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‘Capital grabs back’: towards a global research agenda on the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus

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ABSTRACT

Capital is grabbing back land allocated through diverse national land reform and land restitution programmes globally. This article critically analyses this trend, which has so far received insufficient attention from land grab scholars. Drawing from independent research in South Africa, Bolivia, Canada, and Zimbabwe, we define a future research agenda investigating the capital segments and grabbing mechanisms involved as well as the factors that encourage or retard capital in grabbing back redistributed and restituted lands. We point to the need for further research into the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus in different geographic contexts and its implications for future land and agrarian struggles.

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1. Introduction

We are now several decades into a distinct set of formalised land programmes unfolding in agrarian areas at multiple locations globally. Across the global South, nations have implemented land reform programmes to reallocate land among population subgroups, often as part of a larger economic development or political transition process. Bridging the global North and South alike, land restitution and land claims settlement programmes meanwhile provide a means for redressing historical dispossessions and injustices experienced by particular rural peoples. These two sorts of programmes frequently share an anchor point in long-running land struggles, in which land has surfaced as a site of both popular political contention and the construction of future imaginaries. Yet the programmes also share another temporal grounding: they are contemporary and in many cases ongoing, differentiating them from earlier, historical efforts to reallocate land, including to address past wrongs.

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Our contribution adds to the critical appraisal of contemporary land reform and restitution programmes by focusing on a matter that has yet received insufficient scholarly attention. This regards the intersections of these land programmes with processes of land grabbing. We show that differentiated fragments of capital are ‘grabbing back’ redistributed and restituted land in a wide variety of locations globally. Such a trend raises unique concerns: while all land grabbing deserves critical analysis, capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land has a particularly regressive character, insofar as it reverses the hard-won achievements of diverse land movements, activists, and ordinary peoples who fought, often over decades or longer, to see their interests recognised. In this sense, our analysis of land grabbing following land reform and restitution programmes is central to thinking about the future of land and agrarian struggles both globally and at particular national and regional conjunctures.

This article explores capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land as an emerging global trend surfacing in highly differentiated agrarian settings. It does so by bringing together insights from four independent PhD research projects undertaken in South Africa, Bolivia, Canada and Zimbabwe. We use these insights to propose a series of questions that we hope can act as a research agenda for future scholarly work, namely: (i) What types of capital are involved in grabbing back redistributed and restituted land, and by what mechanisms? (ii) What particular openings and susceptibilities make redistributed and restituted land vulnerable to being grabbed back by capital? And (iii) What particular barriers and limits does capital encounter in its efforts to grab back redistributed and restituted lands? In proposing these questions, our overarching aim is to initiate and promote a more focused and sustained debate among scholars on the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus and its implications for longer running agrarian change processes in different geographic settings. While our suspicion is that our cases serve as emblematic instances of a still larger trajectory, further research is clearly needed to substantiate this hunch.

2. Conceptualising the land grabbing-land reform/land restitution nexus

The term ‘global land grab’ began circulating widely among activists and academics following the 2008 publication of a report by the international non-governmental organisation GRAIN (GRAIN 2008). GRAIN identified an emerging suite of new, transnational land acquisitions, linking these to the activities of food-insecure governments and powerful agri-food investors and corporations in the face of conjoined global food and financial crises (*ibid.*). The voluminous academic literature that followed has proceeded by simultaneously expanding and productively complicating this initial framing. In an influential piece, Borras et al. (2011) suggested that alongside a North–South dynamic in recent land acquisitions, there is also a South–South dynamic and instances of ‘internal colonialism.’ Expanding the original geographic focus on Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia, scholars have highlighted cases of land grabbing in the global North (Holt-Giménez, Wang, and Shattuck 2011; Magnan 2012), in post-Soviet Eurasia (Visser and Spoor 2011) and inside Russia (Visser, Spoor, and Mamonova 2012). Alongside transnational actors, attention has been paid to the role of national and domestic governments and

elites in shaping and participating in land deals (Wolford et al. 2013; Madgulkar and Del-l'Angelo 2025). While early accounts tended to portray outright, seemingly simple title acquisitions, it soon became clear that a far larger set of shifts in 'de jure' and 'de facto' land control were underway (Peluso and Lund 2011).

Understanding the roles and responses of local communities to land grabs has been a major focus of the academic literature. As a form of capital accumulation, land grabbing has proceeded not just from above, but also from below (Hall 2013; Cousins 2013). Indeed, even when deals are externally originated or imposed, the reactions from agrarian peoples have been remarkably diverse, ranging from forms of organised and everyday resistance to demands for better terms of incorporation into particular deals (Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015). Nonetheless, seen as a fundamentally capital-driven process, land grabbing frequently sparks new rounds of dispossession and impoverishment among differentiated rural poor, contrary to what certain development practitioners have predicted (see Li 2011). These negative social impacts can pertain even when local peoples consent to participate in certain land acquisitions (although such consent should not necessarily be conceptualised as free from larger contexts of violence and coercion – see Woods 2020). Indeed, even 'failed' or 'non-operational' land grabs can significantly rework the social relations governing land access and use, as can more incremental 'pin prick' acquisitions (Borras et al. 2022; Borras and Franco 2024).

Calls for theoretical and methodological interventions have accompanied these different reflections. For example, Edelman, Oya, and Borras (2013, 1517) have suggested that while '[t]he initial 'making sense' period [of land grab scholarship] drew sweeping conclusions from large databases, rapid-appraisal fieldwork and local case studies', there is now a need for more grounded accounts. These might usefully examine the historical antecedents of contemporary land grabbing processes, their legal contexts, their articulation with the agrarian questions of capital and labour that have long animated critical agrarian studies (and its progenitor agrarian political economy), and their intersections with grassroots resistance (ibid.; see also Scoones et al. 2013; Oya 2013). Locating land grabs within broader and longer running agrarian transition processes remains crucial (Borras and Franco 2013; Hall et al. 2015). More recently, Wolford et al. (2024) have pointed to the role that longitudinal and comparative approaches to land grab case studies might play in helping to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

In this article, we use these provocations as a jumping off point to argue for a still further expansion to the academic land grab literature. Specifically, we consider the dynamics of land grabbing on land allocated to diverse individuals and communities through national land reform and land restitution (sometimes also called land claims settlement) programmes. While the possibility that capital might 'grab back' these lands from programme beneficiaries seems central to determining social justice outcomes, the matter has received insufficient attention from land grab scholars. The main exception to this trend is in the work of researchers focusing on Russia and the post-Soviet sphere, who have pointed to the imprint of post-dissolution land reform programmes on the emergence of large scale agro-holdings in the region, with uneven benefits for rural residents (see Visser and Spoor 2011; Visser, Spoor, and Mamonova 2012; Mamonova 2015). While this work is extremely valuable, it stops short of the

more systemic analysis that we attempt to begin with our piece.¹ Indeed, we argue that land grabbing has a much more deeply imbricated and globally significant overlap with contemporary land reform and restitution programmes than scholars have yet appreciated. To this end, it is important to properly historicise these contemporary land programmes before moving forward with our argument.

Historically, the notion of land reform emerged to displace parasitic landed property. This agrarian class was regarded as a major obstacle to the modernisation of agriculture (i.e. the expansion of capitalist relations) given its unproductive character based on rent extraction and underutilisation of resources (Bernstein 2002). It was seen as an anachronistic remnant of previous colonial regimes incompatible with the political and developmental aims of emerging struggles for national liberation. 'Peasant wars' against parasitic landed property have been present throughout modern history but were particularly intense and widespread in the period from the 1910s to the 1970s (Wolf 1999). Major instances of these struggles taking place during this window include the Zapatistas in Mexico and the peasant communes in Russia.

The reverberations of the 'peasant wars' shaped and informed discussions on land reform as a policy project, particularly in the post-1945 historical conjuncture. Land reform was a central policy issue in the Cold War context as the USA and USSR competed for influence in the so-called Third World. Yet, as Bernstein (2002) notes, views regarding the aims and desired outcomes of the land reform project differed. The dominant liberal (bourgeois) view understood it as a means of actively restructuring land tenures, and thereby establishing a property regime where independent farmers operate in conditions of market competition and the (capitalist) modernisation of farming is facilitated. Marxist perspectives in turn saw land reform as part and parcel of a radical social revolution led by some type of worker-peasant alliance. The elimination of predatory landed property was considered a necessary condition to develop the productive forces in agriculture which could in turn generate surpluses to fund a virtuous process of industrialisation. A third view that we can describe as 'agrarianist' put the peasantry centre stage in the struggle for land reform.² And, unlike Marxist views, advocated for small-scale agriculture proclaiming the superiority of this form of farming on both developmental and moral grounds.

These competing understandings and approaches influenced in complex and different ways the land reform policies and practices pursued from the 1950s to 1970s. A distinctive feature of this historical moment was the centrality attributed to the state as the manager and director of 'national' development. This period saw the rise of the 'first wave' of reform programmes, where the state played a leading role in land allocation (Borras and McKinley 2011). State-led programmes did manage to redistribute large portions of agricultural land, though with notable variation between cases (ibid.). Establishing a more equitable land tenure structure was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the success of these land reform programmes. Sustained and targeted state support in the form of credit schemes, technical assistance, infrastructure, and the like proved to

¹Of course, it seems probable that land reform and land restitution programmes remain hidden in the background of many other contemporary land deals and correspondingly land grabbing accounts. But that is exactly the point: rather than being hidden from view they should instead be explicitly theorized at points of connection with ongoing land grabbing processes.

²Bernstein (2002) calls this view 'populist' but we consider that the term 'agrarianist' captures better – and with less potential for stigmatization – the centrality it attributes to agrarian livelihoods.

be essential. While the resultant state-led land reform programmes differed substantially in their policy designs, ideological orientations, and outcomes, they were united by a common rationale, that of expanding and intensifying commodity production.

By the 1970s, the developmentalist moment had begun to recede globally amidst a renewed emphasis on liberalising national economies and promoting exports according to a country's 'comparative advantage.' This new phase of neoliberal globalisation enabled an unprecedented expansion of financial capital, deregulation of international trade, privatisation, and an increasing concentration of the wealth and power of transnational corporations (Goldin 2006; Harvey 2007). It was facilitated by rapid technological changes in transport, communication, and information, as well as a selective retreat of the state from economic planning (*ibid.*). Although land reform received less attention from diplomats and policy-makers early in this period, it was not long before it made a comeback in the political and developmental agenda – but this time in a radically different form reflecting the new neoliberal conjuncture (Akram-Lodhi, Kay, and Borras 2009; Moyo 2004).

Aggressively promoted by the World Bank, a 'second wave' of market-led land reforms emerged with force in the early 1990s. The rationale for the new approach, as Borras (2007) explains, evolved from a pro-market critique of the previous state-led land reforms. The latter were presented as coercive, inefficient, corrupt, and costly interventions that 'have been more successful in creating bureaucratic behemoths and in colonising frontiers than in redistributing land from large to small farmers' (Deininger and Binswanger 1999, 267). By contrast, market-led land reform programmes minimise direct interventions by the state, particularly in land markets. They are often based on voluntary 'willing buyer, willing seller' provisions to ensure that previous landowners receive the market value of their lands. They may also eschew measures such as land size ceilings or prohibitions on land sales and rentals on the grounds that these create market distortions that prevent more efficient producers from obtaining and accumulating land. Extension services to farmers are at the same time decentralised and/or privatised. Although market-led land reforms have often been presented as a 'pro-poor' project (Borras 2007), their record in terms of land redistribution is quite modest. Borras and McKinley (2011) suggest that underutilised and abandoned farms of small and medium size constitute the bulk of the redistributed land under this type of reform.

'Market-led' land reform programmes remain ongoing in many countries today. But in recent decades, these approaches have been joined by another set of contemporary land programmes falling under the broad label of 'land restitution.' The central ambition of these programmes is to address historical dispossessions and injustices experienced by particular rural populations (Fay and James 2009). While land restitution programmes frequently surface at points of political disjuncture, this can be either a sudden rupture or a more gradual transition (*ibid.*). One example of the former is the ending of the Cold War and fall of the iron curtain, which kicked off land restitution processes in some formerly Soviet countries, including Romania (Verdery 1994). An example of the latter is the establishment of land claims settlement processes for Indigenous peoples in the USA and Canada from the early 1970s. Importantly, these and similar land restitution programmes globally reflected both the growing power of Indigenous movements and a shift in state policies, which increasingly incorporated concerns related to Indigenous rights and multiculturalism while retaining a broadly neoliberal remit (Hale 2005; Melamed 2006). This

neoliberal flavour was similarly reflected in the particularities of adopted land restitution policies (Bryan 2012; Somerville 2019). This is true even where governments simultaneously incorporated demands to manage the potentially dispossessive effects of new property regimes, not least by allocating restituted lands to beneficiaries in forms of collective and inalienable land tenure (Li 2010).

While it is possible to mark a conceptual distinction between contemporary land reform and land restitution programmes, the two frequently overlap both practically and politically. On the practical side, one example is South Africa (discussed further below), where land restitution is but one arm of a larger land reform programme that also includes land redistribution and tenure reform policies (see Hall 2004). Additionally, many countries in Latin America with long histories of state-led land reform are now utilising land restitution to remedy historical and contemporary harms against Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants (Teubal 2012; see also the discussion of Bolivia below). Yet we argue that alongside these pragmatic collisions, there exist important political ones. First, while land restitution has an obvious moral component related to historical redress (see Fay and James 2009), 'market-led' land reform programmes too have frequently arisen in the context of well-established land movements. Popular conceptions of the connections between land and social justice consequently inform the creation and design of these contemporary programmes and the public's assessment of their success or failure. Moreover, as discussed separately for land reform and land restitution above, both programme sets have arisen under and been conditioned by the ascent of neoliberalism as a global policy paradigm. These moral and political intersections create a constant tension between land reform and restitution as policy programmes and land reform and restitution as popular objectives. These two dimensions interact with each other and can each shape capital's efforts to grab back land following redistribution and restitution programmes, not least through processes or 'powers' of regulation and legitimisation (cf. Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011).

Our argument in this piece also has an important precursor in that of Latin American scholars working with the concept of agrarian 'counter-reform' (Kay 2001; Bellisario 2007a, 2007b). For these scholars, counter-reform presents a way of making sense of the period following the conclusion of the widespread state-led land reform programmes that characterised Latin American countries from the 1950s-1980s. As noted above, these programmes ended with the uptake of neoliberal land policies, which in turn drove a series of individual titling programmes that ultimately favoured commercial farmers over peasant farmers and Indigenous communities (thereby encouraging the new wave of ethnic claims that are now being serviced through restitution, according to Kay 2002). Counter-reform scholars therefore offer important insights into agrarian restructuring, the deepening of capitalist relations, and associated processes of social differentiation in the aftermath of land reform and land restitution programmes. Moreover, similar to our own perspective, they assert that land reform is 'often spurred on by deep social changes and pressures from below,' even as it is most frequently implemented as 'an outcome of political changes from above' (Kay 2002, 28). Recognising the parallels with our own formulations has encouraged us to think about our work as extending the temporal remit of the counter-reform concept to the present day and its geographical remit to the global scale. Below, we consider how such counter-reform tendencies play out by

capital grabbing back land in a diverse set of countries implementing contemporary land reform and restitution programmes.

3. 'Capital grabs back': our cases

This brings us to the empirical material underpinning our claim that capital is grabbing back redistributed and restituted lands in a range of locations globally. This argument and our broader article are derived from independent PhD research projects conducted by the four authors in South Africa (two authors), Bolivia, Canada and Zimbabwe (one author each). We authors met when our respective projects were substantially completed, meaning that there are some asymmetries in the focus of our work as well as in our methodologies (on which, see Sommerville 2019; Castañón Ballivián 2020; Mudimu 2020; Ngubane 2020). These inevitably carry over into the current piece.³ The limited number and range of geographic locations discussed here similarly reflect the organic origins and history of our collaboration, although we hope to expand our geographic coverage by convening a special journal issue on the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus in the near future.⁴

This processual background also conditions the comparative approach taken in our article. Specifically, we engage in a form of what Gillian Hart (2002; 2018) calls 'relational comparison,' an approach that aims to bring the 'key forces' at play in distinct research locations 'into the same frame of analysis.' Relational comparison posits these research sites as 'connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies' (Hart 2018, 373). Such an approach can accommodate both the uneven and variegated character of land grabs alongside their origins in broader sets of capital relations (cf Welford et al. 2024). Consequently, in each of our case studies below we first review the histories, forms, and key features of the land reform and/or land restitution programmes implemented in the respective countries. We then examine contemporary instances of capital grabbing back land in the midst of these programmes. Along the way, we lay the groundwork for the emerging research agenda that we propose in Section 4.0 of the paper, which we hope will attract further research into capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land as a phenomenon with diverse spatio-historical forms.

3.1. South Africa

The land question in South Africa has existed for as long as the country's colonial and apartheid history and it received considerable attention during the national liberation struggle. The country first embarked on small pockets of land reform during the dying days of apartheid, when the state expropriated farmland next to the so-called Bantustans as buffer zones between the latter and white owned farmland (Ngubane 2020). After the first democratic election in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) embarked on an official countrywide land reform. This reform has three components (see Hall 2004).

³As but one example, in the degree of detail with which we can describe particular capital actors engaging in 'regrabbing' activities.

⁴If you or another scholar you know might be interested in participating in this initiative, please contact the corresponding author.

The first component, tenure reform, aims at providing tenure security for tenant farmers on white-owned farmland as well as small farmers in the former Bantustan areas. The second component, land redistribution, entails the acquisition of farmland from white farmers at market value. The third component, land restitution, provides redress to people evicted from their ancestral lands by successive colonial and apartheid regimes following the 1913 Natives Land Act.

Initially, these land reform programmes aimed to reallocate 30 per cent of white-owned farmland to black farmers by 1999. However, only about 10 per cent has been redistributed so far (Cousins 2015; Sommerville 2019; Ngubane 2020).⁵ Alongside this quantitative under-delivery, there has been a qualitative shift in the focus of land reform programming, from a 'pro-poor' dispensation to one aimed at facilitating the emergence of an entrepreneurial class of black farmers (Hall 2004; Kepe and Hall 2016; PLAAS 2016). Despite this shift, post-settlement state support to land beneficiaries has been lacking amidst broader agricultural deregulation and neoliberalisation processes (Greenberg 2010; Cousins 2016). Consequently, the government has turned to the private sector to aid in the delivery of land reform (Hall 2004; Sommerville 2019). This, in turn, has facilitated various means of capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land.

On the eastern side of the Free State province cultivable land was transferred from white to black farmers from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. This coincided with the creation of Bantustan buffer zones, disguised as land redistribution for emerging black farmers in exchange for their political support. White landowners were compensated for the acquired land, which was subdivided into parcels (ranging from 72 to 1000 hectares) and allocated to former labour tenants (resident farm workers), off-farm petty commodity producers, and a few business and political elites (see Ngubane 2020). These beneficiaries were granted mortgages from South Africa's Land Bank to support their acquisitions. Until the early 2000s, the state provided modest agricultural support to land recipients such as a few head of cattle or farming equipment.

The Land Bank mortgages proved to be a recipe for disaster, and most land beneficiaries defaulted on loan repayments. Faced with threats that their land would be auctioned, most opted to rent out their cultivable land at below market value. This remains a central tendency to date, combined with beneficiaries maintaining livestock herds on rangelands. White-owned agribusiness dominates the rental market but some successful black farmers also lease redistributed land. Relatedly, a few land beneficiaries succumbed to distressed sales to white farmers at auction sales.

Alongside these Eastern Free State developments, Sommerville (2019) documents cases of capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land through a family of inter-related commercial fruit farming and financial companies. At the centre sits South African Fruit Exporters (SAFE), founded by Dutch entrepreneurs in 1997 and financed in part by the Dutch bilateral development bank FMO. Starting in the mid-2000s, SAFE deployed a multi-pronged strategy for expanding its operations amidst the intense competition that followed liberalisation of the commercial fruit sector.⁶ This strategy saw the company

⁵In this piece, we deliberately disregard recent assertions that land acquired by black persons on the open market should count as part of land reform totals (see for example Kirsten and Sihlobo 2022), not least since such transfers occurred outside of state-facilitated land reform processes.

⁶For an overview of the liberalisation process see Mather and Greenberg (2003).

engage with land reform programming in at least six South African provinces: Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga.

The first prong of SAFE's expansion strategy attempted to harness the growing interest in agricultural investment that pervaded the global economy after the 2007/8 financial crisis (see Fairbairn 2015; Ducastel and Anseeuw 2018). The company created UFF African Agri-Investments (UFFAAI) and teamed up with Old Mutual (an international banking group controlling significant South African pension capital) to establish a new Agri-Fund for investing in South African agriculture. Initially, the Fund planned to focus half of its investment on acquiring a portfolio of farms that it would hold for 10 years before selling to the government for land reform. During this period the farms would be run by professional managers who would implement worker empowerment programmes.

While this plan garnered significant praise from government representatives, they evidently overlooked SAFE's earlier activities in the land reform space. Specifically, Sommerville (2019) traces several instances where SAFE, operating in conjunction with a black South African entrepreneur through a company called Bono Farm Holdings (Bono), engaged in farm flipping. Such undertakings saw the companies realise sizeable profits by reselling either land or shares in farms acquired from the properties' previous white owners to the government for land reform at significantly higher purchase prices.⁷ After the sales, SAFE and Bono continued to manage the farms and to market the fruit produced thereon.

SAFE's land reform-focused Agri-Fund initiative hit a roadblock when it emerged that a sitting government could not commit a future one to farm purchases.⁸ Consequently, SAFE turned to the second prong of its expansion strategy, namely, the formation of so-called strategic partnerships with land reform beneficiaries. Strategic partnerships pair land beneficiaries with business partners (often local agribusiness firms) to create a joint venture (JV) company that leases the beneficiaries' land for farm production. The partnership is meant to improve beneficiaries' access to finance, professional management skills and markets for farm products (Derman, Sjaastad, and Lahiff 2010). In return, beneficiaries should receive rental income for their land, a share of profits, training opportunities and preferential employment and, at the end of the arrangement, a functional and productive farm (*ibid.*). In the period in question, strategic partnerships were increasingly becoming a government conditionality for land transfer to beneficiaries in high value commercial farming areas, although they were also often embraced by community leaders with limited experience running such farms (Derman, Sjaastad, and Lahiff 2010; Sommerville 2019).

Government appointed SAFE and Bono as strategic partners on at least nine redistribution and five restitution farms. The firms traded on Bono's 'Black Economic Empowerment' credentials to secure both government and community support. SAFE and Bono claimed that they would help increase production, transforming the farms into commercial

⁷Such resales occurred before the government created the Office of the Valuer general to provide credible property valuations in support of land reform in 2015.

⁸UFFAAI thereafter focused on acquiring commercial farmland in South Africa, which it planned to resell or roll into 'evergreened' investments. Sommerville (2019) links the corporate family's larger activities to some 66 different farms in the country. Additionally, the companies have launched parallel investment funds with acquisitions in other African countries including Eswatini, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi and Morocco. While the intersections of these funds with land reform programmes remains unclear, the South African case suggests a need for careful monitoring.

operations while preventing mismanagement and protecting government investment. But in actuality, these partnerships quickly became a site of exploitation. The firms made high-interest loans that JV operating companies could not pay back and charged sizeable management fees and marketing commissions. They controlled packing infrastructure and access to marketing channels allowing value transfer up the chain. Rent and dividends payments were sporadic or missing altogether, and communities found themselves shut out of decision-making and without information on farm production. Reinvestment was minimised, despite several grants received under the government's Recapitalisation and Development Programme. Still further, the problems that SAFE and Bono created for land beneficiaries were echoed in the difficulties facing farm workers at their properties, including wage reductions that inadvertently triggered the Western Cape farmworkers strike (see Trollip 2013; Wilderman 2014).

Like farmworkers, beneficiaries also protested against their treatment by the firms, ultimately dismissing them at four of the restitution sites where they were operating. But on the redistribution side, the companies remained entrenched, doubtless boosted by the fact that, in some cases, the firms appear to have been involved in assembling (or reassembling) redistribution beneficiary lists (see Somerville 2019).

The aforementioned activities in different South African provinces are likely only two faces of capital grabbing back land in the wake of land redistribution and restitution. Recently, scholars have described the situation as reflecting the elite capture of land reform due to a combination of state neglect and policy bias, corrupt practices, and class dynamics (Hall and Kepe 2017; Mtero, Gumede, and Ramantsima 2023). Scholars have also pointed to beneficiaries losing control of their lands through strategic partnerships on game farms (Somerville 2019; Somerville et al. 2021) and through the establishment of community nature preserves in the former Bantustan areas (Ramutsindela 2002; Ngubane and Brooks 2013). Alongside the grabbing of redistributed and restituted land, more attention is needed to the situation facing former labour tenants, given that opposition from farm owners has often resulted in tenants' dispossession even before registered claims could be settled (see Levin and Ngubane 2023; Kupa 2024).

In recent years, the many tensions over land in South Africa have reached a boiling point. Under pressure from rival political party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and following a five-year consultative process, the ruling ANC signed a new Expropriation Act into law in January 2025. The Act is intended to fast track land reform by setting out the conditions under which land can be expropriated without compensation and the mechanisms for such expropriation. Along the way, debates around the matter have garnered significant attention among the public, media, and academics, not least given the potential implications for private property ownership. The potential intersections of the new Act with the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus and its implications for capital-led land grabs is another topic requiring further attention from scholars, although a recent edited collection by Zenker, Walker, and Boggenpoel (2024) has made a start on this task.

3.2. Bolivia

Bolivia's 1953 agrarian reform was one of the most radical in Latin America. Although often thought of as a state-led programme, the reform was the result of a longer historical

struggle for land restitution by Aymara and Quechua Indigenous peasants. It had a transformative but highly uneven impact. In the highlands and valleys, the hacienda system was effectively dismantled by massive land expropriation. In the lowlands, however, the impact of the agrarian reform was very limited. Agricultural labourers seized only a dozen haciendas and the state expropriated just a few estates owned by political rivals of the then-ruling class – the vast majority of the haciendas were not affected by the reform (Soliz 2021).

The entrenched land inequality in the lowlands became a major issue of public debate again in the early 1990s. The renewed attention was sparked by two important events. First, the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB) staged a historic ‘March for Territory and Dignity’ covering more than 640 km from the lowland city of Trinidad to the country’s administrative capital of La Paz. Second, a parliamentarian discovered a major corruption scandal in the distribution of land in the so-called ‘eastern lowlands’ triggering widespread condemnation. These two events reinvigorated calls to address the country’s ‘unfinished land reform’ (Kay and Urioste 2007). The consolidation of Indigenous territories and transparency in land governance became the main popular demands for the new land reform programme.

The neoliberal governments of that time responded by promoting a new process of agrarian reform. Following the World Bank’s market-led approach, the new initiative embraced property rights and the liberalisation of land markets as key principles of the reform. As a policy project, this second agrarian reform was implemented by the passing of Law 1715 in 1996, most commonly known as the INRA Law (Colque, Tinta, and Sanjinés 2016).⁹ This law instructed a nationwide process of regularisation of land property rights through a technical and legal procedure called *saneamiento*. The term can be translated as ‘healing the records’, a figure of speech that tried to convey a reboot in land administration towards more transparency. Another key provision stipulated that land ought to fulfil an Economic-Social Function (FES) to promote productivity and prevent speculation. The INRA law also sought to address the other main popular demand by recognising a new type of communal property called *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (TCO) as ethnic territories to be titled in favour of Indigenous groups.

Despite these progressive provisions, the reform largely failed to redistribute land and create a more equal land tenure. Therefore, when the country’s politics veered to the left with the historical electoral victory of Evo Morales in 2005, the new *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) administration pledged to ‘redirect’ the INRA Law towards the interests of peasants and indigenous peoples. After months of debates and conflicts with the landed elite, Morales enacted Law 3545, the Community Redirection of the Agrarian Reform, in 2006. This marked the return of state oversight over land redistribution, declared natural resources as the state’s property, and gave teeth to the principles of the INRA law to effectively control land consolidation and labour conditions in agriculture. Crucially, it also stipulated that public land can only be redistributed to peasants and Indigenous peoples. In practice, the modifications of the INRA implemented by the MAS government substantially increased the redistribution of land in the lowlands, particularly in favour of Indigenous organisations. However, they did not modify the entrenched

⁹The acronym stands for Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA), the main body created by Law 1715.

patterns of land inequality in the most productive lowland areas that continued to be largely controlled by the traditional landed elite (Colque, Tinta, and Sanjinés 2016).

In this context, capital has found ways to grab back parts of the redistributed land but not without facing significant barriers. Two main dynamics stand out. First, the demarcation of Indigenous territories has made it much more difficult for capital to control land. Forms of 'translatino' corporate capital (Borras Saturnino, Gómez, and Wilkinson 2012) that had quickly acquired large tracts of land in the early 1990s saw their expansion slowed by the establishment of indigenous territories, particularly in the agricultural frontiers. Yet, ironically, the official titling of such territories in favour of the Indigenous organisations became, in some places, an enabling factor for the commodification of land. In the Guarayos province, for instance, the leaders of the local Indigenous organisation have become *de facto* proprietors of the land. As the official representatives of the Guarayo Indigenous people, they exercise total control over the official TCO land title issued by the state. They have in turn installed a corrupt system of ad hoc 'certifications' that allows them to sell the land to the highest bidder (Castañón Ballivián 2021). It has been estimated that more than 100,000 hectares of the Guarayo Indigenous territory have been transferred to large farmers via this corrupt system (Colque and Vadillo 2022). Such farmers include both Bolivian and translatino (mainly Brazilian and Colombian) interests (*ibid.*). Cynically, the emerging Guarayo elite present themselves as the true stewards of their people's territory and autonomy. They constantly strive to legitimate a status quo in which the majority of Guarayo people remain locked in precarious livelihoods with limited access to land. Yet grassroots members have increasingly vindicated the historical struggle for land restitution in an attempt to destabilise the leaders' monopolistic control of the land (Castañón Ballivián 2021).

The second dynamic is less paradoxical but similarly concerning. Large Brazilian farmers and emerging capitalist small farmers are increasingly acquiring more and more land in the country's agribusiness heartland. They have done so at the expense of worse-off smallholders who had benefited from redistributed land as part of a state's major 'colonization' programme since the late 1970s. By 1988, there were 36 peasant communities in this area controlling about 36,700 hectares. These communities had between 30 and 50 smallholder households each typically receiving a 50-hectare parcel of land. Most of these smallholders did not have enough capital to put their parcels of land into production. While initially they tried some sharecropping arrangements, it was not long until fully fledged land rental markets developed. In the communities of Naciones Unidas and Nuevo Palmar, for instance, 28% of the parcels were already being rented in 2013. This percentage quickly increased to 56% by 2017 (Castañón Ballivián 2020). The dynamism of the land rental market was largely due to the pressure of incoming Brazilian capital and, to a lesser extent, a process of accumulation from below within the communities themselves. The emphasis placed on land titling (via the *saneamiento* process) in the latest market-led land reform programme facilitated this dynamic. Yet this has not passed uncontested. The presence of peasant unions has slowed the overall land grab dynamic. Where peasant unions remain relatively strong, the landholder/parcel ratio has been fairly equal (1:1.10); whereas in places where peasants' organisations have disappeared this ratio quickly doubled (1:2.20) (Castañón Ballivián 2020). Their political agency has often been motivated by memories of previous

struggles for land reform, particularly the need to achieve in the lowlands what previous generations had achieved in the highlands.

3.3. *Canada*

Similar to South Africa, the land struggle in Canada is as old as the country's settler colonial provenance. However, First Nations' political mobilisation against the dispossession of their land increased after changes to the federal Indian Act removed a prohibition against First Nations using their monies to sue the Canadian government in 1951 (Aalbers 2015). In 1973, the Supreme Court's ruling in the Calder case acknowledged the possibility that Aboriginal title to land had persisted despite European settlement (ibid). This spurred the formation of Canada's Specific Claims process, which aims to address claims that the federal government has not met its obligations under historic treaties.¹⁰ Of particular importance in the prairie provinces are the so-called 'Numbered Treaties' (signed between 1871 and 1921), which created the reserve system and dispossessed First Nations of their broader ancestral territories.

Specific Claims settlements give First Nations cash payouts to buy land on the open market and thereby expand their reserves. Settlement mechanisms have shifted over time but have maintained a 'willing buyer, willing seller' orientation. While many First Nations have received significant settlements, the process is very slow and many communities also have outstanding claims and unspent settlement monies, so land ownership in the prairies remains in flux. Land on reserve is generally held collectively through a range of federally administered and local protocols. Many First Nations also have individual land-holding regimes, allowing lands to be leased or otherwise assigned through variously formalised processes. Decisions as to how reserve land is used have generally been made by an elected Chief and Council, frequently without much input from community members.

The historical dispossessions enacted by the Numbered Treaties restricted First Nations' participation in farming relative to white settlers from the get-go. First Nations also faced a raft of early policies discriminating against them in the region's growing agricultural economy (Carter 1990). First Nations-led agriculture programmes in the 1970s and 1980s received insufficient support from governments and Indigenous farmers faced challenges accessing Canada's then strong paradigm of state supports for agriculture (Sommerville 2019). The retraction of said supports under agricultural neoliberalisation from the early 1990s differentially impacted First Nations amidst a broader landscape of growing farm consolidation and debt (ibid.). As a result, by the early 2000s, where First Nations were operating collective ('band') and individual farms, these were struggling with a lack of access to capital. Many First Nations were instead leasing out their arable land to local (usually white) family farmers and agribusinesses, even where there was community interest in autonomous farming (Sommerville 2019, 2021).

Rentals of First Nations land by local farmers already point to a form of capital grabbing back reserve and restituted lands. But the commodity boom of the early 2000s together with the price spikes associated with the 2007/8 food crisis brought new pressures on prairie farmland. The region became a hotspot for financial investment given its high-

¹⁰Canada also has a Comprehensive Claims process, which addresses Indigenous claims in regions where Aboriginal title has never been extinguished (i.e., regions that are not covered by historic treaties).

quality land, strong processing infrastructure, proximity to regional markets, stable political climate, and low land prices relative to adjoining regions (Sommerville and Magnan 2015). This led to the emergence of several large-scale agricultural investment ventures involving prairie farmland that variably engaged in land ownership, leasing, and/or agricultural production (*ibid.*).

In 2008, Sprott Resource Corporation, a Toronto based investment firm entered into this growing investment market with the establishment of One Earth Farms (OEF), a purported partnership between the company and prairie First Nations (see Sommerville 2019, 2021). The venture aimed to create Canada's largest farm by leasing First Nations' land for vertically integrated grain and oilseeds and cattle production. Corporate benefits from the deal included access to land unhindered by provincial legislation prohibiting publicly traded companies from farming (because reserves are federally regulated), access to labour in regions where it was scarce due to competition from the oil and gas sector, and benefits associated with OEF's positioning of itself as both an environmentally and socially responsible venture based on its engagement of First Nations lands and peoples. First Nations were promised access to training programmes, employment opportunities, the chance to start ancillary agricultural businesses, equity provisions in the deal, improved rents on leased land, and better land stewardship.

OEF secured at least CAD 113 million in capital for its early operations from SRC, regional agribusinesses, a private investment fund focusing on Aboriginal initiatives and the federal government. The company used First Nations liaisons to form partnerships with 16 distinct First Nations in the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta, and by 2013 controlled some 33,000 acres of cropland and 123,000 acres of pastureland, together with a herd of 18,000 cattle.

While these totals look impressive, OEF was in fact falling well short of its expansion targets. Some First Nations approached by the company declined to join the venture given longstanding relationships with other tenants. The firm was also haemorrhaging money, losing some CAD 69 million by 2013. Although part of this loss stemmed from problems common to all prairie farmers (poor weather, limited regional grain transport capacity, volatile commodity prices), other issues related to the company's financial character, including hubris and an overreliance on centralised decision making (Sommerville 2019, 2021). Moreover, factors specific to the company's partnership with First Nations presented additional barriers, including difficulties integrating both land (due to the different forms of collective and individual landholding on reserve) and labour (due to First Nations limited agricultural experience). Racial tensions proliferated, and two First Nations withdrew from OEF prior to conclusion of their leases after changes in community leadership (*ibid.*). Cumulatively, these factors drove OEF to exit operations in 2014, severing its ties with First Nations. Benefits to First Nations had been minimal at best, mainly short term access to training and employment and small increases in rent for some First Nations.

Although OEF represents an isolated and time limited case of very large scale grabbing of farmland restituted to First Nations, it exists in a larger context of invigorated resource extraction and indeed urban development on First Nations land. The resulting projects articulate uneasily with the politics of recognition and reconciliation that Canada is currently pursuing in its relationship with First Nations (see Sommerville 2019; 2021; Yellowhead Institute 2019; van der Haegen 2024; van der Haegen and Whiteside 2025). In the meantime, First Nations activists and their allies have increasingly been gathering

under the banner of #LandBack, a decentralised campaign seeking to establish Indigenous sovereignty and political and economic control of ancestral land. According to at least some analysts, the #LandBack movement aims to push beyond the bounds of the current land claims process, opening up a broader array of routes to substantive Indigenous land control (see Manuel and Klein 2020).

3.4. Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe experienced several processes of land reform. From the 1980s to the late 1990s, a market-led approach was dominant. The state purchased farms from white landowners on a willing buyer-willing seller arrangement. This had a modest impact in terms of land redistribution as only 24 per cent of the targeted land was acquired (Moyo 2011). In 2002, a renewed process of land reform began with the implementation of the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP). The FTLRP expropriated land from previous owners without compensating them, providing land beneficiaries in turn with usufruct rights. Again, the aim was to shift land ownership from the white minority to black majority population. The FTLRP has arguably been the most progressive instance of land reform in the country so far. It benefited more than 160,000 households under the A1 smallholder farm model and around 17,000 under the A2 large scale model with 90 percent of targeted farms acquired (Moyo 2004; 2011). In recent years, however, redistributed land has increasingly been the subject of capital-led grabs in various regions.

Zimbabwe's contemporary agrarian structure has become increasingly dualistic, with both smallholder farming and large-scale corporate agriculture. Unable to self-finance their production, land reform beneficiaries rather engage in land collectivisation and bundle the land into larger units to rent to the former landowners (Mudimu, Ting, and Nalwimba 2022). Beneficiaries usually turn to wage employment on the subsequent farms. While the government recognises the disadvantageous position of beneficiaries, it provides them little or no direct agrarian support.¹¹

Instead, the government encourages joint ventures as the most promising way of increasing production levels among these beneficiaries. This represents the first major driver of contemporary land (re)grabbing in Zimbabwe. These joint ventures are part and parcel of a larger neoliberal approach of promoting large-scale land-based investments in land reform areas under the 'Zimbabwe is Open for Business' framework (Mazwi and George 2019). Concurrently, numerous policy measures such as the Statutory Instrument 53 of 2014 have been put in place to support joint ventures between capital and land reform beneficiaries, thereby facilitating the penetration of capital into the countryside. Consequently districts such as Marondera, Goromonzi, Chinhoyi and Mazowe have seen several agricultural joint ventures established engaging former landowners and other actors including agribusiness firms on resettlement farms.

This neoliberal agenda also has a clear, if not explicit, geopolitical motivation. With the implementation of the FTLRP, Zimbabwe was put under economic sanctions by the West for allegations of violating human – and property rights in the land expropriation process. As part of the post Mugabe era, the 'new' regime is pushing for reintegration into the

¹¹ Although the state has several support schemes these are usually in the form of contract farming schemes and are not input subsidies (see Mazwi, Chambati, and Mudimu 2020).

international community and the Commonwealth. The government has thus put in place 'conciliatory' measures ranging from offering compensation to white farmers whose land was expropriated to having unproductive land reform beneficiaries evicted from the land (Batisai and Mudimu 2021).

A second important driver of contemporary land regripping dynamics relates to the lack of a consistent land policy following the FTLRP, opening numerous loopholes in land tenure management. Consequently, illegal land sales have accelerated and become a means by which capital grabs back redistributed land. In 2024 alone more than a dozen cases of illegal land sales were recorded, involving both large-scale land-owners and smallholders (see Mazwi, Chambati, and Mudimu 2020). Livelihood precarity plays an important role in this dynamic as it leads to distressed land sales among peasants. Illegal land acquisitions also take the form of multiple farm holdings and oversized farms. Land reform farms are supposed to be sized according to agroecological principles, with regions with the highest rainfall and best soils having the smallest farms. Nevertheless, several media and audit reports have revealed oversized farms and multiple farm holdings contradicting the established legislation. These reports point to the harnessing of the FTLRP by members of the political elite, some of whom have resisted efforts to downsize or redistribute their farms for broad-based land reform.¹²

Agrarian counter-reform dynamics in the countryside also unfold through the adverse incorporation of land reform beneficiaries into large-scale agricultural projects. An emblematic example is the Chilongo Lucerne project in the southern Masvingo province. In this region, peasant farmers are ceding their land to Dendairy, one of the largest dairy agricultural enterprises in Zimbabwe. In the process, peasants effectively lose access to their land although they may benefit from land rentals. A few could be lucky and enter the project as labourers but the majority became landless and jobless. The current large-scale acquisition of land for commercial production of hemp/marijuana could soon trigger similar dynamics, although firms in this sector are. While not specifically targeting resettlement areas currently.

Although capital may continue grabbing back redistributed land, the ZANU-PF led state may not allow a full-scale reversal because the land reform areas are the power basis for the ruling party. A total reversal of the land reform would mean the ruling party would lose its majority supporters that reside in these areas. In the past four election cycles, the party has obtained only low support among urban voters. A full-scale agrarian counter-reform would only further undermine the party's power and in a way set into motion a direct revolution from below (Mudimu and Kurima 2018). This revolution would emanate from the war veterans and rural poor who form the majority of land reform beneficiaries and who played an active and leading role in driving the FTLRP.

4. Revisiting the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus: an emerging research agenda

The above empirical sections outline some ten different forms of capital grabbing back land following the implementation of contemporary land reform and restitution programmes across the four countries (see Table 1). In this section, we use these instances

¹²For example, it is alleged that former President Mugabe's daughter owns twenty-one farms. This is far above the 'one man one farm' policy that the government pushes in the media.

Table 1. Key features of capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted lands in the research settings.

Country	Types of capital and grabbing mechanisms	Susceptibilities to capital 'grabbing land back'	Barriers to capital 'grabbing land back'	Articulations with land and agrarian struggles
South Africa	Local predominantly white-owned agribusinesses leasing redistributed land in former Bantustan 'buffer zones' and/or acquiring said land through distressed farm sales	Absence of governmental support for black and emerging farmers amidst neoliberalisation after 2000 Inability to service Land Bank mortgages used to support land acquisitions drives beneficiary decisions to lease their land	N/A	Land reform (redistribution, restitution, tenure reform) seen as a central plank of South Africa's democratic transition Shifting of land reform away from an initial 'poor' dispensation towards one of supporting an emerging class of black farmers (Hall 2004; Kepe and Hall 2016; PLAAS 2016) Growing concern about the 'elite capture' of land reform (Hall and Kepe 2017; Mtero, Gumede, and Ramantsima 2023) Strengthening demands for expropriation without compensation leading to a new Expropriation Act in 2025
	South African agri-business fortified by bilateral development finance, international pension capital and Black Economic Empowerment capital engaged in 'flipping farms' to government for land reform purposes	Government buying land and shares at inflated prices for land reform purposes	Government proceduralities hindered Agri-funds first attempt to expand the firms farm flipping activities. Establishment of the Office of the Valuer General to provide credible valuations for land reform in 2016	
Same consortium as last entry engaging in strategic partnerships with land redistribution and restitution beneficiaries				
		Government increasingly engaging the private sector in the delivery of land reform Strategic partnerships increasingly a government conditionality for land transfer in high value commercial farming areas Firms' articulation with Black Economic Empowerment policies helped secure government appointments and agreement from redistribution and restitution beneficiaries Firms' involvement in crafting beneficiary lists on the redistribution side Government support for strategic partnerships through the Recapitalisation and Development Programme effectively captured by the firms	Beneficiary opposition as strategic partnerships deteriorated leading to firms' dismissal at some sites (more successful among restitution beneficiaries than among redistribution beneficiaries)	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Country	Types of capital and grabbing mechanisms	Susceptibilities to capital 'grabbing land back'	Barriers to capital 'grabbing land back'	Articulations with land and agrarian struggles
Bolivia	Large-scale Bolivian and 'translatino' (Brazilian, Colombian) farmers purchasing Indigenous (TCO) land through unofficial 'certifications' issued by corrupt Indigenous leaders	Demarcation of Indigenous territories (TCOs) interrupted the 1990s expansion of 'translatino' corporate capital but opened the door to subsequent commodification via the 'certifications' process	Provision that public land can only be distributed to peasants and Indigenous peoples under the 2006 Communitarian Redirection of the Agrarian Reform Law	Popular demands to address the country's 'unfinished land reform', especially in lowland areas Pressures to establish Indigenous (TCO) territories as part of a land restitution struggle since colonial times Popular demands for more transparency in land reform programming following corruption scandals
	Large Brazilian farmers and emerging capitalist small farmers in the agribusiness heartland renting land obtained by smallholders via 1970s state 'colonization' programme	Titling of land via <i>saneamiento</i> process enabled development of land rental markets	Landholder/parcel rations remained more equal in areas with peasant unions relative to those without	
Canada	Local family farmers and agribusinesses leasing small parcels of land from individual First Nations members and communities	Absence of governmental support for First Nations agriculture and First Nations' differential exposure to risks inherent to a broader neoliberal retraction of state supports	Establishment of large-scale farming venture amidst a new wave of agricultural investment (next entry) displaced previous tenants farming First Nations' land	Specific Claims process as means of addressing claims that federal government has not met under historical treaties Uneasy articulation between economic development projects and recognition and reconciliation politics advanced by the settler colonial state (see also Yellowhead Institute 2019; van der Haegen 2024; van der Haegen and Whiteside 2025)
	Publicly traded resource finance firm fortified by agribusiness capital and a private 'impact investment' firm focused on Aboriginal initiatives leasing large parcels of land across multiple First Nations members and communities	Federal regulation of First Nations reserves exempted them from provincial land legislation prohibiting publicly traded companies from undertaking large-scale farming High rates of leasing out farmland among First Nations (previous entry) Availability of a large pool of First Nations labourers together with government grants supported a bespoke training and employment programme created by the firm	Complex mix of land tenure and administration regimes on First Nations reserves slowed expansion of the venture Difficulties integrating First Nations labour due to limited agricultural experience Racial tensions Changes in community leadership led two First Nations to withdraw from the company Huge financial losses ultimately led to the dissolution of the venture	Strengthening #LandBack movement aiming for Indigenous sovereignty and control of ancestral land 'going beyond' land claims settlements

Zimbabwe	Former landowners, agribusiness and other actors forming joint ventures with beneficiaries on redistributed farmland	Neoliberal 'Zimbabwe is Open for Business' agenda promoting large-scale land-based investments in land reform areas including agricultural joint ventures Government seeking geopolitical reintegration into international community and Commonwealth through 'conciliatory gestures' after sanctions in response to FTLRP	Expropriation without compensation under the FTLRP programme Land reform beneficiaries are highly important to securing Zanu-PFs political majority	Land justice via expropriation without compensations Growing concern that FTLRP has been harnessed by political elites Importance of land reform beneficiaries as a voting bloc
	Illegal land purchases, including by members of the political elite, from both smallholders and large-scale landowners	Lack of clear land policy after FTLRP allowing land tenure loopholes Livelihood precarity leading to distressed sales	Governmental policy provisions meant to prevent oversized farms and multiple land holdings (although these are commonly disregarded)	
	Adverse incorporation of redistribution beneficiaries who cede their land to large scale agricultural projects	Possibility of obtaining rental income and/or employment (although most beneficiaries become landless and jobless)	As per last two entries	

to propose a research agenda for further scholarly and activist work on the land grabbing-land reform/restitution nexus in these and other countries. We identify a series of questions that we suggest can motivate and focus such future work, offering a brief reflection on each based on our empirical material. While we recognise that both our questions and short responses to them are necessarily preliminary and partial, we contend that they can nonetheless provide a valuable jumping off point for other scholars.

4.1. What types of capital are involved in ‘grabbing back’ redistributed and restituted land and by what mechanisms?

Our empirical cases reveal instances of capital ‘grabbing back’ reallocated land from both above and below in all countries, with the former dynamic more significant at the national and cross-case scale. Amongst the fractions of capital that are involved, agribusiness features prominently, whether as initiators or participants in contemporary land regrabs. The cases include local (in South Africa and Zimbabwe) to transnational agribusiness actors, although the transnational actors typically have either regional (‘translatino’ in Bolivia) or domestic (in Canada) history and pedigree. Significantly, in Zimbabwe it is sometimes former landowners who are involved in capital ‘regrabbing’, a trend that has similarly been observed in South Africa by other researchers (see Derman, Sjaastad, and Lahiff 2010). In Canada, neighbouring farmers renting First Nations’ land were in turn sometimes (though not always) displaced by OEF on the basis of that firm’s purported partnership model and benefits.

Finance capital is clearly another key actor in capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land. The new enthusiasm for agricultural investment that followed the global food and financial crises appears to have had substantial influence. Here, a mix of domestic actors (such as SRC in Canada) and transnational banking interests (such as Old Mutual and FMO in South Africa) are involved, as are both publicly traded and private ventures. Novel configurations joining agribusiness and financial interests together (including the Agri-Funds established in South Africa and now other African countries) are similarly present. In Canada and South Africa, there is a prominent ‘socially responsible investment’ or ‘impact investment’ component to capital grabbing back projects on land restored to historically disadvantaged populations (an irony that is discussed further below). Where local actors and elites are involved in harnessing redistributed or restituted land, they generally have access to banking institutions and/or state subsidies and grants, and they often have other business interests or lines that they can borrow against to facilitate their activities. These elites may also benefit from political patronage (as in Zimbabwe). This is an important part of the ‘backstory’ to capital grabbing back that needs further scholarly attention. What is clear is that in every case the finance capital that is accessible to ‘grabbers’ substantially dwarfs that available to land reform and land restitution beneficiaries. This results from or is accentuated by the neoliberal restructuring of agricultural support for small-scale and family farmers in the global North and South alike (Wolf and Bonnano 2013; Connell and Dados 2014).

With respect to mechanisms, there are certainly instances of direct land acquisitions and consequently outright dispossession of land beneficiaries (in particular, in South Africa’s Free State and also in Zimbabwe). Such acquisitions appear mainly to arise under situations of distress for land beneficiaries brought about by unsustainable loans

and livelihood precarity. But what emerges more prominently across our cases is the importance of land rentals as a form of capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land. While these are sometimes facilitated by land beneficiaries (as in the case of Zimbabwean peasants who are 'collectivising' their land for rental purposes), they more frequently arise as a result of governmental policy or approaches favouring private sector involvement in farming post land reform or restitution (including through the formation of strategic partnerships and joint ventures).

From a neoclassical perspective, some scholars consider these rental arrangements a positive outcome, arguing that the emerging rental market can potentially yield valuable income for landholding smallholders and communities (Deininger and Byerlee 2011; Vranken and Swinnen 2006). While our cases include some occasions where land beneficiaries do appear to obtain a relatively fair market value for leasing their lands (specifically, in Bolivia), this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. In other cases, rental payments to land beneficiaries are sharply discounted, not least due to the poorly formalised (or institutionalised) nature of rental arrangements, the particularities of land tenure regimes and/or a racialisation of property market dynamics. Corporate control of value chains and malaccounting practices also appear to provide opportunities for land 'regrabbers' to allocate monies away from lease payments (and similarly, equity benefits to land beneficiaries). In any case, we should question the uncritical celebration of rental income given that for at least some beneficiaries, renting is a 'last resort' relative to farming their land autonomously.

4.2. What particular openings and susceptibilities make redistributed and restituted land vulnerable to being 'grabbed back' by capital?

Bernstein (2002:, 443) suggests that virtually all land reform programmes follow 'a logic of the extension and intensification of commodity production.' Whether implemented by conservative or progressive governments, land reform policies in the countries examined in this piece and elsewhere have privileged the development and deepening of capitalist agriculture, either generally or for particular groups that are viewed as having been hitherto excluded from said development. In Bolivia, land reform programming has historically been concerned with developing a 'modern' capitalist agriculture in the country's eastern lowlands. In South Africa, an early 'pro-poor' dispensation to programming was quickly displaced by a policy focus on developing an emerging class of black farmers. In Zimbabwe, the FTLRP model originally differentiated between small farm peasant agriculture (A1 farms) and large scale capitalist farming (A2 farms), but in recent years the state has applied a productivist approach across beneficiaries in both tracks. In these contexts, it is in a sense unsurprising that capital manages to 'grab back' land that has been reallocated through official land reform plans. The emergence or expansion of a 'modern' agricultural sector based on economies of scale, capital-intensive innovation, and specialisation has been a central objective of these plans. That this technocratic rationale is often at odds with the egalitarian and revolutionary ambitions articulated in historical and contemporary land struggles is a point that we return to in the conclusion of this piece.

In this article, we also consider instances of capital grabbing back land following contemporary land restitution and land claims settlement programmes operating in countries in both the global South and global North. These programmes have a still more obvious

moral remit than do redistribution programmes, being directly linked to notions of historical redress. Of significance in our cases is the presence of a well-developed capitalist agriculture sector in each of the countries we examined. While in South Africa, this is part of a 'dualistic' agrarian structure, in Canada it is the only game in town (or the countryside, rather). Presumptions that land beneficiaries will follow suit by taking up capitalist farming, among both government officials and the beneficiaries themselves, here need critical examination. In the absence of suitable post-settlement support, our research shows that many beneficiaries are pushed away from farming their lands, into leasing to local farmers and agribusiness actors or powerful domestic and transnational financial firms.

Our empirical cases show that even state regulations that might be framed as containing or moderating capital's advance can in effect become enabling factors on the ground. In Bolivia, the titling of Indigenous territories has facilitated land grabbing rather than protecting Indigenous peoples' access to land and keeping capital at bay. In other cases, loopholes remain and are quickly exploited. In Zimbabwe, the lack of a coherent land policy after the implementation of the FTLRP facilitated a suite of land sales. In South Africa, the absence of consistent and credible property valuation protocols (at least until the creation of the Office of the Valuer General in 2016) allowed for manipulations where land resellers were able to grab an outsized portion of the limited funds set aside for land reform-related purchases. In Canada, the federal regulation of First Nations reserves permitted the emergence of SRC, a venture that would have been prohibited on surrounding provincially regulated land.

Beneficiaries of redistributed and restituted land usually expect to obtain not only access to land but meaningful support to establish productive farms. The lack of governmental support to small and/or Indigenous farmers is thus a key factor enabling capital to grab back redistributed and restituted land. This factor, testament to the ascent of neoliberalism globally, is significant in all of our cases even as it is constantly reshaped by nationally specific political conjunctures. In post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, small farmers receive no subsidies or other concrete forms of support that might be deemed 'interventionist', not least because of the regime's geopolitical aspirations of joining the Commonwealth group of countries. In Bolivia, state support for small farmers increased under the MAS government as part of its political agenda of demonstrating 'post-neoliberal' credentials. While this triggered an incipient process of 'accumulation from below', such a process lacked the scale and consistency to modify the structurally precarious position of small farmers (Castañón Ballivián 2024).

In dealing with the needs of land redistribution and restitution beneficiaries, governments in three of the countries we examined have promoted the establishment of 'partnerships' between these beneficiaries and agribusiness firms. In South Africa, the government has compelled beneficiaries to form 'strategic partnerships' with private enterprises as a condition for land transfer. In Zimbabwe, the state has put together a series of statutory instruments to foster joint ventures between land reform beneficiaries and former landowners. Yet even in Canada, a location in the global North, a similar encouragement existed, highlighting the global character of this model. While often presented as a win-win strategy, these so-called partnerships constitute another enabling factor of land grabbing dynamics in contexts of land reform and restitution, where they acquire a dispossessionary and in South Africa, deeply exploitative edge (see Sommerville 2019).

4.3. What particular barriers and limits does capital encounter in its efforts to 'grab back' redistributed and restituted land?

In its efforts to grab back land following land reform and restitution programmes, capital also faces barriers. Institutional barriers loom particularly large in our cases, although as noted above these sometimes have a confounding effect. In South Africa, the inability of a sitting government to commit a future one to purchasing farms earmarked for land reform constrained the 'farm flipping' strategy that SAFE's Agri-Fund originally planned to implement, leading the company to double down on forming strategic partnerships with land redistribution and restitution beneficiaries as a way of expanding its fruit supply. In Bolivia, the provision that public land can only be distributed to peasants and Indigenous peoples under the 2006 Community Redirection of the Agrarian Reform Law interrupted a previous wave of corporate farm expansion but also opened the door to new commodification processes. In Canada, provincial legislation limiting the area that publicly traded companies can farm constrained the emergence of mega-scale farming ventures across most of the prairie provinces, but OEF circumvented these rules by operating on federally regulated First Nations reserves. Nonetheless, the complex mix of land tenure and administration regimes on these reserves limited the speed with which the Canadian venture could scale up its operations. Meanwhile in Zimbabwe, the state's ultimate ownership of land following the FTLRP makes full private control impossible. What persists is then a more limited and virtual control of land by corporate interests and former landowners.

These institutional barriers can also drive up the cost of doing business for capital engaging in regrabbing activities. The clearest example of this is the case of OEF in Canada, where the aforementioned difficulties integrating First Nations reserve land seem to have contributed to the company's financial woes. At the same time, challenges typical of farming in the region and characteristic of the firm's financial origins also played a role in driving the firm's substantial losses and its decision to ultimately exit operations. This is a good reminder that capital led regrabs are subject to the same pressures and constraints that researchers have observed in grabs outside of redistributed and restituted lands, and may experience similarly high rates of failure (on which see Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013; Borras et al. 2022).

Alongside institutional and economic barriers and limits, there are also political ones. In both Zimbabwe and Canada some beneficiaries declined to take part in renting out their land and participating in joint ventures, and in the latter country changes in community leadership led two First Nations to withdraw from OEF before expiration of their leases. In South Africa, four restitution communities ultimately evicted SAFE and its collaborators from their lands as their relationship with the companies deteriorated. These examples suggest that resistance to capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land is far from futile. Important mediating factors here appear to include the strength of local agrarian classes of labour, their degree of organisation, and their leverage on political processes. For example, in Bolivia, the presence of strong peasants' unions restricted land concentration by capital regrabbers in certain lowland areas. In Zimbabwe, the government's reliance on the small farmers that have benefitted from the FTLRP for political support has had a similar tempering influence.

5. A (temporary) conclusion, or so what?

An emerging trend sees capital grabbing back land in the aftermath of diverse contemporary national land reform and land restitution programmes. We have observed and documented this trend based on independent research projects in four distinct and highly differentiated settings across the global South and North. Drawing from our pre-existing studies and a cross-case relational comparison approach, we have examined some of the specific segments of capital and mechanisms involved in such 'regrabbing' practices. We have also identified a number of key enabling factors and barriers that capital faces when grabbing back redistributed and restituted land. While the dynamics and practices of capital have been central concerns in the land grab literature, the intricate nexus between land grabbing and land reform and restitution programmes has often remained under the academic radar. Our contribution seeks to bring this nexus to the fore and propose some initial questions for a nascent research agenda.

Our rationale with this proposal links directly to our sense that capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land is politically regressive in character. It violates many of the historical aims articulated in the long-running land struggles that often spur and underpin official land reform and restitution programmes, whether these aims pertain to democratising land access, building sustainable livelihoods, or achieving meaningful historic redress (to name just three examples from our own studies, see [Table 1](#)). Understanding how these popular aims become truncated by concrete policy formulations in land reform and restitution programmes is a key area for future research and writing. So too is understanding how instances of capital grabbing back redistributed and restituted land articulate with evolving land movements in different geographic settings, alternatively motivating new directions for these movements or frustrating future action. In South Africa, the new Expropriation Act responds to political demands for a more radical approach to land reform stretching across the country's redistribution, restitution, and tenure reform programming. In Canada, the #LandBack movement points to the limits of 'one-off' land claim settlement payouts, rather outlining a broader array of routes to substantive Indigenous land control. In Zimbabwe, the fact that FTLRP beneficiaries remain an important voting bloc for the ruling Zanu-PF party ensures that the official land reform programme can not stray too far towards capital's favour and away from broad-based results. Yet in Bolivia the land reform issue has lost the centrality it once had in popular mobilisations. This is due to disillusionment with land reform outcomes but is also a reflection of the complex relationship between agrarian grassroots and the MAS government.

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