**BOOK PROPOSAL**

**The Enchanted Land. Violent Inequality and Environmental Extraction on the Colombian Frontier**

**By Diego Lugo-Vivas**

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**THE BOOK –BACKGROUND**

**This book focuses on land concentration, resource grabbing and frontier dynamics in post-conflict settings in Colombia**. It is multidisciplinary in nature, covering the topics of political ecology, environmental science, rural and environmental sociology, as well as comparative politics and critical geography in the Americas.

The analysis of extractive violence and land-grabbing in the 21st century is important due to the intensification of rural and environmental inequality worldwide. Land and resource grabbing as related to internal armed conflicts and transitions to peace is even more relevant due to recent peace negotiations that have come up in the sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southeast and Central Asia, as well as Latin America. In different war-torn countries undergoing complex peace processes, there is a reordering around land regimes that prioritizes market forces and deepens inequalities due to the entry of new business and illicit groups. In such a context, why do countries that have gone through transitions towards the negotiated resolution of armed conflicts experience renewed trajectories of land & resource grabbing? Why if a high intensity of armed confrontation, particularly in Latin America, has been associated with land abandonment and violent dispossession, do transitions to peace seem to rekindle deeper expressions of land reconcentration?

To answer these questions, an analysis of Colombia as a single case study with regional variations has been proposed. This book details in a comparative manner how in periods of transitions to peace (2000-2018), resource grabbing and trajectories of land re-concentration -meaning the very processes behind the armed conflict- persist, and in several instances, exacerbate. It approaches militarily oriented environmental and economic programs[[1]](#footnote-2), particularly the implementation of corporate greening and sustainable development platforms, through which the state has attempted to recontrol the contested frontier, perpetuating a highly unequal system of land and property relations.

**BOOK’S CONTRIBUTION**

This manuscript contributes to both the literature on land/land grabbing and studies on war & peace by detailing in time (2000-2018) and space (a statistical sample of 311 municipalities and three ethnographical case studies), the functioning of state-sponsored productive mechanisms designed to increase the state’s territorial control in times of both conflict escalation and peace negotiations. It focuses on the impact that such productive programs have had on the reconcentration and grabbing of land and questions the argument that transitions to peace produce more egalitarian rural landscapes. Likewise, this book examines how such developmental paths produce not only new conflicts for land, but also incentives that increase the dependency over either corporate agrarian capital or criminal and illicit economies.

In this vein, the analysis of statistical, spatial, and ethnographical material allows for the framing of an updated political ecology perspective that highlights the creation of environmental wealth as an engine of both land markets and renewed forms of corporate and illicit extraction on the frontier. More generally, this book illuminates processes of land and resource grabbing in other post-conflict and ceasefire contexts in which not only such corporate-illicit duality deepens (sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast and Central Asia, and Middle East), but also where conflicts over land stem from increasingly complex transnational and criminal networks.

**Theoretical puzzles and scholarly debates**

Colombia has experienced the longest and bloodiest internal armed conflict in the Americas since the end of World War II. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, levels of armed violence reached unprecedented peaks across the country. This led to a humanitarian crisis that placed Colombia among the countries with the highest levels of forced displacement and land abandonment in the world. It is estimated that between two and ten million hectares were abandoned during the six-decade internal armed conflict from the 1950s to 2012. And while the role of paramilitary and guerrilla actors in such waves of violence has been discussed in political and academic circles, there is no clarity on the impact of such processes on the reconcentration of landed property at a national scale.

The Colombian case poses important challenges to the conventional wisdom. Official data and regional experiences have shown that during the negotiation of peace accords with the largest paramilitary (2003-2005) and guerrilla (2012-2016) organizations, land grabbing in the periphery persisted and, in many cases, soared. In this sense, the main question this book tries to answer is why, in the advent of major peace negotiations (including a Victims and Land Restitution Law) and more atomized criminality, land grabbing and re-concentration has accelerated. If in the zenith of armed violence, land dispossession by paramilitary groups and drug-lords was associated with property reconcentration, what happens when the intensity of such a conflict unevenly declines –at least in the short term– and when new forms of institutional and state presence surge? In contrast to common approaches to the violent character of land grabbing that emphasize the role of the military and paramilitary in forced displacement, land abandonment and dispossession, I contend that in contexts of systemic violence, the promotion and functioning of both corporate greening and platforms of monocrop-based sustainable development in which a strong military and environmental apparatus has converged, have perpetuated preexisting land structures. The above has not only kept land markets in place, but has also operated in situations of both intense violence and a selective de-escalation towards a negotiated resolution of the conflict.

I support my arguments through a rich combination of research strategies, which includes non-spatial and spatial panel linear regressions, spatial data analysis, and ethnography for two years. The latter comprises 145 in-depth interviews with socio-environmental leaders, representatives of public, private and multilateral offices, victims of land abandonment and forced and productive displacement, as well as academics. These materials are complemented by extensive archival and secondary sources.

This book engages three lines of scholarly debate. First, violent land accumulation and dispossession in war-torn territories (Ballvé, 2020, Grajales, 2017, Watts, 2007, 2015; Reno, 1998; Giustozzi, 2004). In the critical geography of civil wars, land has been viewed as an obscure object of desire in the fight for power and resources. Land grabbing reflects the excesses of the war and the ambitions of different actors who are in the bid to obtain and maximize territorial control. Regionally, the Colombian case is an anomaly to the extent that the armed conflict, in addition to being the oldest and bloodiest in the hemisphere, has evolved in contexts of both formal democratic electoral stability and sustained growth in the countryside, especially of a corporate nature. However, the foregoing has not limited the scope of forced displacement and systematic land abandonment, almost unique in the Americas.

A second line of debate –and the foundation of this book– focuses on the environmental imprint of the current land and resource grabbing. In a global context of resource extraction, the promotion of platforms of large-scale conservation, corporate greening and monocrop-related sustainable development have allowed the concession of extensive portions of lands to companies, NGOs, and foreign states who look to create new “environmentally and socially responsible” economic sectors (Peluso 1993, Woods, 2011, Brockington & Duffy, 2010, Ybarra, 2013). Worldwide, this has operated through mechanisms such as the establishment of large-scale forestry and flex crops, conservation in protected areas, the operation of regulated and “socially responsible” mining and hydrocarbon enclaves, forced eradication of illicit crops and the subsequent promotion of small-scale and supposedly low-carbon monocrops, among others. In Colombia, the defense of these discourses and productive platforms is yet another way in which the State has attempted to gain territorial control over the last decades, while economic activity is opening up to new sectors.

Finally, a third line of debate looks at the (re)production of the frontier as an uneven spatial process (Uribe, 2019) in which a regional rush for land takes shape. This is in relation to the developmental paths created to connect the periphery with transnational chains of economic value and the ways in which such paths have affected both land distribution and its use. In Colombia, the frontier has experienced an uneven deepening of corporate and illicit economies, which has perpetuated resource grabbing and land re-concentration in multiple ways.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

**Chapter One – Title?**

This chapter introduces the main questions of the book, its theoretical and methodological approaches, and situates the case of the Colombian frontier in the larger literature.

**Chapter Two – Title?**

In this chapter, I discuss non-spatial and spatial linear regressions of the factors associated with the concentration of land in the Colombian frontier. The distribution of land in Colombia has been an active component of both the armed conflict and the type of economic expansion this country has experienced since the 1970s. A two-fold analysis is conducted to highlight the main interactions between three different dimensions of the state[[2]](#footnote-3) and the territorial control of armed actors that are related to increases in land concentration at a municipal level from 2000 to 2013. This chapter shows that in the context of sustained violence, high Gini coefficients for Land and Ownership persist and are positively correlated to paramilitary predominance and economic variables of fiscal dependency and lootable-resource performance (i.e., coca crops). In addition, controls and spatial models developed at a second stage, show that persistence of land concentration is locally determined and regionally attached to the economic value of land.

**Chapter Three – title**

This chapter presents a reflection on both the pillars of corporate rurality in times of war and peace and the productive dynamics in Colombia that have been determined by the green enterprise, particularly ‘environmentally sustainable’ monocrops and large-scale conservation in a context of systemic armed violence.

**Chapters Four, Five, and Six** – titles

This section constitutes the ethnographical core of this book with three case studies[[3]](#footnote-4) that expound the statistical findings. These cases are presented separately because of their regional coverage, ethnographic richness and because they are part of world-renowned processes, although they have rarely or never been studied in a comparative manner. They refer to 1) the development of extensive land deals in the Colombian High Plains, which are connected to the experience of resource grabbing in the Brazilian Cerrado, 2) the irregular appropriation of vacant lands and the subsequent expansion of deforestation and agribusiness clustering in the Amazon fire and burning belt, as well as 3) attempts at environmental control and land occupation in one of the hearts of coca cultivation and illegal mining in the Colombian Pacific.

The set of factors that explain the direction and regional contrasts taken by land concentration and grabbing, encompasses: first, the type of productive chaining prioritized and the sectors of corporate greening, monocrop-related sustainable development, and large-scale conservation in which major investments have been made. Second, the strength and effectiveness of the alliances between the military, environmental/rural development agencies and private (trans)national actors. And third, the changes in the dynamics of the armed conflict, especially in the ability of groups to move not only territorially, but also between licit and illicit economies, thereby expanding the frontier and new expressions of land and resource grabbing.

**Chapter Four - title**

This chapter details the situation of Cumaribo-High Plains, in which a counterinsurgent program to promote agro-export, forestry and biofuel economies has resulted in both a boom in the irregular handover of titles of vacant lands and pronounced land grabbing starting in the early 2000s. Coca containment, a productive reorientation towards the establishment of large-scale flex crops, and new agribusiness and military infrastructure, have transformed the landscape of the High Plains, making it one of the strongest and deepest (yet surprisingly unexplored) examples of land and resource grabbing in Latin America, similar to the experience of The Brazilian Cerrado.

**Chapter Five - title**

In the Amazonian Piedmont programs to control high levels of violence have kept levels of land concentration stable; intra-regional variations, however, have been pronounced. On the one hand, areas of peasant contestation have witnessed both relatively successful programs of land parceling, especially in the early 2000s, and more recently, active processes of deforestation and coca resurgence inside National Natural Parks. On the other hand, where the State has asserted a militaristic presence, alliances between the State and agribusiness sectors have promoted land valuation and the reconversion from coca to “clean and socio-environmentally responsible” palm plantations. The above has not only impacted the balance between licit and illicit economies, but has transformed the regional landscape, in a way that replicates the advance of deforestation and agribusiness clustering in the Amazon fire and burning belt.

**Chapter Six - title**

Finally, a third case study in which land concentration has been modestly controlled is the subject of Chapter Six. In the Pacific, a sort of stabilization of private land grabbing has been the result of conservation agendas developed particularly by the Office of Natural Parks. Alliances between environmental agencies, the military and regional governments to advance conservation programs, have defined a stabilization in land deals in Los Farallones National Natural Park, buffer zones and surrounding Afro-descendant community councils. However, illicit income, especially from coca crops and illegal mining have soared in one of the hearts of coca cultivation in the world. This paradoxical movement of large-scale conservation and portfolios of illicit extraction on the rise will be explained in Chapter Six.

**Chapter Seven – Conclusion**

I conclude the book in with a comparative reflection on violent accumulation in contexts of fluctuating civil wars, fragile post-conflicts and new institutional devices that channel land and environmental wealth. First, I draw specific conclusions about the process in which the Colombian State, through militarily-oriented environmental programs, has sought to diffusely and erratically regain control of the frontier. This has produced an ambiguous complementarity of forces in which corporate rurality and illicit economies deepen, creating opportunities not only for new land grabbing but for more violent land struggles. On a more global scale, I conclude that this is exactly what is happening in a number of countries, in which land grabbing has exacerbated leading to stronger territorial disputes, environmental violence and new chains of illicit extraction.

**AUDIENCE, MARKET, AND NETWORKS**

My primary audience includes scholars interested in environmental problems in the Global South and students, preferably juniors, seniors, and graduates in programs of geography, environmental studies, sociology, political science, and those interested in methodologies. This book is broad enough to reach audiences in different countries (not only in the US, Canada, or Latin America) because it locates the Colombian case within a global rush for land and has been carefully written as a comparative monograph, without using complicated language and jargon, except for some statistical and spatial terms.

No other book has, through a multipronged research method, studied and compared intranational contested frontiers and the persistence of land grabbing in post-conflict settings in the Americas. This makes the proposed book distinctive and useful for understanding related problems in Southeast Asia (the so-called golden triangle between Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), Central Asia, West Africa (Sierra Leone-Nigeria), Central America (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala), and South America (Peru and Bolivia).

**BIOGRAPHY**

Throughout my career, I have established exchange networks with academics, policy makers, and people interested in the fields of geography, environmental science, sociology, & political science, thanks to my participation in congresses, conferences, seminars, and social platforms around the world. I belong to the American Association of Geography (AAG), the Southern Political Science Association (SPSA), the American Political Science Association (APSA), the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the Congress of Latin American Geographers (CLAG), the Fulbright Alumni Association, the Colombian Association of Geography (ACOGE), and the Colombian Association of Political Science (ACCPOL), among others. As my CV shows, over the last five years, I have attended around 40 conferences as main (and single) speaker, paper-speaker, panelist, chair, organizer, and discussant of different academic sessions. I am also the creator and administrator of the largest network of geographers, environmental scientists, and scholars interested in the disciplinary aspects of geography in Colombia. Geografxs Colombianistas has more than 400 active members (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/geografxscolombianistas/>), and through it, we have promoted academic initiatives around the world. As the creator and administrator of this network alongside the specialty groups from associations such as the AAG and LASA to which I belong, I can stimulate discussions about my book, the articles related to it, and all the academic endeavors I endorse.

Scholars and additional networks with whom I have developed academic initiatives – and I will do so in the future include:

Colombia:

* Universidad Santo Tomás and Universidad del Valle where I currently work. The departments targeted in these universities are: Sociology, Geography, the School of Natural Resources and the Institute of Political Studies
* Universidad de los Andes
* Universidad del Rosario: School of International, Urban, and Political Studies.
* Universities: de los Andes, ICESI, del Norte, EAFIT, Javeriana, Universidad Nacional, and Universidad del Cauca, among others.

The US and the UK:

* CET Academic Programs: A consortium that works in the mobility of US students abroad. Through this organization, I can reach audiences in more than 15 universities with which we currently work. So far, I have developed academic initiatives with universities in Massachusetts, New York, California, Michigan, Tennessee, Minnesota, and Washington DC, among others. So, I can foster academic spaces and make visible my intellectual production, especially my book, through the departments my students belong to.
* Dr. Elvira María Restrepo and the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University,
* Dr. Nazi Richani and the Center for Global Studies at Kean University,
* Dr. Kendra McSweeney and the Mershon Center for International Security Studies at Ohio State University,
* Dr. Jennifer Devine at Texas State University,
* Dr. April Mayes and the Oldenborg Center for International Relations at Pomona College,
* Dr. Teo Ballvé and the Lampert Institute for Civic and Global Affairs at Colgate University,
* The Institute for Advanced Studies of the Americas (MIA) and The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Miami,
* Dr. Victor Uribe, Dr. Ulrich Oslender and the Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs at the Florida International University
* Dr. Ieva Jusionyte at Harvard University and the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs,
* Dr. Juan Manuel Kanai, Dr. Simon Rushton, Dr. Anastasia Shesterinina, the Sheffield Institute for International Development, the Centre on Global Health Security at the Royal Institute of International Affairs and Chatham House, where I have recently published.

**ELEMENTS OF BOOK**

**Publication type:** research monograph

**Length**: 89,650 words

**Illustrations and imagery**

Number of maps (main text): 15-18

Number of tables (main text): 12-14

Number of figures / charts (main text): 12

Number of images (main text): 12

**Annexes: 2**

Number of maps (annexes): 10

Number of tables (annexes): 19

Number of figures / charts (annexes): 11

Number of images (annexes): 0

The length of this manuscript is about 89,650 words. This book is divided into six chapters plus two methodological annexes.

**EXPECTED COMPLETION**

1. Which includes the establishment of large-scale flex crops, conservation strategies inside National Natural Parks and buffer zones, forced eradication of illicit production, mainly coca and illegal mining, as well as the subsequent promotion of small-scale corporate monocrops. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This includes first, the social capacity of the State to provide public services (measured through an index of social development); second, its economic performance, particularly, its level of fiscal responsibility (approached through a fiscal dependency index), and third, the judicial-apprehensive capacity of the State to guarantee the administration of justice (explored through an apprehension rate per homicide). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Each case study represents one or two municipalities that form an administrative and geographic unit. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)