



A World-Systems Frontier Perspective to Land:

Exploring the Uneven Trajectory of Land Rights Standardization in the Andes

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Abstract

This paper proposes a world-systems frontier framework by approaching frontiers and frontier zones as analytical tools in indicating and understanding the uneven local-global interactions underlying world-systemic incorporation processes. It argues that the notion of frontier can highlight the role of 'peripheral agency' in local-global interactions, revealing incorporation as a negotiated process. This paper applies a world-systems frontier perspective to the analysis of historical processes of land rights standardization in the Andes. Based on a longue durée assessment of the implementation and contestation of land reforms in Highland communities in Bolivia, the formation and reorganization of a centralized land regime in a peripheral setting is unveiled as a negotiated process. Its course is shaped by the interplay of the modernizing aspirations of public authorities and international interest groups and the strong communal land claims defended by indigenous peasants. This complex (re)negotiation over rights and resources drives the creation and movement of (new) frontiers of land control, materializing in an uneven trajectory of land commodification. The presented frontier perspective is instructive to questions on the expansion, limits, and contradictions of the capitalist world.

Keywords: Frontier; Incorporation; Land Rights; Commodification; Bolivia



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In his influential book *The production of Space*, the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that every society not only occupies but also produces its own space (Lefebvre 1991).¹ Within historical capitalism, the accumulation of capital is the production of space. Accumulation booms and busts are themselves products and producers of spatial configurations. All social relations are spatial relations; they develop through, and actively co-produce space (Harvey 1982). In his recent book, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Jason W. Moore develops a powerful argument to analyze capitalism as a way of organizing space and nature, including human nature (Moore 2015). Historical capitalism, “the thrust towards the commodification of everything” (Wallerstein 2003:16), is a frontier process. Endless accumulation and endless geographical appropriation drives capitalism’s extension to new, uncommodified spaces.

The opening of the “Great Frontier” made new supplies of land, nature, labor, and energy more or less cheaply available to the centers of capital and power. The rise of capitalism launched a new way of organizing land and nature, mobilizing for new inputs of labor and energy premised on the rise of labor productivity. The incessant reduction of labor time can only occur to the extent that new bundles of uncapitalized nature, work, and energy can be mobilized and secured through new waves of appropriation (Moore 2015:301-303). The massive internalization of new spaces allowed for the appropriation of new free inputs and the externalization of new costs. These great frontier movements are the counterpart of the spatial and productive “fixes” of capital accumulation in the metropolises.

Geographical expansion and incorporation necessitated new ways of mapping, categorizing, and surveying the world. The Great Frontier had to be imagined, conceptualized, and materialized. This allowed capitalists, empires and states “to construct global webs of exploitation and appropriation, calculation and credit, property and profit, on an unprecedented scale” (Moore 2015:190; Webb 1964).

The notion of the Great Frontier goes back to Frederick Jackson Turner’s *American frontier* (1920) and, later, Webb’s *Great Frontier* (2003 [1951]). These classics in Western history gave shape to a broad field of frontier studies in which essentialist visions portraying the opening of the frontier as a one-directional transmission of modernity are being challenged by a critical reading of the opening of the frontier as shaped by agency and negotiation. The former current continues to reproduce dichotomist representations of peasant and indigenous societies as either unequivocally vanishing or untouchable reserves. This essentialist stance is upheld in

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contemporary development and adjustment schemes pushing to open those societies for investment and accumulation (e.g. World Bank, IMF) and popular science books stripping those societies from much of their complexity and global interconnectedness (e.g. Diamond 2005 and 2012). This paper contributes to this Great Frontier debate by highlighting the role of “peripheral agency” in processes of incorporation—without negating the role of asymmetry—and its consequent deviating course and uneven spatial impact.

The theoretical framework and its application as elaborated in this paper adds to research exploring how world-system peripheries are incorporated and reproduced over long periods of time (see e.g. Hopkins and Wallerstein 1987; Dunaway 1994; Carlson 2001; Kardulias 2007; Kaup 2013; *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Volume 19, Number 1, Winter 2013). In addition to the cited work of Jason W. Moore, it builds particularly on the work of sociologist Thomas Hall who explicitly unveils the margins as the pulsating heart of expansive systems (Hall 2013:50-1; Hall 1989 and 2000), as well as Kardulias’ notion of “negotiated peripherality” unveiling the periphery as “a zone of opportunity” (Kardulias 2007).

Andean communities present a case in point. In order to construct and safeguard maneuvering space, they have obtained official recognition of their customary land tenure regulations through diverse repertoires of negotiation and resistance consisting of legal action, political alliances, and violent conflict. According to the Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands, Bolivia holds one of the strongest legal bases to protect indigenous and community land rights (LandMark 2015). These land rights do not fit the dichotomous categorizations of “full-fledged” private property or “underdeveloped,” non-commodified forms. They must be understood as the outcome of a longer trajectory of successive phases of land appropriation, land reform and land conflict. Peasant and indigenous mobilizations and achievements underscore—as Kardulias demonstrates for ancient Cyprus—that in core-periphery interactions “you don’t get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate” (Kardulias 2007: 78).

This paper positions the frontier at the center of analysis. It consequently proposes world-systems analysis as a world-systems frontier perspective, with the purpose of problematizing and understanding the role of peripheral agency in local-global and internal-external relations beyond isolation or opposition. In the first section of this paper, frontier processes and frontier zones are discussed as analytical categories that enable the tracing of temporal and spatial shifts in frontier processes and that explain how these frontier movements shape the inherent unevenness of capitalist development.

The second section addresses a central question within the Great Frontier debate, the question of land control, and particularly the persistence and recreation of communal land tenure systems in a globalizing world. It explores land rights as a point of friction between peripherally located

groups and state authorities, nowadays identified as a pivotal action terrain for the struggle against poverty and hunger, environmental challenges and climate change, and injustice.²

In the third section of this paper, the reorganization of Bolivia's centralized land legislation and the repertoires of reaction by Highland communities are discussed in relation to the notion of world-systemic frontiers. This trajectory is analyzed through the method coined by Philip McMichael as "incorporated comparison," in which cases are contrasted because of their historical connectedness and mutual shaping rather than their separateness (1990), identifying four to five frontier shifts respectively in the early colonial period, the late 19th century, the mid-20th century and over the last decades.

In the concluding section, the case study on land commodification in Bolivia is framed as a frontier process. The benefits of a frontier perspective that displaces the center of analysis are discussed in terms of enhancing a more textured understanding of how temporal and spatial unevenness is shaped in the modern world.

A World-Systems Frontier Perspective: Incorporation as Negotiation

Foreshadowing the notion of the frontier, a number of world-systems scholars have repeatedly demonstrated the role of peripheral agency in shaping core-periphery relations (Bunker 1984; Bunker and Ciccantell 2005; see also O'Hearn 2005:132-135; Hall and Fenelon 2009:12). These insights have generated increased understanding within the field of world-systems research, not only of world-systemic expansion needing and simultaneously generating frontiers but also that the role of agency in/at/on the margins of expansive systems is essential in shaping the expansion, limits, and contradictions of the world-system. Several notions of frontiers and frontier zones have been put forward, forged within or in critical dialogue with world-systems analysis (Hall and Fenelon 2009:11; Vanhaute 2013:157-159). Operationalizing these notions demands an apt systemic framework that counter-argues images of peripheral groups as captured in sterile conservation or powerless assimilation.

Within this theoretical framework, frontier as an analytical category entails the basic three-dimensional scope of world-systems research: time, space, agency. First of all, it concerns a historical, creative *process* of encounter, which by definition has a start and an end. Second, these frontier processes have a concrete *setting*; encounters produce spatial reorganizations. Third, this encounter is structured by asymmetrical *power* relations, yet has strategic potential for the most powerful as for the powerless involved in this encounter (Sassen 2013). There is an analytical difference as well as interconnection between frontier (the process) and frontier zone (the space). Frontier zones emerge where different actors—be they individuals, companies, projects,

² See the recently launched global campaign #LandRightsNow <http://www.landrightsnow.org/en/why/>

institutions, etc.—embedded in different forms of organization based on different systemic logics come into sustained contact without predefined common rules of encounter (Hall 2012:51; see also Sassen 2013:67). They are key to capitalism’s constant drive “to divert or attach itself to other kinds of energy or logic” (Gidwani 2008:xix).

Within a world-systemic framework, the frontier perspective is adopted to assess the unevenness of capitalist expansion in terms of a 3-step mechanism of restructuring, interruption and feedback. These processes of incorporation entail the *reordering* of zones that were first open, undecided, or under negotiation, into commodified social structures. Incorporation restructures encounter by imposing new delineations and classifications functional to the envisioned social order. Schematically, the trajectory of frontier processes can be envisioned as the process in which fuzzy zones of contact are defined (as poor or rich, uncivilized or acculturated), shaken-up (by revolutions and reforms) and fragmented (through impoverishment, resistance or segregation) (Hall 2000:241; Kaup 2013:112).

Systemic restructuring is discontinuous; *interrupted* by the unfolding of social change. Frontier zones provide a vacuum for this irregularity. They are mobile and mutable constructs, where a new order is created whose outlook is still wavering. Contrary to the first theoretical conceptualizations of frontiers, notably Turner’s work on the movement of the U.S. western frontier and the transmission of modernization (Turner 1920), frontiers are essentially two-directional processes. Frontiers become visible in a concrete locus of both confrontation (war, resistance, lawsuits, intolerance, plunder, extraction, sabotage, ecological degradation, segregation) and cooperation (biological symbiosis, marriage, economic partnership, political bonds and treaties, celebration, conversion, gifts). Because the outcome of these confrontations and alliances seldom acquires a definitive status, constant renegotiation in lived settings forms a fundamental process in the shaping of ongoing, accelerating, retreating or stagnant incorporation processes. Incorporation consequently proceeds in waves. Its irregular rhythm reflects how the “profit-centered rationality” of capitalism is being “contaminated, consolidated, and continuously interrupted by other logics” (Gidwani 2008:xxiv).

This “contamination” points to the role of peripheral agency. Numerous ethnographic studies on both historic and contemporary cases give empirical evidence of how peripheral groups negotiate the terms of participation and autonomy and how this may *feed back* into the system. Kardulias’ concept of “negotiated peripherality” explains how peripheral groups’ “willingness and ability [...] to determine the conditions under which they will engage” in frontier-creating practices (trade, marriage, religion, ideology etc.) involves them as decision-makers in the encounter with agents of expansive systems (2007:55). Incorporation thus proceeds through feedback loops, tempering the ambition of complete assimilation and even generating a boomerang potential that may alter the course of incorporation. This is evidenced in the forging of alliances, carving out of

concessions or retreat, particularly in the case of indigenous peoples in the contemporary world (Hall and Fenelon 2009).

This perspective has implications for world-systems analysis, in terms of promoting an explicit focus on peripheral agency, but also in terms of the world-system itself. The analysis of frontiers and frontier zones is instructive to questions on the functioning, the dynamics and the limits of systemic expansion. A frontier perspective has the potential of understanding why the impression that global incorporation proceeds towards the eventual evaporation of systemic difference (homogenization) is constantly countered by the observation of the reproduction of different spaces from where frontiers are being contested and (re)created (heterogenization). Rather than instances of isolation or confrontation, a world-systems frontier perspective reads and exposes these spaces as the lever that converts incorporation into a negotiated, hence instable process.

Land Rights Commodification and Communal Land Control

In order to clarify the still abstract notions of incorporation and frontier, this paper approaches land rights commodification as a concrete—and possibly “the single most important”—frontier that has shaped the historical trajectory of capitalist expansion (Wallerstein 2012:7; Araghi and Karides 2012:1; Weis 2007:48-50). The commodification of land rights corresponds to a reshuffling of labor, legal, fiscal and spiritual ties to the land among people living from the land and of those living from the property of the land in such way that it separates the former from nonmarket access to land (Sevilla-Buitrago 2015). The advance of commodified relations to the land was a diverse process shaped by shifting economic conditions and emergent political ideologies, fueling an ideologically colored, power-attributing and hence highly disputed transition process that pretends to put the future of civilization at stake (Engerman and Metzger 2004:17; Cole and Ostrom 2012). The outcome was a modern private property regime that linked land to capital and that was consolidated and expanded through state power (Moore 2016:86).

The frontier as a tree-dimensional analytical tool can be applied to the land rights frontier, identifying and explaining its time (phases), spatial (zones) and agency (negotiation) dimension. Symbolically starting in 1492, this frontier shifted from a colonial phase of primitive accumulation (16th-17th centuries), through an imperial phase (18th-19th centuries), followed by a nationalist-developmental phase (mid-20th century), to a neoliberal phase (late 20th century onwards) of intensified globalization (Araghi and Karides 2012). Over the last five hundred years, these shifts have intersected with other frontier developments such as economic transformations in view of increasing resource competition (Barbier 2011), ecological changes (Moore 2008, 2010b, 2015), and the social reorganization of peasant livelihoods (Vanhaute 2012; Vanhaute, Cottyn and Wang 2016). Strongly related to European expansion into new (colonized) zones, privatization,

displacement, and depeasantization restructured places, landscapes, and territorial orders to a substantial degree, producing a secular growth in the concentration of land property (Araghi and Karides 2012:2). Through expropriation, enclosure and accumulation, as well as contestation, counter-enclosures and re-appropriation, new and old frontier zones were (re)created, where the direction and forms of the process were negotiated, thereby defining the changing shape of the world-system.

While the forms that this transformation took were complex and varied across time and space, four central features can be distinguished: the transformation of a complex system of customary rights to land usage to legal and written titles to land ownership (formalization); the transformation of the concept of property from jurisdiction over ambiguously defined areas to concretely defined, and possibly enclosed, physical spaces (fixation); the optimization of the use of such demarcated landed property as a form of capital (rationalization); and the absorption of the earth's surface into a land market (privatization), implying the dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous populations (based on Araghi and Karides 2012). Imperial and national states played a decisive role in creating the conditions for capitalist transformation, fostering the delineation, endorsement and extension of "a systematic legal basis for what is called title to the land" (Wallerstein 2012:7). In order to enforce a minimal degree of loyalty and obtain the necessary revenues to uphold centralized power, a homogeneous institutional framework for land ownership, use and transaction needed to be created, provided of property deeds and cadasters to make society 'legible' (Ubink, Hoekema and Assies 2009:11; Richards 2009:58; Scott 1998; Linklater 2013). Thereto, customary tenure arrangements are to be encapsulated within a standardized legal framework for land property, neutralizing the co-existence of multiple locally-rooted systems for communal control over land. In the process, the rural landscape and rural-urban linkages underwent repeated and radical transformations.

Yet, despite its force, this historical transformation did not pave the way for a definitive commodification of communal land rights systems. At the start of the 21st century, approximately 2.5 billion people hold, use or manage communally controlled lands, corresponding to more than 50 percent of the world's land area (Oxfam 2016: 7). On a global level, Latin-America is a particularly striking region, with about 20 percent of the land collectively managed—but not necessarily possessed—by indigenous and peasant communities, through different constellations of common and individual/family entitlements.³ In South-America, Bolivia represents the strongest evidence, with 36.4 percent of its land surface assigned to, or in property of, indigenous and peasant communities (LandMark 2015). This indication of the continuing significance of

³ Globally, this is not the highest result, but the most evenly spread, as the regional picture for Asia and Oceania depends on the dominance of one single country, respectively China and Papua New Guinea.

indigenous and peasant community structures unsettles the assumed force and global spread of standardized land titles.

Successive incorporation pressures effectively pushed the management of land and natural resources in many localities out of customary and communal control and under statutory laws that structure dualist and exclusivist land regimes. In this process, communal land systems did not just persist through isolation or expulsion, but were the product of the constant (re)creation of “new frontiers of land control,” which “are not sites where ‘development’ and ‘progress’ meet ‘wilderness’ or ‘traditional lands and peoples’ . They are sites where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations, and property regimes” (Peluso and Lund 2011:668). The expansion and contraction of these sites, or “frontier zones” results from re-negotiations among state, capitalist and communal interests of peasants, elite and broker groups, state institutions (and, increasingly, supra-national institutions), as well as the forces of nature. Central in this negotiation is the relation to the land, which under unequal power relation is squeezed into legible (alienable/private) “principles true in every country,” superior to deviant (inalienable/collective) principles (Mitchell 2002:54-79)—taxable for the state; tradable on the market. Relations to the land are positioned on a continuum of tenure security (extensive-limited, short-long term, real-perceived, de jure-de facto, etc.) that establishes the superiority of private property arrangements (Ubink, Hoekema and Assies 2009:13-5; Ostrom and Hess 2007). Failing or refusing to grasp the value and normality of the pluralist character of most land systems and the responsiveness of the people managing them, the co-existence and overlap of private and public, open and exclusive rights is being substituted by an improbable uniformity.

The portrayal of alternative (spiritual, informal, communal, non-European) forms of access in terms of dichotomy and anomaly has been used to justify and further nurture the global trend in the incorporation and formalization of customary property relations (Van Bavel and Hoyle 2010:12; Rights and Resources Initiative 2014). However, disparities in local land right security testify that property regime changes through land reform programs, either state- or market-driven, are not deployed in a vacuum. Reproduced and accelerated under post-colonial regimes, this colonially-initiated trajectory took shape through localized interactions, interspersed with counter-enclosures, revolutions and alliances. Moreover, commodifying operations rarely produce a homogeneous property regime or foster the desired social effects. The outcome is a hybrid and uneven (trans-)national institutional control over territory with important achievements and bitter setbacks for communal and indigenous land rights in relation to fluctuations in natural resource demand (Benton 2009; Serrão 2013; Rights and Resources Initiative 2015). Through the erroneous equation between privatization and development (Engerman and Metzger 2004), the endurance of plural, community-based land rights systems in which individual and collective access co-exist

has been concealed or reduced to an anachronism. This obscures that the strategies of self-organized resource communities in (globalizing) local struggles are not targeting individual ownership in itself, but the absoluteness of private property arrangements. Communal ownership, and its persistent significance, as mentioned above, has been put forward as “the most fundamental challenge to capitalism, (...) because it denies the overarching dominance of private property rights” (Hall and Fenelon 2009:6). This counter-dichotomous resistance logic and the multi-scalar negotiation dynamics can only be grasped beyond local-global and incorporated-isolated dichotomies.

Here, the figure of the frontier is enlightening to understand the pulsatile expansion of standardized land rights and the ensuing interweaving of local patterns of land control and struggles for self-determination under the scheme of a globalizing property regime. The analytical category of the frontier is adopted to map the temporal and spatial *restructuring* of land rights, to interconnect formalization, fixation, rationalization and privatization pressures with bottom-up strategies of resistance and *interruption*, and to trace how negotiations on the part of peripheral groups are *feeding back* into expansive land rights agendas.

Land Reform in the Andes: Negotiating the Limits of Communal Autonomy

Seeking to trace and map the deviating pathways of communal land control reorganization in a concrete setting, there is a strong case for Bolivia. By 2014, 237,000 square kilometers, corresponding to 21% of the national land surface, was formally recognized as “Native Indigenous Peasant Territory,” a juridical figure that assigns land in collective property to an indigenous community (Chumacero 2015:181). These lands have remained or been recuperated in communal hands through successive frontier shifts over the past five centuries. The long trajectory towards that constellation can be traced back to the Andean highlands, inhabited by rural communities with varying degrees of ancestral-ethnic (Quechua, Aymara and Uru) or peasant (syndical) forms of organization.

As the capitalist world-economy expanded geographically out of Western-Europe, the Andean region became one of the first testing grounds and testimonials of capitalist incorporation dynamics. Through conquest and colonization, a disconnected area—politically and economically tied to the Inca empire—became an area of European economic extraction and political influence. As the Andes transformed from an external into an internal frontier zone of the modern world-system, the region and its people were more closely yet asymmetrically tied to the pulsating rhythm of the modern world-system. This peripheralization—the restructuring of the region and its people into a dependent position—was a dialectical and heterogeneous process in which local histories refused to neatly integrate into more global flows.

Today, the Andean region contains complex land systems in which communal arrangements coexist with private land consolidation, cooperative property and state property. In the following, the formation and reshuffling of this complex is assessed as a frontier process. First, successive moments of land rights reorganization are identified, in line with the global commodification phases sketched out above by Araghi and Karides (2012), and parallel with Rivera's historical cycles of rebellion in the Bolivian highlands (Rivera [1984] 2010). Second, these phases are assessed through "incorporated comparison", juxtaposing specific cases as "relational parts of a singular (historically forming) phenomenon" (McMichael 2000: 672). This method serves to problematize global processes as single historical projects through which different periods and regions become conceptually interconnected and to identify parallel or repeated strategies across space and time. Examples are Arrighi's comparison of accumulation cycles as instances of the historical project of capitalist expansion (1994) or McMichael's juxtaposition of contemporary globalization of free trade and market rule during 19th century British imperialism (2000). Araghi and Karides have made a similar exercise for processes of land rights standardization, interrelating colonial, liberal, revolutionary and neoliberal repertoires of reform, adaptation and resistance as constitutive to one single historical project (2012).

From precolonial times up to the twenty-first century, four to five frontier shifts are identified, which can be related to changing state-capital relations. The ensuing redefinition of incorporation strategies over time brought new threats and opportunities for communal systems. The way in which struggles in defense of communitarian land tenure informed frontier making and unmaking strategies around the implementation of modern land rights regimes in the Andean region is highlighted throughout the trajectory of indigenous communities of the Bolivian Highlands. The following assessment is based on an interdisciplinary (history, anthropology, geography) literature study in combination with the insights from ethnohistorical research (local and national archives and field work) on the repercussions of consecutive land reforms for Aymara communities of the Oruro department in the 19th up to 21st centuries (Cottyn 2014). The Oruro department is situated at the heart of the *altiplano* (high plateau) and is marked by strong rural experiences of colonial exploitation, indigenous market participation and mining expansion, interposed by mixed experiences of land usurpation, struggles and recuperation, peasant mobilization and ethnic revitalization. The trajectory of these communities offers a good example of what Kardulias defined as negotiated peripherality. The following trajectory is informed by the "agentic capacities" observed in the Aymara strategies of negotiation, adaptation and resistance, but reflects the more diverse experience of Bolivia's (mainly Quechua and Aymara) Highland communities over the last 500 years. An assessment of this trajectory of incorporation and contestation from a frontier perspective reveals how communal spaces were (re)created and thereby undercut the logic and outlines of a neatly commodified land regime.

The Tributary Frontier, 1532-1874

In a first phase of incorporation, the Andes was restructured into a new frontier of land control of the emerging capitalist world-economy. The setting of this frontier was the Potosí mining complex; its time frame that of Spanish colonial domination. When the first Spanish troops arrived to the South-American mountain ranges in the 1530s, a region-wide agrarian system was in place, marked by a complementary resource management that allowed for the “vertical control of a maximum of ecological niches” (Murra 1975). Inca rule, which had come to the area about 80 years earlier, built further on earlier forms of production and governance (Assies 2009:295). Local land administrations had been integrated in a tributary structure backed by a redistribution logic (Murra 1975). It was through this tributary mechanism—appropriated and distorted by the Spanish—that Andean frontier-making was channeled. It was only after the first chaotic decades of conquest, colonization, and indirect rule that the territorial, productive and representative organization of Andean rural communities was restructured accordingly, aiming at an incorporation that—while undeniably destructive—allowed the survival of its population and the extraction of their resources.

Formally, the incorporation of the indigenous population as vassals under protection of the Spanish Crown ensued from a series of regulations, later compiled into the *Leyes de Indias* (1680). It was only after nearly half a century of Spanish presence that demographic and fiscal pressures urged the Crown to enhance its direct control through a regulated property rights system. From the 1570s on, under viceroy Francisco de Toledo, a sweeping resettlement program was introduced that still counts as the most thorough and formative historical transition in Andean rural organization (Mumford 2012). Shortly before, communities had been integrated into *corregimientos* (provincial units), headed by a tax collecting official. Within the *corregimientos*, hamlets were concentrated into Spanish-style villages, called *reducciones de Indios*, under local control of the traditional chiefs, the *caciques*. The *reducciones* policy was intended to guarantee the survival of communal structures, for the sake of an optimal evangelization and labor and tax extraction. At the regional level, this reform set an amputation process in motion through which originally discontinuous (usually highland) territories lost their direct access to distant complementary production (usually valley) lands and were reorganized into enclosed entities.

The formalization of land rights involved the forced purchase of collective land titles from the Spanish Crown, thereby fixating communal boundaries in written property deeds. This mode of commodification established a paternalistic state-community relation, coined by Tristan Platt as a “reciprocity pact” (Platt 1982, 1984, 1987). According to this pact, the Spanish Crown protected communal land rights in return for free labor in the Potosí mines (*mit'a*) and taxation (*tributo*). The fiscal and labor obligations were key instruments in the organization of a colonial

intercontinental silver economy. Based on the exploitation of the Potosí mines, this silver flow nurtured the process of Andean ecological and social peripheralization (Moore 2010a). With Toledo's reform, the locus of indigenous incorporation shifted to the "renewal" of the communities' purchase of protected collective land rights through two-yearly tribute payment. Indigenous contestation of these terms of incorporation is empirically traceable in migration patterns, switching between fiscal categories, lobbying and violent uprisings against the *mit'a* and *tribute* (Larson, Harris and Tandeter 1995). At the same time, the loyalty ties forged through fiscal and labor obligations entailed the guarantee of autonomous control over community lands, which would feed back into the Bolivian land regime once the colonial system crumbled. When privatization initiatives engulfed the Bolivian highlands, indigenous communities and their leaders heavily relied on colonial land titles and the granted rights as incorporated vassals as discursive negotiation resources. As carriers of identity and collective memory, these resources were appropriated as empowering tools for ethnic territorial defense.

The Liberal-Oligarchic Frontier, 1874-1952

From the 1860s on, land rights commodification in Bolivia—now independent—deepened and shifted in a dramatic way. In the late nineteenth century, the core of economic and political power moved on the highlands, from its colonial base in Potosí and the nearby capital of Sucre to La Paz. This shift was supported by the "second conquest" of Andean resources, spearheaded by British imperialist ambitions and supported by an attractive economic context for vast inflows of international capital (Larson 2004:46). In the transition to independence, the mutual state-community pact that protected the communities' landowning, taxpaying and representative competences initially survived (Antezana 2006:90-3). However, from the late eighteenth century on, new ideas on civilization and nation-building gave shape to a different concept of land property and the formulation of "dead hands" (mortmain), which gained major entrance under influence of the French Revolution (Linklater 2013:199-211). The debates at the *Cortes de Cádiz* (1810-1814), would influence the future reorganizations promoting land privatization in the entire Spanish American region (Rodríguez 2005). Also in the newly independent Andean nations, a wide debate developed on how to modernize the colonially inherited land system (Larson 2004). The emerging liberal elites decided the debate, pinning down the principle of private property as the basic condition for the free movement of goods and labor. This required the formation of a modern, legible, hence centralized and homogeneous legal framework for land control.

Because of the incompatibility detected between moveable private and immobile collective property, the movement of that frontier particularly targeted communal landholdings. Somewhat later than elsewhere in Latin America, this shift materialized in Bolivia only when the mining sector started to usurp the Treasury's dependence on the indigenous tribute tax in the 1860s (Klein

2003:136). In 1874, the government enacted the *Ley de Exvinculación* (Alienation Act), thereby radically and one-sidedly terminating the existing guarantees for communal land arrangements (Ovando Sanz 1985). While the law aimed at converting collectively owned lands into individual held marketable plots, and hence community members into smallholders, its effect was much more differentiated, manipulated and incomplete (Rivera [1984] 2010:88-89; Barragán 2012). In regions with appropriate ecological conditions for agricultural surplus production, privatization had a strong impact. However, in large part of the highlands, particularly in the La Paz area, numerous communities were absorbed by a large-scale expropriation movement between 1880 and 1930, incorporating communities into private estates, which boosted the expansion of the hacienda complex (Klein 1993:157). Liberal reforms consolidated an oligarchic land system.

Whether in the eye of the storm or enduring in the margin, indigenous communities in all regions witnessed an erosion of their land rights security and social safety net. The existing balance between communities and haciendas was broken (Grieshaber 1980). Some regions remained more easily excluded from the tragedy of the commons, particularly where factors of pastoralism, community organization and communal ethics outbalanced the factors of market forces and demographic pressures on resources (Guillet 1981:145-6). However, in all regions increased vulnerability incited a strong and coordinated reaction which was quite successful in defending key indigenous demands against weak state structures (Barragán 2012; Rivera 1991). In marginal regions, ecological conditions tempered privatization pressures of agricultural entrepreneurs, but it was through the combination of the indigenous numerical force, their coordinated anti-alienation resistance and the solidity of the colonial reciprocity pact that they managed to keep their community lands outside the reach of liberal policies (Cottyn 2014). Across the highlands, indigenous resistance relied to great extent upon the mobilizing potential of communal structures, a national grassroots movement of community leaders, and a pragmatic alliance between indigenous leaders and rural elites. Communal resistance strategies included legal procedures, political lobbying and violent revolts. This multifaceted maneuvering materialized in legal loopholes to circumvent the new legislation (Larson 2004:220). Communities in possession of colonial land titles successfully lobbied for a formal exemption from the law on a national level and compelled the state to a deliberate policy of oblivion and non-intervention (Barragán 2012). Hence, the frontier was prevented from settling in the Bolivian highlands.

The Peasant Frontier, 1952-1985

The next frontier shift consisted of an internal restructuring through the dissolution of the hacienda complex and the opening of a new land reserve for large-scale land appropriation. This was a double state-centered incorporation strategy, aiming at the land regime's rationalization by conditioning land property in the highlands to size limits and its effective "social-economic

function”, and at its geographical expansion into the eastern lowlands. This phase was dominated by new revolutionary and moderate political movements and conditioned by a Cold War context in which the US sought to exercise internal influence, including in agrarian politics, and create room for foreign investment, however challenged by popular mobilizations and competing economic models (Field 2014; Young 2017).

The frontier shift materialized through a rupture, represented by the National Revolution of 1952 and the Agrarian Reform of the following year, as the result of accumulative cycles of popular resistance (Rivera [1984] 2010). The Chaco War (1932-1935) had put the land and the Indian question—amongst other topics that generated widespread discontent—on the political agenda in Bolivia. On the countryside, where 8% of the production units held 95% of all arable land of which they cultivated only 0.8%, organized protest against excessive land concentration and servile labor relations rose (Rivera [1984] 2010:132).

A combination of popular mobilization, syndicalist organization and the “discovery” of the peasants as political subjects led to the National Revolution of 1952. Counting as Latin America’s first successful revolution after Mexico, the new nationalist reformist government of the MNR nationalized the major mining companies, declared universal suffrage and implemented an agrarian (1953) and educational (1955) reform. The 1953 Agrarian Reform Decree declared that land belonged to the person who worked it; its ownership should fulfill a social function; and the state was the final owner of all natural resources (Assies 2009:298). The reform promoted a reversal of the private land usurpations and servile labor relations on the countryside, at least in the highlands (Stern 1987; Larson 2004; Gotkowitz 2007). Under the premises of nationalist developmentalism, which defined the dominant economic policy adopted by Latin American countries since the 1930s to the 1970s, the reform was oriented towards redistributive justice, subdividing and relocating hacienda holdings into small individual plots for peasant families organized within agrarian syndicates, while non-absorbed communities retained their communal structures. However, criteria were lax and prevented the expropriation of many large properties, while the deficient technical-financial capacity of the Bolivian state impeded an increase of productive resources for peasants (De Janvry 1981:208-209). Still, the overall outcome of 1953 was an expansion of standardized property rights and an increasingly stronger connection of rural communities’ land, labor and production to the market.

This phase corresponds to a process of “peasantization” which restored collective forms of land control through a reorganization of state-community reciprocity relations under a peasant-syndicalist scheme. This implied a denial of indigenous identities and logics and their formal substitution by peasant categories. In a following moment, the countryside was appeased through the authoritarian military-peasant pact, installed in 1964. While in several places communal forms of political mediation persisted, this explicit negation and pacification would trigger more radical

forms of rural-urban organization and negotiation. The indianist *katarismo* movement would break open the military-peasant pact and anticipated the communal redefinition of the land question in Bolivia in a successive moment (Rivera [1984] 2010). This latent unrest would merge with the effects of an inefficient land reform that augmented rather than mitigated the pressure on land. The 1953 legislation allowed for large estate formation in the lowlands, at the cost of indigenous community land. In the highlands, the reform spurred land fragmentation and forced indigenous peasants to choose between individual and undivided community land titles, molding peasants' access to land into a dual private-versus-collective pattern, ignoring that both usually coexist within community systems (Urioste 2005:17).

The Neoliberal-Indigenous Frontier, 1985-2015

A new shift in Bolivia's land regime trajectory was shaped by a double movement. In 1985, president Víctor Paz Estenssoro subjected Bolivia to an economic shock therapy, thereby definitively closing the period he had initiated himself as head of the revolutionary state of 1952. Heavily influenced and sponsored by supranational financial cooperation, neoliberal recipes were translated into a land reform focused on titling (INRA 2008:90-92). At the same time, the pursued land titling operation entailed important advances in terms of securing indigenous territorial rights, which might seem counterintuitive. While Bolivia's previous reforms focused on the highlands, this transformation was mainly triggered by lowland indigenous demands to secure an equal access to land – as a result of the spatial shift after 1953. The consequences of this shift in terms of communal rights provided indigenous communities with new tools for the consolidation of communal land tenure rights, thus reproducing the obstacles to incorporating these lands as commodities on the market.

By the end of the 20th century, it was irrefutable that the reformed land system had failed to halt land fragmentation, extreme poverty, and marginalization. It continued to favor capitalist agro-industrial production (Kay and Urioste 2007; Urioste, Barragán and Colque 2007). It became clear that the reform had been “abandoned” somewhere halfway (Urioste 2005), if not “reversed” (Rojas 2012). By the 1990s, national land distribution was marked by an asymmetric proportion between a growing group of *minifundio* landowners, occupying extremely small highland plots of less than 20 hectares, and a small group of *latifundio* landowners, now concentrated in the lowlands and including estates of over 5000 hectares (Chumacero 2012; Urioste 2005:24-25). Peasant and indigenous mobilizations pushed the agrarian question back on the political agenda. In response to the collective (land) demands of revitalized indigenous movements, a new legal figure of “Native Community Lands” (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen*) or, in short, TCOs, was introduced. This was a major innovation as this title explicitly recognized indigenous rights to communal control over resources, customs and forms of decision-making. In 1996, this instrument was

adopted by the new land reform law *Ley 1715*, commonly known as the INRA Law. INRA refers to the reorganized National Institute for Agrarian Reform. Its objective was to normalize and modernize the agrarian property situation as inherited from previous governments (Urioste 2005:19). Thereto, all post-1953 land property documents and titling procedures were cancelled and subjected to a technical-juridical regularization operation, termed *saneamiento* (Art. 64. Ley 1715; Mendoza et al. 2000:53). However, after ten years, only 11.6% of the country's land base had been regulated (INRA 2008:153).

The INRA law reproduced the dual framework installed in 1953. The assumed incomplementarity of individual and collective rights inflamed feelings of insecurity that challenged intra- and inter-community relations and their national integration (Chumacero 2012). In the context of the radically new political landscape after 2006, with the ascent of Evo Morales and the MAS party, the legislation was modified in an attempt to respond to these tensions. In 2009, Bolivia adopted a new constitution, declaring the country a "Plurinational State." The constitutional reform opened more room for heterogeneity in local customary land tenure systems. Indigenous land rights were extended to territorial rights under the status of "Indigenous Native Peasant Territory" (*Territorio Indígena Originario Campesino* or TIOC) (Rojas 2012). This reinforced the established guarantee of non-intervention on part of the state in the internal organization of land use and property, leaving this to the supervision of indigenous community leaders. Here, a new frontier shift may be identified that can be categorized as the "autonomy" or "plural" frontier. However, the Law on the Communitarian Restoration of the Agrarian Reform (*Ley de la Reconducción Comunitaria de la Reforma Agraria*) was more about the reaffirmation of the legal security of indigenous and peasant land rights and the acceleration of land titling, than a structural reform (Rojas 2012) .

Legal innovations have encountered serious difficulties to live up to the rising expectations (Urioste 2008:8; Rojas 2012). The new measures did not protect communities from the ongoing land grab in Bolivia's lowlands nor from far-reaching land fragmentation in the western highlands (Achtenberg 2013). Hence, land rights are far from disappearing on the country's political agenda; as are indigenous rights. It shows that the expansion of land right frontiers comes with contradictions and conflict, resulting in differentiation (fragmentation vs. concentration of lands) and lacuna (special status for community lands), hence securing the constant recreation of frontier processes. The reproduction of incorporation pressures was most clear in the commodifying ambitions expressed at Bolivia's Agricultural Summit in April 2015 (Fundación Tierra 2015).

In the course of the last five centuries, the granting of formal land titles constituted an essential step in the advance of a strategic frontier of land control in the Andes. Yet the explicit recognition of collective land tenure would act as an important brake on the further incorporation of Andean rural peoples and resources. In a second moment, the privatization of land rights, functional to the

installation of a national land legislation framework, was undercut. The previous phase of formalization had resulted in colonial property deeds which now functioned as counter-enclosure instruments. In a third moment, the reorganization of land rights was functional to the national incorporation and pacification of the countryside. In a last moment, the Bolivian state seems to have made a deliberate choice to settle the land rights frontier without completely incorporating communal systems. By 2013, of all the land that had been regularized since the 1953 reform and under the more recent reforms, one-third corresponded to collective Native Community Land titles held by indigenous and peasant organizations (Achtenberg 2013). Through national revolutions, constitutional change and land reform, the state-centered land rights system of Bolivia was compelled to recognize room for heterogeneity and negotiation that allows for the existence of communal arrangements. This created an important margin for autonomy—albeit one subject to recurrent pressures to conform. In the face of growing state and private claims on the land, indigenous communities and their leaders are triggered to constantly renegotiate their land rights. It is this combination of autonomy and participation, rooted in the ability to carve out concessions but also to reconcile to supra-local control systems, that explains the resilience of Andean communal action and the re-production of communal spaces in an ever globalizing world. It gives evidence of how Andean rural communities define the conditions under which they will participate in incorporation strategies.

The Land Question as a Frontier Process

The expansion of global capitalism is the expression of a fundamental transformation of land rights. Being a constitutive frontier process, the land question can be understood as a central point of friction between peripherally located groups and the development of a capitalist world-economy. The struggle over rights to access, withdraw, manage, exclude or alienate land constitutes land regimes. They are the manifestation of the paradoxes of shifting world-historical processes of land commodification. This unevenness produces hybrid social spaces, fueling and fueled by partial incorporation of customary tenure systems.

While the commons disappeared in many other parts of the world, community land still stands out as a decisive component in the constitution of Andean land systems. Communal efforts to secure a margin for community-based land and resource management deal with the attempts of national governments to subject access to land to a centralized and standardized (legible, accountable) legal framework. Driven by liberal ideas on property and state aspirations for “modernity,” the spatial and social structures of communal organization have been identified as to-be-incorporated. Incorporation pressures triggered diverse repertoires of reaction developed by local communities and their leaders. A frontier perspective reveals how these repertoires interrupted the development of a capitalist land regime, and connected the histories, spaces and

agency of peripheral groups to this expansive process. Tracing the temporal and spatial shifts in the shaping of Bolivia's plural land regime reveals how new places and societies were incorporated and transformed while explicitly recognizing degrees of non-incorporation.

This article has explained and tested the world-systems frontier perspective by tracing how a frontier zone has been (re)shaped in the Andean highlands throughout the historical formation of a national land regime. Land commodification in the rural Andes is analyzed through an incorporated comparison of successive frontier shifts over the last five centuries. This trajectory shifted from colonial *tributary* frontier evolved to as a post-independence *liberal-oligarchic* frontier, which was restructured into a *peasant* frontier in the context of mid-twentieth century nationalist developmentalism, and redefined as a *neoliberal-indigenous* frontier in the late twentieth century. The changes under Bolivia's first indigenous president announced a new frontier shift in the country's land regime towards pluralism, yet are currently being evaluated as a shift towards the exacerbation of capital vs. communal contradictions (Webber 2017). The spatial nexus of these frontiers shifted from the Potosí mining complex to the new liberal elites in La Paz, until historical highland dominance was lost to the lowland region of Santa Cruz. Neoliberal times witness an increasing transnationalization of power relations, currently challenged by a revitalization of lowland, highland, and international community voices. Externally, the frontier moved from the European mainland to the Americas and then from the colonial highland heartland into new peripheries. Internally, the frontier between individual private property and collective tenure is being redefined.

By adopting a frontier perspective the incorporation and reproduction of communal systems in the Bolivian highlands is deconstructed as a process of negotiation. The notion of negotiation does not neutralize the effects of commodifying pressures that push for a homogenization of spaces, but points to the simultaneity of counter-pressures that contribute to the heterogeneity of local spaces. The modernizing aspirations of public authorities and strong communal land claims forced local communities, rural elites, corporate interests and government actors into a complex interplay. Rather than passive victims or stubborn opponents, Andean rural communities appear as active negotiators. The repercussions of the conflicts and alliances developing on the Bolivian highlands produced an incorporation without commodification of community lands within a centralized land regime. Moving the frontier to center stage in world-systems analysis is instructive on several fronts. The frontier perspective elaborated in this paper enables scholars to analyze peripheral agency in the context of incorporative processes in other temporal and spatial settings. It explains how the (re)production of frontiers of land control in specific places gives shape to a far from homogeneous world-system. In that sense, a frontier perspective offers a strategic toolbox to enhance a more comprehensive and non-dichotomous world-systemic understanding of the expansion, limits and contradictions of the capitalist world.

About Author

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