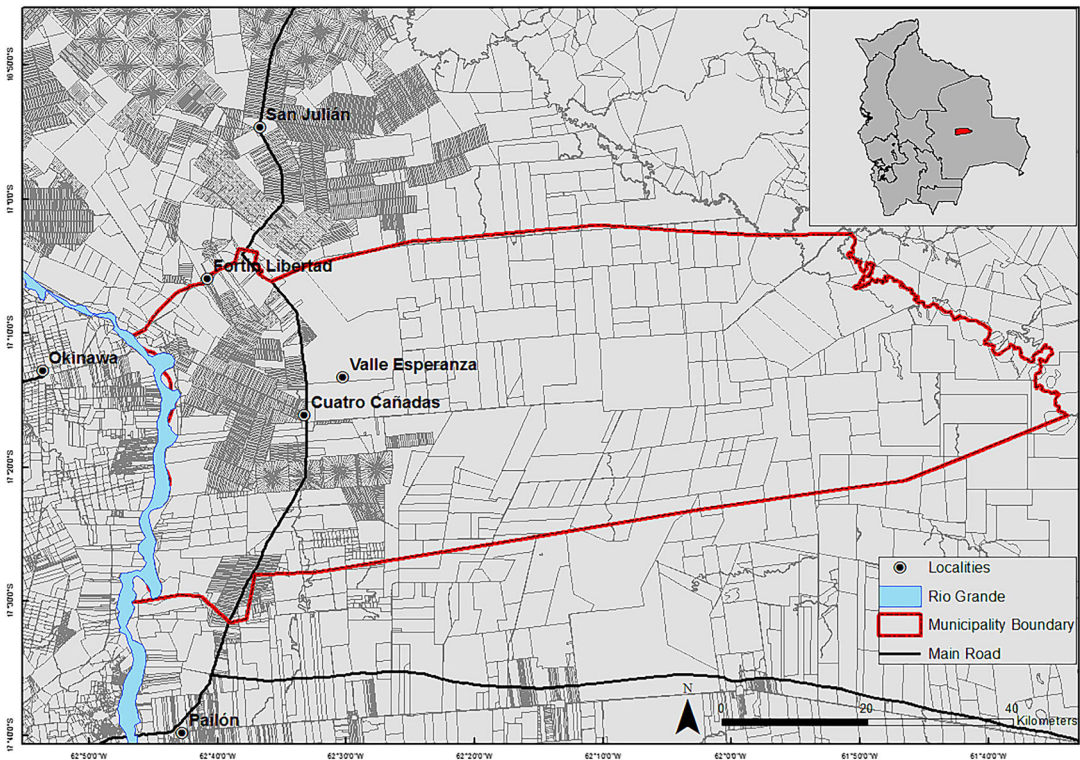


FIGURE 1 Municipality of Cuatro Cañadas.

Source: Elaborated based on data from GeoBolivia (2020).

My exploration of the labour dynamics builds on the theoretical approach of Marxist political economy. Campesinos in eastern lowland Bolivia continue to rely heavily on their labour power, even though the specific socio-economic situations of campesino families, and the livelihood options opened to them, vary significantly. To capture this complexity, I employ the concept of ‘classes of labour’ as put forward by Bernstein (2006). The concept encompasses the growing number of people whose daily reproduction depends directly and indirectly on the sale of their labour power. These are the people facing the escalating fragmentation of labour intensified by neoliberal globalisation. To make ends meet, they increasingly alternate/combine insecure and oppressive forms of wage employment with other precarious self-employment activities in the so-called ‘informal sector’, including small-scale farming. Classes of labour often combine wage labour with petty commodity production in diverse ways. In political economy, the term ‘petty commodity production’ specifies a form of small-scale commodity production in capitalism—with varying degrees of specialisation—that is constituted by a particular combination of class places of capital and labour (Gibbon & Neocosmos, 1985). As a form of production, it ‘stands between labour-hiring capital, on the one hand, and hired labour, on the other, though it may be merged with both’ (Harriss-White, 2012, p. 118). Due to the contradictory combination of class places, petty commodity producers occupy an unstable position susceptible to class differentiation. They also typically find themselves in a structural disadvantageous position vis-à-vis forms of capital (Bernstein, 2006; Harriss-White, 2012).

In my analysis, campesino classes of labour encompass three main class typologies of campesinos: (1) ‘landless campesinos’, a group largely composed of late migrants and the offspring of landed campesinos whose access to land was effectively restricted by agribusiness expansion; (2) ‘worse-off smallholders’ who had managed to clear their parcels but had to lease them to other machine-owning farmers due to their lack of capital to put them into production themselves; and (3) ‘better-off small farmers’ who possessed enough capital to put their own parcels into

production, including that of soy, and may occasionally lease land from others and employ sporadic wage labour but continue to rely mostly on the households' own labour. I defined these class typologies based on the categories campesinos themselves used when referring to the existing class hierarchy. Landed campesinos consistently made a distinction between those who were able to sow their own parcels and those who were forced to rent them due to lack of capital. This distinction was usually linked to wellbeing levels as in the following common phrases: *los que siembran viven bien* (those who sow live well) or *la vida es dura/peor para los que tienen que rentar su tierra* (life is hard/worse for those who have to rent their land). I thus employ the denominatives of 'worse-off smallholders' and 'better-off small farmers' to signal both the linkage with the notion of wellbeing and the fact that the former may *hold* land but the latter are the ones able to *farm* it.

It is important to note that I utilise these class taxonomies as heuristic devices to organise the analysis of processes and agency. The categories should not be seen as fixed as the boundaries between them were usually fluid. In as much as all these campesino classes of labour tend to combine, to a greater or lesser extent, wage labour with other precarious activities (e.g., petty trade, local transport and small-scale agriculture), they can be analytically framed as instances of petty commodity production. Moreover, as noted above, 'campesino' is a historically specific term that emerged in the intersection of class and ethnicity. Consequently, my class analysis of campesino classes of labour has an implicit ethnic dimension. But it does not include any substantial analysis of this ethnic dimension or that of gender. This is a clear limitation of my analysis that may be corrected by other studies.

As I show below, campesino classes of labour were keen to participate in the soy agribusiness dynamic since its inception. Landless campesinos hoped that an increasing labour demand would allow them to settle and build a livelihood in the region while established campesino smallholders envisage themselves as full-time farmers producing a global market crop. They were all determined to take advantage of the new livelihood opportunities that may be opened by the influx of agribusiness capital. Following Li (2023, p. 526), I characterise these groups of campesinos as dynamic farmers 'who create and respond to new livelihood opportunities, transform their social, ecological and economic relations, and take risks'. She identifies three main conditions that are necessary for 'dynamic farmers' to launch into the production of global market crops: desire, opportunity and security. I use these conditions to structure my grounded analysis. They enable the exploration of people's aspirations, targeted state interventions and structural insecurity. The latter is constitutive of the notion of precarity that I define, following Waite (2009, p. 426), as referring to 'life worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity that are either thought to originate from a generalised societal malaise, or as a result of particular experiences derived from neo-liberal labour markets'. Importantly, the notion of precarity entails a dual quality—as a condition and point of mobilisation—that distinguishes it from other similar concepts:

the socio-political framing and conceptual depth of the term precarity encapsulates both a condition and a point of mobilisation in response to that condition, whereas risk and vulnerability generally refer to just conditions. The analytical advantage of the concept of precarity, therefore, is that it more explicitly incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs rather than focusing solely on individualised experiences of precarity. The potential of the term precarity over risk and vulnerability is thus in terms of what can be gained politically by adopting the term. (Waite, 2009, p. 421)

My study draws mostly on primary data collected during 1-year fieldwork carried out between September 2017 and August 2018. I conducted ethnographic work using a combination of different research instruments. I relied heavily on qualitative interviews carrying out a total of 86 between semi-structured interviews and life histories. I used semi-structured interviews to get contextual information and to probe for specific data to confirm historical trends/processes. I carefully selected exemplifying cases of different agrarian classes for the life stories. I also employed participant observation to document situational experiences and a small survey ($N = 50$) with landed

campesinos to collect data on land and asset ownership. In addition, my study benefited from primary data gathered remotely in June 2019¹⁷ and from previous research trips that I made to Cuatro Cañadas in 2012 and 2015 when I was working as an NGO staffer investigating the implications of agribusiness expansion on food security.

4.1 | Soy Boom: Campesinos as precarious labour

In his study of Santa Cruz's agricultural colonies, Soria (1996) noted that migrant campesinos quickly articulated a new identity as 'small producers'.¹⁸ This context-specific identity was used to signal an aspiration to become 'proper farmers' in two main ways. First, they could become full-time consolidated farmers who will not need to work for someone else to make ends meet. Second, they would be able to obtain a sizeable scale of production impossible to achieve in the highlands largely due to the problem of *minifundio*.¹⁹ Indeed, 'sowing big', as campesinos usually put it, was a widely shared and very strong aspiration in Cuatro Cañadas—but one extremely difficult to accomplish in this isolated and marginal land frontier. Therefore, when news about the implementation of the Eastern Lowland Project started to circulate in the region, campesinos' first reaction was positive. Contrary to the VC narrative, they did not see agribusiness expansion as a threat to their livelihoods but rather as an opportunity to prosper. They were hopeful that improved roads, new silos and credit schemes would help them to become truly independent 'small producers'. Although an all-weather road had been opened since 1987, most campesino communities were poorly connected to this main road. Consequently, campesinos had high hopes that the project could improve the existing secondary roads and indeed open new ones. Their desire for new silos was also well-justified. Up until the late 1980s, the company SAO had established a monopsony as it owned practically all the silos in the region. The possibility of incoming companies opening new silos was seen as an essential condition to start producing soy. Lastly, the credit component of the project had been advertised as a mechanism to enable the successful integration of campesinos into the agribusiness dynamic—in line with the WB narrative—thus raising people's expectations.²⁰

Campesinos' desire to be part of the agribusiness dynamic should be understood as part of their historical struggle to challenge their economic and political marginalisation. Although the state had sponsored campesinos' migration to the lowlands, their presence in Santa Cruz was challenged more than once. The region's landed elite constantly portrayed them as a 'dangerous other' who should be kept at bay. For instance, a front-page op-ed published in Santa Cruz's most important newspaper in the late 1960s described campesinos' arrival to the region as a 'calamity' that had disrupted what used to be an 'absolutely peaceful' countryside (El Deber, 1969). Campesinos were tolerated by the landed elite as cheap labour for the plantations but not as own-account farmers who might eventually dispute the elite's control of the land. Therefore, they were systematically sidelined from credit schemes and other forms of state support. Campesinos were depicted as second-class settlers who lacked the character, skills and entrepreneurial spirit attributed to other incoming settlers, notably Mennonites and Brazilians. They were constructed as conformists 'without long-term goals and objectives' who are 'solely focused on securing subsistence' (Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales [ILDIS], 1987, pp. 56–57). Although for opposite political ends, the VC narrative often shares this assumption that small farmers' natural priority is to produce food for their subsistence and the local economy. In doing so, it neglects the agency of dynamic farmers (Li, 2023) like the campesinos in eastern Bolivia who are keen to produce global market crops.

Li (2023) identifies three main conditions that are necessary for 'dynamic farmers' to launch into the production of global market crops: desire, opportunity and security. In the case at hand, campesinos' desire to produce soy was

¹⁷I collected this data using the WhatsApp online platform. I benefited from close contact with several campesinos who offered their time for online calls and kindly added me to a WhatsApp group used by them to discuss their needs, demands and, crucially, road-blockade strategies.

¹⁸The term 'small producer' was often promoted by neoliberals to uproot/depoliticise the identity of rural farmers. In Bolivia, however, campesinos have appropriated the term to signal their production aspirations without necessarily abandoning their previous identities.

¹⁹The term *minifundio* refers to land units that are too small to provide employment and/or cover the subsistence needs of a smallholder family.

²⁰One of the stated objectives of the Eastern Lowlands Project was to 'raise the family income of small subsistence farmers' by promoting agribusiness expansion (World Bank, 1990, p. 2).

already there. For years, they had observed how Mennonites cultivated the oilseed while weeding their soy fields and they aspired to emulate them: 'The Mennonites were already sowing soy. I paid attention to how they did it, they used tractors. I said to myself, "I have to clear my plot to cultivate soy." I used to return home with those thoughts' (Fieldwork notes 26 January 2018, campesino small farmer). Adopting soy, however, was expensive. It required a transition towards mechanised agriculture that most campesinos could not fund. To have a meaningful opportunity to produce soy, campesinos were counting on the support of the Eastern Lowlands Project. Yet their expectations were quickly crushed. Only 26% of the credits offered by the project were assigned to 'small farmers' despite these constituting 62% of the intended 1420 beneficiaries. Plus, the vast majority of the targeted small farmers were Mennonite smallholders who had already mechanised their farms; campesino migrants in the region were largely ignored. Similarly, the project's road component upgraded and repaired around 410 km of roads in the region—none connecting campesinos' settlements (World Bank, 1998).²¹

Adopting soy was seen as the most tangible and direct way to achieve security. This was particularly the case given soy's extraordinary prices during the 1990s boom. Campesinos desperately wanted to tap into the soy boom and expand their farms, but producing soy demanded levels of capital that virtually no campesino household possessed at that time. A few better-off campesinos found an alternative accumulation route. Given that many large farmers were shifting from cotton to soy, the local cotton trading company, Boltrade, opted to offer contract farming arrangements to some 'viable' campesino small farmers to offset the impact. Those deemed viable were campesinos who had enough capital to hire labourers for the cotton harvest. Some of these capitalised campesinos did relatively well with cotton which allowed them to fund their transition to soy years later, but not quickly enough to take advantage of the soy boom.

Other landed campesinos tried out sharecropping arrangements with machine-owning middle farmers, usually Mennonites. These arrangements were colloquially called *al-partir* given that profits were divided into equal parts between the parties. Although seemingly fair in the abstract, in practice the arrangement entailed a clear power relation that largely benefited the owner of the machinery. The latter possessed privileged access to networks and information regarding inputs and markets which allowed him to extract rents. Trying to bypass this disadvantageous sharecropping option, a group of campesinos in the community of Nuevo Palmar created an informal co-op in the hope that cooperation could enable economies of scale. Two group representatives managed to get seeds and other inputs from the SAO company claiming to be the sole owners of 90 ha when in reality the land belonged to nearly 30 campesinos. While the production went reasonably well and the soy prices were still high, campesinos hardly earn anything. The main problem was that they could not harvest the soy at the right time due to the lack of a combined harvester as Porfirio recalled:

In this community we decided to sow together, to form a group. We managed to sow 90 hectares [of soy] in the first year. Five hectares were mine, one of the highest [shares], the rest sowed around three hectares each. My neighbour Victor and I played as the owners as if everything were ours only. The rest sowed and got inputs in our name. We sold the entire production as one, and we got paid as one too. We were the first [campesino] community to sow soy ... We struggled to find the harvester though, all of us went searching for one, but no one wanted to come to our community because all the machines were busy working for the [agribusiness] enterprises. We organised groups to find a harvester and off we went on our bicycles. It took us almost a month to find one. (Fieldwork notes 30 March 2018, campesino smallholder)

The above example depicts not only campesinos' determination to enter the agribusiness dynamic but also their marked marginalisation from it. In contrast to the WB narrative, the influx of agribusiness capital did not create

²¹The bias was spatially visible in the project's road map. Tellingly, the labels of the map were in the upper-left part of the sketch thus blanking out the area where most campesinos were settled.

opportunities for small farmers to access new markets and increase their production. The problem was not the lack of adequate institutional arrangements or corporate social responsibility standards. Nor was it simply that agribusiness companies wilfully ignored campesinos' presence. Rather, the issue had to do with agribusiness' strategy to maximise profits in that particular conjuncture. Campesinos did play a prominent role in that strategy but not as soy producers; instead, they were incorporated as cheap precarious labour. As I elaborate in the next subsection, some better-off campesinos eventually managed to become soy producers when the state intervened to create better credit and market conditions for small farmers. It was a state intervention that facilitated the integration of small farmers into the agribusiness dynamic—not the incoming corporate capital.

Securing campesinos' cheap labour was a key enabling condition for the unprecedented expansion of soy cultivation during the boom. Their labour was required for multiple activities from land clearing to harvesting, including—crucially—the weeding of soy. Up until the late 1990s, non-transgenic varieties of soy dominated the landscape which had important implications for weed control. Burndown herbicides were used before planting but, once the soy emerged, the weeding needed to be done manually because spraying herbicides would have killed the soy plant too. Piecing together various comments, it seems that around four labourers were needed to weed 1 ha in 1 day. Therefore, substantial amounts of people needed to be mobilised. For instance, FINO S.A., one of the region's emblematic agribusiness enterprises, employed more than 600 people for the weeding of soy (Fieldwork notes 27 December 2017, machine operator).

The soy boom thus greatly increased labour demand. It triggered a new wave of campesino migration from the country's highlands and valleys to the eastern lowlands. The numbers were comparable to the seasonal migration prompted by the cotton boom in the early 1970s.²² But, unlike the latter, the soy boom made work abundant year-round. Consequently, many migrant campesinos started to move permanently into the region's towns. In Cuatro Cañadas, the town's population increased eight-fold between 1989 and 2001 from 500 to 4642 people, respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2002; Muñoz Reyes, 1990). Daily wages were two to three times higher than in the highlands (paying between Bs 80 to 100), but the labour regime was similarly precarious. Only a tiny fraction of campesino labourers, often those with machine-operating skills, signed permanent contracts with agribusiness companies. In the case of FINO, for example, there were only 45 permanent workers at that time—that is less than 7% of the company's workforce. Yet working conditions were very precarious for temporary and permanent staff alike. Accidents and snakebites were common in those days. Agribusiness enterprises did not provide basic work boots, let alone cover any medical treatment. As their work increasingly exposed them to dangerous agrochemicals, permanent workers started to demand adequate uniforms to safeguard their health but to no avail.

By the mid-1990s, the local town became a pool of abundant cheap labour. This was a positive development for agribusinesses but not in itself an optimal configuration from a profit-making perspective. Educated in the *sindicato* tradition, campesino labourers were quick to organise and not easy to discipline. They managed to amass substantial bargaining power when acting collectively to demand higher wages. They took advantage of the fact that carrying out the weeding at the right moments of soy's development was essential. It could make the difference between generating surpluses or facing losses. Given their scale of production, agribusiness enterprises were in a particularly vulnerable position because it was not that easy to quickly mobilise hundreds of people. Aware of the urgency, campesino labourers used this to negotiate better prices for their labour. Once taken to the field, they usually claimed that the amount of weed did not correspond to the payment offered and so refused to start with the work. Managers of the enterprises often had no choice but to concede to workers' demands. Importantly, campesinos' struggle for higher wages and appeals to group unity was framed around a discourse that denounced the precarity of their working conditions:

²²The cotton boom of the early 1970s increased labour demand in the lowlands which in turn intensified migration flows. In 1976, for instance, agricultural labourers in the Santa Cruz department increased from 18,000 in February (prior seasonal migration) to 95,000 in August (Rivière d'Arc, 1980).

Back then [the 1990s] there were jobs, but it was not easy. We worked barefoot next to the snakes. With the sun and all, you sweat a lot and only rarely they [agribusiness enterprises] provided [drinking] water ... The first weeding was [done] after they put poison, so it was toxic, you needed to drink milk afterwards, like when you work in the mines of Potosí. These are the things we all suffered. So, we got together to demand better pay, a more secure job, because we had families, children to look after. (Fieldwork notes 08 March 2018, campesino labourer)

As agribusiness companies continued to expand soy cultivation, labour costs soon became their main concern. The solution to the so-called 'labour problem' came in the form of transgenic soy seeds and their associated glyphosate-based herbicides. This labour-dispelling technology quickly became the dominant way of handling weeds. Big soy farms rapidly became the infamous desolate spaces of seemingly endless green rows. It was estimated that the shift to transgenic seeds made 95% of the soy workforce redundant. The introduction of transgenic seeds was celebrated as a decisive step towards the consolidation of the agribusiness model which, ironically, was legitimated by the increasing labour demand it had initially triggered. This technological innovation coincided with the collapse of the soy boom in the late 1990s²³ making campesinos' situation ever more precarious and uncertain. Candelario Fernández, the then representative of the rural labourers, denounced that daily wages plummeted from Bs 50 to only 30 because 'more and more unemployed people [are] willing to work for any money' (El Deber, 2005).²⁴

The fallout from the soy boom also triggered processes of land dispossession. While there was one emblematic case of an agribusiness enterprise buying up an entire campesino community, instances of 'intimate exclusion' between campesinos at the community level predominated. For example, my fieldwork data show that 40% of campesino smallholders lost their land in the community of Naciones Unidas. While most of those who lost their land were worse-off smallholders, some heavily indebted capitalised campesinos also went completely bankrupt. People remembered with astonishment how the wealthiest member of the community lost two tractors, a pickup truck and his parcel of land. The boom's fallout accelerated the process of differentiation, making evident the formation of agrarian classes within campesino communities: 'Those who bought the [available] parcels were people from the community, the ones with more money. Few families started to own three to four parcels. That was new, a big change. That's why the community weakened' (Fieldwork notes 04 December 2017, campesino smallholder).

4.2 | The State Intervenes: Campesinos' precarious incorporation into the agribusiness dynamic

In the discourse of Santa Cruz's agrarian elite, the consolidation of soy agribusiness represented the pinnacle of its efforts to attract foreign capital—a process they proudly referred to as the 'internationalisation of the lowlands'. Guilds of agroindustrialists and large farmers celebrated the arrival of agribusiness capital as the long-awaited key that would open the doors of modernisation and economic development. It was a discourse that exalted abstract notions of 'freedom' and 'inclusion' claiming that not only large agricultural enterprises but also thousands of campesino small farmers would have the opportunity to prosper (Castañón Ballivián, 2015; Valdivia, 2010). In practice, however, the influx of agribusiness capital did not enable the inclusion of campesinos as small soy producers. At that time, most landed campesinos had less than four hectares ready for cultivation—far less than the 100 ha required for profitable soy production. This was largely due to lack of capital and technology as they had no means to clear the forest other than slash-and-burn practices. Their tiny arable plots and lack of capital made them risky/losing ventures from an investor point of view. Consequently, they were largely left out of the World Bank's scheme.

²³The soy boom collapsed due to market and environmental conditions. The crucial year was 1999 when soy international prices went down from USD 224 to 176 per ton and a major drought hit the region (Medeiros, 2008).

²⁴A wage of Bs 30 was barely enough to cover the food needs of a family. A kilo of chicken, for instance, cost around Bs 11 at that time.

Campesinos' situation changed radically though with the historical electoral victory of Evo Morales' MAS party in 2005. Upon taking office, the new administration quickly signalled its political will to reverse the state's long-standing 'landlord bias' (Kay, 2006). Just days after Morales was sworn in, the Rio Grande flooded thousands of hectares in the eastern lowlands. A total of 96,000 cultivated hectares were lost affecting both campesino small farmers and large agribusiness enterprises (Acción contra el Hambre [ACH], 2009). The guild of large farmers rushed to demand the creation of a debt relief trust fund to reprogramme their debts with private banks. As previous governments had done in similar circumstances, the MAS government created such a fund but this time only credits below USD 10,000 were eligible to apply—thus effectively targeting campesino small farmers.²⁵ The political opposition and mainstream media denounced the manoeuvre as a 'discriminatory practice' against Santa Cruz's businessmen (Agencia de Noticias Fides [ANF], 2007). Other initial gestures that signalled the state's new approach included inspections inside big farms by the Labour Ministry to ensure working conditions comply with the law and the distribution of numerous *Veniran* tractors²⁶ to campesino sindicatos throughout the region.

More importantly, the state intervened to create favourable credit and market conditions for campesino small farmers. Cuatro Cañadas was one of the first places where the TCP programme was launched. It was operationalised through a 'productive organisation', ACIPACC,²⁷ that was meant to function as the 'economic arm' of the campesino union. A total of 198 small farmers signed up for the scheme during the summer campaign 2008/2009 (EMAPA, 2010). The TCP programme funded the acquisition of all necessary inputs (e.g., diesel, seeds and agrochemicals) and made them available through credits with an annual interest of 4%—a very low rate compared to the 18% charged by input merchants at that time (Ortiz, 2009). It also guaranteed very attractive prices in the Venezuelan market. The scheme paid USD 220 per ton of soy at a time when the local industry was offering USD 160. Such a significant difference was meant to incentivise small-scale non-transgenic soy production.

Interestingly, the MAS government rejected transgenic soy following the tenets of the VC narrative. For instance, a newspaper article promoting the TCP programme explained that 'for indigenous and campesinos of the global south, traditional ecologically sustainable practices are a comparative advantage against transgenic agriculture' (La Prensa, 2006, p. 8). Nonetheless, campesinos at Cuatro Cañadas themselves seemed to differ. Their main concern was not opposing transgenic agriculture but finding out whether the subsidised price would offset the greater production costs. And, for most, that was not the case. The 2008/2009 summer agricultural season turned out to be the first and last in which ACIPACC members sowed non-transgenic soy.²⁸ After two and a half years of implementation, the TCP programme had only been able to send 50,000 tons to Venezuela—a quarter of what was originally planned—and was therefore phased out (Catacora-Vargas et al., 2012). That ended the brief governmental attempt to promote non-transgenic soy production, but it did not stop campesinos' determination to cultivate soy. They quickly found an alternative source of input credits, Mennonite merchants, who offered interest-free arrangements under the condition that repayment was made in grain.²⁹ Unlike the TCP programme, Mennonites provided the most common 'technological package' based on transgenic soy seeds. The fact that campesinos swiftly changed from non-transgenic to transgenic soy production was strongly condemned by NGOs and other activists sympathetic to the VC narrative. From the campesinos perspective, however, this was a rather mundane change motivated by the urgency of sustaining their livelihoods.

State support towards campesino small farmers quickly resumed via a programme sponsored by EMAPA, the state-owned enterprise mentioned above. Through this programme, campesino small farmers accessed diesel, input

²⁵Yet only a minority of indebted campesinos benefited from the debt relief fund as the scheme covered solely loans with formal financial institutions.

²⁶These tractors were donated by the then-Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chavez. The tractors were produced as part of a cooperation agreement between Venezuela and Iran, hence the brand name *Veniran*.

²⁷The Asociación Comunitaria Integral de Productores Agropecuarios de Cuatro Cañadas.

²⁸Campesinos highlighted three main reasons behind this failure: (1) wind currents spread glyphosate-based herbicides to the non-transgenic fields affecting the crop, (2) weed control in conventional varieties demanded specialised knowledge that most campesino small farmers lacked and (3) opting for conventional seeds implied an increasing labour cost as workers needed to be hired for the weeding of soy.

²⁹Mennonite merchants demanded payment in grain because that way they could profit from a provision in the tax regulation that allowed them to avoid an 8% price cut by being registered in the NIT-RAU tax regime. I explore these unequal exchange relations in more detail elsewhere; see Castañón Ballivián (2020).

credits with no interests and attractive prices for their produce. Buying above the market price—usually paying between USD 10 and 30 per ton more—was an explicit policy of this public enterprise. This forced other companies in the industry to improve their prices too; the policy worked as a market intervention in favour of small farmers' interests. Campesino small farmers greatly benefited from EMAPA's intervention as it made wheat production profitable. This was a transformative development because it allowed them to find a lucrative crop for the winter agricultural season. Now, campesino small farmers could establish the crop rotation (soy in summer and wheat in winter) that was pivotal for achieving profitability in this agribusiness structure—the same production pattern was used by the region's large farmers.³⁰ In the winter of 2009, 33 campesinos joined EMAPA's wheat programme in Cuatro Cañadas. The subsidies in place allowed them to make substantial earnings which in turn encouraged others to join the programme. For the next winter of 2010, 118 campesino small farmers signed up to sow a total of 5249 ha. EMAPA quickly consolidated its presence in the municipality building its storage and processing plants (EMAPA, 2013, 2010). Without EMAPA's support during the winter, the vast majority of campesino small farmers would not have been able to fund their soy production during the summer. It was a game-changing state intervention that enabled in a very concrete way the integration of campesino small farmers into the agribusiness dynamic.

These state interventions by the MAS government did modify the conditions of access to credits and markets, thus establishing circumstances of greater opportunity for landed campesinos. Yet some landed campesinos benefited more than others. Better-off campesinos started to buy machinery and expanded their farms like never before as part of a significant process of 'accumulation from below'. A reliable proxy indicator of accumulation in this milieu is machinery acquisition. In this sense, my survey data showed that 80% of machinery purchases between 1990 and 2018 took place after the government of Evo Morales got into power. A larger survey conducted at a regional level by Suárez et al. (2010) corroborated the fact that campesino small farmers greatly improved their access to machinery after 2007. The accumulation strategy of these better-off campesinos also depended on the extraction of value from other landed campesinos via various mechanisms including the unpaid monitoring of crops, usury lending and swindling.³¹ Class differentiation intensified as a result. Indeed, this conjuncture saw the consolidation of two main classes of landed campesinos: worse-off smallholders and better-off small farmers. The latter needed the former's land to augment their cultivated area and scale of production to meet market imperatives. Lacking capital, the former could not put their land into production and had no choice but to lease it out to make ends meet.

Contra the WB narrative, it was the state—not agribusiness capital—that enabled the incorporation of landed campesinos into the agribusiness dynamic. Some became fully integrated into the agro-industrial commodity chains while others were linked mostly via the land market. Yet both classes of landed campesinos faced a similarly precarious situation. Returning to Tania Li's triad, we could say that state action provided a reasonable 'opportunity' for landed campesinos to realise their long-standing 'desire' to produce soy. However, the third condition—security—remained largely missing. It was the lack of security that made their livelihoods distinctively precarious. Some landed campesinos were able to accumulate and others managed to increase their income significantly. And yet whatever gains campesinos made during those years, their livelihoods continued to be structurally insecure. They understandably identified the weather as a major source of insecurity; after all, the region had been catastrophically hit by droughts and floods alike. But they also associated their insecurity with the ways agribusinesses operated and blamed them for their precarious situation. In a letter addressed to President Evo Morales, for instance, the *Federación Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos* (FSUTC) [Peasant Workers Federation] complained that agribusiness capital was only interested in taking advantage of campesinos rather than helping them to prosper:

Esteemed brother [Evo]: This great assembly [of campesino unions] wants to denounce the formation of a big agribusiness [mafia] cartel that is monopolising, assigning itself powers that are not theirs, [and] setting

³⁰Weather conditions impeded soy production during winter.

³¹I elaborate on the nature and functioning of these mechanisms elsewhere, see Castañón Ballivián (2020).

soy prices at will ... [thus] harming and making more vulnerable the economy of small farmers. This [mafia] cartel makes huge and exaggerated profits at the expense of small and medium producers ... We demand actions to address this huge abuse by transnational companies that take away producers' earnings and sacrifice. (FSUTC, 2013)

Researchers have documented the agribusinesses' oligopsonic practices denounced by campesinos (see Canelas, 2012; Castañón Ballivián, 2017; McKay, 2018). Indeed, this *modus operandi* was an emblematic feature of agribusiness development in the eastern lowlands (and elsewhere)—and yet one that was largely ignored or downplayed by the celebratory WB narrative. It was estimated that the oligopsony³² allowed agribusinesses to extract as much as USD 50 per ton of soy (Castañón Ballivián, 2017). Such rents were a key factor pushing campesino small farmers into downward spirals of debt but not the only one. Other central factors included more expensive weed control (as these became gradually resistant to glyphosate) and lower yields resulting from both a higher incidence of weeds/pests and an increasingly drier climate due to the extensive deforestation. The combined effect of reduced income, increased costs of production and lower output make them subject to what Bernstein (1994, p. 56) calls the 'simple reproduction squeeze'. This situation of being squeezed from the production and consumption sides was colloquially expressed with the phrase: *estar con el agua al cuello* (having water up to the neck). To cope, campesino small farmers adopted a series of desperate practices that reveal their highly precarious position. One such practice was to secretly divert part of their produce and sell it using another name. This way input providers and other creditors would not take all their money when coming to collect outstanding debts after the harvest. The saved money was often just enough to put food on the table. Another practice was the 'innovation' of refurbishing old rusty disc harrows to till the land before sowing as a weed control measure. This was a rather hopeless attempt to compensate for not being able to afford the increasing amounts of herbicides that were needed.

Despite their efforts, more and more campesino small farmers were going 'on and off' of farming. They resorted to renting out their land parcels due to downward spirals of debts. In doing so, most of them were gradually pushed into the ranks of campesino worse-off smallholders. Only a small minority had been able to consolidate their economic position by diversifying income sources and sites of accumulation. By 2018, three main agrarian classes were discernible in the studied campesino communities. Worse-off smallholders formed the largest social group with 54% of the total cases whereas better-off small farmers and emergent capitalist farmers constituted 36% and 10%, respectively. Table 1 illustrates the differences among these agrarian classes in terms of land access, labour mobilisation and machinery ownership. The general trend was towards greater polarisation. Indeed, a clear outcome of agribusiness expansion in this setting was an intensification of class differentiation among campesinos—a crucial trend largely neglected in the VC narrative's framing of peasants as a homogenous group external to the agribusiness structure.

Although the increasing class inequality motivated some discontent, it did not inform campesinos' political practice. Rather, campesinos' politics revolved around a challenge to agribusiness capital for failing to bring about prosperity and installing instead precarity. Campesinos resented not the increasing commodification of land and labour as such, but the concomitant precarisation of life. The emphasis was on the insecurity and instability of their livelihoods resulting from the agribusiness' organic link with market volatility. In June 2019, for instance, campesinos in the eastern lowlands staged a major road blockage that made it to national news. The agribusiness grain traders had offered farmers an unusually low price of USD 230 per ton of soy blaming volatile tendencies in international markets (El Deber, 2019a; Página Siete, 2019). Campesinos saw this as another abusive tactic by the agribusiness 'mafia cartel' and decided to confront it directly. Led by the campesino unions, various groups of landed and landless campesinos blocked several points of the main road connecting the departments of Santa Cruz and Beni. They demanded the intervention of the national government to ensure a 'fair price' of around USD 300 per ton of soy

³²Four agribusiness enterprises—ADM-SAO, Cargill, FINO and Gravel—controlled more than 70% of all soy exports.

TABLE 1 Class differentiation patterns in selected campesino communities circa 2018.

Differentiation criteria		Worse-off smallholders	Better-off small farmers	Emerging capitalist farmers
Cases	Number	79	53	14
	Percentage of total	54	36	10
Land	Ha owned	20–50	20–50	50–100
	Ha accessed via renting	0	10–50	60–250
	Ha cultivated/used	0–10	15–100	110–350
	Typical land use	Small-scale livestock rearing	Summer: soy or maize/ winter: sorghum or wheat	Summer: soy/winter: wheat or sunflower
Labour	Wage work in other farms	Seasonal	Sporadic	No
	Labour hiring	No	Sporadic, typically to assist sowing/harvesting	Regular, typically machine operators and drivers on precarious short-term contracts
	Other work/income activities	Petty trade or transport (truffi drivers)	Rare, usually focused on commercial farming	Transport and/or harvesting services
Machinery	Tractor	No	Yes	Yes
	Second tractor	No	No	Yes
	Tillage equipment	No	Yes	Yes
	Sprayer	No	Small trailed sprayer	Self-propelled sprayer
	Seeder	No	No	Yes
	Harvester	No	No	Yes

Source: Elaborated based on fieldwork data from a survey (N = 50) with landed campesinos and information on 153 landholders collected during participatory mapping sessions in six selected campesino communities.

(El Deber, 2019b; Los Tiempos, 2019a). The road blockage was sustained for nearly 2 weeks despite several clashes with the police. It was a truly cross-class mobilisation of the region's campesino classes of labour. Local organisations of petty traders, builders, moto-taxi drivers, mechanics and even nurses sent representatives to join the road blockage points. A local radio covering the dispute described it as 'the people's struggle for a dignified life' (Radio Gigante, 2019). Similarly, campesino leaders framed the mobilisation as an effort to stop the increasing precarisation of people's lives. A campesino leader I interviewed explained the conflict as follows:

The [agribusiness] industry wanted to pay 225 or 230 [USD per ton of soy] at most. That's [like] telling us 'go and starve'. It doesn't cover our costs [of production] ... These companies have been living at the expense of people for years. It's not that people don't want to work, to produce [soy] ... People want to be better, to progress, [but] we are seeing the opposite ... producers can't afford poisons [agrochemicals], young people leaving, life is harder, people are worried all the time, you don't know if you'll have [enough money to provide] for your family ... That's why people said enough and blocked the road to tell the [agribusiness] companies and also the [government] ministers that we also deserve to improve our lives. (Fieldwork notes 28 June 2019, campesino leader)

My grounded account in this section has demonstrated the blatant inability of the dominant capital-centric narratives to capture the complex nature of an actually existing agribusiness structure. Agribusiness corporate capital is thus neither an enabling virtuous asset nor simply a vicious external force. The WB narrative was instrumental in justifying and legitimising agribusiness expansion by peddling the promise of shared prosperity and campesino inclusion. In practice, however, agribusinesses offered no opportunity to campesinos other than becoming their supply of cheap and precarious labour. Some landed campesinos eventually managed to integrate themselves into the agribusiness commodity chains but only when concrete state interventions opened such possibility. On the other hand, the VC narrative neglected campesinos' own aspirations and obscured their internal social differentiation. It failed to capture campesinos' desire to produce global market crops due to its assumption that peasants favour 'traditional' locally orientated production. Similarly, its tendency to treat peasants as a homogenous group defending a bucolic life was found wanting. In parallel, my analysis has also shown that campesinos' political practice have been increasingly articulated around the notion of precarity. I close this article discussing in more detail the relevance and implications of the latter.

5 | PRECARIY AS A TERRAIN OF POLITICAL STRUGGLES OF CLASSES OF LABOUR

As classically conceived, the agrarian question was concerned with three interrelated 'problematics': (i) whether, and if so to what extent, capitalism was transforming the social relations of production and developing the productive forces in farming; (ii) the resulting consequences for rural politics, especially in terms of the possibility of an alliance between the working class and the peasantry in struggles for democracy and socialism; and (iii) the impact of such transformation for capital accumulation that might lead to industrialisation (Bernstein, 1996; Byres, 1992). It provided a powerful framework to analyse the nature and implications of processes of agrarian change during the formation of global monopoly capitalism. With the rise of neoliberal globalisation since the 1970s, however, the assumptions of the classical agrarian question have been changed. The centrality of agriculture for capital accumulation appears now outdated given the predominance of financial capital and the internationalisation of the circuits of capital. Similarly, the prospects of structural transformation and comprehensive industrialisation of poorer countries look rather bleak considering the restructuring of the international division of labour. Rural politics have also changed radically as agrarian classes of labour are no longer engaged in struggles for national liberation to defeat predatory landed property and build democratic/socialist societies.

The contemporary relevance of the agrarian question has thus generated rich and fruitful debates.³³ Analysts have reinterpreted the nature and dynamics of the three aspects of the classical agrarian question—that is, production, politics and accumulation—in the era of neoliberal globalisation. Discussions on the 'politics' aspect are of particular relevance here as these have centred on the political practice of agrarian populations vis-à-vis agribusiness expansion. One influential position is that of McMichael (2008). He anchors his reinterpretation of the agrarian question in the political discourse of peasant movements along the lines of the VC narrative. Peasants emerging politics are said to be those of 'resistance to the commodification of land, seed and food, and to a WTO trade regime whose policies systematically disadvantage and dispossess small farmers across the world' (McMichael, 2008, p. 207). Peasant politics, so the argument goes, recreate an 'agrarian citizenship' as part of a Polanyian countermovement against the expansion of corporate capital. On the other hand, the teleological optimism of the WB narrative resonates with the path-dependent reinterpretation of the agrarian question provided by Sender and Johnston (2004). Although with somehow a different prescription with a more tangible role of the state, their account shares the World Bank's

³³A comprehensive review of these debates lies beyond the scope of this paper. For a sophisticated overview see the volume entitled *Peasants and Globalization* edited by Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009).

minimalist take on rural politics and dominant focus on the promotion of large-scale farms on efficiency/technical grounds.

Another influential perspective puts the politics of land at the centre of contemporary rural politics. In contrast to the positions just outlined, this perspective avoids essentialising the peasantry and challenge the teleological bias of agricultural modernisation. For instance, Akram-Lodhi et al. (2009) argue that the neoliberal agrarian restructuring has intensified the formation of a 'bifurcated' agrarian structure—that is, an export-orientated subsector sitting beside a peasant producer subsector—which in turn is being realigned and contested by a new global politics of land. They point to the revival of the land reform project, now reframed as a market-friendly mechanism fully committed to private individual ownership, as symptomatic of the contemporary neoliberal conjuncture. The contesting land politics between dominant class forces promoting a market-led appropriation of land and transitional agrarian movements disputing such capitalist enclosure become paramount. From a dependency theory perspective, Moyo and Yeros (2005) also identify the confrontation between rural movements and land-based political power as the main struggle—but one that is unavoidably intertwined with the 'national question'. Their analysis puts the agency of the rural poor centre stage highlighting their mass land-occupation tactic as capable of influencing land reforms of various types. In celebratory tone, they situate rural movements in a leading position claiming 'the countryside of the periphery today has become the most significant location of antiimperialist politics worldwide' (Moyo & Yeros, 2005, p. 35).

Yet, as Bernstein (2009, 2004) argues, such celebratory accounts of popular struggles over land often overstate their historical/political significance while downplaying their complex and contradictory nature. Bernstein (2004) contends that land struggles are more likely to be driven by experiences of the fragmentation of labour than organised progressive agency of unified rural movements to restore full peasantry. Crucially, he calls attention to the fact that 'political struggles of classes of labour evidently range across far wider terrains than issues of land, important as those are in particular places to particular groups of the labouring poor' (Bernstein, 2009, p. 252). One such terrain of political struggle, I argue, increasingly revolves around the notion of precarity. Understood as a condition and possible point of mobilisation (Waite, 2009), the notion of precarity appears to have particular potential to describe and challenge the structural insecurity installed by agribusiness expansion.

Campesino classes of labour experienced precarity largely due to their disadvantageous position vis-à-vis agribusiness capital in both labour and grain markets. Images of campesinos weeding soy barefoot in snake-infested fields or resorting to rudimentary rusty disc harrows due to lack of herbicides visually illustrate the condition of precarity materialising in their daily activities. It is the sharp contrast between their lived experiences and their truncated prosperity aspirations that appears to inform their political practice. Here the notion of precarity plays a key role as it enables 'articulation' in the double sense employed by Hall (1986) to specify political practices: 'articulation as making explicit, and articulation as forging a connection' (Li, 2019, p. 35). Precarity makes explicit the structural uncertainty and insecurity campesinos face in a context of agribusiness expansion whether engaging in wage labour or petty commodity production. It gives a name to their concrete experience within the agribusiness structure. Precarity also has the potential to forge a connection between different classes of labour in as much as it enables the construction of a shared political discourse/practice. It can become a point of popular mobilisation in particular circumstances, although this is never guaranteed.

The 2019 dispute between campesinos and agribusiness traders showcases the significance of precarity as a terrain of political struggle. As described in the previous section, the conflict triggered a cross-class mobilisation of the campesino classes of labour against the attempt of agribusiness traders to transfer international market volatility to soy farmers. The traders had offered an unusually low price of USD 230 per ton of soy—far away from the farmers' demand of USD 300 per ton of soy. Expectedly, big farmers in the region also saw their interests affected and publicly opposed the actions of agribusiness traders. They voiced support for the campesinos' road blockages hinting that they might join them with their tractors. On the surface, the conflict looked like a common dispute between agrarian and merchant capitals. But it was more than that. To start with, big farmers never joined the road blockages and quickly struck better deals with agribusiness traders. Campesino small farmers, in contrast, continued their

mobilisation for longer and to no avail. They denounced their different treatment as an injustice based not only their smaller scale of production but also on their subordinated position in the agribusiness dynamic (Los Tiempos, 2019b).

The framing of the dispute was also markedly different. As absentee landlords who resided in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, big farmers framed the conflict in more abstract terms denouncing that traders and the government³⁴ were introducing 'market distortions' (El Deber, 2019c). For campesinos, however, the conflict reflected a more structural dynamic with tangible effects on their livelihoods. Indeed, their political discourse dubbed agribusiness companies as a 'mafia cartel' for two main reasons: (1) The oligopsonistic practices of agribusiness grain traders were perceived as the source of livelihood deprivation and precarisation, and (2) agribusiness expansion in the region did not translate into people's prosperity as it had been advertised. While the 'mafia cartel' label was more commonly used for the first reason, it also conveyed a general disillusionment with agribusiness expansion more broadly, including the proliferation of large agro-industrial farms. Interestingly, Li (2018) found that small farmers in Indonesia have characterised the oil palm agribusiness structure also as a 'mafia system'. In this case, the term encompasses a wider set of practices and relations, but it also conveys frustration over the precarisation of livelihoods and failed promises of prosperity: '[f]rom the out-growers' perspective, a plantation that has a monopoly on their fruit but fails to provide adequate roads, or refuses to buy their fruit when the price drops, is mafia for sure' (Li, 2018, p. 331). By likening agribusiness to a mafia cartel, campesinos seek to convey the violence involved behind the increasing precarisation of their lives. The comparison also implies the twisted nature of a production system that, as a campesino leader put it, 'takes advantage of small farmers instead of modernising the countryside' (Fieldwork notes 28 June 2019).

In their analysis of agrarian dynamics in Bolivia's lowlands, McKay and Colque (2016, p. 606) claimed that campesinos' 'resistance' against soy agribusiness expansion may have subsided but they 'remain attached to their lands and self-identify as "agrarian citizens"'. Such interpretation resonates with the VC narrative and is problematic in two main ways. First, it assumes campesinos reject agribusiness as an external entity to be resisted. Second, it elevates land as a defining element of their subjectivity. My empirical evidence points in different directions. Following Li (2023), I contend that it is more productive to think of campesinos as 'dynamic farmers' who are enthusiastic about the possibility of becoming soy producers. They challenge agribusiness expansion not because it threatens their 'agrarian citizenship' but because it fails to deliver on its promises of stable more prosperous livelihoods.

Campesinos' desire to participate in the agribusiness dynamic and dispute the terms of their integration instead of land property relations may be seen as petty bourgeoisie in nature. For instance, Moyo and Yeros (2005, p. 42) resolutely submit that where small farmers organisations 'eschewed advocacy of land issues' is due to 'bourgeois elements within them'. They point to the case of the so-called new farmers' movements in India³⁵ as an illustrative example. But while the conservative politics of small farmers in India systematically excluded agricultural labourers (Banaji, 1994), both landless and landed campesinos in Bolivia's eastern lowlands have often acted together. Different classes of labour have been able to coalesce behind an anti-precarity discourse as it resonates, albeit in different ways, with their lived experiences.

I do not intend to claim that the emerging politics of precarity represent a consistent political project. Granted, the cross-class alliance that it seems to facilitate is not without its contradictions and limitations. This is further complicated by social divisions of gender, ethnicity and generation not explored here. Furthermore, other important context-specific conditions have certainly played a role in enabling campesinos' agency in Bolivia, not least the unusual hegemony of a 'campesino party in power' (Do Alto, 2011). Nor do I seek to disregard the importance of land politics in other sites of agribusiness expansion. Campesinos themselves have been engaged in intricate land disputes in the agricultural frontiers of Bolivia's eastern lowlands (Castañón Ballivián, 2022). Land access will certainly remain a key point of contestation, but more scholarly attention is due to other terrains of popular struggle in the countryside and beyond. With the increasing fragmentation of labour, more 'traditional' forms of social organisation

³⁴The MAS government installed a system of export quotas for key agricultural products to regulate their supply in the domestic market. Exports were therefore restricted and conditioned to the satisfaction of the internal market at 'fair prices'.

³⁵See the special issue introduced by Brass (1994).

that relied on people's relatively stable position in the social division of labour are likely to be weakened. Fragmented livelihoods undermine effective political organisation (Pattenden, 2018). Yet a shared condition of precarity and related politics might enable a renewed articulation of the political struggle of classes of labour. Under what conditions that might or might not happen constitutes a key aspect of the contemporary agrarian question of labour.

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The author reports no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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