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# Development by Dispossession: Land Grabbing as New Enclosures in Contemporary Ethiopia

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**Development by Dispossession:  
Land Grabbing as New Enclosures in Contemporary Ethiopia**

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**Abstract:** The confluence of the world economic crisis with the global food and energy crises has set off a frenzy of land grabbing in Africa, accelerating trends of de-peasantization, large-scale commercial farming and tenure re-arrangements favoring international agribusiness. This process raises a host of issues concerning the socio-spatial dynamics of the contemporary restructuring of agrarian relations and the recurring ways in which states use cosmographies of power and *terra nullius* narratives to remake places identified as empty, underutilized or underproductive. In this paper we propose to examine the dynamics of large-scale land alienations in Ethiopia through the lens of enclosures and state projects of developmentalism. We conclude by suggesting that the spatial turn in the social sciences needs to pay more attention to the emptying out of space as a corollary to its social production, and to the various cosmographies of power that imaginatively constitute and reconstitute them in the form of ‘fictitious commodities’.

**Key words:** Ethiopia, enclosure, *terra nullius*, cosmographies of power, sovereignty.

In 2010 the World Bank produced a study of large-scale land acquisitions entitled *Rising Global Interest in Farmland*. The study’s inventory of land transfers from 2004-09 in fourteen countries was accompanied with background on major land transactions in numerous countries over nearly half a century.<sup>1</sup> According to the Bank, “Compared to an average annual expansion of global agricultural land of less than 4 million hectares before 2008, approximately 56 million hectares worth of large-scale farmland deals were announced ever before the end of 2009” (World Bank 2010: xiv). This expansion can be traced to an array of global transformations including changing demographics, consumer demands and expectations, and international trading arrangements. When

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<sup>1</sup> These ranged from in-country consultants to media reports on large investments in 2008-09 (using GRAIN’s blog [farmlandgrab.org](http://farmlandgrab.org)), and a review of historical land expansion processes and predicted rates of increase of cultivated area depending on different demand drivers (2)

in 2007-08 the global food and financial crises crystallized, the demand for yet more farmland became insatiable. According to the study by the World Bank over 70 percent of the large-scale land deals have been in Africa. Many of these African countries are host to what is widely called “land grabbing,” or the aggressive foreignization of land and resources through a suite of land transactions and in the name of food and fuel security (Zoomers, 2010). The recent spike in global food prices is again igniting another round of land acquisitions and there seems to be no end in sight to food price increases. Indeed, they are now at their highest levels since indexing by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization began in 1990, contributing to historic unrest in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

The form, substance, and meaning of such large-scale land acquisitions vary across states (Hall 2010; Borras and Franco 2010). Most are as yet projected and not actual, and are dominated by leases rather than sales, making ‘grabbing’ - strictly speaking - a misnomer. It can also be confining because the resources targeted by this transnational surge of asset concentrations extends beyond land to water, sub-surface minerals, carbon spaces, wildlife habitats, genetic substances and labor. The fact that the social and institutional agencies of this reconstitution of global property relations also include local capital and non-Western states unsettles the simple north-south dichotomy suggested by discourses of re-colonization. Despite the concentrated and hectic pace of the current spate of acquisitions, it arguably constitutes the latest phase of an ongoing process of neoliberal restructuring that has profoundly reshaped African social landscapes since the 1980s (Ferguson 2006).

In this work we propose instead the sociologically grounded analytical concept of enclosures to explain what the generic and descriptive term ‘land grabbing’ has sought to examine. Specifically, we seek to recast and explicate land grabbing as socio-spatial enclosures in a global context characterized by sovereign states and the ever-continuous process of capitalist commodification and valorization. Here we amplify the insights of Philip Woodhouse (2003) that enclosures are a default mode of capitalist development and suggest that this needs to be historicized in relation to the shifting cosmographies of power within which they are framed. Our goal is to more fully appreciate the place of land and *lebensraum* in neoliberal accumulation and to explicate the uninterrupted and continuous reordering of social nature that constitutes the ontology of development.

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<sup>2</sup> Egypt is reportedly the world’s largest wheat importer (Garrett, 2011).

Key to these processes is the notion of *terra nullius*, understood here not as a legal doctrine but as a potent developmentalist narrative for the incorporation of social and physical spaces whose denizens challenge and resist processes of commodification. Any attempt to understand the current dynamics of enclosures would be incomplete without addressing the critical role of the state. We elucidate this argument through a discussion of changing forms of land and agrarian relations in Ethiopia where today a spatially differentiated process of capitalist enclosures maps on to an earlier form of semi-feudal predatory dispossession. Ethiopia is particularly illustrative of the processes we seek to discuss. In 1975, after the overthrow of the imperial monarchy, the country experienced the most radical land reform so far undertaken in the continent, a transformation that abolished all forms of tenancy and vested control of the land in the state. Paradoxically, that very same redistributive reform today serves to facilitate a spatially differentiated but no less extensive process of land alienation. Using optics of emptiness and inefficiency, the Ethiopian state is selectively replacing recalcitrant development sites with newly capitalized enclaves likely to yield higher rents and institute what James Scott has called the legibility of both nature and society (Scott 1998).

### **Enclosures and Development**

Imperial and capitalist forms of enclosures have been a constitutive feature of the international expansion of the capitalist world market over the past few centuries. Enclosures both precondition and recondition capital accumulation and represent far more than the mere fencing and bounding of open fields, pastures, and woodlands. They signify the processes through which common lands were integrated into market relationships, the hallmark of which was the displacement of commoners and their gradual conversion to wage labor (Marx 1867). This involved the refashioning of land into a commodity through its disenchantment as a lineament of nature and moral economies. The formation of a class of wage-laborers through separation of the direct producers from the land simultaneously separated the land from the producers and made its reproduction in the abstracted form of a 'fictitious commodity' possible (Polanyi 1944). The change this brought about was not confined to formal property rights. Turning land into a quantifiable and calculable commodity entailed a profound erasure of sedimented cultural practices and historical memories through which land as a collective entitlement had been inscribed. This emptying out and disenchantment represented a profound reordering of social nature in order to make way for the reified and fetishized relations characteristic of capitalist commodity relations.

Enclosures in this sense have been an integral component of the development of historical capitalism. As David Harvey (2003) reminds us, accumulation by dispossession is a recurrent phenomenon that seeks to incorporate new spheres of social life into the remorseless engine of the capitalist world market. In an age of development and high modernism, enclosures have also proved central to state projects of modernization. The immense material process of ‘creative destruction’ that is entailed by the advent of capitalist accumulation means that “modern places must be reinterpreted within the complex thematic of ‘abstract space’— that homogeneous realm manufactured by an immense network of banking systems, business conglomerates, and information lattices that produce state and commercial power” (Yaeger 1996: 8). Enclosures do not follow the innocent nursery tale of land-based people saving enough money to voluntarily migrate, thereby clearing the way for the capitalist improvement of soil, seeds, production technologies, and infrastructures. Both were and are marked by the violent dispossession and displacement of people and the expropriation of common lands (Federici 2009, Manning 1998, Woodhouse 2003, Linebaugh 2009).

The enclosure of the commons and European expansion overseas were historically related processes and their overall effect was to expand the productive base of capitalism, which meant that land could now be marketed for “higher use.” The development of agrarian capitalism in England provides a paradigmatic instance of these twin processes. Between 1793 and 1815, the British Parliament passed 5,286 private Enclosure Acts that redistributed seven million acres or about 21 percent of the country’s surface area (Ordinance Survey Atlas 1985: 154). But the prodigious expansion of English industry proved incapable of absorbing the mass of displaced peasants, and the space of the British Empire served as a crucial release-valve for the ‘surplus populations’ thrown out by enclosures. According to Robin Blackburn, these two processes were at times mutually reinforcing, as the enclosure of the commons within England was facilitated by the flow of profits from the new world slave plantations: “the number of Enclosure Bills presented to Parliament closely follows Ward’s findings for plantation profitability” (Blackburn 1997: 577, note 67). Elsewhere too as capitalist states annexed foreign lands, they cannibalized the commons within the metropolises as well through a gamut of land reclamation schemes.

### **Cosmographies of Power and Rituals of Dispossession**

The political world out of which these transformations emerged was characterized by the

European colonial expansion overseas and the development of absolutist states within Europe itself. During the Renaissance Europeans partitioned the earth into places enchanted and profane, known (*terra firma*) and unknown (*terra incognita*); leading cosmographers in this age absolutism included the Spanish Hapsburgs, who used the science of cosmology to expand their powers vis-à-vis other sovereigns (Portuondo, 2009:119). Cosmographies are master representations embedded in conceptual or physical maps that delineate and categorize places (Raffles, 2002). The criteria for representation are politically nuanced, and naming, signifying, and locating are value-creating acts that augment the power of those who wield them. Imperial representations and ideologies of conquest drew on various motifs including assertions of a God-given right enacted through ceremonies of the 'Requirement' of submission as in Spanish America (Seed 1995), or the rights of discovery and trade as in the Portuguese or Dutch empires (Pagden 1996), or the Justinian notion of *terra nullius* invoked by the British Crown, first in Africa and more famously in Australia (Banner 2005, Richards 2002, Daintith 2010, Stolzenberg 2010).

The uneven and staggered extension of modern forms of sovereignty and capitalist social relations created the conditions of possibility for a new cosmography of power. If the political reach of the state had structurally delimited the space of surplus extraction in premodern empires, the 'empire' of capital was constitutively different and could in principle operate through the mechanisms of the market without necessarily impinging on formal political sovereignty as such. Far from being a trans-historical form of territorial rule, modern sovereignty is the geopolitical expression of the historically and sociologically specific features of capitalism as a social order. The social form of sovereignty that crystallized over the past two centuries is in this respect intimately tied to the distinctive mode of surplus extraction under capitalism. An emergent feature of this social order is the formal separation of the political from the economic as institutional domains, and as a result of this differentiation:

Lines of political jurisdiction halt at fixed national borders, while those of economic activity speed on through a myriad of international exchanges without undermining the ramparts of formal sovereignty above. ... It is now possible, in a way that would have been unthinkable under feudalism, to command and exploit labor (and natural resources) located under the jurisdiction of another state. This is because capitalist relations of surplus extraction are organized through a contract of exchange which is defined as 'non-political' (Rosenberg 1994, 121, 129).

This structural differentiation of spheres made it possible to express cosmographies of power in ostensibly neutral and non-political forms through seemingly technical or self-evident notions of ‘improvement’ and ‘development’.<sup>3</sup> But their substantive content has been a persistent rationalizing ethos of utilitarian calculation:

[t]he calculations that drove the Parliamentary enclosures in the interests of ‘improvement’ were not so very different from today’s economic arithmetic. The pressures of intensified production and profitability have been infinitely aggravated by the growth of supermarket chains and globalization, and the technical possibilities of industrialized agriculture have increased beyond measure. But at the root of the problem now, as it was then, is the logic of capitalist profit (Wood 2003).

As more and more spaces were incorporated into the world market and the dynamics of capital accumulation, the territorial extension of political rule to secure surplus became less and less an imperative. But there were always places outside the spaces of capitalism, communities and commons that appear as empty spaces from the vantage point of capital, and consequently not amenable to its commodifying logic. These are places that had to be politically subjugated and pacified in order to be incorporated into the workings of the world market. The Roman doctrine of *terra nullius* crystallized as a powerful signifier of this socio-political logic. Shorn of legal pretenses, *terra nullius* delineates a land belonging to no one. If *res nullius* is an ownerless thing, *terra nullius* is a place without an owner. It is nullified place, a void waiting for remediation in the form of investments of capital or developmental interventions. Modern sovereignty impedes this unless, of course, *terra nullius* is claimed in a non-politically imposing way. Here, the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* forms of *terra nullius* becomes salient, the latter being unlikely to upset formal political sovereignty. Indeed, under certain circumstances, such a designation even enlists the self-interested support of political sovereigns.

The doctrine of *terra nullius* has had a distinctive history prior to and during the era of the

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, of course, Lockean notions of improvement were inextricably bound up with imperial expansion in Ireland and North America, just as the notion of development had its origins in the late colonial period (Cooper 1997: 64-92). Nor did formal sovereignty imply that post colonial states were henceforth from politically mediated pressures from the IMF or the World Bank. But with the historical extension of the system of sovereign states as a result of decolonization, the empire of capital did take on the form of appearing less and less territorial.

consolidation of capitalism (Benton and Straumann 2010). While not explicitly referring to *terra nullius*, Locke claimed that the whole world was initially an empty and desolate commons awaiting the investment of labor and improvement by humankind to make it theirs (Locke, 2003). The natives beyond the space of capital were only entitled to land in so far as they could enhance it through labor-induced exchange value. For Locke there was no doubting the superiority of this principle of improvement: “There cannot be a clearer demonstration than that of the American tribes who possess unlimited land, but no private property, have not one hundredth parts of the Conveniences we enjoy” (Locke 2003, 296-97). Most famously, the British took the self-serving position that until their arrival in 1788, all of Australia was unsettled and theirs for the taking, a legal fiction that endured until 1992 (Banner, 2005). In the post-World War II era of development, non-capitalist social spaces were likewise considered static voids in need of development and progress, dormant traditional places waiting to be brought to modern life. Developmental states everywhere have used notions akin to *terra nullius* to figuratively nullify space, enclose it, and then ‘develop’ it. Capitalist development appears here as redemptive, the antidote to a condition of emptiness.

Discourses of *terra nullius* are not necessarily new to Africa. The continent has repeatedly been defined as “empty” in terms of culture and history and subjected to various attempts at enclosure long before the current panic over global food and fuel security took root. As French (2004: 19-20) points out in *A Continent for the Taking*, “From Hegel to Conrad, we have been told time and again that Africa has little history worth recalling, or to believe the late Oxford scholar Hugh Trevor-Roper, no history at all, ‘only the history of Europe in Africa.’” These Eurocentric assertions were of a piece with the late-nineteenth century European civilizing mission. Decolonization and independence have done little to prevent new assertions of emptiness and new modes of enclosures of social and physical spaces, forms of *terra nullius* narratives that are routinely expressed in statistical averages of low population densities, underutilized land and unproductive labor (Bellamy, 2009; Geisler, 2010).

In its own way the World Bank has applied a version of *terra nullius* to Africa. Recent reports (2007, 2009, and 2010) suggest a shift of institutional support and focus away from smallholder farming in favor of industrialized agriculture and new green revolution approaches (McMichael, 2009). Its 2010 report arranges countries according to yield gaps, situating most of sub-Saharan Africa into the category “high yield gap” despite “suitable land available.” The same episteme

dominates a 2009 report by the Bank entitled *Awakening Africa's Sleeping Giants*, where the Bank posits a “‘vast underused land reserve’ in the Guinea-Savannah zone covering much of West, Central, East and Southern Africa, and proposes an intensive process of agricultural commercialization across the region” (Hall 2010:6). Both reports, Hall continues, “agree that, in this region, low population densities and low mobility prevail, which suggests that agricultural intensification will require larger farm sizes (World Bank 2010: 64).” A predictable consequence of this instrumentally rationalizing logic is the tragedy that the very African nations who are today net sellers of farmland have the highest scores on the global hunger index (Robertson and Pinstrip-Anderson 2010 : 272). One such state is Ethiopia where today agribusiness expansion is dramatically recasting the social and physical landscape of the country. Despite being free from direct colonial rule and experiencing one of the most radical redistributive land reforms in the 1970s, Ethiopia has today become one of the main sites of developmentalist enclosures.

### **Ethiopia: From Imperial to Developmentalist Enclosures**

At the end of the nineteenth century the Ethiopian state was able to defeat Italy and as a consequence of not being colonized, Ethiopian society did not experience the sorts of transformations introduced by colonial capitalism elsewhere in the continent. Instead, European territorial encroachment triggered a sustained process of predatory expansion that more than doubled the imperial realm. In the process, various smaller polities were incorporated into the imperial tributary order and their inhabitants reduced to servile status. A complex, culturally coded social and spatial hierarchy consequently characterized the political economy of twentieth century Ethiopia.

In the core regions of the agrarian empire, social stratification was articulated around rights derived from persons on the land. The immediate producers were in principle free with secure and hereditary rights to land known as *rist* that was periodically redistributed within the kinship community. Superimposed on this form of tenure were tributary rights known as *gult* in which a class of warrior lords had asserted prerogatives to appropriate anywhere from a third to half the peasant output (Tamrat 1972; Crummey 2000; Rahmato 1984; Donham 1986). This nexus of social property relations had important implications for the developmental dynamics of the agrarian polities in northern Ethiopia. Since lords did not own the land from which they derived tribute, they did not exercise a direct role in the process of production and could do little to

enhance its productivity. Peasants likewise had no incentive to increase production since it would be subject to appropriation by the class of lords (Rahmato 2004; Makki 2011).

The effect was a sharply restricted potential for productive advance and technological innovation. With no social impetus for intensive gains in productivity warrior lords found extensive territorial expansion to be the most reasonable strategy for increasing the overall surplus and augmenting their social power. The late nineteenth-century predatory expansion was driven as much by this social logic as it was a response to European imperial penetration into the region. In the newly incorporated peripheral regions, a system akin to serfdom was unevenly instituted in areas of plough cultivation while the territories beyond them, the *dar ager*, where culturally different pastoralists or lineage-based communities lived, were transformed into a peripheral zone beyond the pale and therefore subject to periodic pillaging and plunder (Donham and James 1986; Tibebe 1995; Hassan 1994).

Despite some significant reforms that accompanied the process of dynastic centralization and absolutist state formation in the 1940s and 1950s, most significantly by the partial and uneven transmutation of dues into taxes, this entrenched social structure remained essentially intact until it was decisively felled by the 1974 Revolution (Zewde 1984, Rahmato 1987, Donham 1986, Makki 2011). In perhaps the most profound social transformation in twentieth century Africa, the Revolution dislodged both the *ancien régime* and the tributary system on which it rested. A radical land reform was promulgated in March 1975 that vested all land in the State. Newly formed Peasant Associations were given authority to oversee the redistribution of the land and an upper ceiling on the size of plots of ten hectares per household was set. All litigation related to land was cancelled and the hiring of wage labor was prohibited.

In subsequent years, several unsuccessful attempts were made to extend state farms and producer cooperatives in line with the statist orientation of the new post-revolutionary republic (Clapham 1988). But following the Great Famine of 1984, when an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 peasants perished, the State launched a forced campaign of resettlement and villagization (Giorgis 1989). Peasants were congregated into compact village settlements or resettled from the north to places in the south often through sheer coercion. As a result, by the end of the 1980s, close to half a million peasants had been resettled and the state had overseen the construction of new villages where “nearly 40 percent of the country’s rural population, numbering about 14 million peasant farmers, had forcibly been villagized” (Berisso 2002, 117). This centralizing drive,

and the suppression of all political manifestations of cultural distinctiveness, fueled an ongoing armed insurrection by an alliance of ethno-nationalist movements that mobilized peasant producers along social and cultural lines to intensify the assault against the state.

In May 1991, this alliance of ethnonationalist movements - known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) - seized power and reconstituted the state into a Federal Republic organized along ethnically-defined administrative units. Coming to power in a context of neoliberal globalization, this second republic adopted a generally market-oriented approach and collective farms were rapidly privatized and producer cooperatives dismantled. The government has so far refused calls to reconstitute property relations by privatizing land and the 1995 Constitution reaffirmed key provisions of the 1975 land reform that guaranteed the usufruct rights of smallholders. In this respect, the state's basic market-oriented developmental strategy has been based on the commercialization of smallholder agriculture (MoARD 2006: 3). Towards this end, between 2003 and 2010 the government carried out an extensive certification and titling program that has been much praised by the World Bank for its low-cost approach. But these are not free hold titles that can be used as collateral. They merely certify the use-rights of the smallholders (Holden, Deininger, and Gebru: 2007).

Given that the EPRDF came to power on the backs of a mobilized peasantry, this is perhaps not so surprising. But the rationale for this strategy was not merely political. It was also based on the recognition of two key features of the country's socio-economic reality. First, given the prevalence of smallholder agriculture with low capital inputs, a strategy geared to increasing their productivity through inputs such as chemical and organic fertilizers and improved seeds could generate high returns without creating major social dislocations. If each of Ethiopia's nine million cultivators was to produce one quintal of grain more per year it would represent a considerable augmentation of the 2010 total cereal production of 18m tons. The second reason for this emphasis on smallholder agriculture concerns food security. Here too the regime cogently argues that the mere expansion in total food production is no guarantee that the poor would be in a position to access it in a market-mediated system of grain provisioning. A universe of smallholder agriculture, whatever its limitations, would ensure that peasant households will continue to have direct access to basic food grains.

While this reaffirmation of support for smallholder agriculture would seem expedient for political and social reasons, state interest in foreign investment has stirred in the last few years. The

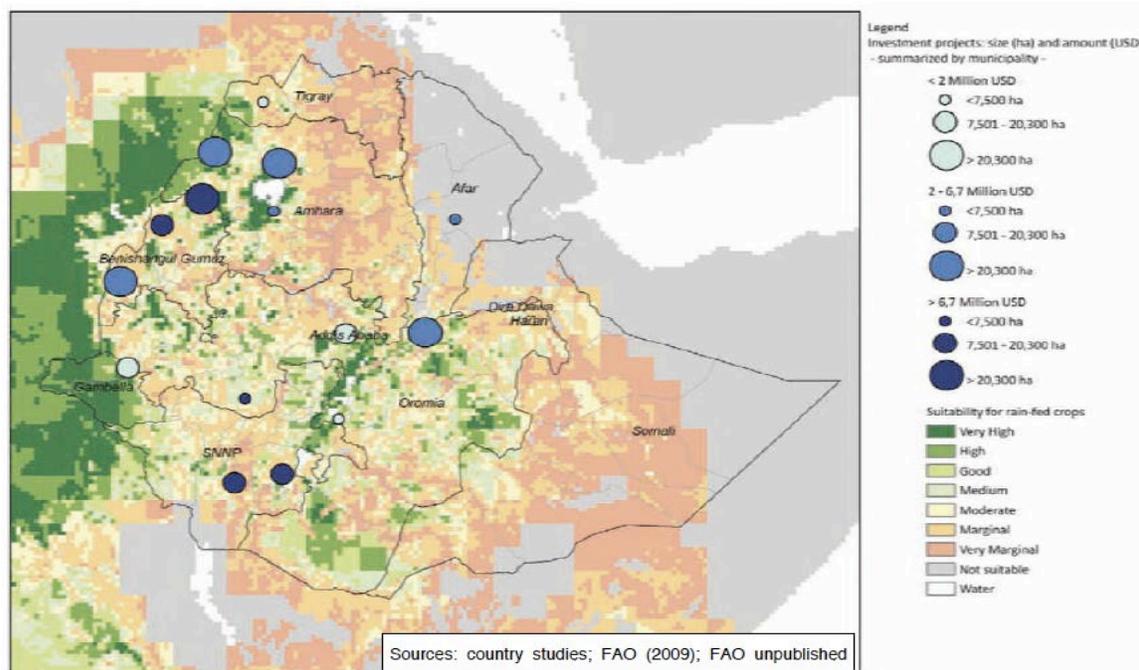
famines of 1973 and 1984 - recent enough to be a lived experience for today's leaders - produced massive mortality and political discontent that fuelled the crisis and eventual downfall of the First Republic (Keller, 1992). This is not lost on the current leaders and has made them more open to recommendations that the solution lies in the application of commercial-scale green revolutions (Webb, Von Braun, and Yohannes, 1992). In line with this, two investment zones have recently been opened to foreign private investors. In small enclaves in the highlands themselves, where the majority of smallholders reside, investors interested in forms of horticulture cultivation that require heavy capital and labor inputs on limited amounts of land have been awarded concessions. This is the case with the growing floriculture industry which has been expanding prodigiously over the past few years, in part driven by investments from Dutch companies (Meles and Helmsing 2010). According to the government, in one hectare of floriculture, investors could hire an average of 20 laborers. But given the perishable nature of these products, horticulture can only be undertaken in areas close to a developed transport infrastructure. In the current conditions this means they have to be undertaken in the central highlands, primarily around Addis Ababa. But the government plans to extend floriculture and fruit cultivation to the environs of Bahr Dar, Arba Minch, Mekele, and Dire Dawa as well, where regional airports have recently been expanded. So far, some 4,000 ha of land have been leased to Dutch investors without any extensive alienation of peasants from their land given the existence of considerable reserves of State Land (MoARD 2010; MoFED 2010).

If no extensive expropriation of smallholders is envisioned in the highlands, the cultural core of the old empire, in the lowland peripheries state policy boldly echoes *terra nullius* narratives of unproductive and empty spaces that need to be made productive through agribusiness investments. In 2005, the Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) embraced foreign and domestic investment in large-scale commercial agriculture on "unused" lands (MoARD 2006). These are areas with limited labor supplies and poor infrastructure, and where malaria and the tsetse fly have traditionally inhibited large movements of highland people into the area. In these circumstances, according to government officials, the kind of agriculture that is suitable cannot be labor intensive, but must instead rely on mechanized farming requiring considerable outlays of capital for irrigation systems. While in the past investors were presumed to be uninterested in these areas, two recent developments have changed the situation. The first is the expansion of transport infrastructure into the lowland areas with the result that investor interest has steadily increased (Foster & Morella 2010). The second has to do with the changing circumstances of the world

food market. In contrast to the past 40 or 50 years of relatively stable world food prices, prices and demand have recently soared because of energy costs and the changing demands of an expanding middle class in China and India. This situation, likely to persist for decades, makes Ethiopia's agricultural sector much more attractive to investors looking for 'virgin' lands. These agricultural investments sites are located in the very regions that historically constituted the imperial periphery, and their conversion into mechanized agriculture entails enclosing the land and water resources used by pastoralists and historically marginalized communities on the western periphery. Lavers (2011:7) is very clear about this:

For a minority subsisting from pastoralism or shifting cultivation, mostly in lowland areas, the government sees no long-term alternative to sedentarisation (MoFED 2003). In the words of Dr Aberra Deresa, State Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, "at the end of the day we are not really appreciating pastoralists remaining as they are. We have to improve their livelihood by creating job opportunities. Pastoralism, as it is, is not sustainable. We want to change the environment" (Butler 2010).

Map I: Documented Land Acquisitions in Ethiopia, 2004- 09



Source: FAO, IIED and IFAD (2009)

The investors that have so far come forward are a mix of states and private agro-industrial complexes. They include three Indian companies: Karaturi, the Ruchi Group, and the BHO Agro Plc. All three were awarded land in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia. Another company, Saudi Star, established by billionaire Saudi/Ethiopian citizen, was given 10,000 hectares to grow rice for the Saudi market, but this is set to expand to as much as 100,000 ha in the near future. In addition, there are smaller scale investments by Israeli, Dutch, German, Italian, and Chinese firms interested in biofuels or grain production. Besides the private companies, the government has approved the leasing of 22,000 hectares of land to the National Bank of Egypt and another 3,000 ha of land in Bale has been provided to neighboring Djibouti in exchange for space in the port of Djibouti, Ethiopia's primary access to the sea (Addis Voice, 29 August 2010). So far some 300,000 ha of land have been disbursed, but the government plans to lease out an additional three million hectares by 2015 (MoFED 2006). Towards this end, the federal state has instructed each of the nine ethnic administrative regions to create a 'bank' of priority investment land. Since April 2003, the government has also declared a five-year tax holiday for agribusiness ventures that export at least 50 percent of their production (EIU 2008). The effect has been a steady secular increase in total FDI inflows into Ethiopia over the past decade, increasing from US\$ 135m in 2000 to US\$ 545m in 2004. Since then the yearly FDI inflows have varied between US\$ 545m and US\$ 265m (UNCTAD 2008).

After a period in which the terms of the leases were being set by regional administrations that had very poorly developed regulatory capacities, in January 2009 an Agricultural Investment Support Directorate was established at the federal level within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD). The Directorate is to serve as the principal agency for negotiating leases on land above 5,000 ha. In April 2010, the Directorate issued a standard federal rate for land leases. The price is contingent upon proximity to the central market of Addis Ababa or to the sea ports so that on a farm site located 700 km away from Addis Ababa, an investor is expected to pay 111 birr (about 8 USD)/hectare per annum. From there the price either increases by 4.05 birr/km as the location draws closer to the central market, or declines by the same rate as it moves further away from it. For irrigated farms, the lease price was to be 158 birr per hectare/annum, subject to the same changes in the rate depending on distance from Addis Ababa and the ports. Astonishingly, there are as yet no fees being levied on the use of water resources for irrigation

purposes, although the Ministry of Water Resources has been mandated to introduce fees (NBE: 2010).

The speed and scale of these transformations is, paradoxically, accounted for in part by the very radical land reform that was instituted in 1975. While the land proclamation in the first republic and the 1995 Constitution of the second republic in principle protect the use rights of producers and pastoralists, by creating a defacto state monopoly, they in effect provide state actors with enormous powers to alienate the land from the direct producers. Peasant in areas adjacent to expanding urban centers or in zones targeted for large-scale investments are particularly vulnerable and are increasingly being evicted. According to Article 3/I of Proclamation 455 of 2005:

the woreda [district] administrator the power to expropriate lands and evict peasants from them on the grounds that the lands in question are needed for ‘public purposes’, or will be more valuable if they are utilized by private investors, cooperative societies or “other bodies” (Rahmato 2004: 239).

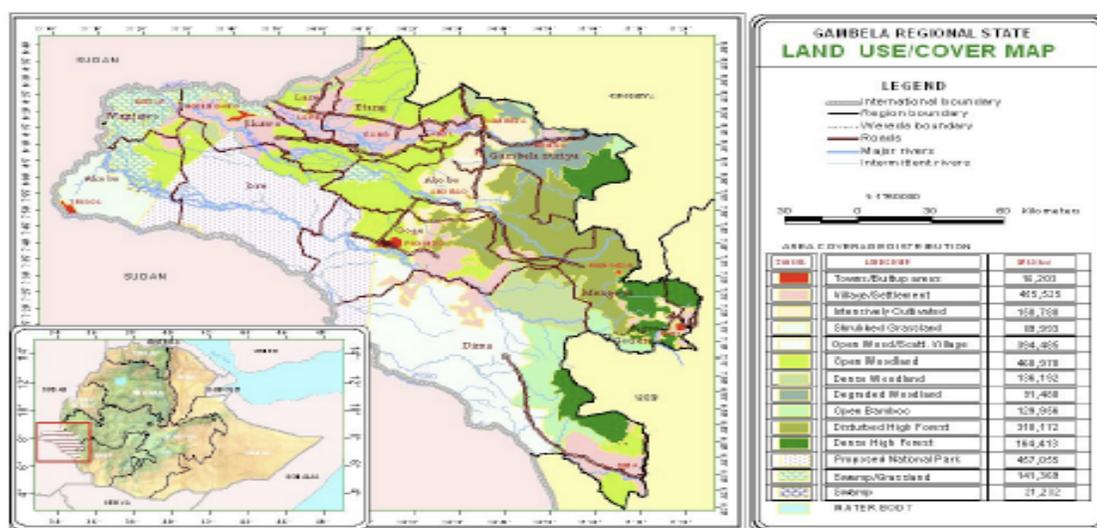
While the law stipulates that peasants have to be compensated, for the most part this has taken the form of providing them with an alternative plot and some financial compensation for the loss of some movable property. In almost all cases, there is no prior consultation with the concerned communities, and while peasants have expressed the hope that land titling will provide them with tenure security, the primacy being given to large-scale commercial farming suggests that from the perspective of the state, the registration of land is just as much intended to facilitate ‘better’ land use (Rahmato 2004: 235-243)

The developmentalist state is here recasting its internal landscape, consolidating its sovereignty, and signifying its hegemony. The cosmography of power justifying enclosures is moving from conceptual mapping to an officially transformed cartography of land use. No longer does this show a relatively uniform and egalitarian social landscape of smallholders and pastoralists. Instead, what is emerging is a physical representation of development strategy: a highland of smallholders surrounded by patches and swaths of extensive commercial farms laced with infrastructure and new worker settlements (Map 2). Having identified its *terra nullius*, the state in alliance with corporate capital can now offer developmental opportunities to fill them in. A 2009 government brochure intended to attract large-scale investors declares that as much as 1,238,005 ha of unused land is currently available in the relatively fertile Gambella region alone. Almost all the districts in the

Baro Alwero, Gilo and Akobo watersheds are believed to have huge potentials for cotton, sesame, soybeans, groundnuts, rice, sugarcane, spices, fruits and vegetables, large-scale livestock operations, apiculture, and fish production (FDR of Ethiopia Gambella Investment, 2010).

As noted above, the World Bank has become a key player in this process, mounting research to identify “areas of growth potential, where increased public investment in specific geographic and development areas might make an optimal contribution to economic growth” (World Bank, 2006:i). World Bank research regroups Ethiopia’s administrative districts into “Four Ethiopias” based on 51 welfare indicators, and sets the stage for an operational expression of *terra nullius*. The report charts out lands susceptible to varying degrees of underutilization, and, drawing on the analysis of de Soto’s (2000), identifies spaces of dead capital waiting to be brought to life (World Bank, 2010:xix).

Map 2: Land Investment Potential in Gambella



Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ethiopia (2009)

All this is not to say that the current regime in Ethiopia is pro-large corporation. But it definitely is pro-development and committed to a classical notion of development that once informed the national projects of newly independent post-colonial states. Modernization from this perspective implied a progressive decline in the share of agriculture in the national income and in the composition of the labor force. The resources released from agriculture would ostensibly help to fuel an industrialization drive. Although the highland peasantry is an untouchable political base,

pastoralists and indigenous producers in the periphery constitute a reservoir of backwardness and a chronic impediment to modernization, the industrialization of agriculture has increasingly acquired priority in the regime's development agenda. This is still largely perceived as a benign extension of new technologies and improved inputs, abstracting from the displacement of pastoralists and indigenous producers that the enclosure of land and water entails.

The expansion of agribusiness and industrialized agriculture at the expense of smallholders has been part and parcel of the current market-oriented transformations in Ethiopia. Their stated aim is to overcome the social obstacles and natural limits to the capitalization of agriculture, but in fact constitute a profound challenge to smallholder farming and to the viability of social organizations based on *res communes*. Given the transnational scope of these challenges, local struggles in Ethiopia will necessarily have to be linked to solidary struggles elsewhere, and the issues over which they mobilize can no longer be confined to the traditional repertoire of peasant grievances, but will have to include issues of identity, housing, gender, and ecological citizenship articulated within what Farshad Araghi has called the New Agrarian Question (Araghi 2000).

### **Conclusions**

We have suggested in this paper that this latest wave of large-scale land grabs is better understood through the analytical lens of enclosures, and that it represents a concentrated expression of the capitalist reconstitution of heterogeneous places and times in order to construct the homogeneous abstract space-time of commodity production and circulation. These expansionary and rationalizing processes have historically been accompanied by ideologies and discourses that represent differential social spaces as backward, stagnant and beyond the horizon of modernity, a *terra nullius* outside the invigorating dynamics of capitalism. Their redemption through modernization and development requires a profound process of cultural disenchantment and social emptying out, a reconfiguring of the multiple social forms through which the metabolic relations with nature were regulated. This transition from a generically defined traditional past to a modern future has been conceived and framed in the anodyne language of rationalization, improvement, and development. Situated within an alternative history of the annihilation of non-capitalist spaces, enclosure appears not as a figurative trope, but a harshly lived experience. It is the bludgeon that shatters the presumed condition of static pre-modernity and customary forms of property, production and exchange in order to inaugurate their transition into the supposedly universal and

dynamic forms of capitalist modernity.

Discussing the inner connections between these processes of territorial incorporation and expanded reproduction, Rosa Luxemburg once argued that capital accumulation over time would require imperial expansion across space, and the continuous incorporation of non-capitalist social spaces would make it increasingly difficult to resolve crises of overproduction and ultimately doom the civilization of capital itself.<sup>4</sup> Almost a century later, Fredric Jameson remarked that it had today become easier to imagine the end of the world through ecological catastrophe than it is to imagine the end of historical capitalism as such (Jameson 1994: xii). The imaginative and political dilemmas suggested by this differing diagnosis are today being tested on an astonishing scale, in conditions of profound ecological crisis, in the continent of Africa - the ostensible 'last frontier' of capitalist rationalization. The societies subjected to these projects of incorporation and rationalizations are of course not empty or blank spaces on which capitalist forms can be straightforwardly inscribed. The current attempts to resolve the world economic crisis through a renewed process of enclosures and the extension of market relations has met a powerful chord of resistance. These complex and uneven forms of resistance constitute a profound challenge to neoliberal doctrines that have served as the ideological cement of world politics and economics over the past three decades. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the outcome of these convulsive transformations and contestations constitutes one of the great moral and political challenges of our times.

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<sup>4</sup> "The more violently, ruthlessly and thoroughly imperialism brings about the decline of non-capitalist civilization, the more rapidly it cuts the very ground from under the feet of capitalist accumulation" (Luxemburg 1963: 453). The inner connections between expanded reproduction and territorial expansion suggested by Luxemburg have been controversial ever since they were first articulated. See here Ernest Mandel (1968: 362-363).

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