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Land concentration and land grabbing in Europe: a preliminary analysis

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Abstract This article offers three insights. First, the renewed global land rush is indeed global: it occurs in the Global North too. Second, the ongoing trend of (generic) land concentration is just as problematic as land grabbing. Third, political processes involving actors at various sites and levels of the state and society mediate corporate and state interests in land, sometimes producing untended outcomes. New "deal brokers" (in finance, business and property) have joined the ranks of other elites (food empires, commercial producers, banks) to determine the dynamics of the European land rush.

Résumé Cet article présente trois constats. Premièrement, la ruée vers les terres est véritablement un phénomène mondial, qu'on retrouve même dans le Nord. Deuxièmement, la tendance actuelle à la concentration des terres est aussi problématique que l'accaparement. Troisièmement, des processus politiques impliquant des acteurs de divers secteurs et à différents niveaux de l'État et de la société interviennent dans les intérêts des grandes entreprises et de l'État pour la terre, avec parfois des résultats inattendus. De nouveaux courtiers financiers, commerciaux et immobiliers sont venus grossir les rangs d'autres élites (empires agroalimentaires, producteurs commerciaux, banques) dans la structuration de la ruée vers les terres européennes.

Keywords: land grabbing; green grabbing; land concentration; financialisation; Europe

Introduction

Land issues are rarely considered to be a problem for Europeans or a cause of popular struggle in Europe today, as they are elsewhere in the world. This is the impression that one gets from the emerging literature on contemporary global land enclosures, which is largely focused on countries in the Global South. However, a few important glimpses into the scale and nature of large-scale land deals (or "land grabs") in the North have emerged recently: in post-Soviet Eurasia (Visser and Spoor 2011; Mamonova 2012; Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012),[1] Canada (Sommerville 2011) and the United States (Kerssen and Brent 2014). Taking a cue from these still rare, but crucial, studies on land deals in the North, a group of researchers and activists joined together particularly to extend the work by Visser, Spoor, and Mamonova into Europe. The team carried out an action research programme on land issues in 13 countries of Europe, including several European Union (EU) member states. The study was launched by the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) and Hands-Off the Land (HOTL), a loose campaigning network of civil society groups. The technical coordination was handled by the Transnational Institute (TNI), an independent think tank. This article draws from the collection of papers that emerged from this

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action research, but focuses mainly on the EU case studies (and excludes the non-EU ones).[2] This is a preliminary exploration intended to trigger future discussion around land issues in the EU and to broaden the discussion around contemporary land grabs.

Our preliminary analysis suggests that the many concerns over land issues that are associated with countries and peoples in the Global South actually exist across the globe, including in "elite" regions such as the European Union, where one might least expect them. By bringing land issues in the EU into focus, this study seeks to contribute to the broader literature on the global land rush in at least three ways. The article offers three insights: the renewed global land rush is indeed global, it occurs in the North too; land grabbing is not the only important land issue in the world today, the ongoing trend of (generic) land concentration is equally significant; and intentions of corporate/state interests in land involve political processes mediated by actors at various sites and levels of the state and society. Land, business and financial "deal brokers" have emerged in the European land rush, joining the ranks of other elites (food empires, commercial producers, banks) in partly determining the dynamics of land politics. As the *Economist* recently observed:

> Weather, commodity prices, soil health, water access, dietary and animal health are not the forte of the average pension-fund investment officer. Political risks abound: cash-strapped governments in Europe and America may (belatedly) get around to cutting farm subsidies. (Economist 2015)

In light of this, we propose to draw preliminary conclusions about the presence of land grabs in the EU, and to argue for a future research agenda on this issue.

The remainder of the article is an elaboration of the three points above. The next two sections explain the context of land issues in Europe and examine land concentration processes. This is followed by an extended discussion of land grabbing, taking off from the notion of "control grabbing". We argue that land grabs cannot be understood as simply another set of transactions in the land market; the use of extra-economic coercion is, time and again, decisive. We also will stress that land grabbing implies a drastic re-ordering of land use. Next we explore the phenomenon of "green grabbing" in the European context. Finally, we offer insights into how and why land grabs and land concentration interact in the European context, which helps to make visible the issue of "entry denial" to young prospective farmers. Throughout this elaboration, the role of the elites is underscored.

The context: the urgency of land issues in Europe today

Despite the highly urbanised and industrial character of the EU economy, agriculture remains an important sector for a number of reasons. According to the 2012 Edition of Eurostat (EU 2012, 27), there were close to 12 million farms in the EU-27 in 2010, covering 170 million hectares of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA), a little more than 40 per cent of the total territory of the EU-27. These farms provide livelihoods and jobs to 25 million people, a total of 9.7 million annual working units (AWU) which expresses the number of full-time labour equivalents (EU 2012, 53). Farming in the EU is highly family labour-oriented. "In the EU-27 the share of family labour force in AWU was 75%, the regular non-family labour force was 17% and the non-regular non-family workforce 8%" (EU 2012, 53). There are other reasons why agriculture is so important in the EU:

> [i]n 2011, gross value added (GVA) at producer prices amounted to more than EUR 148 billion in the EU-27. 83.3% of this value is generated in the EU-15. France, Italy and Spain together produce almost 58% of the GVA of agriculture in the EU-15. (EU 2012, 65)

But subsidies also play an important role in this sector:

> In 2010, the value of all agricultural subsidies in the EU-27 amounted to EUR 55.5 billion. The share of the new Member States in the total value of subsidies paid to agricultural producers rose from 3% to 17.7%. (EU 2012, 65)

There have been significant shifts in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies over time, from subsidies on products to income support (based on previous levels of production)[3] and more recently to land-related payments. Alongside these changes the budget for rural development (the "second pillar" of the CAP) has been considerably enlarged. Together, these shifts have had direct and far-reaching (albeit sometimes contradictory) implications in terms of land and land concentration. In 2000, subsidies on products amounted to EUR 26.6 billion, but these fell to just EUR 4.7 in 2011. By contrast, subsidies on production jumped from EUR 2 billion to EUR 50.9 billion during the same period (EU 2012, 65). This shift is directly correlated with a dramatic concentration in land ownership within the EU during the same time period.

It is also worth looking at the composition of the value of intermediate inputs consumed by the agricultural industry in the EU-27. This shows how deeply industrialised the EU's agricultural sector has become and its high level of dependence on fossil fuel energy and on imports of resources, notably feedstock (which represents "virtual" soil and water) from, often, distant lands. These data go a long way to explaining why it is not easy for prospective farmers with little or no land or start-up capital to enter the sector, why small farmers have difficulty competing with larger farm enterprises and why "alternative agriculture" faces a constant uphill struggle. It also reveals who corners most of the profits from agriculture:

> Intermediate consumption in 2011 in the EU-27 accounted for more than 61% of the output value of the agricultural industry at producer prices […]. The main input from intermediate consumption is represented by animal feedstuffs, which account for 39% of the total value of intermediate consumption. Energy and lubricants account for 12% of the total value of intermediate consumption, while fertilizers and soil improvements amount to around 8%. The main intermediate input items for crop production are fertilizers, plant protection products and seeds and plants, which together account for 17% of total agricultural intermediate consumption. (EU 2012, 72)

This has direct implications on the incomes to be derived from farming by those working in the fields.

Land concentration: a persistent and accelerating phenomenon

Although land remains central to the lives and livelihoods of millions of Europeans, agricultural land is becoming concentrated into ever fewer, large holdings under the control of a few corporate entities. This is undermining the capacity of many farming households to construct and defend their livelihoods and maintain their autonomy. Growing concentration has shaped – and been shaped by – governmental agricultural policies, including the different modalities of the CAP subsidy scheme that favour elite large holdings, marginalise small farms and block the entry of prospective farmers.

Land control and ownership have become increasingly concentrated in a few large holdings. This is shown in Table 1, in which we compiled trends that are uneven and varied between selected EU countries. In 2012, small farms of less than 2 hectares (ha) dominated EU agriculture, comprising nearly half (49%, or nearly 6 million holdings) of the total holdings. While more numerous, these farms only control a small portion of the total UAA: a mere 2 per cent. In sharp contrast, farms of 100 ha and above – which represent just 3 per cent of the total number of farms – control half of the entire UAA in the EU-27 (EU 2012, 27). Applying more sophisticated statistical

Table 1. Utilised agriculture area (UAA) in hectare (ha) by size of holding, 1990, 2003 and 2007, selected countries in today's EU.

	Total UAA			Holding size < 2 ha			Holding size > 50 ha		
Country	1990	2003	2007	1990	2003	2007	1990	2003	2007
Bulgaria		2,904,480	3,050,740		312,790	191,100		2,278,900	2,497,710
Germany	17,048,110	16,981,750	16,931,900	123,670	24,770	20,110	9,228,820	12,046,610	12,594,570
Spain	24,531,060	25,175,260	24,892,520	555,600	369,710	311,960	14,836,700	17,406,120	17,481,430
France		27,795,240	27,476,930		82,610	62,180		22,022,030	22,745,390
Italy	14,946,720	13,115,810	12,744,200	1,246,160	901,620	773,120	5,072,440	5,099,300	5,015,850
Hungary		4,352,370	4,228,580		210,920	145,410		2,961,900	3,159,770
Austria		3,257,220	3,189,110		23,280	22,330		1,262,440	1,298,220
Romania		13,930,710	13,753,050		2,031,430	1,807,510		6,798,110	5,500,620

Source: Calculated by the authors using data from Eurostat (EU 2012), downloaded 9 March 2013.

techniques (defining "large farms" according to the specific distribution of land per member state), EUROSTAT identifies a category of "large farms" that have, on average, a utilised agricultural area of over 1000 ha. Together, these farms represent only 0.6 per cent of the total number of farms and yet they cover as much as 20 per cent of all UAA in Europe – a total of 35 million ha – which, putting it in perspective, equals the total land area of Germany.

Land concentration is driven by various factors. The economically polarising effect of capital accumulation in the rural economy and commodity chains means that smaller holdings are increasingly unable to compete with large farms. This is partly because of the changing pattern of the EU subsidy scheme CAP, which, despite its present form of a subsidy paid for each hectare of land,[4] still privileges elite large holdings. As a result, small farms become weaker and elite large farms become stronger and more able to compete in markets. This is not because the latter are necessarily more efficient in their farming, but rather because they are much more efficient in capturing subsidies.

The contemporary pattern of land distribution by size of holding is the outcome of a persistent trend that started several decades ago. It is largely related to the existence (and structure) of the CAP. The system of protected prices, market interventions and interest subsidies for farm modernisation created a protected space for agricultural entrepreneurs engaged in farm expansion (Van der Ploeg 2008, 128). Over the last 20 years, though, this trend toward the concentration of land has increasingly accelerated. This is partly due to financialisation: the availability of credit to finance further farm expansion.[5] In Germany, for instance, the land area covered by farms of 50 hectares or more grew from 9.2 million hectares in 1990 to 12.6 million in 2007. The acceleration of the trend toward increased land concentration can be seen throughout Europe. However, these large landholdings turn out to be very fragile constructions, largely due to the debts they accumulate. In volatile markets the combination of high debts and low prices can often result in negative cash flows. Between 2008 and 2009, and again in 2014, many large-scale farms in the process of expansion went bankrupt, particularly those in Denmark and the Netherlands (see European Commission [2010, 33, especially graph 4.4] for the composition of liabilities per farm by EU member state; see Oostindie, van der Ploeg, and Broekhuizen [2013] for the effects of the interaction between low output prices and high debt levels).[6] We will return to this specific fragility later in the article.

Land concentration and CAP subsidies have (re)structured each other over time: as land becomes concentrated in fewer and larger holdings, the CAP subsidies also become more concentrated. Take the case of Italy, where in 2011 a mere 0.29 per cent of farms accessed 18 per cent of total CAP subventions, with 0.0001 per cent of these cornering 6 per cent in total. The remaining 94 per cent of farms shared just 39.5 per cent of all CAP subsidies (Onorati and Pierfederici 2013). Similarly, in Spain 75 per cent of all subsidies in 2009 were cornered by just 16 per cent of eligible farmers (Aparicio et al. 2013). During 2007–2012, the EU and the Romanian state spent more than EUR 2.9 billion, most of which went to large-scale agriculture; further incentive for land monopoly and land grabbing. This is in addition to the fact that the cost of renting land is included in the direct subsidy scheme by the EU and the Romanian state, providing incentives for large agribusiness and speculators to accumulate more land (Bouniol 2013).[7]

In short, as the current land rush gained momentum globally, it reached the EU at a time when land concentration was already well under way. The former might have contributed to the acceleration and expansion of the latter.

Capturing control of extended tracts of land: a limited but potentially explosive issue

Alongside land concentration, another process taking place in the EU today – one that is largely below the radar of the media, NGOs and the academic literature – is land grabbing. It is important here to be clear about the term: for us, land grabbing is, in the first place, about *capturing control of extended tracts of land*.[8] It is about the construction of landholdings that represent a deep rupture with family farming and the scale of farming that has typified European agriculture. Although there are places in Europe where, for specific historic reasons, large holdings emerged earlier (such as Andalusia in Spain, the Mezzogiorno in Italy, Scotland and eastern Germany), we are now witnessing a renewed emergence of very large holdings. We view contemporary land grabbing in the EU as a "creeping" phenomenon, since, if compared to countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and former Soviet Eurasia, it is as yet limited in scope and geography (mainly, though not exclusively, to the eastern part of the EU). However, in the decades to come, the process of land grabbing might well accelerate and embrace the northern, western and southern parts of Europe as well, for reasons that we discuss below.

Large-scale land deals in the EU are currently limited to the eastern member states, but these take on many and varied forms. Take the case of Romania. There are no official statistics, but, according to observers, transnational corporations are thought to control as much as 700,000–800,000 ha, or 6 per cent of Romanian farmland (Bouniol 2013). One example is Transavia, an agribusiness firm originally specialising in meat and poultry, which recently acquired over 12,000 ha in the Cluj district to produce grain (corn and wheat). It seeks to control the entire value chain for its produce, and is expanding both horizontally and vertically. In 2005 and again in 2006, Transavia received a subvention from the EU of EUR 1 million to modernise a cereal processing plant. In 2007 it bought 85 per cent of shares in Avicola Brasov, its main national competitor, and in 2008 yet another competitor, CerealCom Alba. Since 2011, Transavia has invested more than EUR 10 million in renting land and building storage facilities in the Cluj District alone (Bouniol 2013).

The two villages where Transavia has acquired land – Aiton (2000 ha) and Tureni (10,000 ha) – are relatively remote with an ageing population; many of the young people have left the area. When Transavia first arrived in Aiton, many plots outside the village centre were no longer under cultivation. The company worked to get lease contracts through a well-known villager – a former town hall employee, now employed by the company – who also leases 7 ha of land to the company. Indeed, the role of another layer of elites in land grabbing, the land brokers, as observed by Sud (2014) in India, is observable here too. Local politicians got behind the company, and many villagers were persuaded to sign a contract leasing their land for EUR 100 per hectare per year, representing 800 kg of cereals per hectare per year; cheap by any EU standard (Bouniol 2013, 151).

Some observers might not see this as a case of land grabbing. After all, the villagers appear to have leased their land voluntarily to the company. But the term "land grabbing" can be applied here, not just because a big company is getting land so cheaply and its operations have been subsidised with a large amount of public money, but more fundamentally because it has captured control of extended tracts of land, deeply rupturing existing patterns of local land use and family farming; the definition of land grabbing we have adopted for this study.

Extra-economic coercion

The manner in which large-scale land deals are carried out in the EU today is not, after all, very different from how they occur in the Global South. Central to the non-transparent, questionable transactions is the role of a range of "brokers", middlemen who facilitate transactions for large-scale land acquisition. They are the new land-grabbing entrepreneurs, an emerging elite who, in turn, transact with other land-rush elites. Indeed, imagine that a Chinese company has acquired vast tracts of land to grow a range of crops, and is planning to acquire further land. Middle Eastern companies are also exploring the region in question, seeking to embark on large-scale production of, say, wheat. Meanwhile, a foreign company engaged in renewable energy has acquired a huge tract of land for a commercial solar panel project, further reducing the already limited area available for local food production. Imagine these large-scale land deals are being carried out in a secretive, non-transparent manner. The situation described here is not that of Ethiopia, Cambodia or Paraguay. The situation we describe here can be found inside the EU, in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and Italy, to name but some examples. We now turn to some of these other cases.

In Bulgaria there is an emerging class of entrepreneurs, the *arendatori*: a set of elite actors that has emerged distinctly in the context of land grabbing. They are playing a key role in shaping land ownership patterns, which can be illustrated by the case of Boynitsa, a grain-producing village and one of the poorest in the Vidin region in northwest Bulgaria (Medarov 2013). In 2011, with full support from China's government, the Chinese firm Tianjin State Farms Agribusiness Group Company leased 2000 ha of land in Boynitsa to produce corn, with a plan to acquire 10,000 ha more. The company acquired the land through a lease agreement with major *arendatori*, who bought it in the early 1990s when land prices were very low. Neither the local community nor the municipal authorities were consulted. The mayor first learned of it in a phone call, when she was ordered to appear the following day at a meeting and media event with company representatives and the Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture. The actual work of farming had been subcontracted to a Bulgarian agribusiness company. Then, in November 2012, the Chinese investor suddenly announced it was terminating the contract and moving elsewhere in the region, leaving many to wonder what had happened. The initial deal may have been simply testing the limits and prospects of such investment in Bulgaria but there was also speculation that the *arendatori* had scammed the Chinese company (Medarov 2013).

In Poland a similar dynamic was unfolding, until changes were made in regulations concerning land sales. In recent times the Agricultural Property Agency, the agency responsible for managing public land, has been dissolving land lease contracts made by small farmers in the province of West Pomerania in order to sell off the land (Lopata 2013). Even though foreigners are legally prohibited from buying land in Poland until May 2016, local farmers claim that more than 200,000 ha of land in the province has been bought by foreign companies – mainly Dutch, Danish, German and British – through substitute or "dummy" buyers; often small farmers who meet the legal requirements for making a tender and who are hired by foreign companies to buy the land and then transfer control of it to them. The land is used to establish large industrial farms or for speculative purposes since land prices are expected to rise in 2016 when the moratorium on foreign ownership lapses. In addition to buying land in this way, foreign companies are also said to be leasing as much as 200,000 additional ha in West Pomerania. Under new regulations, however, those who buy land from the Agricultural Property Agency must cultivate it for 10 years. These new regulations are probably largely the result of farmers' protests (Lopata 2013).

These two cases show that establishing control over extended tracts of land does not solely occur through the land markets. Coercion, cheating or orchestrated publicity to create confusion are, time and again, key aspects of the contemporary land grabbing phenomenon, in the EU as elsewhere.[9] The term "extra-economic" coercion includes special conditions offered by state apparatuses (at national, regional or local level), good political connections, the full support of governors, practices of skirting the law (as in the Italian case, below) and "pocket contracts" (again, see below).

As in Bulgaria and Romania, the low price and relative abundance of land compared to the older EU member states has also been a driving force behind land grabbing in Hungary. In the mid-1990s the price of 1 ha of land in Hungary was around HUF 30,000 (compared to HUF 3 million in Austria). While the price of land has been slowly increasing (by 7.7% in 2010), it is still 5–10 times lower than in western European countries. This factor is key in the recent scandals surrounding "pocket contracts" and the lease of state lands in Hungary. The term originally referred to land deals in which the date of purchase remains unspecified and the contract is kept "in the pocket" until the existing moratorium on land sales is lifted. The term is now used to describe a multitude of contracts that aim to circumvent legal restrictions on transacting land deals (see Bouniol 2013; Medarov 2013).

According to Fidrich (2013), over the past two decades an estimated 1 million ha of land in Hungary[10] has been obtained through "pocket contracts" by foreign individuals or companies, including Austrian, German, Dutch, Danish, and British. On the dubious premise that the contracts are legal, these entities have received an estimated HUF 300–500 million (some EUR 1.1–1.8 million) of national and EU agricultural subsidies since Hungary's accession to the EU.[11] One name that has been linked to pocket contracts in Hungary is Benetton of Italy, whose presence in the country made headline news when the right-wing party Jobbik organised a demonstration in front of the Benetton Farm in April 2012. This former cooperative property in Görgeteg, Somogy County, was initially purchased by a German and then an Austrian before being bought by Carlo Benetton, who grows corn, wheat and poplar trees there. The case was picked up by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, which reported:

> As for the village of 1,200 residents, hemmed in by fences to protect the Benetton fields from game, some have nick-named it Alcatraz, after the former US prison. The unemployment rate here is 50%, with little hope of finding a job – except for working security on the estate.[12]

While foreign companies are busy acquiring Hungarian land, Hungarian companies are also involved in grabbing control over vast tracts of land in other countries, illustrating very well Europe's dual role as both a site of land deals and a point of origin of land deals. Sándor Csányi, one of the owners of the largest Hungarian bank, the OTP Bank, is also one of the biggest landlords in Hungary. His company, Bonafarm, has been implicated in a land grabbing case in Zambia. Bonafarm was one of the foreign investors who submitted bids to the Zambian Development Agency (ZDA) to develop the Nansanga Farm Bloc. This project would reportedly have involved resettling at least 9000 farmers living on the 18,000 ha site. As fate would have it, the negotiations with the government failed and Bonafarm gave up on this project, but is understood to be preparing for large-scale land deals in Romania, negotiations for which are said to have already started (see Fidrich 2013). As this case shows, it is not sufficient to view contemporary global land grabbing as a rupture between the Global North and the South; many of the elites and entrepreneurs involved in the global land rush straddle hemispheric divides. That these land deals are fluid and uncertain (some deals push through, others do not; some have projects implemented, others have none) is an inherent feature of a land rush; it is the same around the globe.

Financialisation of land, agriculture and the food system (Clapp 2014; Fairbairn 2014; Isakson 2014) has accompanied the global land rush. It is also so in the EU. In Bulgaria, alongside the *arendatori* one also finds a new type of elite investor, individual traders and investment funds which are growing in importance (Medarov 2013). For example, the investment fund Black Sea Agriculture, founded by a former Wall Street trader (and current CEO of Global Quest), aims to acquire land along both the Romanian and Bulgarian Black Sea coasts (the Black Sea Farm Belt). It had reportedly acquired 113 ha of farmland by the end of 2011. However small this investment is, it highlights a new type of elite actor in this part of the world. Other examples are Ceres Agri-growth Investment Fund (a grouping of Raiffeisen Centrobank AG), global investment funds (such as Firebird Management, Black River Asset Management and Mezzanine Management) and private equity companies such as Rosslyn Capital Partners, which in 2008 had more than

22,000 ha of land and EUR 45 million of capital combined. Yet another example is the Elana Agricultural Land Opportunity Fund, one of the largest non-banking financial groups, which has been operating since 1989 and is owned by QVT Fund LP (based in the Cayman Islands), Allianz Bulgaria (owned by the German Allianz Group) and Credit Suisse Securities (Europe). By early 2009, Elana alone reportedly controlled no less than 29,320 ha of farmland in the country. It is worth noting, however, that Bulgaria's land rush today is linked not only to large-scale agriculture but to cyanide-based gold mining and shale gas extraction (hydraulic fracturing, or fracking) (Medarov 2013).

Land grabbing and the re-ordering of land use

The shift toward new forms of control over land implies a far-reaching re-ordering of agricultural production. Land grabbing does not mean that agricultural production is simply continued under new ownership and patterns of management. On the contrary, both the bio-material reality and the socio-institutional contours of agricultural production are deeply affected. In several places in which land is concentrated into fewer hands, yields per hectare (and per animal) are going down. Remarkably, the EU's "larger farms", which, according to EUROSTAT (2011), account for 20 per cent of all utilised agricultural land, are generating only 11 per cent of Europe's total agricultural production (calculated here as the total Standard Gross Margin of the EU-27). Employment levels are low: for example Emiliana in west Romania only generates employment for 99 people on an area of 12,000 ha (Bouniol 2013). Animal production and grain growing are separated (this is notably the case with the *arendatori* in Romania). Monocultures start to dominate. The large tracts (and extended herds) require a standardisation of the production process; this greatly increases the use of chemical inputs and preventive medicines.

This re-ordering of agricultural production also occurs because, in many cases, agricultural production (more specifically food production) is not the central aim of those who acquire these large tracts of land. Representatives of financial and industrial elites often make such investments for reasons of tax evasion or speculation. In most countries agricultural enterprises are exempt from a range of taxes, so it is attractive to channel profits obtained from other sectors into these enterprises. In several cases losses at the level of the agricultural enterprise are even a benefit, for they smooth these transfers. Speculation is another common motive. With low interest rates, uncertain stock markets and real estate in crisis, land not only offers an interesting safe haven, it might generate considerable benefits if and when land prices increase.

When tax evasion and speculation dominate it is likely that less care and attention is paid to the land and to agricultural production than when the objective is to generate an income through agricultural production. This tendency might be further aggravated in the course of time, as the new investors realise that agricultural production is harder than they initially thought. As a matter of fact, many large-scale investments are "turned down" after a few years, when it becomes clear that investing less (in labour, technologies, inputs and other things) can promise greater rates of return. Thus, land use is extensified and reproductive tasks (maintaining soil fertility for instance) receive less attention.

In addition, large-scale agro-industrial operations tend to subordinate, marginalise or destroy smallholder agriculture. This sometimes occurs directly, as Van der Ploeg (2008, chapter 3) illustrates in a different context. Mostly, though, it occurs indirectly as a consequence of the interaction with food industries and large retail chains which prefer a few large suppliers instead of many small suppliers, since transaction costs tend to be far higher in the latter. Such shifts may undermine the continuity of food production in the long run.

Overall, the current land rush, manifesting both in the large-scale land deals and in the generic forms of land concentration, threatens to introduce profound imbalances in society as a whole.

One aspect of this is that the enormous ecological capital that has been developed in Europe over the ages may come under the control of large-scale financial operations. Another strategic aspect is that, so far, land grabbing has mainly occurred in the eastern parts of Europe (and of course, over the borders, for example in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan or North Africa). These spaces are not only characterised by relatively low land prices, but also low wages and more "environmental space" (because regulations either do not exist or are not enforced). Considerable profits can be made by exporting agricultural commodities from these "spaces of poverty" toward "spaces of affluence" (such as northwestern Europe). This creates insurmountable competition for smallholder farmers, especially in northern and western parts of Europe, since their land is far more expensive and machine servicing more costly. Thus, the risk of being outcompeted is far from imaginary (see Van der Ploeg 2008, chapters 3 and 4).

So far we have focused on the more conventional types of large-scale land deals being observed in Europe. But there are other, less conventional forms that are also occurring. We turn now to those other cases and reflect on their implications.

"Green grabs" in Europe: land grabbing in the name of the environment

"Green grabbing" – land grabbing in the name of the environment – is increasingly in the spotlight (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). The term, originally coined by journalist John Vidal, describes land acquisitions that are made in the name of climate change mitigation strategies, such as carbon sequestration by way of forest conservation or the production of renewable sources of energy that require some form of land control. The production of biodiesel in Europe that encroaches into grasslands and areas previously devoted to set-aside initiatives that had both economic and environmental functions is also, arguably, a form of green grabbing (Franco et al. 2010). But there are other forms, as illustrated by the case of a solar panel project in Sardinia, Italy (Onorati and Pierfederici 2013).

EnerVitaBio arrived in Sardinia in 2008 to launch the largest solar energy project in Italy, with a production target of 27 megawatts (MW). It consists of 107,000 installed panels and 1614 greenhouse sections (200 square metres each, supported by 33,000 concrete pillars) covering 64 ha of what used to be irrigated farmland. The project will receive more than EUR 7 million in incentives annually over 20 years, twice as much as it will receive for the sale of energy. To date, EnerVitaBio has built seven plants with a generating capacity of about 80 MW, which allows it to access almost EUR 22 million in subsidies per year (over the same 20-year period). The crop and pasture lands used for the project once generated acceptable incomes. The company purchased this land from farmers, for EUR 40,000 per ha. The limited supply of agricultural land, combined with increasing land concentration, means that any reduction in the land available for farming, although minimal in absolute terms, has far-reaching impacts on the island's ability to produce its own food or the ability of prospective farmers to acquire land. The situation will definitely worsen in the coming years: 22 more companies have been approved to produce photovoltaic energy in Sardinia, with a combined projected output of more than 1000 megawatts (Onorati and Pierfederici 2013).

In addition to showing how smallholder agriculture in some parts of Europe is being subordinated through green grabbing, this case shows that Europe is linked to green grabbing in not just one, but two ways. On the one hand, EU policies, such as the one for bio-fuels, and other global policies such as the United Nations' REDD+ programme[13] are a critical context for widespread land deals in other parts of the world; from oil palm expansion in Colombia and Indonesia to sugarcane plantation expansion in Cambodia (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). On the other hand, Europe itself may slowly become an important site of green grabbing, with growing corporate investments in renewable energy that involve acquiring land and changing its use, often supported by extensive public subsidies. Whether this will continue in the future is an important question to research.

Ongoing pressures to withdraw land from agricultural use

Land is generally used to produce primary commodities, especially food, and to nurture the environment. In recent decades, however, the drive for urbanity and the imperatives of capital accumulation have increasingly encroached on agricultural land, eroding the stock of the latter through steady and widespread land use change. In Europe, a significant amount of prime agricultural land (particularly that near to road infrastructure) is lost to urban sprawl, real estate interests, tourist enclaves and other commercial undertakings. Scattered yet also widespread across Europe, such land deals – usually smallish in scale – encroaching into the most fertile and productive agricultural lands do add up. These processes of land use change are sometimes collectively referred to by French agrarian and environmental activists as land "artificialisation".

An illustrative case is the Notre-Dame-des-Landes Airport project in France (see Pieper 2013), set to become operational in 2017–2018, which threatens to take over 2000 ha of prime agricultural land outside the city of Nantes. Led by the world's largest building corporation, French Vinci, including ancillary infrastructure the project will cost a projected EUR 4 billion. The project's proponents argue that it will attract investors and tourists to the area and thereby stimulate the local economy. But others see many reasons to oppose it, including conflicts of interest among key officials and the companies involved, the destruction of a special area of high biodiversity and the option of renovating the city's existing international airport.

Artificialisation thus refers to a multi-faceted process that is occurring throughout Europe. It does not only occur because land is needed for infrastructural works and building activities required by society. It is underpinned and driven by the huge difference between the value of agricultural and non-agricultural land. When a piece of agricultural land is turned into land for housing its value can increase by 10- to 20-fold. Thus, much artificialisation is driven by speculation. This largely explains why cities keep growing at their edges, even when considerable parts of the urban centres lie undeveloped (RLG 2000; Primdahl and Swaffield 2010).

The "denial of entry" to prospective farmers and urban gardeners

The land question in Europe and beyond can also be seen as a generational problem. The combination of land concentration and creeping land grabbing results in ever diminishing land available to young people, be they the sons and daughters of farming families or young people from a non-agricultural background.

Many young people in rural areas today (both in Europe and the wider world) do not want to remain or become farmers. There are both "push" (poor economic remuneration for hard work, limited social opportunities) and "pull" (urban lifestyles, with a wider range of job opportunities) factors at work here. This should be a matter of great public concern, especially since Europe's agricultural work force is ageing. Often, the question of how to make agriculture attractive to young people is posed. Indeed, while difficult to quantify, it is safe to assume that many small farms that have been swallowed up by bigger holdings were vulnerable primarily because there was no interest among the younger generation in taking over the family farm. But there are also clearly cases in which young people from rural and urban areas do want to take up farming but cannot because of numerous structural and institutional barriers that deny them entry into the farming sector. This is a pressing matter in contemporary Europe, and we use the case of France to illustrate how the entry of prospective farmers is blocked by market forces and institutional architecture.

In France there are numerous hurdles to becoming a farmer for those without land (Ody 2013). To receive state support one must first get a diploma in agriculture, find a farm to buy or rent and then obtain a licence to farm. But land is getting more expensive and is becoming scarcer. Prospective farmers find it increasingly difficult to acquire land to farm (precisely because of the processes of land concentration and "artificialisation" described above). Farms of less than 50 ha that come on the market are often snapped up by neighbours, seeking to enlarge their own holding (and encouraged by CAP subsidies that are linked to farm size). In 1955, 80 per cent of all farms in France were less than 20 ha; the average size today is around 80 ha. This trend is reinforced by environmental laws such as nitrate regulations, which encourage farm expansion rather than reductions in livestock herds as a way of achieving a prescribed nitrate ratio (Ody 2013).

The existing institutional incentives and subsidy structure, combined with the dynamics of capital accumulation, clearly work to frustrate the entry of prospective farmers. Changing this denial-of-entry situation will probably require not only an overhaul of the existing land policy regime but also of the entire agricultural policy regime. Any initiative to stimulate alternative agriculture will be weakened if prospective farmers lose interest as a result of being unable to secure access to land (White 2012, for a general discussion on this topic). This poses a huge challenge at a time when many younger people with non-farm income sources are interested in part-time farming and when interest in urban farming is also rising (as part of growing awareness about food quality or a growing realisation that producing one's own food actually costs less).

Interactions of land concentration and land grabbing

The problem of the denial of entry to prospective farmers occurs throughout Europe, and is bound to deepen and grow wherever there is land concentration and land grabbing. The three trends are inextricably interlinked, even though they may be unfolding unevenly across Europe. If we step back, what we see is a potentially explosive situation developing around land issues in Europe.

It is probable that the newly emerging, large agricultural enterprises will increasingly flood European markets with very cheap food and agricultural products. But this does not mean consumers will benefit from substantial price decreases even if the major retailers and the food processing industries will benefit from these. A second process, likely to strengthen the first, is the ongoing liberalisation of markets, which will increasingly crowd European farmers out of the market. Growing numbers of farmers are likely to go bankrupt and as a consequence will have to sell their land. As recent history has shown, the large and rapidly expanding entrepreneurial farms, which have already concentrated a lot of land, are more likely than smallholder farms to go bankrupt (Oostindie, van der Ploeg, and Broekhuizen 2013). These large farms are more vulnerable because their high debt-to-asset ratios make them more sensitive to market volatility. This might result in large tracts of land coming on the market at a time when other farmers will find it difficult to acquire extra land. (A general discussion of this dynamic is provided by Veerman [1983]; statistical information on the current situation in the Netherlands is in Bruchem [2010]; DLG [2010] comments on the current situation in the Netherlands; Ross [2014] describes the North American situation.)

At the same time, private investment funds will continue to eagerly search for secure investment opportunities, especially during a period of ongoing economic and financial crisis, which makes land an attractive investment opportunity. Using data from Bloomberg and Saville, the *Economist* (2015) suggests that over the 1994–2013 period the acquisition of farm land represented the highest annualised return and, simultaneously, a relatively low level of volatility.[14] This explains why transfers of land to private investment funds are more than modest (in the

Netherlands two private investment funds – Fagoed[15] and a.s.r. Real Estate Investment Management, formerly Fortis – currently control 6000 and 30,000 hectares of farmland, respectively).[16]

This tendency might well be accentuated given the role and position of the banking sector. As a result of the general economic crisis, much farmland throughout Europe is de facto owned by banks. For example, Monte dei Paschi di Sienna owns a large proportion of Italy's vineyards. The deeds have been exchanged as collateral for credit that is almost impossible to repay under current circumstances. Rabobank (Netherlands) virtually owns most of the horticultural land in the Netherlands. The total debt of Dutch agriculture and horticulture amounts to EUR 30.2 billion.[17] If these banks were to capitalise more (due to Basel III-type agreements[18] or losses in, say, the real estate sector), bringing these huge amounts of land to the market might become an attractive, maybe even necessary, course of action. As a matter of fact, Rabobank recently contracted the McKinsey consultancy firm to explore possibilities for bringing horticultural farms to the market.[19]

The above scenario remains hypothetical, but it is not impossible. The point is that if (or when) it occurs, Europe will be without defence. There is not even a monitoring system in place to provide an early warning. What happens in the land markets is, as argued earlier, largely invisible. In this context, there is another potentially problematic issue: the hectare payments that are (and will continue to be) one of the cornerstones of the CAP. The influence of this policy could be very different. On the one hand it might encourage poor farmers to refrain from selling their land; on the other hand it might be an enormous incentive for entrepreneurs in the global land rush to obtain extended tracts of land. This suggests that a mandatory – as opposed to voluntary – capping of the total amount of payments per farm is urgently needed.

Concluding remarks

What we have sketched in this article is very preliminary. Nevertheless, we feel that the conceptual and empirical components serve our goal of starting an academic conversation around land issues in Europe in the context of global land grabbing. We have no doubt that there is sufficient empirical evidence – some updated statistical data and some anecdotal hints, from which logical inferences can be made – to allow us to broaden academic discussions on global land grabs to include land issues in the Global North in a more systematic way. Our preliminary analysis also links closely with a 2011 study of land issues in 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Borras et al. 2012). One of the key conclusions of this study was that land grabbing, generally understood as the "foreignisation of land", is only one of several critical land issues. The issue of generic land concentration remains central and is one of the most urgent land issues in the region today (Borras et al. 2012). Indeed, one of the main implications of our study for the broader discourse about global land grabs is that land concentration remains a critical development issue, and is at least – or perhaps even more – important than what is popularly referred to as land grabbing.

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Notes

1. See also Plank (2013) on the Ukraine.
2. This article is a revised version of van der Ploeg, Franco and Borras (2013), which introduces and summarises the collection of papers. For the complete report on the study, see Franco and Borras (2013).
3. Income support differs from price support. It is, as the official jargon goes, "decoupled" from actual levels of production. It is related to historical levels of production. It is granted even if production is stopped. The start of this change was known as the "MacSharry Reform".
4. There is considerable political willingness to correct this undesirable distortion. Proposals for "capping" (introducing a ceiling to subsidies per farm) and "redistributive payments" (that favour smallholdings) have been formally integrated in the regulations. However, both measures are voluntary, and EU member states are not obliged to apply them. National power dynamics mean that these measures are least likely to be applied in the countries where they could have the most impact.
5. The role of financialisation of land, agriculture and the food system, as analysed more broadly by Fairbairn (2014), Isakson (2014) and Clapp (2014), exerts quite considerable influence in the EU and is a common thread throughout this paper, although we do not explore the details of the process.
6. Recent data on bankruptcy levels are given at http://www.faillissementsdossier.nl/nieuws/6144 and http://www.boerderij.nl/Home/Nieuws/2013/8/Meer-agrarische-bedrijven-failliet-1332580W/. See also LEI (2014, 109),
7. In several eastern European and former socialist countries, various forms of land restitution (that is, restituting lands to pre-socialist era landlords) have contributed to post-1990 land concentration, such as in Romania (Bouniol 2013). In Bulgaria, restituting land to "original" (pre-1946) owners automatically excluded from the land restitution programme many people who did not own any land before state socialism, but were employed in and whose livelihoods depended on cooperative agricultural production before 1989. This is one factor behind the massive land concentration and economic degradation of the 1990s in Bulgaria, in which people who were dispossessed were pushed to urban areas, often into informal settlements (Medarov 2013).
8. Our reference point for the loose definition we use here is the one initially explored by Borras et al. (2012).
9. See general discussion by Hall (2013).
10. It is difficult to know the real extent of pocket contracts because of their illegal nature; see Fidrich (2013).
11. http://mno.hu/hirtv_gazdasagi_hirei/igy-vedik-az-osztrakok-a-foldjuket-1116566
12. http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/21548 (accessed 5 August 2013).
13. According to the website, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is an effort to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development. "REDD+" goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation, and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. http://www.un-redd.org/aboutredd/tabid/102614/default.aspx (accessed 18 January 2015).
14. The data presented in this article were drawn from Bloomberg, Savills, Morningstar and National Council of Real Estate Investment Fiduciaries (NCREIF).
15. Fagoed stands for *Financiering agrarisch [onroerend] goed* (English: "Financing agricultural property"). It is an alternative source of financing for farmers besides bank mortgages.

16. Fagoed (2014). The a.s.r. website is http://www.asrvastgoedvermogensbeheer.nl/landelijk/grondfinanciering/ (accessed 18 February 2015).
17. This is 15 times as much as the total agrarian income of Dutch agriculture.
18. See Pauly (2008) and Slovik and Cournède (2011).
19. See, for instance, http://www.foodlog.nl/short-news/detail/tuinbouw-inlevingsvermogen-rabobank-is-bizar/ (accessed 16 January 2015).

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