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Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?

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Abstract

For decades, cocaine trafficking has been a key factor in accelerating the social and ecological transformation of rural landscapes across Latin America. In this review article, we explain why and how. Drawing from scholarly, journalistic, and policy sources we identify and theorize the political-economic logics and grounded processes underlying the pervasive nexus of agrarian change, clandestine activities, and illicit capital. We first outline three key elements of the political economic context that create and enable land acquisition by drug traffickers. We then elucidate narcos' multiple motives for acquiring, transforming, and holding rural landed property. Ultimately, we make a case for understanding drug traffickers as a "narco-bourgeoisie" due to their use of cocaine profits to establish and extend private property relations into erstwhile communal and protected lands that were previously unavailable for capital accumulation. We argue that theorizing drug traffickers in this way better captures the relationship between drug control policy and capitalism, and the role of illicit capital in land use change.

Keywords: *Cocaine, drug traffic, land grab, agrarian change*

Resumen

Por décadas el tráfico de cocaína ha generado bruscos y violentos cambios socioeconómicos como ecológicos, transformando las economías rurales en todos los países afectados en América Latina. Este artículo presenta un análisis del impacto multidimensional del narcotráfico sobre las economías rurales de Colombia, Centroamérica, y México. El artículo analiza los elementos fundamentales que han impulsado a los narcotraficantes (narco burguesía) a la adquisición masiva de tierras. En este sentido, el artículo discute tres factores interdependientes que explican el impacto de la economía del narcotráfico: cambio en las economías rurales, las actividades clandestinas del narcotráfico, y el capital ilícito. El artículo analiza elementos de los contextos internacionales (como la guerra contra las drogas) y de los contextos locales (corrupción, leyes de tierras) que posibilitaron el acaparamiento de tierras por la narco burguesía. Finalmente, el artículo argumenta que los narcotraficantes, y su emergente burguesía, son instrumentales en la expansión de la propiedad privada y en la concentración de tierras, impulsando el sistema capitalista selva adentro, perjudicando comunidades indígenas y afrodescendientes, el medio ambiente y la seguridad alimenticia.

Palabras clave: *Cocaína, narco-tráfico, acaparamiento de tierras, transformación agraria*

Introduction

Through a process described as a “narco land grab” (Ballvé 2012), drug trafficking organizations currently control an estimated six million hectares in Colombia (Richani 2012). In Brazil, drug traffickers¹ had 62 km² of Amazonian forest cleared in a mere three weeks (Fearnside 2008). In northern Guatemala, the criminal Mendoza Group used a government land registry to illegally acquire 28 farms—one 11,364 ha in size—from the campesino owners (Anon. 2011, CICIG 2016). Across Central America, cocaine flows trend closely—in both time and space—with forest loss (McSweeney *et al.* 2014). From 2000-14, from 15 to 30 percent of annual forest loss in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua was associated with narco-capitalized pasture expansion (Sesnie *et al.* 2017). In the specific Central American regions where these effects are concentrated, the value of lost ecosystem services approaches USD\$147 million annually (Aguilar-González *et al.* Forthcoming).

What’s going on? Latin American drug traffickers are more often associated with urban real estate, tax havens, football clubs, beauty pageants, flashy vehicles, and ostentatious homes. In contrast, the above examples point to a distinct empirical reality: drug traffickers also appear to be significant actors in social and environmental change in rural areas, especially through the rapid conversion of biodiverse landscapes of smallholder production to ecologically simplified agribusiness.² These effects are particularly pronounced in the peripheral transit spaces associated with the movement of cocaine from South American source areas to northern markets. These are not spaces in which coca is grown or cocaine is processed. Rather—and as the above examples make clear—these are regions dominated by drug transshipment.

How and why, exactly, is the clandestine northward relay of cocaine related to agrarian transformation? How widespread is this connection? Does drug trafficking work with or against the licit processes shaping frontiers, such as state-endorsed “land-grabbing”

expansion of energy and transportation infrastructure, timber extraction, and mineral and hydrocarbon mining?

We have been intrigued by these questions since we found evidence of a stark correlation between the movement of cocaine through rural spaces and the dramatic transformation of those same spaces. We particularly seek to understand how the business of moving drugs shapes socio-ecological change in indigenous territories, conservation zones, and other remote areas—lands that prior to drug traffickers' arrival were widely considered to be “off-limits” to outside landowners and to be well-protected by vigorous indigenous, peasant, and conservation movements. In exploring this issue, we reviewed a host of case studies by journalists, practitioners, and scholars, including insightful research by geographers. But we found little over-arching empirical or theoretical treatment of what appears to be a pervasive nexus of agrarian change, clandestine activities, and illicit capital.

This paper, therefore, takes a synoptic look at this body of work. Our review leans heavily on the experience of Colombia (since the 1970s) and of Guatemala and Honduras (more recently). This is partly because these are the places where we as scholars have been working for many years, and where the drug trafficking/land nexus seems particularly dramatic. Narco-financed land concentration in Colombia developed over decades in the context of a brutal civil war (see Richani 1997); in Guatemala and Honduras, its recent surge may reflect the economic importance of the agricultural sector in those countries compared with other Central American nations (FAO 2014), the volume and value of cocaine transiting each country—especially since the mid-2000s, and the specific territorial dynamics of the criminal groups operating there (see, e.g., UNODC 2012). That said, these countries are hardly unique in their experience of drug trafficking-related agrarian change, and we draw from documentation of comparable dynamics in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, the Brazilian Amazon, and Mexico.

There are, of course, stark differences within and between these regions. But our goal here is to identify commonalities of experience, which necessarily means glossing over complex histories and place-specific nuance. It also implies contending with the empirical gaps that are typical of work on clandestine activities (see Abraham and van Schendel 2005, May 2017). Despite contextual differences and data gaps, we argue that there are identifiable and consistent processes at work—processes that are likely to emerge wherever illicit capital and land abundance converge—whether in Latin America or elsewhere (see, e.g., WACD 2014).

To better understand those processes, and to guide future work in this area, we lay out a preliminary framework for thinking about the relationships between clandestine activities, illicit capital, and frontier change in a way that is consistent with broader accounts of rural transformation. Specifically, we place the dynamics we describe within the history of capitalism, and make a case for conceptualizing drug traffickers as a “narco-bourgeoisie” that uses profits captured from a transnational (cocaine) commodity chain to establish and extend private property relations into new spaces. This, we argue, lays the foundation for state and corporate consolidation of erstwhile communal and protected lands.

In what follows, we first turn our attention to the larger structural context in which drug traffickers arise and operate, with particular attention to the questions “Why now?”

and ‘Why there?’ Second, we focus on the logics underlying traffickers’ interest in the rural sector. Third, we explore the mechanics by which traffickers acquire and legitimize landed property. Fourth, we theorize the relationship between drug traffickers and social and ecological change. We conclude by considering the implications of our analysis for policy and scholarship.

The Enabling Political-Economic Context

To understand narco presence and behavior in rural areas, it is necessary to place their activities within the broader political-economic context, which we locate at the juncture of three processes: the War on Drugs, late 20th century neoliberalism, and pervasive inequalities in Latin America’s agrarian sector.

War on Drugs

The UN-sanctioned, U.S.-led “War on Drugs” has served many geopolitical and geoeconomic ends over the past forty years (see, e.g., Scott and Marshall 1991, Youngers and Rosin 2005, Collins 2014). For our purposes, two defining characteristics of this war are particularly important: drug prohibition and drug interdiction. Intended to curb global demand and curtail supply, both have failed utterly (Buxton 2006, Keefer *et al.* 2008, OAS 2013, Caulkins 2014). What they have done—among many other effects—is to create drug traffickers as “...agile, wealthy, and opportunistic non-state actors” (Bunck and Fowler 2012:4) while conditioning traffickers’ spatial mobility and investment options.

Specifically: the universal prohibition of cocaine ensures that those involved in its production and shipment are criminalized, while simultaneously making those criminals incredibly rich. In 2010, some 200 metric tons of pure cocaine transited Central America and Mexico, earning traffickers an estimated \$6 billion (UNODC 2010). Relative to non-prohibited commodities, the per-gram wholesale export value of cocaine is staggeringly high (OAS 2013, Caulkins 2014). Moreover, the relatively small number of traffickers moving drugs through transit zones (relative to production or retail zones) means these mid-stream actors capture a relatively large share of the transit profits (Allen 2005, OAS 2013, Stewart 2013). Thus the war on drugs simultaneously relegates drug traffickers to the social margins and massively enriches them (Buxton 2006). This sets up the conditions by which traffickers become extremely powerful extra-legal actors in transit countries (OAS 2013). Their ability to corrupt political, judicial, military, religious, and business elites is legendary, blurring the line between bona fide drug traffickers and narco-enriched elites (Rosenberg 1988, Bunck and Fowler 2012, Gutiérrez 2016, Miraglia 2016, Chayes 2017).

Drug “interdiction,” in turn, refers to initiatives designed to delay, disrupt, or destroy drugs as they are exported from production zones towards northern markets. In the western hemisphere, interdiction operations focus on cocaine being moved through the so-called “transit zone,” which includes (but is not limited to) the northern coasts of South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and all associated maritime areas. For decades, the U.S. has used the drug interdiction mandate to equip, fund, train, and coordinate directly with military units in most countries within this zone. Such cooperation intensified under the Mérida Initiative (2007-10) and its later off-shoot, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI; 2008-present), and under the Caribbean Basin Security

Initiative (2010–present). All are modeled after Plan Colombia (2000–present).

Interdiction operations generate a predictable and ongoing cat-and-mouse dynamic in which traffickers seek to stay a step ahead of their pursuers—especially when they are receiving relatively detectable bulk shipments from South America via plane or fastboat (Caulkins *et al.* 1993, Bagley 2012, Gootenberg 2012, Reuter 2014). This dynamic plays out at multiple scales. Regionally, it means that drug traffickers constantly re-route their principal shipments. Over the past two decades, for example, primary trafficking routes have shifted from the eastern Caribbean, to Mexico, back to the Caribbean (principally Haiti and the Dominican Republic), then into Central America (UNODC 2012), such that by 2012 some 80 percent of all U.S.-bound cocaine transited the isthmus (INCSR 2013). Within Central America, “hotspots” receiving bulk drug shipments directly from South America shifted from northern Guatemala to eastern Honduras during the mid to late 2000s; routes remain highly dynamic (see, e.g., Josephs 2013).

Within each of these countries, in turn, cocaine transit hubs are constantly shifting from one place to another in order to stay—literally—under the (counter-narcotics) radar (Bunck and Fowler 2012). In the context of our Central American analysis, it is these within-region and within-country displacements that can have particularly pernicious effects. Because as interdiction incentivizes traffickers to repeatedly establish new transit sites, they seek out evermore remote ‘frontier’ landscapes—i.e., the relatively land- and resource-abundant spaces of smallholder agriculture, indigenous territories, and protected areas. Once established in these “safe haven[s]” (Bunck and Fowler 2012:307), it seems common for narcos to move drugs through the new site for several years without any significant interference from law enforcement. It is in that window that they appear to foment rapid social and ecological change.

The eventual arrival of counter-narcotics forces is often coordinated between drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and corrupted police/military units to ensure that each gets what it needs (see, e.g., El Heraldo 2016c). The resulting pro forma counter-narcotics operations ensure that the locus of trafficking shifts to another rural space, demonstrating the “effectiveness” of law enforcement. But in a win for narcos, the net effect is trivial because drugs are simply re-routed. The losers are, invariably, the communities targeted for counter-narcotics actions. In Central America it is often the high-profile arrival of police and military units who in the name of ‘securing’ rural communities harass, terrorize, and kill local inhabitants (see, e.g., Espach *et al.* 2011, OHCHR 2016, OIG 2017).³

Twentieth-century neoliberalism

Critical to understanding the drug/land nexus is the role played by 30 years of neoliberal development policies within the transit zone, including trade liberalization and financial deregulation. Scripted under the so-called “Washington Consensus” and fomented by global institutions like the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank, these policies have, *inter alia*, made drug trafficking easier, lubricated the flow of capital—both licit and illicit—and, more recently, incentivized investment in the agribusiness and extractive sectors.

In Central America, for example, successive neoliberal efforts to integrate national economies have included CAFTA-DR, SIEPAC, Proyecto Mesoamérica, and other initia-

tives (Segovia 2006, Grandia 2013).⁴ The expansion and integration of transportation and energy infrastructure (roads, ports, oil pipelines, electrical grids) are intended, in part, to stimulate export markets and accelerate trade in natural resources (Muñoz Martínez 2004, Finley-Brook 2012). At the same time, global deregulation of the banking and finance industries means that inter-regional and international capital is evermore available to finance and profit from these mega-projects (Segovia 2006, Global Witness 2017).

Drug traffickers benefit from both trends (e.g., Allen 2005, Bhattacharyya 2005, Naím 2005, Gilman *et al.* 2011). For example, they are widely reported to hide drugs in containers flowing through the Panama Canal and newer trans-isthmian routes (Velásquez Runk 2012, Maldonado Aranda 2013, INCSR 2017). Simultaneously, the easing of financial regulatory oversight makes it easier to launder drug dollars through banks (Segovia 2006). For example, Wachovia and HSBC are known to have helped Mexican DTOs move USD\$420 billion and USD\$670 billion, respectively (Mercille 2011).

The 2007-08 global economic crisis was widely understood to be a partial result of financial deregulation under neoliberalism. One outcome of that crisis, world-wide, has been that investors—including hedge funds and pension funds—seek alternatives to declining rates of profit and price fluctuations in financial markets by investing in the relatively secure and stable land, agribusiness, and extractive sectors (Farthing 2017). These investments have helped to accelerate and extend the concentration of rural land in elite hands—what many describe as a global land grab. In Latin America, land concentration has largely been financed by domestic and regional capital as much as international capital (Borras Jr. *et al.* 2012, FAO 2014). Lands are often developed for highly marketable “flex crops” such as oil palm and soybean—crops that also benefit from incentives created by carbon and clean energy markets (FAO 2014). In Central America, the expansion of oil palm since 2008 has been remarkable (Borras Jr. *et al.* 2012, Farthing 2017). As with any growth sector, the oil palm industry attracts all investors, including DTOs (Ballvé 2012, Kerssen 2013, CICIG 2016).

Neoliberal policies have also facilitated the ability of the private sector to capture public funds and public assets, typically through the growth of public-private partnerships (Segovia 2006). This has allowed for ostensibly state-led development projects to be increasingly driven by the interests of private capital. One outcome is that private firms often lead the push to “develop” remote frontiers through construction of hydroelectric dams, ports, roads, mines, tourist infrastructure, airports, and other ‘public’ works (Chayes 2017). When well-positioned drug traffickers or narco-corrupted politicians insert themselves into the associated planning, bidding, and construction process, they stand to gain substantially from state contracts and as frontier landowners (Duffy 2006, Anon. 2011, Velásquez Runk 2012, Criterio 2017, Gagne 2017).

The expansion of agribusiness and mega-developments into rural landscapes has also been predicated on policies that have generally weakened the economic and political foundations of smallholder and indigenous lifeways. For example, NAFTA, CAFTA-DR and other free trade agreements hit smallholding producers of basic grains particularly hard (Edelman 2008), and structural adjustment programs removed many price, credit, and sectoral supports that smallholders once enjoyed (Maldonado Aranda 2013). At the same time, development banks have aggressively pushed countries to “regularize” rural

land through cadastral and titling programs. These “market-assisted land reforms,” however, erode communal safeguards and open up peasant and indigenous lands to purchase by the narco-enriched and others (Ybarra 2008, Richani 2012, Gould 2014, Larson *et al.* 2016, OHCHR 2016).

Peasant and indigenous resistance to this de facto dispossession has frequently been intense and sustained, including constitutional amendments to protect indigenous territorial rights from extractivist state and private sector interests (Ybarra 2011, Abbott 2015, Kroger and Lalander 2016). At the same time, states have deployed tactics of “neoliberal multiculturalism” to coopt and divide social movements (Hale 2005, Velásquez Runk 2012). Less subtly, states use brutal violence to silence peasant and indigenous leaders protesting the loss of their lands, the routine violation of their rights, and the ongoing destruction of the environment. Across the transit region, police, military, paramilitary, and private security forces have increasingly harassed, assaulted, and killed peasant, labor, and environmental activists (Global Witness 2014). Honduras currently stands as the most deadly country in the world in which to be an environmental defender (Global Witness 2017). Remarkably, this violence is often blamed on rural communities themselves, who are accused of drug trafficking (OIG 2017). In fact, the opposite seems true: state repression has repeatedly been documented to protect narco-landowners and other private landowners from the legitimate grievances of the rural poor that they displace (see, e.g., Paley 2014, Lakhani 2017).

Agrarian structures and chronic underemployment

Colombia and Central American nations are infamous for appalling rural land inequality (FAO 2014) and for the racist ideologies that underpin elite constructions of Afro-descendent and indigenous spaces as underdeveloped and available (Mollett 2006, Hendlin 2014, Velásquez Runk 2015); the latter trope is common in media coverage of drug trafficking zones (see, e.g., El Heraldo 2016c). “Bi-modal” agrarian structures date to the nineteenth century and are little improved despite multiple reform attempts (Kay 2002, FAO 2014). The persistence of land inequality is a key reminder that contemporary pressures on land- and resource-rich frontiers are only the latest chapter in the centuries-long siege on indigenous and peasant lands (Edelman *et al.* 2013, North and Grinspun 2016).

Agrarian inequality has been maintained through time by—among other things—tax regimes and land laws that favor large landholders, irrespective of land productivity. Such policies were crucial in incentivizing narcos’ investments in rural land in Colombia, and to subsequently protecting those investments (Richani 2012). In Central America, land laws that were originally designed to protect peasants and re-distribute ‘idle’ land have, in many cases, been re-purposed by elites and by narcos to legitimize and extend their holdings (Kerssen 2013). More recently, a host of “counter-reform” laws allow private titling, sales of agrarian reform lands, dissolution of communal land titles, and foreign land ownership (Edelman and León 2013, Paley 2014, Mollett 2016).⁵ Justified to facilitate foreign investment, these laws also make it easier for drug traffickers to privatize and legitimize stolen land.

In Central America and Colombia, land inequality has fostered rural landlessness,

underemployment, low wages, and poor agricultural performance overall (Kay 2006). It has also driven rural-to-urban and international migration, particularly to the U.S. (Kay 2002, Segovia 2006, FAO 2014). Those who remain face chronic unemployment and underemployment. Not surprisingly, many drug traffickers—particularly those comprising loose-knit drug-running networks—come from their countries’ social underclass, who move into drug-running from other parts of the informal economy, both licit and illicit (Camacho Guizado and López Restrepo 2000, Dudley 2010, UNODC 2012, Vo 2016).

That said, just who ‘counts’ as a drug trafficker at any time can be murky. Some analysts make clear distinctions between opportunistic, footloose drug runners (*transportistas*) and highly organized, well-connected, territorial-based crime families (UNODC 2012). In practice, however, the two types can be hard to distinguish. This is partly due to the spatial and structural dynamism of trafficking networks themselves (Wilson and Stevens 2008). It is also because the drug business provides remarkable opportunities for upward mobility and self-transformation otherwise closed off to the region’s poorest residents. In Colombia, for example, Richani (2012:69) describes how “one can start as drug trafficker and end up as an agro-industrialist farming African [oil] palm and owning another parcel for cattle ranching...” Next, we explore how and why land figures so prominently in this process.

Drug Traffickers’ Motives for Accumulating and Transforming Land

Case studies from across the region suggest that narcos amass land for at least five reasons. Although we separate each motive for analytical clarity, they are profoundly intertwined.

Business logistics

Traffickers acquire large, remote rural properties for at least two logistical purposes. First, monopolizing land along strategic trafficking routes prevents territorial encroachment by rival groups (Anon. 2011, Castillo Girón 2011). Second, land ownership is essential to move drugs surreptitiously and with minimal interruption. The more properties owned, the more spatially nimble the operations can be in response to interdiction actions.⁶ Remoteness is a particular asset when unloading/loading hundreds of kilograms of cocaine from a plane or boat, and for setting up refueling stations, storage facilities, landing strips, roads, and other infrastructure to facilitate entry/egress of drugs, fuel, food, labor, and more (El Heraldo 2016c). Thus even as drug traffickers initially seek isolation, their own activities help to integrate and connect remote landscapes to regional and national transportation networks (Grandia 2013, Velásquez Runk 2015). Roads built by traffickers in western Honduras, for example, have become *de facto* regional highways (Farah 2014).

Situational legitimacy

Across the transit zone, drug traffickers often acquire lands that are in primary or secondary forest, and/or used for smallholder food production. They typically pay to have those lands quickly cleared for cattle pasture, and in some cases for oil palm. This hasty conversion may appear illogical to observers who might: a) see forest canopies as useful

cover for illicit activities; b) consider the value of standing rainforest to far exceed that of a low-grade cattle pasture; and/or c) consider pasture a serious misallocation of land in countries that are known to be highly food insecure. The logic behind traffickers' pasture establishment, however, is robust. First, in many frontier settings, laws protect the rights of "squatters" who establish that status by clearing and maintaining residence on state land for a given period. Second, land clearing is often regarded as "improvement" that increases the land's exchange value several-fold and thus ensures an (eventual) return on the investment. Third, clearing land neutralizes indigenous peoples' or conservationists' claims to that land based on the use value of forest or the inherent value of biodiversity (OHCHR 2016). Finally, when narcos turn their holdings into cattle pasture, they legitimize their presence in the area under the "cover" of being frontier cattlemen (Grandia 2013, McSweeney and Pearson 2013).

Money laundering

In Guatemala and Honduras, it is estimated that drug trafficking organizations earn about USD\$2,000 for every kilogram of cocaine they move (Stewart 2013). For individual DTOs transporting thousands of kilograms annually, earnings can be in the tens of millions of dollars. As a result, drug traffickers at all levels routinely face the problem of over-accumulation: what to do with all the money (see, e.g., Riding 1988)? This problem is compounded by the fact that their earnings are often in USD\$20 bills and therefore conspicuous as illicit proceeds.⁷ Narcos therefore seek ways to: a) merge illegal funds within legal cash flows; b) find assets that can be purchased with cash, and c) otherwise invest in ways that can simultaneously absorb cash/foreign currency and obscure its provenance (this latter technique is known as "layering"). All such activities are components of the money laundering process (Cox 2014).

Frontier economies are particularly amenable to money laundering because of the pre-existing prevalence of barter and cash-based exchange. Thus, economic transactions are rarely traceable; the evidentiary needs for receipts of capital are simply not there. Further, most assets—such as cattle—are not formally registered. Also, few Central American nations enforce import/export controls on livestock, meaning that it is often impossible to know where a given animal is from. This makes it easy for traffickers to launder money through cattle purchase and sale, often across borders (see, e.g., Galvan-Miyoshi *et al.* 2015, La Tribuna 2015). Any subsequent sale of cattle or land then releases laundered (aka "legitimate") funds to the trafficker.

Narcos can also off-load currency by paying cash to day laborers to burn, clear, and maintain land—either in areas they have already acquired or which they intend to acquire (Castillo Girón 2011). In fact, where narcos routinely pay ranch hands and other wage workers, rural communities can be so awash in narco-dollars that USD bills become the *de facto* currency (Edelman *et al.* 2013, OAS 2013). While such dollarization can seriously distort crop prices and wages (Geffray 2001, Vo 2016), it also makes the original sources of the dollars hard to identify, masking and perpetuating dollar laundering through the rural economy.

Drug traffickers also commonly launder dollars in the construction and acquisition of agricultural enterprises such as slaughterhouses, meat-packing plants, sawmills, and oil

palm processing facilities (EIA 2005, Anon. 2011, Treasury Department 2013). Laundering through these “fronts” is particularly easy because, with little government oversight of agricultural/silvicultural production or export, no receipts are required to match product flows (cattle, raw palm fruit, beef, or oil) against profits. Moreover, these are businesses that are supplied from lands controlled by traffickers themselves. Thus the same activities that are designed to integrate illicit activities horizontally into the (legitimate) agribusiness sphere also help traffickers to vertically integrate their own laundering projects (see also Salama 2000).

In sum: rural areas do not only provide traffickers with the spaces through which to move drugs. These spaces also provide accessible, multiple, and integrated laundering opportunities—in land, labor, livestock, and processing facilities. It is not only in situ narcos who launder in these ways. For example, there are multiple instances of Colombian and Mexican DTOs investing in Central American agribusiness through their in situ associates (McSweeney and Pearson 2013)—a pattern of integrated and strategic investment that matches the behavior of licit firms (Segovia 2006, FAO 2014). Rural investment opportunities are especially attractive when compared with more conventional laundering mechanisms such as banks and urban real estate, which are more prone to state control, international oversight, and active monitoring by anti-narcotics forces (see, e.g., Thoumi 2003, Stein *et al.* 2012, OAS 2013, Cox 2014). In contrast, the effectiveness of the rural laundering strategy seems to have been confirmed by the U.S. State Department’s recent inability to conclusively trace links between alleged drug “kingpins” and agribusinesses (Yagoub 2017).

Land acquisition as path to political power

A fourth motive for investment in land is that becoming a latifundista (large landowner) is a traditional path towards upward mobility and political power in many parts of the region (Riding 1988, Richani 2012, Maldonado Aranda 2013). Landownership reflects and confers wealth, while the acquisition of land at the expense of smallholders means that drug traffickers are more able to control the labor and political participation of those they have dispossessed. DTOs often finance the political campaigns of allies; some narcos buy votes in order to enter the local political sphere themselves, often as municipal leaders (e.g., mayors) (Araújo 2001). In these or other leadership roles, their strategic largesse (sometimes building schools and health facilities) can endear them to communities, especially when they play on “rags-to-riches” tropes (Camacho Guizado and López Restrepo 2000, Castillo Girón 2011, Cabañas 2014, Farah 2014).⁸ In this way, they can begin to ascend the political ladder, ensuring a perpetually favorable political climate for their business activities (Geffray 2001, Anon. 2011).

Land speculation and land rent

As frontier land owners, drug traffickers typically convert lands to pasture or export monoculture. Their patterns of investment, however, suggest far greater interest in the speculative value of land than in any potential returns from agricultural production (Richani 2012)—i.e., narcos are betting that the value of the land will increase, regardless of the land use. This is in part because as they buy land, they create demand for land,

subsequently increasing future value (Riding 1988, Richani 2012). It is also because land speculation is typically low-risk—narcos’ return on the land will exceed the opportunity cost. That is, once drug traffickers get land titles (see below), favorable tax structures mean that they assume little financial burden in holding onto land as its value rises. In these ways, drug traffickers profit from the “rent” that the land generates irrespective of use (Richani 2012).⁹ In the process, narcos turn landscapes of food production and biodiversity into spaces of a “rentier” agrarian economy predicated primarily on rent extraction (see also Borras Jr. *et al.* 2012, Campbell 2015).

The potential profits to be made in land speculation are arguably highest in the many instances in which drug traffickers are illegally acquiring land in indigenous territories, peasant cooperatives, and conservation areas. In these settings, narcos’ land purchases are alienating formerly protected lands, creating a new land market in places where sale of land to “third parties” is illegal. Entering at the bottom of a speculative land market, then, they are in a position to reap particularly high profits, especially when they “flip” those lands to corporate actors, such as licit domestic and transnational bio-fuel, mineral, timber, hydroelectric, cattle ranching, and petroleum companies (Hernández 2012, Guereña and Zepeda 2013). Thus while an initial purchase of land may have been motivated by the need to hide illicit capital (“layering”), and despite what may be minimal investment in the land itself, subsequent sale of that land completes the laundering cycle with the narcos making substantial profits.

How Traffickers Acquire and Hold Land

Drug traffickers typically break laws as they acquire and hold lands. Certainly, they are not alone in seizing lands by illegal means (Farthing 2017). As a group, however, they have the opportunity, means, and motives to acquire land in areas that more legitimate actors (states, corporations) would be less able or less willing to access (Borras Jr. *et al.* 2012). Below, we elaborate on the mechanisms they use to do so.

Financial and physical coercion

Compared to any other frontier actor, drug traffickers have unparalleled and unprecedented amounts of cash-in-hand. They leverage the lure of liquid capital and a quick deal to secure land from impoverished smallholders. Some traffickers purchase the land of entire communities outright (McSweeney and Pearson 2013). When individual landowners resist, narcos have been known to pressure sellers by buying up all surrounding land until the hold-out relents (Hernández 2012). Drug traffickers also manipulate debt to acquire land by lavishing gifts on individuals and later demanding land in return. Narcos’ ability to manipulate social relations in these ways appears to derive from their social embeddedness in the spaces through which they operate (Van de Bunt *et al.* 2014).

For these reasons, drug traffickers have, in many cases, been able to acquire vast parcels of land quickly, quietly, and even with little violence. Indicative of this is that drug traffickers are often accommodated and sometimes welcomed in communities where they spread narco-dollars widely through their spending and hiring practices (Riding 1988, Castillo Girón 2011, Espach *et al.* 2011, OAS 2013).

This does not mean, however, that traffickers’ financial persuasiveness in securing

land can ever be separated from their threat of, or actual deployment of, extreme violence. Because drug traffickers use violence to enforce contracts between themselves, they regularly provide graphic and widely-reported evidence of their willingness to maim, rape, kidnap, torture, and murder those who oppose or cross them (and their family members). For this reason, narcos' land purchases invariably occur in terrifying social contexts in which the ability of landowners to negotiate, resist, or denounce land sales is effectively nil.

Corruption in land legitimization

For drug traffickers to most successfully launder money in land, or to use rural properties to establish legitimate businesses and themselves as legitimate landowners, it helps to acquire formal title. As Grajales (2013: 772) puts it, "...profits from crime and violence need to be converted into legally recognized forms of capital, and public institutions are the only actors capable of this conversion. There is considerable evidence that narco-traffickers' ability to do this is based on their cooptation of state land titling processes" (Sarruf Romero 2016).

Advocates for indigenous and peasant groups have argued that strong communal land rights are vital in protecting rural communities from narco-land theft (e.g., PRISMA 2014). In the Petén, for example, well-organized forestry cooperatives appear to have deterred narco-led land invasion (Devine 2016). However, we found that there does not appear to be any landholding regime that is immune to cooptation. In Colombia, for example, traffickers' ability to corrupt, intimidate, and fraudulently title land allowed for them to eventually control as much as 11 percent of the country's agricultural lands by 1998, regardless of the titular status (Thoumi 2003, Richani 2012). In Honduras, traffickers have little trouble in falsifying title documents in a national context in which 80 percent of the country's privately held land is estimated to be either untitled or improperly titled, and where title fraud is more the rule than the exception (U.S. Department of State 2016).

Even well-developed and transparent cadastral and land-registration systems provide little protection. Rather, they appear to make peasant holdings more legible—and thus, accessible—to narcos. In northern Guatemala, for example, land registration systems developed as part of peasant resettlement programs and market-assisted land reform were used by one DTO to identify prize parcels, which they acquired by force and paid corrupt notaries to legitimize (CICIG 2016; see also Grandia 2013). As a result, narco families' ability to acquire lands has been remarkably traceable (Anon. 2011). Land transfer records become, in this case, a remarkable testament—rather than a barrier—to the speed and impunity with which drug traffickers amass and legitimize vast holdings (Castillo Girón 2011).

Impunity from law enforcement and prosecution

As a business, drug trafficking requires the complicity of the police and military. When traffickers first move into a new rural transit territory (as interdiction requires that they perennially do), pay-offs are designed to ensure that police/military "look away" (see, e.g., El Heraldito 2016b). For law enforcement, this means failing to enforce border controls, neglecting surveillance designed to intercept drug flows, failure to report evidence of money laundering (including widespread illegal land acquisition), and sluggish response

to narco-related crimes. Narcos also pay law enforcement to alert them to impending actions by other units (such as the U.S. Coast Guard or Drug Enforcement Administration), and occasionally to persecute or kill members of rival DTOs (Insight Crime 2016).

Police/military collusion is also essential to protect traffickers from prosecution by independent judiciary or investigative units. Police do this by failing to collect, or to provide, satisfactory evidence to prosecutors. They can also use more direct methods to hinder investigation. In Honduras, for example, it was members of the military police who, at the behest of a DTO leader, assassinated both the Special Prosecutor charged with freezing cartels' assets and the country's "Drug Czar," who had vowed a crack-down on trafficking (Cálix 2017).

Of course, drug traffickers also pay judges, politicians, business elites, and even religious leaders to ignore their activities, as they have done for decades (Rosenberg 1988, Allen 2005, Bunck and Fowler 2012). In such a corrupted political context, those who denounce or even report land thefts risk death. Nevertheless, the sheer scope, pace, and brazenness of narcos' land accumulation inevitably draws the attention of media and demands a response from law enforcement. In some cases, this has led to criminal investigations, convictions, arrests, and the freezing of drug traffickers' assets, including rural land and associated laundered property (livestock, processing facilities) (see, e.g., Treasury Department 2013, CICIG 2016).

These prosecutions suggest that in Guatemala and Honduras at least, measures are in place to confiscate narcos' landed holdings and presumably restore them to the original landholder(s). But land restitution is never straightforward. In Colombia, traffickers' tendency to register lands in the name of third parties has long bedeviled restitution efforts (Forero 2004). In the Guatemalan Petén, traffickers sold former campesino lands to legitimate companies who have since planted them in valuable teak and oil palm (Solano 2016). Even when prosecution follows quickly in the wake of narco land theft, the fate of "frozen" assets is rarely clear. In Guatemala, for example, assets confiscated from traffickers are sold at auction, with proceeds going to the military (Stone 2013). Ostensibly designed to incentivize military enthusiasm for counter-narcotics activities, the process can instead become a roundabout way for drug traffickers to shift land from one owner to another (not back to smallholders), and to demand kickbacks and favors from the military who benefit from the sale. In Honduras, where new anti-laundering laws are being haphazardly implemented, the fate of assets seized from drug traffickers is unclear; delays and confusion in their processing can allow properties to be reclaimed by traffickers' families (El Heraldo 2016a).

Theorizing Narco-driven Land Privatization

In orthodox development economics, criminal activities are typically understood to hinder the forms of capital investment required to develop rural areas. Most salient here are claims that criminality creates an insecure investment climate and "divert[s] valuable resources away from more productive uses" (Gilman *et al.* 2011). This is a key part of the logic that is routinely used by the U.S. and its drug war allies to justify militarized interventions in drug trafficking zones (see, e.g., World Bank 2011). Indeed, purging traffickers is seen as a necessary prerequisite for corporate investment in the rural sector (SOUTH-

COM 2009).

Our review suggests quite the opposite. Rather than being anathema to private investment in the rural sector, narcos create the very conditions for it—not everywhere, but importantly, in the very landscapes most likely to have been closed off to capital investment prior to drug traffickers' involvement. Before counternarcotics forces show up in Central America's frontiers, drug traffickers use the vast wealth they capture from an illicit commodity chain to act as neoliberal pioneers, spreading circuits of capital into new territories: communal, reserved, and public lands.

As our research shows, they do this through a number of interdigitated processes that include: a) acquiring and privatizing frontier land and expanding land markets into zones where such markets are absent and illegal, and where legitimate actors are therefore unable or unwilling to operate; b) deeply corrupting state land registration systems to legitimize land seizure and transfer; c) using financial and physical coercion to accumulate vast properties at the expense of indigenous and campesino smallholders, thereby creating surplus labor; d) creating the conditions (forced land purchases, ecological destruction) that delegitimize campesino and indigenous groups' political claims to land/territory; e) extending the connectivity of remote rural areas into regional infrastructure networks; f) directly brokering frontier lands to corporate agribusiness, such as palm oil companies; g) laundering vast sums of cash in land and agricultural enterprises, thus distorting rural economies and helping to horizontally and vertically integrate frontier farming economies into transnational agribusiness networks; h) providing a pretext for state/parastatal militarization of coveted rural spaces, leading to further eviction of smallholders and the consolidation and defense of the nascent private property system.

In short, drug traffickers hasten the transformation of landscapes of smallholder production into the “rentier-agribusiness nexus” of land speculation, cattle, and export monocrops—now arguably the dominant agrarian form in Colombia and Central America (Richani 2012). We do not claim that this transformation requires drug traffickers, only that narcos are uniquely positioned, motivated, and capitalized to spatially expand and accelerate it.

Drug traffickers as latter-day bandits

In playing this role, drug traffickers are far from historical anomalies. According to historians of capitalism, pirates and bandits have, since the 17th century, been instrumental in spreading market economics into ‘inhospitable’ areas where the state was largely absent, and among peoples that were living largely outside the orbit of capital and private property rights (Gallant 1999, Abraham and van Schendel 2005, Beckert 2014). Like contemporary drug traffickers, they often arose from the lower classes, including those dispossessed by commercialized agrarian regimes—“of the peasant world, but not totally in it” (Gallant 1999: 51). From the social margins and through the use of violence, they could achieve things that states could not (due to the expense or the threat to state legitimacy). That included “facilitat[ing] capitalist penetration of the countryside by increasing monetization, encouraging marketization, and by providing a venue for upward economic mobility” (Gallant 1999: 51). For states, the usefulness of these liminal actors rested in part on their ability to be embraced or repudiated, depending on political-economic ex-

pediency. But whether “inside” or “outside” the state, violence deployed by pirates and bandits was crucial to the conjoined ‘dirty work’ of territorial and capitalist expansion (Gallant 1999).

In this process, the commodification of land and labor have always been interlinked (Karatani 2014). That is, private land ownership commodifies land thus commodifying the labor of those who once worked it communally. Moreover, land privatization leads not only to the dissolution of the agrarian community, but to the destruction of the environment whose preservation was predicated on the functioning of that community (Karatani 2014: 198). In the present day, narco-traffickers become key actors in this ongoing process.

A narco-bourgeoisie

Land acquisition by drug traffickers is, then, just the latest version of a dynamic that seems constitutive of capitalism’s spatial expansion. In historical analyses, however, the brigands who play this role are not, in fact, conceptualized as capitalists themselves. In contrast, Richani (1997, 2013) shows how Colombian drug traffickers have not simply brokered land for a bourgeois class, but are a new form of bourgeois themselves (see also Semana 1996). According to Richani, this group emerged in the 1970s after accumulating significant wealth from trafficking first in marijuana and then cocaine. Due to the nature of their illicit business activity, violence was intrinsic to reinforce contractual compliance and to eliminate competition. The deployment of violence by this narco-bourgeoisie evolved with its abilities to use the influx of narcodollars to articulate its own socioeconomic and political project (Richani 2002). Between 1978 and 1988, for example, the emergent narco-bourgeoisie spent USD\$5.5 billion to buy one million ha of farmland in the Amazon basin, in protected areas, indigenous reserves, and the communal lands of Afro-Colombian and mestizo peasants (Riding 1988). By 1998, narcos’ land acquisitions reached an incredible five to six million hectares, and continued into the 2000s (El Espectador 2011, Richani 2012). In this way, “[t]he narco-bourgeoisie and its paramilitaries were instrumental in accelerating land concentration and solidifying rentier capitalism as the dominant mode of capital accumulation in the rural political economy” (Richani 2012: 69).

Like the bourgeois class across the global South, narco-bourgeois enjoy a commanding position in a global commodity chain (Beckert 2014), and, like regular capitalists, accumulate capital while perpetuating a macroeconomic condition of dependent underdevelopment—that is, a situation in which food production and ecosystem services are decimated (Karatani 2014). But unlike the rest of its class, the narco-bourgeoisie is distinguished (among other traits) by the centrality of violence in organizing its business and its illicit status in the normative-legal sphere (Richani 1997, 2013). Trading in a prohibited and thus exceptionally profitable commodity, narco-bourgeois are especially susceptible to the overaccumulation of (narco)capital and uniquely willing and able to resolve that problem through illegal land acquisition. As they establish and enforce new regimes of private property they bring new land and labor into circuits of capital, benefiting the entire capitalist class. As Richani (2002:101) sums up: “Narcotraffickers are economic liberals par excellence...”

For these reasons, “narco-bourgeoisie” seems an apt and generalizable way to un-

derstand the actions and effects of drug traffickers in the rural sphere—whether in Colombia, Central America, or elsewhere. In this respect, our analysis complements but is distinct from other work that contemplates the intersection of drug trafficking and agrarian change. Much of that work, for example, gives analytical priority to the role of violence in land acquisition—whether by traffickers-as-paramilitaries and/or by a repressive state wielding violence in the name of the drug war. This argument is particularly well developed in research out of Colombia (e.g., Grajales 2011, Ballvé 2012, Grajales 2013), but is also emphasized in the wider regional analysis of Paley’s *Drug War Capitalism* (2014) and in other work (e.g., Bhattacharyya 2005, Corva 2008, Mercille 2011). For these analysts, militarized brutality in the guise of counternarcotics operations is often prioritized as the key “moment” in the dispossession of rural peoples and the commodification of frontier land.

Our analysis, however, suggests that—in Central America and likely elsewhere—there is often a prior moment of dispossession. This is when the business of drug trafficking itself—often absent state-sponsored violence—establishes the private property relations that subsequent state or para-statal militarization consolidates and defends. In this formulation, drug traffickers are no less a product of the drug war, but their primary function is distinct. Rather than a class of “paramilitary,” (Grajales 2011, Paley 2014), we emphasize the political-economic character of the narco-bourgeoisie, prioritizing the ways in which narcos’ access to (illicit) capital drives the privatization of frontier lands and the integration of those lands into a rentier agrarian economy.

Implications of a Landed Narco-Bourgeoisie

For scholars of the War on Drugs, theorizing drug traffickers as capitalists matters for two reasons. First, it emphasizes the role of the rural economy in establishing and consolidating “drug war capitalism.” For example, we focus much-needed attention on the financial coercions by which drug traffickers acquire land, and the agrarian structures (land laws, land value) that incentivize narcos to hold and accumulate landed property (see also Grajales 2013). Second, most critiques of the War on Drugs target the ways in which counternarcotics funds are deployed to violently advance the interests of transnational elites. We complement and extend this critique by drawing attention to the ways in which the drug war might be criticized for *first* constituting drug traffickers as cash-rich, spatially nimble, and land-hungry. This is, then, a more primordial critique—one that emphasizes how global drug policy orthodoxies (prohibition and interdiction) first produce and enrich traffickers, and then keep them perpetually moving into new rural landscapes (see also Keefer *et al.* 2008)—a process that in Central American frontiers often precedes the state’s pro forma counter-narcotics efforts.¹⁰

For scholars of land change science and agrarian change, the distinction is also crucial for highlighting the role of illicit capital in rural transformation. In the land-grab literature, for example, much attention has been given to the role of the state in facilitating corporate land seizure (Grajales 2011). In contrast, the role of illicit business relations in general and illicit capital specifically is rarely unpacked (see, e.g., FAO 2014). We use the Central American case to show, in contrast, just how the business of moving drugs—separate from state-endorsed violence—creates the requisite conditions for large-scale

agrarian transformation.

Ultimately, our analysis demands contemplation of intentionality. That is: are the actions of a self-interested narco-bourgeoisie serendipitously (if predictably) dove-tailing with elite plans for resource-rich landscapes? Or are complicit transnational elites—themselves narco-enriched—somehow facilitating drug transit through particularly coveted landscapes in anticipation of the effect that their land-grabbing drug-trafficking associates will have? Grandia contemplated a similar question when analyzing the intentions behind the “power assemblages emerging from narco/cattle/industrial/military land grabbing occurring in Petén” (2013:237). Following from Grandia, we find that while both scenarios are plausible, what matters is that narco-traffickers and transnational elites are ideologically, operationally, and interpersonally synergistic (see also Segovia 2006). Whether deeply interdigitated or less so, each contributes to producing the conditions that allows the other to thrive. And this synergy invariably comes at the expense of smallholder livelihoods, indigenous persistence in place, human rights, food security, and biodiversity.

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Notes

¹ We acknowledge the analytical futility of defining “drug trafficker” when so many elites are narco-enriched, when law enforcement agents can themselves be directly involved in trafficking, and when the term is applied to both small-time drug runners and to millionaire capos (see, e.g., Anon. 2011; Bunck and Fowler 2012). Nevertheless, we find utility in grouping as “drug traffickers” (“narco” is used synonymously) those who are directly involved in moving cocaine—through financing, coordinating, organizing, and otherwise managing transit hubs, distribution networks, and the laundering of illicit proceeds.

² This fact is apparently well-established in literary contexts: “Mexican narcoliterature frequently engages issues of environmental degradation, habitat loss, deforestation, land rights, endangered species, natural resources, sustainability, and the disruption of traditional agrarian society” (Goldberg 2016: 33).

³ In Mexico, Morris (2013) shows that the relationship between drug trafficking and violence is neither linear nor inevitable.

⁴ CAFTA-DR is the Central American Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic (ratified 2005), SIEPAC is the Spanish acronym for the Central American Electric Interconnection System (formalized ca. 1999), and Proyecto Mesoamérica refers to the Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project (initiated 2008), which includes and extends the former Plan Puebla-Panama (launched 2001).

⁵ Some land laws are deceptive in their message and intent. For example, Honduras' 2004 Property Act provides for the registration of indigenous lands, and recognizes indigenous tenure norms and their inalienability from seizure. "However, it [also] permits communities to 'terminate a communal regime, to authorize leases to third parties' or to authorize contracts for investment in development." All such outcomes can "legitimate the presence of outsiders without the consent of the indigenous peoples" (OHCHR 2016:5).

⁶ In 2012, for example, the Honduran military identified at least 200 clandestine landing strips scattered across vast areas of eastern Honduras, less than half of which they were able to destroy (Verástegui 2013).

⁷ Except in El Salvador, where the U.S. dollar is the official currency, and in Panama, where it is legally circulated.

⁸ Celebrated in the Mexican musical form of the narco-corrido, which has been widely adopted in Central America.

⁹ Following David Ricardo and Karl Marx, we conceptualize "rentier" within the capitalist mode of production—i.e., an economic activity that does not include production or labor. Marx argued that "wherever natural forces can be monopolized and give the industrialist who makes use of them a surplus profit, whether a waterfall, a rich mine, fishing grounds or a well- situated building site, the person indicated as the owner... seizes this surplus profit from the functioning capital in the form of rent" (Marx 1993:908).

¹⁰ The sequence has clearly been different in Colombia, where (para)militaries have been crucial to the process of dispossession, concurrent with the incorporation of an area into a drug trafficking network (see, e.g., Grajales 2011).

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