Contemporary agrarian extractivism from a multiple politics perspective: Insights from Guatemala


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Abstract
Since the mid-2000s there has been an outstanding, agribusiness-led expansion of sugarcane and oil palm plantations in Guatemala’s northern lowlands. For Maya-Q’eqchi´ residents of the area, the changing relations of labor and land control that this has brought is believed to threaten their subsistence in multiple and unfamiliar ways. Forces pushing for the emerging flexible agrarian extractivist regime of these flex crop agribusinesses generate both consent and contestation to its particular forms of domination and exploitation. Building from a particular multiple politics perspective this article engages with an initial discussion on the nature and character of current cycle of contention in the Guatemalan countryside. On one hand, many groups of Maya-Q’eqchi´ lowlanders are turning their unrest into concrete practices of resistance framed as “defense of territory”. Such struggles unfold through both militant and everyday forms. Everyday forms of resistance are usually aimed at reducing labor exploitation and eroding the expansionary strategy of the agribusinesses. Q’eqchi´ lowlanders’ militant forms of contention are articulated through “defensive” and “offensive” strategies and are becoming part of strategic litigation processes. For this reason, Q’eqchi´ lowlanders are building strategic-but-delicate alliances with progressive state actors and especially with national social movement organizations. On the other hand, state, corporate and other social actors pushing for sugarcane and oil palm expansion frame this accumulation and governmental project as “responsible and sustainable investment”. Their repertoire of contention involves “divide and win”, “pretty up” and “rule of law” strategies deployed via discursive, regulatory and violent forms of contention. Grounded politics of agrarian change in Guatemala, then, are shaped by complex and messy practices of a material and an ideational nature. They are subject to multiple interventions and tensions, which may mobilize, neutralize or at least transform consent into resistance and vice versa for a time or for good. Outcomes of contemporary agrarian change are, therefore, anything but a story foretold.

Keywords: multiple politics, flex crops, land relations, labor regime, flexible agrarian extractivism, resistance, rural social movements, Guatemala.

1 This paper is based on an article proposal under review at the Journal of Peasant Studies by the time of submission. Please do not cite.
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INTRODUCTION

Questions around the political dynamics of agrarian change regained momentum from the mid-2000s on with growing financialization of the economy (Fine 2012) in general and of agriculture (McMichael 2012) and nature (Lander 2011) in particular. Financialization became a vector and an expression of convergent economic, energy, environmental and food crises in the context of increased pressures over farmland and natural resources within and around rapidly growing economies, like those of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and of some Middle-Income Countries (MICs). In short, favorable structural conditions are at play to (re)invigorate accumulation projects based on the control and exploitation of land, water and other natural resources (hereinafter land resources).

In Guatemala, a domestic oligarchy-controlled bunch of agrarian, financial and industrial firms occasionally allied with transnational investors and financiers, have been ‘grabbing control’ (Borras et al. 2012: 851) over large swaths of farmland for sugarcane and oil palm plantations. This coincides with recent control-grabs in the fields of mining, oil extraction, fast-growing tree plantations, carbon trading, hydropower generation, cattle ranching, high-end tourism and narco-traffic money laundering. Besides, these land resource control-grabs shape and are shaped by increasing economic corridors and mushrooming environmental enclosures. Altogether, such projects result in powerful forces restructuring rural territories in comprehensive way.

Specifically, the Guatemalan government considered in 2008 the spectacular figure of 1,101,604 hectares, or 37 per cent of the country’s total farmland, to be apt for sugarcane and oil palm cultivation (Alonso-Fradejas 2012). These are two ‘flex crops’ which benefit from high material flexibility as their produce ‘has multiple uses (food, feed, fuel, industrial material) that can be, or are thought to be, flexibly inter-changed’ (Borras et al. 2014: 2). Besides, they show high discursive flexibility too, namely ‘the ability to strategically switch among multiple legitimating discourses which construe the necessary meanings and representations to achieve an objective’ (Alonso-Fradejas and Hunsberger forthcoming). Indeed, the legitimating narratives about these flex crops navigate a series of alleged virtues in relation to food and energy security, climate change mitigation, economic development and even (rural) democratization.

Sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses base their expansion in Guatemala upon two complementing strategies. One is the ‘temporal deferment’ (Harvey 2003) of their investment. Namely, current high revenues are dedicated to finance costly and long-term investments including land and (flexible) mills. The other strategy is the making of governable spaces to fit their investment. That is, influencing not only formal regulatory frameworks and institutions but especially ideas, discourses and practices of different state and social actors to accommodate the agribusinesses’ accumulation interests. This

\[3\] Understood as ‘spatial assemblages of power relations and identity strategies [signifying] the ‘bottom-up’ spatial contexts for identity and cultural difference (or place) more than the ‘top-down’ connections between state and territory’ (Gregory et al. 2009: 745-746).
entails the taming of at least, first, the social relations of the dominant agricultural ‘labor regime’ (Bernstein 2010) or the ‘specific methods of mobilizing labor and organizing it in production, and their particular social, economic and political conditions’ (Bernstein 1988 31-32 in White et al. 2012: 622). I will argue throughout this article how the emergent labor regime of the sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses could be defined as a flexible agrarian extractivist regime. Secondly, the making of governable spaces also entails taming the rationality of governing land resources of multiple state and social actors across different scales\textsuperscript{4} and places\textsuperscript{5}. I will discuss how nowadays this is not only pursued through force and coercion but increasingly via different mechanisms ‘involved in the governance of conduct and, a fortiori, in the production of hegemony’ (Jessop 2010: 342).

Forces pushing for this accumulation and governmental project create both consent and contestation to emergent forms of being exploited and governed (Scott 1985, Edelman 2001, Li 2007). Elaborating on research since 2006\textsuperscript{6} in the Guatemalan northern lowlands, I will argue that emerging forms of organizing agrarian production and of governing land resources are fuelling a new ‘cycle of contention’\textsuperscript{7} in the countryside. In so doing, I will engage the economic, political and ideological distribution conflicts around this cycle of contention from a multiple politics perspective. This perspective is thought to be helpful in two ways: 1) in approaching the complexities of contention in historically and geographically situated conjunctures by bringing into the analysis a “comprehensive enough” number of relevant state, corporate and social actors; and 2) in focusing on the nature and character of multiple and analytically relevant relations among such actors, or in other words, on the politics within the politics of contention. An analysis from this multiple politics perspective is only comprehensive when applied to all sets of actors in contention. My main interest here, though, is to put forward an initial discussion on the why, how and whose dissent turns into a practice of resistance to changing labor and land control relations in the Guatemalan countryside. Hence I will concentrate in the analysis of the politics between what seems to me historically antagonistic forms of organizing agrarian production and of governing land resources (i.e. flexible agrarian extractivism vs. indigenous-peasant farming), but just the politics across multiple actors resisting flexible agrarian extractivism (e.g. grassroots groups and organizations vs. national militant peasant movements) and the politics within particular groups of actors in resistance (e.g. the indigenous peasantry).

\textsuperscript{4} Comprising ‘the nested (and sometimes not so nested) hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size’ (Jessop 2007: 104,105).

\textsuperscript{5} Broadly understood as a ‘unit of space that has discrete boundaries, shared internal characteristics, and that changes over time and interacts with other similar units’ (Gregory et al. 2009: 539)

\textsuperscript{6} Research methods include geographic information system analysis, interviews, participatory observation and a gender differentiated household survey in October 2010. The survey’s sample was stratified by village (significance level 5 per cent) and included 294 randomly selected households (586 surveys) in twenty villages of six municipalities within the northern lowlands (see Figure 1).

\textsuperscript{7} Understood by Tarrow as ‘less momentous than revolutions, more connected than contingent chains of events’ (2012: 215)
Beyond a series of conclusions about ruptures and continuities between current and previous cycles of contention, my main corollary here is that outcomes of agrarian change are not a story foretold but the product of multiple and dynamic politics.

**Q’EQCHI’ LOWLANDERS’ GRIEVANCES ABOUT EXPANDING OIL PALM AND SUGARCANE AGRIBUSINESSES**

The Guatemalan northern lowlands encompass almost half of the national territory and are mainly inhabited by the Maya-Q’eqchi’ people (hereinafter Q’eqchi´). It is in this agrarian frontier that the (1.6 million-hectare) *Mayan Biosphere Reserve* co-exists with tens of thousands of indigenous cultivators supplying Guatemalan and Central American food markets, traditional coffee estates and cattle ranches and sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses more recently. As mentioned, this article builds on research since 2006 in various villages from six municipalities within three distinct sub-regions of the northern lowlands depicted in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Research sub-regions, departments and municipalities in the Guatemalan northern lowlands region**

![Map of Guatemalan northern lowlands with highlighted sub-regions and municipalities](image)

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Government of Guatemala 2009. Scale: 1:3,000,000.

The three sub-regions share tropical climate and an altitude below 500 meters above sea level but show significant differences in their historical constitution. Even if worthy, a full-fledged historization of the three sub-regions goes beyond the scope of this article. Risking over-simplification, then, two distinct territorialization processes characterize the social construction of the Polochic\(^8\), on one side, and of South Petén and the

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Northern Transversal Strip\(^9\) on the other. The Polochic river valley farmlands were first granted by the national state in the 1870s to German settlers, “white” Guatemalan oligarchs and government cronies who basically established large coffee estates. Q’eqchi’ families living in the area were incorporated in the estates under the colonato\(^10\) labor regime. Families expelled from or fleeing the haciendas settled in the hilly lands surrounding the valley during the 20\(^{th}\) Century. Other remained as colonos in the haciendas up to very recent. Further north, agrarian colonization of Petén and the Northern Transversal Strip rainforests was sponsored by military regimes in compliance with the counter-revolutionary land policies following the 1961 Alliance for Progress Initiative. Since then, thousands of families (especially Q’eqchi’) fleeing the colonato labor regime (e.g. in the Polochic) and/or the genocidal war violence\(^11\) arrived in these two sub-regions in search of farmland. Together with this majority of landless and indigenous population there were also “white” traditional large landlords, small and medium “ladino”\(^12\) cattle ranchers and government and military officials arriving in South Petén and the Northern Transversal Strip during the second half of the twentieth century.

It is in these contexts that sugarcane (in the Polochic) and oil palm (all over the northern lowlands) agribusinesses are capturing control over land resources. This meaning, they are becoming those with ‘the ability to mediate others’ access’ (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 158). Access control is just one among the three dynamics ‘constitutive of relations among actors in relation to resource appropriation, management or use’ (ibid.): these are gaining, maintaining and controlling access to resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003). There were active land and labor markets in the northern lowlands long before the mid-2000s. Since then, however, the Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR) and land titling programmes unfolded from the late nineties on, in a world historic juncture where land resources became increasingly seen as global commodities, allowed for capitalized “outsiders” to gain control over large tracks of parochial land resources. This led to profound changes in the nature and character of the social relations around land and around the forms of organizing agricultural production within the flexible agrarian extractivist regime brought about by sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses. And indeed, those changes became major sources of unrest among Q’eqchi’ lowlanders. Specifically, this unrest is rooted in historically constituted and interrelated grievances

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\(^10\) As an in-between tenancy and bonded-labor this relation of production has many variants that evolved through time and place. It generally combines wage-work with in-kind or labor payments to the landlord (patron) in exchange of the colono’s family right to live and farm (only) self-provisioning crops in the patron’s estate. For a recent account of the colonato regime in Guatemala see Hurtado (2008).

\(^11\) Still during the 36 years of war and especially under the early 1980’s military-led scorched earth policy, there were also 160 massacres in the northern lowlands region. The 1996 Peace Agreements lead to the official end of a conflict which left 200,000 people killed or disappeared. Over 80 per cent of the victims were civilian, rural, Maya indigenous people (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999).

\(^12\) This is akin to the mestizo racialized identity elsewhere in Latin America.
of agrarian, socio-ecological and ideologico-political nature, as well as in those related to the ‘terms of incorporation’\textsuperscript{13} to the emergent regime.

Agrarian grievances are related to the directions of change in land control relations. There are basically two categories of landless people in the northern lowlands. The first and bigger one is that of second and third generation descendants of the 1960s’ settlers. The second group is that of those who became landless in the context of expanding sugarcane and oil palm plantations. 11 per cent of the families from the investigated areas in the northern lowlands lost their land tenure rights between 2000 and 2010, mostly to give way to oil palm and sugarcane plantations (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 518). Indeed, land use change analysis between 2005 and 2010 shows that 23 per cent of the lands used for oil palm in 2010 were previously used by small-scale cultivators to grow staples (ibid.: 516). All these peasant lands were privately titled by the state so the corporate land-grabs were perfectly “legal”. As the Manager of a leading oil palm company argues, ‘land acquisitions, at least by us, have always been legal. If the transaction is legal I do not see any problem. We have the right to buy [...] When buying land we must be sure there is not a single problem with the title’ (quoted in Hernández 2012, stress added). Still, almost half of the surveyed male heads-of-household who lost their land and were not working for a sugarcane or an oil palm company when surveyed said they were forced to sell their land. A third of them said they sold it because it was useless for farming and the rest because they were highly indebted (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 77). Besides, the meager payment most Q’eqchi’ peasant families received for their land did not allow them to develop alternative non-farm livelihoods nor to regain access to farmland.

Socio-ecological grievances have to do with changing land- and water-scapes. 27 per cent of the lands used for oil palm in 2010 were rainforests in 2005, 1 per cent wetlands and 38 per cent grasslands (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 516). Rivers are usually diverted to irrigate plantations and, together with other fresh water sources, contaminated with sugarcane mill vinasses, oil palm mill effluents and different petro-chemicals (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011).

There are also far-reaching ideologico-political grievances. As expressed by a middle-aged Q’eqchi’ peasant man from Sayaxché municipality, ‘we, the Q’eqchi’, are facing a major problem. Our thinking is being dominated as well as our beliefs. This is the result of the way the powerful and rich people think. Of those who want to dispossess us from our lands once again’ (group meeting, March 2010). Indeed many Q’eqchi’ lowlanders feel outraged at the fact that they are losing the land and autonomy they fought so hard for as swidden cultivators settling as far as possible from estate patrons and state officials.

Finally, it is worth noting that expansion of flex crops in the northern lowlands is destroying agricultural employment by small-scale cultivators. While oil palm requires

\textsuperscript{13} Ranging from advantageous to adverse terms and conditions of people’s incorporation to a new regime of accumulation (Du Toit 2004: 1003)
of 52 working days per hectare/year and sugarcane 36, the two annual maize harvests require 112 and chili cultivation 184 (Dürr 2011, in Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 521). Besides, many of those incorporated to the flexible agrarian extractivist regime as plantation workers or small-scale outgrowers feel they were adversely incorporated. First, most of the available jobs in the plantations are paid via piece work wages which seldom cover the basic food basket cost. Working arrangements and conditions are flexible in time and space, outsourced via subcontracted crews and thus lacking of any labor liability. Secondly, lack of technical assistance and access to sufficient credit together with variable pricing and high quality and uniformity standards for the oil palm fresh fruit bunches delivered by small-scale outgrowers is forcing many out of contract-farming and even into landlessness. Hence, Bernstein’s ‘agrarian question of labor’ becomes a central one. That is, ‘what if the forms of capitalism, including industrialization […] in the South today are incapable of generating sufficient, and sufficiently secure, employment to provide ‘a living wage’ to the great majority?’ (2006: 13).

All these grievances are therefore related to concrete issues that make it harder for many to make ends meet. Different groups of Q’eqchi’ lowlanders feel their ‘subsistence minimum’ (Scott 1976) is being violated. This feeling is enhanced by narrowing (or breaking) moral economic arrangements of inter-class reciprocity (Thompson 1971, Scott 1976). The moral economy relations which allowed for the continuous (re)negotiation of survival standards between (non-indigenous) traditional landed upper classes and Q’eqchi’ ‘rural classes of labor’ are fading away. As argued by an elder Q’eqchi’ man and former landless movement organizer:

Sometimes I wonder if we have advanced at all. As colonos in the estate the Patron forced us to work for almost nothing. Still, we had a patch of land to grow our maize. If anything went wrong with the harvest he would never let us starve. He looked after us because he needed us. Now we are free labor, they say. Free to starve, I say. The rich people do not need us and so do not care about us anymore (interview in Panzós municipality, November 2007).

The previous statement is very telling of historically constituted subsistence levels among Q’eqchi’ lowlanders throughout different labor regimes. Elders usually argue how even though patron-client relations under the colonato labor regime were exploitative and humiliating they still allowed for the continuous renegotiation of the minimum requirements for the reproduction of the family. Even wage and working conditions of seasonal peasant laborers were based on such (if not celebrated at least tolerated) moral economy arrangements. Things have changed under the hyper-commodified, impersonal and flexible labor regime enforced by oil palm and sugarcane agribusinesses. Wages, labor arrangements and conditions are standardized by absentee owners and inaccessible managers so it is far more difficult to negotiate subsistence

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14 All those who ‘have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and increasingly ‘informalised’ wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure ‘informal sector’ (“survival”) activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment’ (Bernstein 2010: 73)
minimums, at least the way it used to be done before. Besides, diverse attributes in terms of class, gender, age and their manifold intersections lead to multiple interpretations of what subsistence is and where its minimum threshold lays. For instance, Q’eqchi’ food cultivators (landed or not, part-time laborers or not) show not only higher expectations but also higher satisfaction levels of their reproduction needs in comparison to non-farming Q’eqchi’ laborers (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 117). Poorer Q’eqchi’ women tend to include access to drinking water, firewood, housing materials and medicinal plants as minimum requirements for subsistence more often than less-poor women and men in general (ibid.). Q’eqchi’ elders consider access to and respect for sacred places a must while Q’eqchi’ youngsters across genders and classes generally show more urban living standards and believe access to information technologies is fundamental for them. Notwithstanding such differently experienced though vital grievances and the growing difficulties to deal with them many are making of their unrest a practice of resistance.

Q’EQCHI’ LOWLANDERS’ RESISTANCE TO EXPANSION OF SUGARCANE AND OIL PALM AGribusinesses

Resistance could be approached as a rather complex and unstable process and Deleuze argues ‘processes are becomings and aren’t to be judged by some final result but by the way they proceed and their power to continue’ (1995: 146 in Gregory et. al 2009: 745). Resistance processes often entail a messy bunch of practices of material and ideational nature. Its power to continue is contingent on multiple interventions and tensions among, across and within contending parts at different scales and places. In engaging with Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ situated practices of resistance I will discuss the way they frame their unrest through ‘shared understandings and identities that justify, dignify and animate collective action’ (Tarrow 1998: 21). Then, I will describe the different forms and particular strategies of resistance to agribusiness expansion informing the Q’eqchi’ repertoire of contention, or ‘the ways people act together in pursuit of shared interests’ (Tilly 1995, in Tarrow 1998: 30).

Resistance framed as defense of territory

A synthetic review of recent master frames of contention in rural Guatemala is useful to understand the way Q’eqchi’ lowlanders frame their struggles today. During the war times (1962-1996), revolutionary uprising relied upon urban and (mainly) rural poor working classes-in-and-for-themselves. Specific claims by indigenous peoples and women, for example, were subject to revolution’s triumph. National peasant organizations related in different ways to guerilla groups and/or to Catholic Liberation Theologians framed their contention for a land-to-the-tiller land reform as part of the broader revolutionary struggle. Some of these organizations disappeared but others remain active and will be addressed here as “militant” peasant organizations, often of national scope.

Neoliberalism was forged and enforced in Guatemala almost a decade before the Peace Agreements were fully signed in 1996. By then, outcomes of the Washington
Consensus’ deregulation, liberalization and privatization imperatives were already a major cause of grievances across (rural) classes of labor. The 1992 National Peasant Congress echoed the problems related to unfavorable terms of (agricultural) trade and the dumping of cheap, subsidized corn from the USA in the Guatemalan markets. Nonetheless, after the bloodiest scorched-earth massacres were held by the military during the eighties\(^\text{15}\) and popular expectations for revolution’s success languished, militant peasant organizations and others framed their contention as a struggle for life (lucha por la vida) prioritizing state’s respect for politico-civil rights. It was only after 1996 and in the context of deepening neoliberal Globalization, that militant peasant organizations embraced food sovereignty\(^\text{16}\) as their master frame of contention against the dominant food regime (Friedmann and McMichael 1989).

To the exclusion of the (indigenous) peasantry from food, labor and credit markets and from public support to their forms of farming during the orthodox neoliberal Globalization period it is added once again from the mid-2000s on their exclusion from the control of the remaining land resources, as previously discussed. It is in this context that resistance to flexible agrarian extractivism came to be framed as defense of territory. This is not a novel concept but it is only within current cycle of contention that defense of territory will be shared among grassroots constituencies other than indigenous peoples, and endorsed with a broader political meaning. As argued by an influential Q’eqchi’ ideologue (lawyer and Member of Congress) the ultimate goal of this frame of contention is to ‘move from practices of cultural resistance to the full exercise of collective rights in the territory’ (in APROBASANK’s workshop in Guatemala City, June 26 2013). Defense of territory entails both oppositional and propositional practices of resistance. It is a vision for a peoples’ self-determined government of the relations of access to, control over and use of land resources as means of production and as territory. In this way, ‘a government agency, an oil palm company or a conservation NGO needs to negotiate not with individuals but with a collective rights subject that is the indigenous community, via the latter’s particular government institutions’ (ibid.). Defense of territory for Q’eqchi’ lowlanders is rooted in their self-representation as R’al Ch’och (Sons and Daughters of the Earth). This shared ethnic identity intertwines with that of a Chayanovian peasant class to encourage, justify and dignify Q’eqchi’ collective action around aforementioned grievances. Indeed, a constitutive and historically distinctive feature of defense of territory lies in its development and enactment from below. There are of course charismatic leaders and ideologues elaborating on the concept. But it is from the grassroots that such actors in particular and (national) militant peasant organizations more generally, adopt this master frame of contention.

\(^\text{15}\) Efraín Rios Montt, one of the most influential Generals at the time, was convicted by a Guatemalan Court for Genocide and Crimes against Humanity on May 10, 2013. Ten days later, the Constitutional Court reversed the verdict. The case was still open while writing this article.

Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ repertoire of contention in defense of territory

Tilly understood the repertoire of contention as ‘the whole set of means that a group has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups’ (1986: 4, in Tarrow 2012: 222). Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ repertoire of contention in defense of territory is informed by corporate agents, government officials, national militant organizations and other allies of the indigenous-peasant movement. For Tarrow, social movements are ‘those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents’ (1998: 2). But as Tilly remarks, ‘social movements are a particular, historically discrete form of organizing contention and not the be-all and end-all of contentious politics’ (2004b, in Tarrow 2012: 222). Evidence from the northern lowlands supports Tilly’s remark. Hence I will discuss a constellation of resistance practices involving both overt-but-occasional militant forms and surreptitious-but-ubiquitous everyday forms of contention in defense of territory, as summarized in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Forms, strategies and practices of the repertoire of contention in defense of territory

Source: Author’s elaboration

Scott defined everyday forms of resistance as ‘the nearly permanent, continuous, daily strategies of subordinate rural classes under difficult conditions’ (1986: 22). In addition to frequent gossiping and grieving in trust networks there are at least four other
recurrent practices of everyday resistance to flex crop agribusinesses by Q’eqchi’ lowlanders. I have clustered them two pairs here. The first pair is particular to landless or occasional wage laborers. It is aimed at reducing exploitation in plantation work. One resistance practice here is group walk off plantation work without prior notice or subsequent justification. Sometimes this a reaction to unfulfilled promises by the agribusinesses to support the local school or to mend local dirt tracks. Other times it is due to offenses by foremen. There are in fact several cases where a community agreement exists not to work for a sugarcane/oil palm agribusiness. The second resistance practice of the first pair entails foot-dragging and reporting more work than actually performed. In the municipalities of Ixcán and Chisec, though, foot-dragging was upgraded to sabotage during 2011 and 2012. Full sacks of agro-chemical were buried instead of applied to oil palms. Drain canals were dug but only next to the roads through which supervisors drove-by and not alongside the plantation. This almost made the main oil palm company in the area face bankruptcy (interview with a small-scale oil palm outgrower, Chisec, July 2013). However, the company survived with new funding and local laborers are no longer hired in retaliation. The other pair of everyday practices of resistance is particular to the peasantry and part of a strategy aimed at eroding the expansionary strategy of the agribusinesses. One resistance practice has to do with a wave of arsons. In 2007, dozens of oil palms caught fire in South Petén when cultivators burnt their fields in preparation for farming. When questioned by the companies’ private security or by the police, village members would argue such incidents happened due to “unintended negligence”. Nonetheless, oil palm companies sued the owners of the plots from which the fire spread out and asked for US$ 1.875 per burned oil palm17. This was considered terribly unfair by the peasants who in many cases found no other option than selling or giving their land as in kind payment to the company. Similar events happened in 2007 and 2008 in the Polochic Valley. Only differences were that maize cultivators were just leasing the farmland, both sugarcane and oil palm plantations were partially burnt and payment to the agribusinesses was in kind but as free labor. The second practice of this second pair is carried out by Q’eqchi’ peasant women from different villages. It is about women concealing the land title so their partners would find it more difficult to sell the family plot. Indeed, 86 per cent of the female heads-of-household within those households who sold their land between 2000 and 2010 was openly opposed to the sale (Alonso-Fradejas 2012: 519).

In spite of everyday forms of resistance by the rural poor being ubiquitous Scott also argued how ‘at times of crisis or momentous political change [everyday forms] may be complemented by other forms of struggle which are more opportune. [Everyday forms] are the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow’ (1986: 22, stress added). In the northern lowlands everyday forms are increasingly being complemented or scaled-up towards more confrontational and organized forms of defiance. As of July 2012, the Guatemalan Secretary of Agrarian Affairs reported ‘1,214 cases of unresolved conflicts in the countryside (involving) 1,000,055 peasants

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17 The official monthly minimum wage in Guatemala was of US$ 190 in 2007 (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011: 45).
claiming rights over 338,935 hectares of land’ (Prensa Libre September 4, 2012). Figure 3 below shows how 76.4 per cent of the conflicts reported by the Secretary were concentrated in the northern lowlands.

Figure 3: Geographical location of the 1,214 agrarian and environmental conflicts registered by the Government of Guatemala in 2012

Negative experiences with the World Bank-designed and financed land titling programmes and Market Led Agrarian Reform motivated many Q’eqchi´ lowlanders to move away from a “freehold property route” towards securing private property rights over particular land plots to a “defense of territory route” towards achieving the juridico-political status as subjects of collective rights in the living territory. Accordingly, militant, overt and structured struggles around land by the Q’eqchi´ are not so much anymore about securing land property rights but about developing and strengthening abilities to control and use land as a means of production and as territory. Militant forms of contention in defense of territory by Q´eqchi´ lowlanders include both defensive and offensive strategies. The former are aimed at developing and strengthening their abilities to maintain and control access to land resources. Through the latter more offensive strategies they seek to gain access (including repossession) to land and to change the terms of incorporation to the flexible agrarian extractivist regime.

Regarding the defensive type of militant strategies Q´eqchi´ ideologues and grassroots organizations alike argue that forcing the state to formally recognize communities as subjects of collective rights is a relatively simple ‘juridical juggling’ (in APROBASANK’s workshop in Guatemala City, June 26 2013). Aware of the fact that law is neither self-interpreting nor self-implementing (Franco 2008) they argue that
state’s recognition is of little use if not underpinned by strong grassroots organization and vibrant livelihoods. Hence defensive strategies to maintain and control access to land resources revolve around community self-determination in the ideologico-political and economic realms. On the one hand, there are ongoing initiatives to strengthen communal-led systems of governing village politics and justice, particularly with regards to the government of land relations. One common practice of contention in this regards is the refusal to give right of way through village lands to trucks, machinery or workers from sugarcane or oil palm agribusinesses. Many a time this is done in retaliation to similar practices by the companies. Another recurrent practice to resist dispossession is that of counter-ruling freehold land tenure. For example, a communal deed from a Sayaxché village states: ‘in those villages where companies are settled people’s freedom is not respected…they privatize all that is indigenous people’s patrimony [so we agree] nobody is going to engage in land deals with them’ (community deed number 19-2007). Other times community members are prevented from leasing or lending farmland to those who had sold their land before to a rancher or to an agribusiness without a community-sanctioned reason or without offering it first to other village members. Similar practices include that of not accepting as a new community member anyone known to have voluntarily sold his/her land before, and that of expelling from the village anyone violating these rules.

Notwithstanding, counter-ruling freehold land tenure is rarely effective if the reasons for villagers with individual land titles to engage in land deals are not comprehensively addressed. Hence, there are on the other hand initiatives to strengthening community livelihoods. Most often, available livelihood options for rural Q’eqchi’ lowlanders revolve around farming. Freehold land tenure has contributed to the shift from a communal system of yearly allocation of farmland according to every family’s reproductive needs to one in which the village lands became privately owned and “fixed” in time and space. As many as eight out of ten Q’eqchi’ families from the northern lowlands had to abandon an agro-ecologically, culturally and socially sound swidden farming system for a more intensive one suitable for the new land tenure regime. Agricultural intensification in Guatemala has been generally akin to growing dependence on petro-chemical farm inputs. Evidence from socio-ecological metabolism analysis of Q’eqchi’ peasant households (Mingorria 2014) and pioneering low external input agricultural practices (AVSF and APROBASANK 2011) show, however, that the key towards enhanced productivity in the many karstic, organic manure-lacking soils of the northern lowlands has little to do with a new Green Revolution miracle. Successful agricultural intensification has more to do with the ability of the family to divert higher amounts of labor towards a low external input-based intensification strategy. Becoming aware of this and lacking support from decimated government extension agencies “Campesino a Campesino” agroecological knowledge exchanges (see Holt-Giménez 2006) and efforts towards increased control over local food markets in search of more

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favorable terms of exchange\textsuperscript{19} have been re-signified as a way of contesting agribusiness expansion. These are some of the many ways in which defense of territory and food sovereignty frames of contention reinforce and intertwine with each other.

The \textit{offensive} type of strategies within more militant forms of contention in defense of territory include struggles for repossession, to gain access to land resources, and for better terms of incorporation to the flexible agrarian extractivist regime. These are often confrontational struggles and involve a wide range of rural working classes across Q’eqchi’ lowlanders. Two cases of struggles for \textit{repossession} are worth describing here because of their particular “access without control” dynamics. The first one is that of a community from Fray municipality which had its land officially titled in 1981, long before FONTIERRAS’ Market Led Agrarian Reform. Around 20 hectares of community land were seized by a large cattle rancher in the late 1990s and since then community representatives have been complaining to FONTIERRAS about it. FONTIERRAS officials advised them not to worry because the land was titled in their name. In 2008 the cattle rancher became an out-grower for an oil palm company and planted the contested 20 hectares with oil palm. Discouraged by governmental inaction the community decided to occupy the plantation, chop-off the oil palms branches and plant maize among them. In an interview in October 2009 company representatives claimed ‘the problem is between the community and the out-grower; we have nothing to do with it’. The conflict was not yet resolved by April 2014. The second case involves another oil palm company and a Q’eqchi’ village from Raxruhá municipality. On June 2012 the community council filed a petition to FONTIERRAS because 2.5 hectares of community land were seized by the company to establish an oil palm nursery. A fresh water creek supplying the village flows through the contested land and villagers maintain the company polluted it with agrochemicals. In November 2012 the villagers decided to put pressure on FONTIERRAS and blocked the nearby national road. They allowed drivers to bypass the blockage only after they had carried two baby oil palms from the nursery and into the middle of the road. The company was forced to withdraw from the 2.5 hectares of land but by February 2014 villagers were still harassed by the companies’ private security when fetching water from the creek.

Notwithstanding other practices\textsuperscript{20} land occupations remain the most common way of \textit{gaining access} to land resources beyond FONTIERRAS’ market mechanism. The most striking example in Guatemala’s recent history is the 2010 occupation of sugarcane plantations by around 800 landless Q’eqchi’ families in the Polochic Valley. It was here that from 2005 on an agribusiness purchased 5,400 hectares of land from traditional estates to move its sugar mill from the southern Pacific region to the Polochic. As mentioned, the Polochic Valley was basically inhabited by Q’eqchi’ families living under long-term \textit{colonato} relations. Since 2002, most of these families were already

\textsuperscript{19} Ongoing successful examples include the weekly “Peasant Markets” in Chisec and Raxruhá where only direct producers can sell their produce

\textsuperscript{20} Like being granted access to communal land resources by the community council or claiming land as an in-kind payment for unobserved wages and labor liabilities as former estate \textit{colonos}. 

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negotiating with their patron the purchase of the estate’s land through FONTIERRAS. Negotiations dragged on to meet FONTIERRAS’ bureaucratic procedures and suddenly came to an end when the sugar mill arrived in. The higher price and immediate payment bid of the sugarcane agribusiness quickly convinced traditional estate owners to call to an end negotiation with their colonos. In retaliation, hundreds of landless Q’eqchi’ families from the valley and the surrounding hilly areas occupied fourteen estates in November 2010. Five months later, 1,500 soldiers and policemen together with the company’s private security evicted all families from the estates. Crops and houses were burned down and one Q’eqchi’ squatter was killed by the police. Two more would be assassinated later on by hitmen. In June 2011 the Inter-American Human Rights Commission called on the Guatemalan state to secure the life and food security of the evicted families. On October 2013 the President of Guatemala announced the allocation of a 3.5 hectares plot to every family. As of May 2014 less than 10% of the evicted families have been granted such land and two of the estates were occupied once again. The sugarcane mill was in full production though.

The third and last category of the offensive type of militant strategies in defense of territory entails struggles for better terms of incorporation to the agribusinesses’ regime either as plantation workers or as out-growers. On one side, and particularly in Sayaxché where most farmland is under oil palm cultivation, Q’eqchi’ plantation workers have been struggling for better wages and labor conditions. Following a major strike during 2012 a negotiating table was promoted by government representatives. Whenever negotiations got stuck or the companies hired workers from other regions to put pressure on them local workers would ban any truck with fresh oil palm fruit from accessing to the mills. Some consider a great success the fact that every worker is now paid the official minimum wage and carried to work in a bus instead of in cattle trucks (interview with the workers’ representative on November 2013). For others, mainly landed workers, these are not achievements but just the minimum observance of some basic labor rights (group meeting with village representatives from Sayaxché, November 2013). On the other side, half of the 300 small-scale oil palm outgrowers in Guatemala claim in a letter sent on December 2013 to their contractor that ‘the company promised oil palm cultivation was the way out of poverty. However, after four years of meager financial and technical support, together with increasingly unfavorable conditions of exchange, oil palm is rather leading us to bankruptcy and landlessness’.

All these forms, strategies and practices informing the repertoire of contention in defense of territory are relatively well-known among contending actors. In fact, they were mostly inherited from previous cycles of contention. Yet a distinctive feature lies in the way they are use nowadays. Very often, this repertoire is unfolded not so much as an end but as a means for strategic litigation processes. These require grassroots practices of resistance putting pressure “from below” to be supported by politico-juridical advocacy “from above” and by research and communication “from the sides”. This is why many Q’eqchi’ grassroots organizations are linking in different ways with different allies within and beyond the local/territorial scales.
Scaling up contention: The politics of alliance-building in defense of territory

Becoming aware of the structural nature of their grievances many Q’eqchi’ grassroots organizations are increasingly willing to get involved in strategic litigation processes. It is for this reason that tactical and strategic alliances need to be forged. Q’eqchi’ lowlanders have found not many but definitely diverse allies. These include (inter)national militant rural social movement organizations, (inter)national development and human rights NGOs, engaged researchers, alternative media networks, the Catholic Church and even some progressive state actors. Among the latter, the “two doors policy” group of government officials stands out. Led by the Comprehensive Rural Development Bureau Secretary this group advocates for a differentiated policy response to peasant farming and to agrarian extractivism. They do this thinking that there are ‘intersections and possible complementarities between the two rural development models in contention’ (Minister of Food, Livestock and Agriculture21). Advocates of this policy fix are critical of both radical rural social movements and ultra-conservative oligarchs – a convenient positioning of those promoting an ‘extractivism committed to the rule of law and the green economy principles, with corporate social and environmental responsibility’ (Director of Strategic Policy, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment22). A more strategic but less influent ally within the state is the mayor of Raxruhá municipality. He was sued in the Constitutional Court by the corporate Guatemalan Agricultural Chamber (Cámara del Agro) after trying to tax oil palm companies in order to ‘recover part of the large expenses we have to make to try and mend what they destroy and pollute’ (interview with Raxruhá mayor, August 2013). Both the initial response of the Guatemalan Agricultural Chamber and the negative Court verdict on May 2014 radicalized the municipal mayor and the 56 auxiliary village mayors who now demand oil palm companies to leave (Raxruhá authorities’ special assembly, May 2014).

Notwithstanding it is with national militant peasant, indigenous, rural women and youth movements’ organizations23 that Q’eqchi’ lowlanders are linking more systematically with. This is not an easy endeavor, though. Increasingly complex class configurations emerging from changing land and labor relations intersect with age, gender and kinship attributes to result in a diverse range of positionings within and across Q’eqchi’ communities. This is not always read properly by militant organizations when they approach Q’eqchi’ villages as a tabula rasa of peasants struggling for autonomy (van der Ploeg 2010). Militant cadres complain about ‘how hard it is to organize people to struggle for land reform’ (interview with a community organizer from major militant peasant organization, October 2009) while village representatives claim that national organizations do not pay enough attention to local politics and timings of struggle.

21 In the academic “Conference on Agrarian and Rural Dynamics in 21st Century Guatemala”, October 11 2011, Guatemala City
22 In the governmental “I National Congress on Racism and Discrimination”, August 7-9 2013, Guatemala City
23 With a few exceptions from the environmental justice side, alliances with environmental organizations have been difficult and rare, not to mention those with big international conservation NGOs. On the latter see Ybarra (2011) and Grandia (2012).
(group meeting with authorities from different villages, November 2013). Besides, some grassroots organizations complain that militant organizations are very much influenced by Socialist imaginaries and do not take on board their particular claims as indigenous peoples (interview with a representative from an influential grassroots organization, October 2013). Indeed, Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ claims in defense of territory are too “indigenist” for some peasant organizations while their call for food sovereignty is too “peasantist” for some Pan-Maya indigenous organizations.

Nonetheless, Q’eqchi’ grassroots groups are linking more and more actively with militant rural social movements (often linked to international activist networks) to scale-up their struggles in defense of territory. Conversely, Q’eqchi’ lowlanders’ place-based practices of resistance allow for the relocalization of national militant rural social movements. These where somehow detached from territorial practices of resistance during the last two decades after their commitment to energy-consuming contention in the national and international arenas24. Place-based practices of resistance by the Q’eqchi’ (and others) in defense of territory are indeed reshaping from below the frames and repertoires of contention of national rural social movements. The “land-to-the-tiller” and “food sovereignty” frames are resignified within defense of territory. One example of this is the “Popular, Peasant, Women and Indigenous March” (La Marcha Indígena, Campesina, Popular y de Mujeres). Originally planned by evicted families in the Polochic Valley and a major national militant peasant organization as a nine-day march from Cobán to Guatemala City it became a major political event. Some 15,000 people walked into the capital City on March 27, 2012 and handed a petition to the President and to the Congress. The government agreed upon four points related to agrarian conflicts resolution and stronger control over private armed groups. According to President Pérez Molina other demands like ‘cancelling the debt of hundreds of peasant groups with FONTIERRAS, the moratorium to some development projects led by private investors, and the withdrawal of new military detachments were signed with reservations’ (Prensa Libre March 28 2012). As for the Congress, a deed was signed where they agreed to include Initiative 4084 on the Comprehensive Rural Development System Law for fast-track approval. Even though basically unfulfilled so far, the petitions of the “March” stand for a coordinated effort to counter the very strategies deployed by dominant state and social actors working on the making of governable spaces to accommodate flexible agrarian extractivism.

REPERTOIRE OF CONTENTION IN PROMOTION OF FLEXIBLE AGRARIAN EXTRACTIVISM

Frames and repertoires of contention are critical arenas of struggle in-themselves that serve ‘just as easily for social control as for insurgency’ (Tarrow 1998: 202). Whether to counter defense of territory, to advance flexible agrarian extractivism or both dominant corporate, state and social actors employ a repertoire of contention in promotion of flexible agrarian extractivism based in three mutually reinforcing

24 I.e., challenging the neoliberal corporate food regime at the World Trade Organization and during the mushrooming free trade agreements negotiations.
strategies (see figure 3 below). One is the old “divide and win” strategy. Its aim is to succeed in the making of governable spaces at the local/territorial scales through enticement, and its fundamental form of contention is of discursive nature. The second is the “pretty up” strategy. This is intended to make the agribusinesses’ accumulation project seem one of socially responsible solutions to pressing ecological problems across geographical scales. The “pretty up” strategy rests in enticement too and its fundamental forms of contention are of discursive and (private) regulatory nature. The third strategy is that of imposing a particular interpretation of the “rule of law”. This has a double intention: to secure what was accomplished through enticement and to achieve via coercion what enticement could not. The fundamental forms of contention within this strategy are of (public) regulatory and violent nature.

**Figure 4: Strategies, forms and practices of the repertoire of contention in promotion of flexible agrarian extractivism**

![Diagram showing strategies, forms, and practices of contention]

Source: Author’s elaboration

Actors pushing for flexible agrarian extractivism are aware of the fact that local/territorial scales are at least as important today as national and international ones, and so they invest considerable resources in the making of governable spaces at these scales. In doing so and realizing that ‘beliefs, ideological controls and discursive practices, as well as negotiated systems of meaning, shape all forms of access [to resources]’ (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 168) they unfold a “divide-and-win” strategy to engage with the symbolic power (Bourdieu 1989) ideological dispute at stake in the northern lowlands. For this, sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses employ what are commonly referred to as “corporate coyotes”. These are either occasionally hired
charismatic subjects or direct employees of the companies’ Community Relations Department or the like. As argued by a group of dispossessed families from Sayaxché:

They came to cheat us. “You better sell your land before it is flooded by the Puebla to Panama Plan hydroelectric mega-dams”, they said. “The companies will provide employment and welfare that the state cannot”, they told us too. And they were not people from faraway places, not even company lawyers or engineers. They were our brothers from neighboring villages! (Group meeting in March 2010)

Due to their local recognition, corporate coyotes can pervade communal institutions to counter the symbolic power legitimating dominant knowledge and imaginaries in the community like those informing the government of land resources. They elaborate on class, gender, generational or any other power cleavage to erode community consensus or to reframe it. They understand that socially differentiated subsistence minimums lead to multiple positionings within and across communities. Broadly speaking, it is mainly Q’eqchi’ young, landless men who are often more enticed by “fast moneys” offered by sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses as a way to escape from their parents’ “backwardness”. There are, of course, those who would rather farm or pursue another type of wage work, and also those who changed their mind after realizing that ‘money goes as fast as it comes and one must leave the skin in the plantation for it; it is just not a good deal’ (group interview with young Q’eqchi’ men from Sayaxché, June 2013). Conversely, Q’eqchi’ women across age groups and classes of labor are often the first to act against their partners’ or fathers’ intention to participate in deals with the agribusinesses. As previously discussed women usually act covertly and individually, although they also come together some times to push through gendered hierarchies in community government institutions and counter corporate coyotes.

However, building new consensus entails only half of the coyotes’ job. The other half requires ‘mobilizing’ the new consensus (Tarrow 1998: 175) in and across community groups so that people willingly accept to participate in land, labor or out-growing deals with the agribusinesses. While very well focused in mobilizing consensus around the flexible agrarian extractivist project among community groups, corporate coyotes are missing out another relevant set of actors in the local/territorial scales. Together with previously-discussed small scale oil palm outgrowers there are medium and large sugarcane and oil palm outgrowers who are anything but happy with the long term contract-farming arrangements (interview with a large oil palm out-grower in Fray, December 2013). Some feel the agribusinesses are not supportive enough when problems come, like in the case of the outgrower who was left alone by the oil palm company in the 20 hectares land conflict with a “bordering” community. Besides, many owners of traditional large estates and ranches who refused to (or could not) join the flex crops bandwagon feel socially displaced and negatively impacted by expanding

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25 They include NGO employees, preachers, teachers, doctors, community leaders, local radio stations, traditional landlords/patrons, ranchers, mayors, corn traders, or civil servants.

26 Indeed, the ideological dispute played out by corporate coyotes shapes all kind of decision making processes, including Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) by “the community”
plantsations. Medium and large cattle ranchers complain their cattle often get sick after drinking water running through or by agrochemical-intensive plantations, or get stressed by the plague of flies around the mills (interviews with ranchers from the northern lowlands during 2013).

The divide-and-win strategy corporate coyotes unfold is informed by and an expression of the “pretty up” strategy deployed to advance flexible agrarian extractivism. The sugarcane and specially the oil palm industries are reframing their image from simply another accumulation project to the ‘answer’ to food and energy insecurity, climate change, rural poverty and rural ungovernability (I Latin American Congress of Oil Palm Growers, October 17-18 2013, Antigua Guatemala). This is not any kind of answer but a “sustainable” and “responsible” one. In the prettying up of flexible agrarian extractivism as a socially responsible and ecologically sustainable answer to pressing socio-ecological problems “sustainability gatekeepers” are of outstanding relevance. They play a leading role in resignifying oil palm from a hazard to the best available option for rural working classes and the environment. Sustainability Gatekeepers are championed by big development and environmental international NGOs part and parcel of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), BONSUCRO, or the Roundtable on Sustainable Biomass (RSB). Both corporate coyotes and sustainability gatekeepers ‘coincide with the greater political power and have a hegemonic advantage [hence] a preeminent position in crafting emergent dominant traditions’ (Sivaramakrishnan 2005: 350). Through the “Guatemalan Sugar Producers Association” (ASAZGUA) and the “Oil Palm Growers Guild” (GREPALMA) agribusinesses are well represented in the powerful “Agricultural Chamber of Guatemala” and from there in the almighty “Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations” (CACIF). In spite of many others CACIF is the main ideologue prettying up flexible agrarian extractivism as the socially responsible and environmentally sustainable national development project.

Yet, when enticement and CSR strategies fall short there is always the state regulatory system. ‘Rule of law’ is what the owners of the Polochic sugarcane mill called for when violently evicting hundreds of families: ‘We bring employment and wealth; how are they [Q’eqchi’ food growers] going to progress with those little maize plants (maicitos)? Who else would be willing to invest US$ 50 million in this petty valley (vallecito de pipiripau)? Rule of law is what is needed here.’ (Guatevisión May 29, 2011). And rule of law was also what the CACIF call for when suing Raxruha Major in court. Within current cycle of contention this core governmental principle in a democratic state framework is being interpreted and implemented in a very particular way by relevant state actors. Even though the Constitution acknowledges constitutional hierarchy to international human rights treaties like ILO’s 169 and the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights, the Constitutional Court does not recognize the outcomes of 61 “community consultations in good faith” self-organized between May 2005 and March 2012. Rule of law also meant fast-track Congress approval on

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27 In all of them, communitarians unanimously rejected different extractivist accumulation projects
February 2013 of eight new laws on investment protection and labor flexibility promoted by the CACIF while freezing the legal initiative agreed with “The March”. ‘Rule of law and unconditional government support for any investor’ is what the Guatemalan President offered in a business forum in Spain on February 2013\textsuperscript{28}. Furthermore, the government is using the 1965 counter-insurgent “Decree 7 on Preventive States of Emergency”\textsuperscript{29} to deploy the military in villages where there are land grab-related conflicts. National attorneys, for their part, deal with disruptive collective action through the Anti-terrorist Bill and treat land occupations as penal offenses of “aggravated usurpation of property”, leading to dozens of peasant leaders and organizers put in jail (interview with a member of the Maya Lawyers Association, Guatemala City, June 2013). This kind of interpretation and implementation of the law speaks by itself about whose interests prevail within core institutions of the Guatemalan state. As argued by Li, ‘more authoritarian forms of government are often reserved for sections of a population deemed especially deficient and unable to exercise the responsibility of freedom’ (2005: 387, stressed added).

In addition to state violence, private and parastatal violence is also constitutive of the expansionary strategy of sugarcane and oil palm agribusinesses. Public dirt tracks are closed by companies’ gates and it is common for peasants refusing to sell to see their plots enclosed by plantations. Private “security” bullies address men refusing to sell their land in ways like ‘either you sell to us at the price we offer or we will have to bargain with the widow instead’ (group meeting in a South Petén village, March 2008). Threats are sometimes fulfilled and many have been assassinated or disappeared after refusing to sell their land or when mobilizing in defense of territory\textsuperscript{30}. If resistance is one side of the survival coin and compliance is the other joining criminal gangs, private security forces or becoming a narco hit man are all in the survival coin’s edge of growing despair in the northern lowlands. Scott argued how ‘certain combinations of atomisation, terror, repression, and pressing material needs can indeed achieve the ultimate dream of domination: to have the dominated exploit each other’ (1986: 30). Or attack each other. This is the case when groups of generally poor, landless Q’eqchi’ men are hired to attack or evict their fellow resisters.

**CONCLUSION**

Current cycle of contention in the Guatemalan countryside resembles to previous ones in many ways. I have tried to show the persistence of the state as a relevant means for as well as an arena of contestation. Besides, many forms, strategies and practices of contention in defense of territory and in promotion of flexible agrarian extractivism are inherited from previous cycles of contention.


\textsuperscript{29} Which do not require of Congress’ approval as long as they run for less than fifteen days (Acuña 2012)

\textsuperscript{30} It is difficult to give an exact figure because many resisters are attacked in moments and places other than those of direct confrontation. However, the Social Pastoral of Petén estimated in ‘dozens’ the number of resisters killed just there between 2004 and 2009 (workshop in Petén, November 2009).
Nonetheless, there are important ruptures with the past due to changing structural conditions of accumulation, domination and exploitation. Emergent land control and labor relations are pushing subsistence minimums to unprecedented thresholds. In this changing milieu the agrarian questions of labor and ecology become as critical as the agrarian question itself. There are also new actors (flex crop agribusinesses, global land governance institutions, NGOs steering RSC, politicized grassroots organizations, etc.) with sharpened governmental and accumulation logics on one side, and historically refined logics of resistance on the other. There are, in short, new analytical and political challenges ahead. For instance, the power transition from traditional landed upper classes to the agribusinesses is characterized by growing animosity of the former towards the latter. And growing cleavages across and within state actors may open new political opportunities for situated practices of resistance in defense of territory.

The framing of resistance to flexible agrarian extractivism as defense of territory offers the possibility to bridge the best of both worlds that is, of indigenous peoples’ particular forms of governing land resources and of peasants’ low external input family farming. It also allows for a grounded, territorialized vision of food sovereignty in motion. However, it brings about new challenges too. Three among such challenges are of outstanding relevance. First, the reliance of defense of territory in a united bearer of collective rights, that is the indigenous community, might be undermined by ongoing social differentiation dynamics. Second, focus on strengthening farming livelihoods and land government practices and institutions at the local/territorial scales provides with necessary means and meanings for resistance. But whether and how to engage with the state regulatory powers remain so far unresolved and central questions if self-determined practices aim to have a future. And lastly, in scaling up resistance towards strategic litigation processes there remains the challenge of the knowledge dialogue between, across and within village authorities, grassroots collectivities and national militant peasant movement organizations.

Analytical efforts to understand the politics of agrarian change and territorial restructuring in Guatemala will benefit from engaging with the economic, political and ideological distribution conflicts fuelling current cycle of contention. In doing so, it is critical to examine the changing practices of and relations between, across and within multiple corporate, state and social actors pushing for, resisting, complying with, or operating at the most violent margins of the flexible agrarian extractivist project. Following this particular multiple politics perspective, then, outcomes of contemporary agrarian change are anything but a story foretold.
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