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Agrarian change through speculation: Rural elites as land brokers for mining in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper studies the connections between the expansion of mining capital, speculative forms of land grabbing and agrarian transformation. It is argued that in periods of commodity boom, the landowning rural elite benefits from mining through speculative land deals with mining companies. They act as 'land brokers' for the mining firms, helping them to overcome a significant barrier to land accumulation through the de facto abolition of landed property. The analysis is based on a qualitative case study on the expansion of coal mining in central Cesar in northern Colombia. To develop my arguments, I refer to the concept of accumulation by dispossession as defined by Michael Levien, and historical materialist approaches on rent, and speculative land dispossession. In addition, I use concepts developed for studying coercive land grabbing and agrarian elite participation in armed conflicts to analyse the mechanisms applied to (coercively) acquire rights to land. It is concluded that with high global prices for minerals, metals and fossil fuels, the expansion of mining in the countryside fosters a process of agrarian change through land speculation that is articulated in a reconcentration of landed property, a re-strengthening of the rural landowning elite and the dissolution of peasant agriculture.

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KEYWORDS

accumulation by dispossession, agrarian transformation, Colombia, land brokering, mining, rural elite, speculation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Due to the global commodity boom and high prices on world markets, investments in hydrocarbon and mineral mining increased worldwide between 2000 and 2013. In this context, mining capital has become a major driving force behind the enclosure of land in the countryside, particularly in areas hitherto considered peripheral and unproductive for capital (Fisher, 2007; Peluso, 2018; Svampa, 2019). Mining has thus become ‘an important force of change’ (Bury, 2005, p. 221) and constitutes a ‘major turning point’ (Mtero, 2017, p. 198) for rural societies.

Until around 2015, a high percentage of global mining investments targeted projects in Latin America (SNL Metals & Mining, 2015). The region possesses some of the world's largest deposits of copper, ferronickel, tin, lithium and gold, as well as fossil fuels like gas, oil and coal (Farthing & Fabricant, 2018; Walter, 2016). Colombia is one of several countries in the region to have received major mining investments over the last two decades. Supported by the national pro-extractivist policies of the governments of the three most recent former presidents, Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010), Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and Iván Duque (2018–2022), (transnational) companies acquired extensive mining rights, began exploration work, opened new mines while expanding existing ones and purchased land.

With the enclosure of arable land for mining, land-based livelihoods and social (re)production patterns have been destroyed. Rural dwellers have lost access to land and other existential resources (including water), have been forcefully displaced or resettled or have had to give up ancestral and communal lands to mining companies (Gill, 2016, 2020; Sankey, 2018; Ulloa, 2020, 2021; Vargas Valencia, 2013). All this has led to an increase in ‘struggles against dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003), a topic that has gained much attention in critical scholarship in recent years in various study fields (including agrarian studies, development studies, social movement studies, political economy and critical geography) (see Bebbington et al., 2008; Bebbington & Bury, 2013; Conde, 2017; Conde & Le Billon, 2017; Dietz & Engels, 2017; Levien, 2011, 2013, 2015; Rodríguez-Labajos & Özkaynak, 2017; Velasco, 2014).

Most of the literature on such struggles has focused on conflicts between peasants, ethnic communities and social movements on the one side, and companies and/or the state on the other. With regard to the dynamics of dispossession of land for mining, less attention has been paid to the role of other (intermediary) actors, such as the rural elite, and their power to both (coercively) dispossess other classes of land users and successfully speculate with land given the prospect of mining. Although this topic has received little attention in the ‘conflicts over dispossession’ literature, critical agrarian scholars have increasingly studied rural land brokerage and real estate speculation in contexts of commercial development processes that require land, such as mining or the expansion of special economic zones (SEZs) in rural areas of the Global South (see, e.g., Campbell, 2015; Capps, 2016; Capps & Mnwana, 2015; Levien, 2011, 2013, 2015).

In this article, I build on this research. I study the connections between coercive land dispossession, speculative commodification and the role of the rural elite therein, in the context of an expanding coal mining frontier in the department of Cesar in the north of Colombia. First, I ask what role the rural elite plays in the dynamics of speculative dispossession of land for mining. Second, I ask what effects the dispossession of land for mining has on the agrarian structure, namely, landed property relations, agricultural production and the distribution of land-based wealth.

I develop two arguments. I first argue that to understand the dynamics of agrarian transformation in areas where industrial mining is expanding, looking at the role of the rural elite is crucial. This is the case for two reasons. First, under the conditions of a booming mining sector, members of the rural elite benefit through speculative land

dispossession. This means that given the prospect of mining, in addition to the land they already owned, they also appropriate land (coercively) from others. In this sense, the rural elites act as ‘land brokers’ for coal corporations and thereby help mining capital to overcome a potential barrier to the accumulation of capital, namely, landed property (for a similar argument, see Capps & Mnwana, 2015, p. 610; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017, p. 745; Levien, 2011, 2015; Sankey, 2018, p. 62). My second argument is that the expansion of mining generates a reconcentration of landownership and wealth, which leads to what Michael Levien (2011, p. 454) calls an ‘agrarian transformation through land speculation’. This transformation favours not only mining firms but also the rural elite and, in consequence, deepens rural class inequalities.

To develop these arguments, I refer to the concept of accumulation by dispossession as defined by Michael Levien (2011, 2013), land speculation, and land brokerage in the context of the global commodity boom and the expansion of the extractive frontier (Capps, 2016; Emel & Huber, 2008). I link these approaches to other theoretical concepts used for analysing (coercive) land grabbing and rural elite participation in the armed conflict in Colombia, as well as the expansion of extractive frontiers in Latin America more generally (e.g., Ballvé, 2013; Campbell, 2015; Gill, 2020; Grajales, 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017; Quinche Roa et al., 2018; Vargas & Uribe, 2017).

The analysis is based on a qualitative case study. The case selected for this research is the coal mining district in central Cesar in northern Colombia (see Figure 1). This case was chosen for three reasons. First, industrial coal mining in central Cesar began in the late 1980s and started to boom by the end of the 1990s, at the height of the paramilitary violence in Colombia that brought mass displacements and land dispossessions. According to the National Centre on Historical Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2016a), between 1996 and 2006, 57,696 persons were displaced from their land in the municipalities that comprise Cesar’s mining district: La Jagua De Ibirico, Becerill, Agustín Codazzi, El Paso and Chiriguaná (p. 91). Of the 150 municipalities nationwide with the highest percentage of abandoned land, two, La Jagua de Ibirico and Agustín Codazzi, are located in the Cesar mining district (Acción Social, 2010, pp. 151–152). By the end of November 2018, 1936 claims for the return of land in these five municipalities had been submitted to the state unit for land restitution (Unidad de Restitución de Tierras [URT]). This is more than one third of all claims in the entire Cesar department and underlines the high level of displacement and land dispossession in the area at the same time as mining was expanding (URT, own request).

Second, industrial coal mining requires large amounts of land. In order to develop opencast mines, mining firms need to continuously purchase land as a prerequisite for accessing coal and for depositing waste materials. Third, the centre of Cesar has historically been characterized by large- and middle-sized landholdings, a concentration of landed property and cattle ranching. The most recent available land tenancy records show that landownership and usage have become more concentrated in Cesar since the end of the 1990s (Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi [IGAC], 2012). This makes the case an ideal setting to investigate the dynamics of land appropriation for coal mining, the role of the rural elite in these dynamics and the effects of mining expansion on the agrarian social structure.

The article is divided into eight sections. I first describe the methodology applied. Second, I introduce the concepts used to theorize speculative land dispossession in the context of the global commodity boom and to analyse the rural elite participation in this. After providing an overview of mining in Colombia, I discuss the development of coal mining and the changing agrarian structure in central Cesar. In Sections 6 and 7, the role of the rural elite in the dynamics of appropriating land for mining, and the effects of this on land property relations and the agrarian structures in the mining region, are discussed. It is concluded that under the conditions of high prices for mineral resources, the expansion of mining in the countryside fosters the reconcentration of landed property, the revitalization of rural landlordism and the dissolution of peasant agriculture.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The analysis relies on a qualitative case study that integrates fieldwork interviews with analyses of governmental statistics, governmental and NGO documents, and media articles. I conducted fieldwork for this research over four

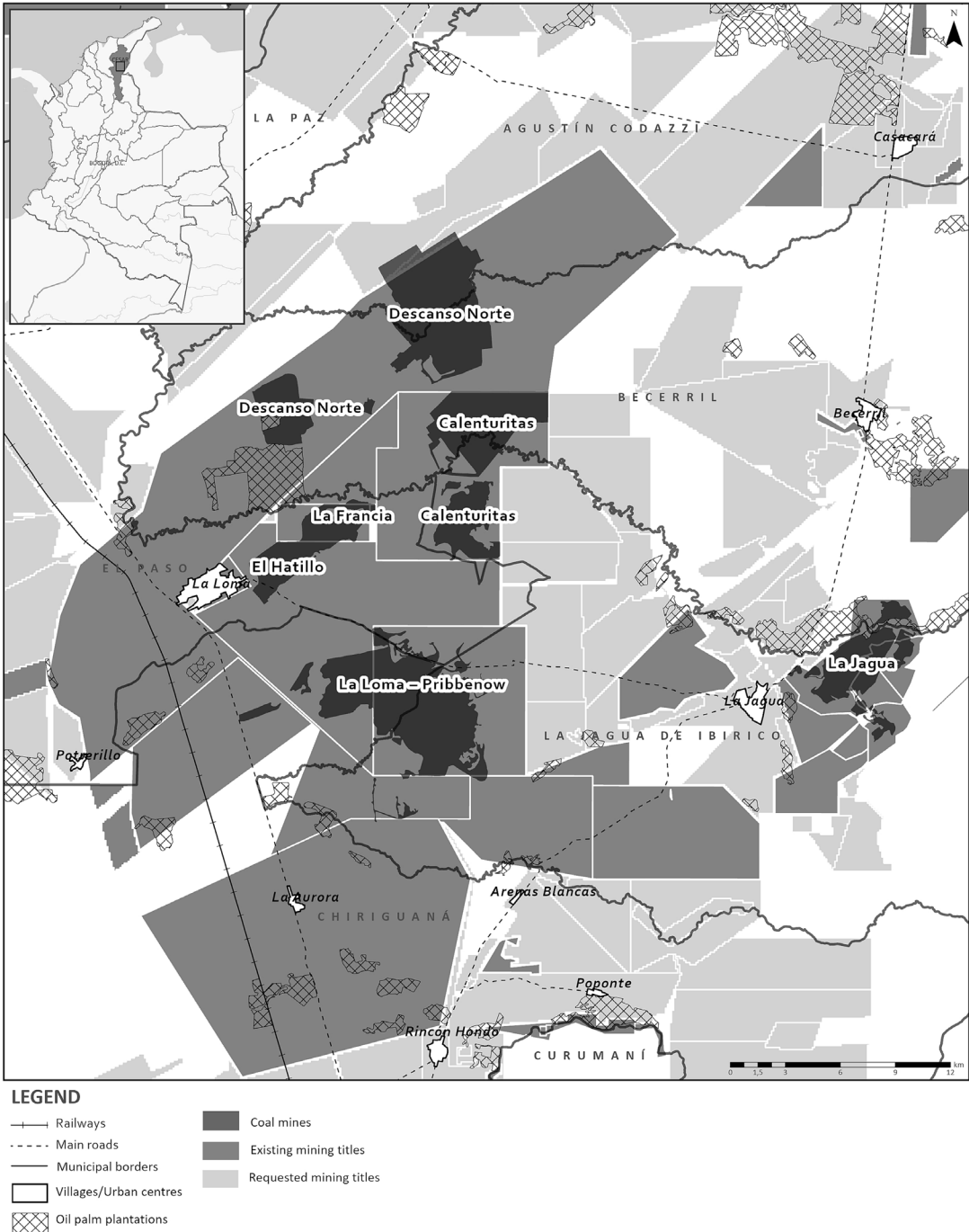


FIGURE 1 Localization of the mining district in Cesar, including municipalities, mines, and existing and requested mining titles. *Source:* Agencia Nacional de Minería, 2021; Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2020; Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales, 2018; Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, 2019; Richani, 2010, elaborated by Natalia Caro.

periods: in March and October 2018 and in March and July 2019. In Cesar, I interviewed trade unionists; members of human rights organizations; regional administrative officials responsible for agriculture, mining, land restitution and the environment; a representative of the people's defence office; activists in social movements and local peasant organizations; members of community committees; and members of a victims' organization representing people displaced from their lands. The latter were interviewed in the context of a focus group meeting in which 12 affected members of evicted families from different hamlets of the five municipalities participated. Additionally, one person affected by displacement was interviewed individually.

Interviews in Cesar were held in Valledupar, the regional capital, and in three of the five municipalities affected by coal mining: La Jagua de Ibirico, El Paso and Chiriguana. Additionally, in Bogotá, I interviewed members of national NGOs and journalists working on land and mining issues; officials of a mining company operating in Cesar; and officials from the Ministry for Mining and Energy, the National Agency for Mining, the National Agency for Environmental Licenses and the Colombian and Regional Truth Commission. One interview was held in Barranquilla, where one of the mining firms has its headquarters. Unfortunately, I was unable to conduct interviews with members of Cesar's rural elite during this time. Information on their participation in speculative land dispossession for mining was collected through secondary literature, media analyses, interviews with journalists and employees of the Colombian and Regional Truth Commission, and analysis of court rulings on land seizures. Themes addressed in the interviews included landownership, property relations, land use and purchases, land dispossession and displacement, land restitution, rural economy, and agrarian transition. For background information, statistics and media articles, two leading national newspapers, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, and the media platform *Verdad Abierta* were consulted. All direct citations from the sources used in the articles were translated from Spanish by the author.

3 | MINING, LANDED PROPERTY, COERCIVE AND SPECULATIVE LAND DISPOSSESSION

In order to exploit minerals, mining firms first need to get permission (a concession) from the state in whose territory they want to exploit resources; second, they must gain access to the land they want to mine; and third, they need to invest capital in order to build the mine and the infrastructure needed for extraction. Once they have received a concession, transnational mining companies usually have the capital to create large-scale mines but mostly lack the property rights to the land they want to exploit. In other words, in order to profitably invest their capital, mining companies need to confront what Marx calls the 'modern form of landed property' (Marx, [1894] 1981, p. 752), which 'presupposes that certain persons enjoy the monopoly of disposing of particular portions of the globe as exclusive spheres of their private will to the exclusion of others' (ibid.; see also Neocosmos, 1986, pp. 13–14).

In contrast to mining companies, landed proprietors have the power of disposal over their land through property rights but often do not have the capital or technical know-how to extract raw materials that might be located below their land. Therefore, the latter can only profit from a commodity boom if they come to agreements with mining companies over access to their land. Landed proprietors can—by virtue of their exclusive control over landed resources—demand from the mining company a certain portion of the surplus value for the use of the land for mining. In Marx's terms, this would be 'ground rent', mostly realized as royalties or lease money (Capps, 2016, p. 459; Emel & Huber, 2008, p. 1394; Marx, [1894] 1981). Alternatively, landowners can directly sell the land to the mining companies. In order to avoid paying royalties or lease revenues, mining firms tend to prefer to directly acquire the land in question, thereby eliminating the potential barriers to accumulation posed by landed property through what Marx terms its '*de facto* abolition' in which the company itself becomes an 'owner-occupier' (Marx, [1894] 1981, p. 855, italics in original; see also Capps, 2016, pp. 461–462; Neocosmos, 1986, pp. 30–33).¹

¹Thanks to Gavin Capps for his suggestion on this sentence.

This process has been witnessed in many resource-rich areas in the Global South (Capps, 2016) since the beginning of the 21st century and can also be observed in the case study region. Transnational coal mining companies have purchased land for mining in the centre of the Cesar region of Colombia from former landowners in an ongoing process as the mines have expanded, often paying inflated prices. In this way, landowning elites with extensive property rights can benefit economically from commodity booms in resource-rich areas, despite losing the property rights to their land.

Against this background, landowners are eager to expand their landed property in mineral-rich rural settings. However, owning land alone is not a guarantee of high profits from land sales to mining companies. The magnitude of the profit depends on many factors, including the class position of the landowner, structural inequalities like the distribution of land in the area, social networks, privileged knowledge, the level of demand, and the bargaining and speculative qualities and powers of the landowners in relation to capital investors.

Levien shows in his research on speculative land commodification in the context of the expansion of SEZs in India that 'the social game of land speculation' (2011, p. 470) is highly dependent on the economic, cultural and social capital of those who engage in it (2015, pp. 83–86). Speculation here means the inflation of land prices with the aim of gaining high revenues when selling (Neocosmos, 1986, p. 24). In Levien's (2011, p. 2025) study case, rich farmers from upper castes profited most from speculative land commodification, as they were able to leave the land fallow and wait until prices were high or private investors were willing to pay high prices. This is what peasants with little or no land cannot do. They must either use the land to secure an income or sell it directly to acquire new land elsewhere. In order to successfully play the game of speculation, beyond class position, Levien thus also stresses the importance of 'illicit insider knowledge' (p. 471) about the planned changes, in his case, the designation of SEZs. Having insider knowledge means having the opportunity to buy land from small farmers and rip them off, because the latter have no idea about the future value of their land (*ibid.*). Another factor that affects the land deals between landed proprietors and capitalists is whether these transactions happen during commodity boom or bust periods. Boom periods, with high market prices for commodities and increasing demand for land and resources, represent an incentive for landowners to expand their landed property for future commodification.

In this paper, I argue that during commodity boom periods, the buying and selling of land to mining firms for inflated prices becomes in itself a business strategy for the rural elite. Thus, in the context of the recent resource boom, a land broker elite has emerged. I borrow the term 'land broker' in part from Levien (2011, p. 463), who argues that in the context of increasing demand for land under the conditions of not-fully-capitalist rural land markets, the Indian state acted as a land broker: It expropriated land from 'low value users' and redistributed it to private actors able to 'improve it' (*ibid.*). I argue that given the prospect of mining in Cesar, the local rural elites are increasingly acting as land brokers for international mining companies. A similar argument with regard to the role of traditional chiefs in the expansion of platinum mining in South Africa has been made by Capps and Mswana (2015, p. 610; see also Capps, 2016). The authors show that chiefs, instead of defending tribal land from industrial mining, increasingly act as land brokers for the platinum companies (Capps & Mswana, 2015, p. 610).

In order to understand and analyse the specific relationship between speculative land commodification, rural elites and the expansion of coal mining in Cesar, understanding the political economy of speculative land dispossession is an important—though not entirely sufficient—first step. Additionally, the mechanisms by which the rural elite manages to institute property rights over resource-rich land need to be theorized as part of an extra-economic process of coercive dispossession in the broader context of the Colombian armed conflict.

Until March 2013, approximately 5 million people were displaced from their lands and homes as a result of the armed conflict in Colombia (CNMH, 2013, p. 33). Scholarship from critical geography and critical agrarian studies shows that forced displacement in the country was not an end in itself but an intentional practice of removing people from their land to appropriate it for other uses, mainly agroindustry (including palm oil), drug production (primarily marijuana and cocaine) and mining (Ballvé, 2012; Counter, 2019; Gómez et al., 2015; Grajales, 2011, 2013, 2021; Reyes, 2009; Vargas & Uribe, 2017). Frances Thomson (2014) calls this intentional form of displacement 'land-grab-induced displacement'. Indeed, the land-grab-induced displacement of small-scale tenants for the purposes of cattle

ranching and agroindustry has been a constant in Colombia's (post)colonial agrarian history (LeGrand, 1986; Meertens, 2000; Thomson, 2011). However, starting in the 1980s, the extent of such displacements became greater than ever (del Pilar Peña-Huertas et al., 2017). Around 8.3 million hectares of land were abandoned or coercively appropriated during the armed conflict (CNMH, 2013, p. 76). The height of land-grab-induced displacement started in 1996 and continued until the mid-2000s, a period marked by the overlap of neoliberalism and political violence in Colombia (Gill, 2016, p. 99).

Land-grab-induced displacement can be understood as part of what David Harvey (2003) calls 'accumulation by dispossession', which he defines in economic terms as a response to crises of over-accumulation in global capitalism. Harvey (2003, p. 149) argues that what accumulation by dispossession does 'is to release a set of assets' (e.g., labour power or land) at low cost, which is then seized by over-accumulated capital and applied to profitable use. This definition, however, does not tell the whole story of coercive dispossession in Colombia, as it fails to explain why, in a particular context, dispossession is triggered by accumulation constraints, how dispossession takes place and who is being dispossessed by whom (Levien, 2011).

Following this criticism, I define accumulation by dispossession based on Michael Levien's (2011, p. 457) definition, as 'the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of subsistence, production or common social wealth for capital accumulation'. Lesley Gill (2016, p. 99) argues that in Colombia, it was violence (coercive dispossession) that created the conditions for neoliberal capitalism to prosper. In the Colombian countryside, this meant the growing emergence of export-oriented agroindustry, the expansion of capital-intensive mining and the 'reorganization of social and economic life on more unequal and authoritarian terms' (ibid.).

Coercive dispossession in the Colombian countryside was primarily done by paramilitary groups. These groups did not operate in political and social isolation but were often supported financially and otherwise by rural elites, support that was legitimized by assertions of self-defence and counterinsurgency (Counter, 2019). In their study on 'agrarian elite participation' in Colombia's civil war, Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín and Jenniffer Vargas (2017) show that large-scale cattle ranchers participated directly in the development and actions of the paramilitaries, as leaders of the units, or as the promoters and final beneficiaries of coercive land dispossession (see also Quinche Roa et al., 2018). Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas state that one central motivation for the agrarian elite to accumulate land by dispossession was to expand landownership in order to—sooner or later—derive 'legal' economic benefits from it, by pocketing state subsidies, putting it to productive use or through speculation (see also Richani, 2012).

In order to render such land profitable—meaning to use it as a legitimate market asset, a source of profit or rent, and to exercise a land monopoly—the property rights need to be institutionally recognized (Counter, 2019; Grajales, 2011, p. 783). The necessary legalization of seized property is reflected in the concept of 'legal dispossessions', meaning 'the planned and coercive transfer of land from one agent to another (...) through the legal institutions that regulate and assign property rights' (del Pilar Peña-Huertas et al., 2017, p. 761). Legal dispossession recalls the practice of *grilagem*, a term widely used in Brazil to refer to the fraudulent land deals or illegal land-grabbing schemes of powerful elites, particularly in the Amazon region (Campbell, 2015; Ferrante et al., 2021). Mechanisms of legal dispossession or *grilagem* vary from 'voluntary' agreements between two parties with unequal bargaining power to the falsification of title deeds or extortion. A particular form of this is 'administrative dispossession' (del Pilar Peña-Huertas et al., 2017), where state actors are central agents of dispossession. In Colombia, legal dispossession has been critically discussed in relation to the role of the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria [INCORA]; later the Colombian Institute for Rural Development, Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural [INCODER]) (Grajales, 2011, 2016; Quinche Roa et al., 2018).

4 | MINING IN COLOMBIA

Colombia is rich in hydrocarbons (gas, oil and coal), minerals and metals (gold, copper, ferronickel and tin). Its (post) colonial history is closely linked to mining, especially gold mining. As global demand for fossil fuels for industrial

production and automobility increased, the focus in the commodity sector shifted first from gold to oil and later to coal. In the context of the global commodity boom at the beginning of the 21st century, Colombia converted itself back into a 'mining country' (Sankey, 2018, p. 52; see also Unidad de Planeación Minero Energética [UPME], 2006). Between 2010 and 2014, more than 52% of all foreign direct investments (FDI) went into the mining sector. FDI in this period totalled US\$7 billion annually. Despite falling commodity prices and a significant decline of FDI since 2013, over one third of all FDI in Colombia remains dedicated to mining (CEPAL, 2015, 2016, 2021). Other indicators that underline the strong political-economic importance of mining in Colombia in the 21st century are the share of mining in total exports and the mining concessions granted and requested over the last two decades.

Mined products make up a big share of all exported commodities. In 2014, two thirds of all exports came from mining, with coal being the most important, followed by gold and ferronickel. Until the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the share of mining in total exports had not principally changed, although produced and exported volumes had declined (García Granados, 2014; UPME, 2021, p. 142). With the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 and the boycott of Russian hard coal, particularly in Europe, Colombian coal exports and revenues have once again begun to rise (Agencia Nacional de Minería [ANM], 2022).

With regard to concessions, the country experienced a veritable concession shower between 2002 and 2010. In this period, the number of granted concessions went up from 1900 to 7774. Not coincidentally, this period overlapped with the term of office of right-wing president Álvaro Uribe Veléz (2002–2010). Later, concessions rose to over 10,000 in 2014, before declining again. According to the National Mining Agency (ANM), as of June 2020, Colombia had 7403 mining titles granted, of which titles for coal mining accounted for nearly a quarter (ANM, 2022; Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [EITI] Colombia, 2020). All concessions comprise an area of around 4 million hectares of land, of which just over 1 million hectares is dedicated to coal mining (ANM, 2022). Whereas high demand and commodity prices on the world markets provided the global political-economic background for the expansion of mining in Colombia, this alone cannot explain it. Rather, political decisions and institutional reforms by the state turned the most recent commodity super-cycle into a bonanza for transnational mining companies and created the conditions for diversely used agricultural land to become a speculative asset for mining interests (Sankey, 2018; Vélez-Torres, 2014). Major institutional changes included the liberalization and opening up of the sector for foreign capital, the slimming down of the government's mining administration, the privatization of national mining companies and the redesign of fiscal policies in order to attract FDI. In 2001, a new mining law (Código de Minas, Law 685, 2001) was introduced, with the aim of implementing a neoliberal resource governance model. After the law came into force and Uribe took office in 2002, he used the awarding of mining concessions as a means of attracting transnational companies and FDI. More than 60% of today's valid mining concessions were granted during Uribe's administration. The 'cornerstone' of Uribe's mining policy was a 'militarized securitization of resource-rich territories' (Sankey, 2018, p. 64), which found its expression in the Policy of Democratic Defence and Security that aimed to win back total control of national territory (Vélez-Torres, 2014, pp. 73f.). Since the presidency of César Gaviria Trujillo (1990–1994), Colombian governments have sought to resolve internal conflict through neoliberal reforms and by attracting foreign investment, backed by state-sponsored violence and militarization.

During the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), mining was listed as one of five key growth engines. The 'mining locomotive' (República de Colombia, 2011) was intended to trigger development processes in rural areas, bring prosperity, end poverty and increase the overall level of well-being in the country. Mineral extraction, including hydrocarbons, generated the backbone of public finances during this time. Moreover, after the signing of the peace accords with the former guerrilla group FARC-EP in 2016, the government argued that it urgently needed mining revenues to finance the peace process. Under the administration of Iván Duque (2018–2022), support for mining continued, though FDI in the sector declined. What is noteworthy about Duque's term is the practical standstill of the peace process. Funds for state institutions to guarantee the peace process were cut, land restitutions progressed slowly and the implementation of the first point of the peace accords—called 'Toward a New Colombian Countryside: Comprehensive Rural Reform'—has hardly started (Instituto Kroc et al., 2021). Instead, threats and assassinations of rural activists mobilizing for land restitution and a just redistribution of land, or against the

expansion of mining, have steadily increased. Since August 2018, when Duque took office, to the end of 2021, at least 550 social leaders were killed throughout the country; many more received threats and experienced acts of aggression. The regional departments with the highest number of murdered activists were Cauca, Antioquia and Nariño (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2022; Programa Somos Defensores, 2019, 2020, 2021). In Cesar's coal mining district, displacements, threats and killings of community leaders also increased during the Duque administration (Pax, 2020).

In August 2022, the first left-wing government in Colombian history took power. Under president Gustavo Petro and vice-president Francia Márquez, the government announced a just energy transition as one of its key reform measures. The goal is to make Colombia climate neutral by 2050, which would mean phasing out fossil fuels in the coming years and issuing no new licences for the extraction of hydrocarbons. Since the announcement was made, a fierce debate about the viability of a post-fossil economy in Colombia has emerged. Civil society actors are calling for the socialization and decentralization of the energy sector and a faster phase-out of fossil fuels. Coal, oil and gas companies argue instead that without the production and export of fossil fuels, the state will lose essential tax revenues and income (Es viable la transición energética, 2022). This political conflict will continue, especially in a country whose national budget is highly dependent on revenues from coal and oil production.

5 | COAL MINING AND AGRARIAN STRUCTURE IN CESAR

Due to neoliberal sector reforms, the global resource boom and growing capital investment, the production of steam coal grew at a national scale from 38 million tons in 2000 to 86 million tons in 2016 (EITI Colombia, 2016). Colombia is the eighth biggest producer and the fourth biggest exporter of steam coal in the world; 94% of the country's production is exported (Oei & Mendelevitch, 2019). More than 90% of the coal is produced in eight industrial mines run by transnational companies in the northern departments of La Guajira and Cesar (ANM, 2013). In Cesar, coal mining is concentrated in the centre of the department in the mining district² known as La Jagua, which is composed of five municipalities: Agustín Codazzi, Becerril, El Paso, La Jagua de Ibirico and Chiriguana (see Figure 1). Between 2012 and 2017, 53% of total national coal production originated from La Jagua (ANM, 2017).

The mining district in Cesar is located between two mountain ranges, the Sierra Nevada and the Serrenía de Perijá. Characterized by fertile plains, wetlands and slopes, the area is considered highly suitable for agriculture and livestock, but land access and property has historically been highly uneven. From the beginning of the 19th until the mid-20th centuries, land was concentrated in the hands of the rural elite and land control was exercised via a 'hacienda regime', a model of social, cultural and economic authority based on landownership and the exploitation of semi-free labour. The land holdings of a single hacienda could be as much as 500–1000 ha or more. Under this regime, land was monopolized and mainly used for poorly modernized livestock production (see Table 2; Barrera & Victor, 2014; Bernal Castillo, 2004; Santos Delgado, 2002; Van Ausdal, 2009).

When I speak of the role of the rural elite in the dispossession of land for mining in Cesar, I refer to descendants of this traditional mestizo or 'white' landholding elite, whose power resources have historically been landownership, clan-like family ties, the exploitation of marginalized labour power, and political and economic alliances at the local, regional and national levels (Sánchez Baute, 2008). The Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1976) argued in the 1970s that the agrarian structure and social order in Cesar was still intricately intertwined with the hacienda regime. The hacienda served the appropriation of communal lands, allowed for the expansion of the agrarian frontier and led to the consolidation of large estates by the most powerful families in the region (ibid.; Meisel, 1980). In alliance with political parties and the political class at the national level, the hacienda system helped to establish a social order in the Cesar region that favoured the concentration of economic and political power among the elite and led

²A 'mining district' is a spatial planning instrument used by the Colombian mining administration to define areas with significant mining activities or the potential to become centres for mining and resource exportation.

to the alignment of state institutions with their interests. Members of the rural elite have historically had strong ties with national ministers, presidents and representatives of the two traditional parties, the conservatives and the liberals. These political and economic alliances, economic networks, and the creation and control of economic associations (e.g., the National Federation of Cattle Ranchers [Fedegán], founded in 1963) have been vital for the rural elite in Cesar in terms of strengthening its power position (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 46; Fals Borda, 1976). All this allowed for the consolidation of a social and cultural hierarchy, with wealthy families like the Araújo, Gnecco, Daza and Quintero at the top, a hierarchy that still shapes the social and political order in Cesar today (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Ocampo, 2015).

From the 1980s onwards, these alliances and networks also included actors from paramilitarism and the drug economy. Some of the most prominent leaders of paramilitary groups in the region, including Jorge Gnecco, Hughes Rodríguez and Tovar Pupo (popularly known as 'Jorge 40'), had strong ties with influential families of the rural elite (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). Today, members of the most powerful families run mayors' offices, are represented in the chamber of deputies and the departmental assembly, and control regional institutions associated with public transport, the National Savings Fund, the Department of Social Prosperity and the Popular University of Cesar, as is the case with the Gnecco family (Mejia, 2019). In addition to controlling political institutions, these families' close ties to the expanding capital-intensive palm oil agribusiness and coal mining form another important base of power.

At the other end of the social hierarchy in the mining district are the landless and peasant farmers. They have traditionally had little to no landownership and are characterized by immigration and settlement from other parts of the country, such as Santander, the Caribbean coast and Antioquia, either due to violence or in search of economic opportunities (CNMH, 2017). Their ethnic composition is characterized by mestizo and Afro-Colombian communities. The migration of poor landless peasants has shaped and reproduced the agrarian social order since the 1920s and has helped to reproduce the hacienda system: To run the hacienda, the rural elite needed the cheap labour of landless farmers, while the latter built their livelihood strategies on leasing and sharecropping within haciendas. Even though smallholders were mostly destitute, they nevertheless always had a high level of organization, which became particularly obvious in a series of peasant upheavals in the 1980s (see below) (Gutiérrez Lemus, 2012; LeGrand, 1986; Reyes, 2009).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the sub-region underwent structural changes driven by an international cotton boom, the expansion of capitalist agriculture and plans for agrarian reform by the then-government of Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966–1970). Both the rural elite and landless and peasant farmers benefited from these changes (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Sánchez Baute, 2008). Due to an open agrarian frontier, vast public lands and large forest areas that could be cleared, land was abundant and tenants and migrant peasants became the owners of small- and medium-sized plots for cotton production. From 1961 to 1994, INCORA allocated property rights to over 789,309 ha of public lands to peasant farmers in Cesar (Villaveces Niño & Sánchez, 2015, p. 57). In some of the current mining municipalities, particularly in Agustín Codazzi, these changes facilitated the consolidation of an agricultural middle class that did not compete with the traditional landholding elite for access to and control over rural lands (see Table 2; Barrera & Victor, 2014, p. 254). This explains the lack of widespread agrarian class conflict in the region at that time, given the availability of land for peasant colonization, the high profits from cotton production for the landed elite and the high demand for labour in cotton farming (Barrera & Victor, 2014, pp. 251ff.).

By the end of the 1970s, the cotton sector entered into crisis, and production practically came to an end in the 1980s. Rural workers lost their jobs, small-scale landowning peasants lost their lands, and middle-class landholders and the rural elite abandoned their plots of land or had to sell them to the banks. As a result, social tensions over land increased. In the mining district, peasants occupied abandoned cotton plantations and mobilized protests with the support of the National Association of Peasant Farmers of Colombia (Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia [ANUC]). In June 1987, the protests culminated in a mass mobilization of thousands of peasants (*la marcha del nororiente*) to Valledupar, the capital of Cesar. They occupied the city centre for a number of days and demanded the redistribution of land, its legal recognition of land titles, and an improvement of rural public services and infrastructure (CNMH, 2016a, pp. 73ff.). As a result of these protests, some peasant families did benefit from

the redistribution of land that INCORA had acquired from the rural elite. From 1962 to 1987, agrarian authorities acquired 57,782 ha in Cesar by direct purchase in order to redistribute them to landless beneficiaries (CNMH, 2016b, p. 150).

The 'rural crisis' (CNMH, 2016a, p. 73) in Cesar in the 1980s coincided with the increasing presence of guerrilla organizations (in particular the FARC-EP) in northern and central Cesar, the liberalization of the agricultural sector, the rise of paramilitarism in the 1990s as a response of the agrarian and political elite to the guerrillas, and the emergence of a new class of landowning 'narcobourgeoisie' (Richani, 2002) with links to drug trafficking. In Cesar, most of the land appropriated by drug traffickers between 1980 and 1995 was located in the mining municipalities (Reyes, 2009, pp. 75–76). For the narcobourgeoisie, owning land in Cesar was a way to launder money from the drug economy and to speculate with land in the context of mining expansion. The agrarian crisis of the 1980s also overlapped with an overhaul of the regional economic development model, from one based on the expansion of capitalist agriculture to an enclave mining-based economy (Barrera & Victor, 2014; CNMH, 2016a).

Industrial coal mining in Cesar started in the 1980s. As a consequence of the oil crisis in 1973 and the subsequent high prices for crude oil on the world market, global demand for coal rose significantly. Thus, by the end of the 1970s, the Colombian government had granted several concessions to national mining companies to explore, exploit and export coal. From the end of the 1980s onwards, these concessions were gradually sold to multinational companies (CNMH, 2018; Vilorio de la Hoz, 1998).

In 1989, the US-based company Drummond Ltd obtained the concessions for its first mine in Cesar's mining district, the La Loma-Pribbenow mine, which began production in 1995.³ Also in 1995, the Swiss-based company Glencore acquired the Colombian firm Grupo Prodeco and obtained several mining concessions in the region. Glencore (still under the name of Grupo Prodeco) runs the Calenturitas and La Jagua mines. In 1997, Drummond Ltd won a public tender organized by the Colombian carbon company Ecocarbón Ltda (Empresa Colombiana de Carbón) and obtained the concessions for another mining project called El Descanso, which comprises a total area of 274,053 ha.⁴

As of August 2021, production took place in seven industrial open pit mines run by five transnational companies (see Table 1). Drummond Ltd and Grupo Prodeco (Glencore) held more than 80% of all concessions granted for coal mining in the Cesar region. The concessions for mining (mostly for coal mining) covered an area of 120,000 ha; with a further 125,000 ha of requested concessions, together, this made up 11% of the entire area of the mining district. In some municipalities, such as La Jagua de Ibirico (see Figure 1), granted and requested concessions cover around 50% of the municipal territory (ANM, 2019). Nevertheless, despite the expansion of concession areas, only a small portion of this land has actually been purchased by mining capital to date. Indeed, in September 2021, Grupo Prodeco (Glencore) announced its withdrawal from its mining operations in Cesar. The company cited profit slumps during the Covid pandemic, a gradual reduction in coal production and poor earnings prospects on global markets. At the same time, the company became the sole owner of Cerrejon, the largest coal mine in the neighbouring La Guajira department (Ovalle Jácome, 2021). A complete phase-out of coal production is not expected for the next 20–30 years (Interview with representatives of Drummond Ltd, 29 March 2019).

With the acquisition of mining concessions in the 1990s and 2000s, the mining companies began to buy up plots of agricultural land, though they did not acquire the land they needed for mining all at once. Land purchases for mining purposes are thus both ongoing and gradual, as the mines develop (Interview with representatives of Drummond Ltd, 29 March 2019). The first phase of land purchases started in the 1990s, before and during the opening of the first mines. A second phase of mass land purchases took place in the 2000s, during the boom phase of coal mining (Interview with a member of a human rights organization, 28 March 2019). Currently, Drummond Ltd is buying land in order to advance exploitation at its Descanso Norte mine. According to its land officer, the company owns around 36,000 ha of land in the centre of Cesar (Interview, 29 March 2019). Irrespective of whether these figures are

³See Contract No. 078-88 between Carbocol and Drummond Ltd: https://www.anm.gov.co/sites/default/files/contrato_078-88.pdf.

⁴See Contract No. 144-97 between Ecocarbón Ltda and Drummond Ltd: https://www.anm.gov.co/sites/default/files/contrato_144-97.pdf.

TABLE 1 Coal mines in Cesar (February 2020).

Name of mine	Ownership	Mining titles	Location/ municipalities	Production (t) in 2017 ^a	Hectares under exploitation ^b
La Loma-Pribbenow	Drummond Ltd	078-088	Chiriguana, El Paso, La Jagua de Ibirico	13,659,650	6560
El Descanso (Zona Norte)	Drummond Ltd	144-97	Becerril, Agustín Codazzi	18,822,113	31,559 (Descanso Sur and Norte)
El Descanso (Zona Sur)	Drummond Ltd	144-97	La Jagua de Ibirico, El Paso, Chiriguana	Not yet in operation	
Similoa	Drummond Ltd	283-95	Chiriguana	Not yet in operation	6937
Rincón Hondo	Drummond Ltd	284-95	La Jagua de Ibirico, Chiriguana	Not yet in operation	9459
Cerrolargo	Drummond Ltd	056-90	La Jagua de Ibirico	Not yet in operation	213
Calenturitas	Grupo Prodeco (Glencore)	044-89	La Jagua de Ibirico, El Paso, Becerril	9,851,786	6677
La Jagua	Grupo Prodeco (Glencore)	HKT-08031 DKP-141 109-90 132-97 285-95	La Jagua de Ibirico	4,775,541	2864
El Hatillo	Murray Energy	147-97	El Paso, Chiriguana, La Jagua de Ibirico	631,717	9639
La Francia I	Murray Energy	5160	Becerril, El Paso	2,973,411	999
La Francia II	Murray Energy	GAK 152	El Paso	Not yet in operation	
La Luna (underground mining)	Sloane Investments Corporations	HAK-093 HKL-15192X	El Paso, Becerril	Not yet in operation	3061

^a<https://www.datos.gov.co/Minas-y-Energ-a/PRODUCCI-N-DE-CARB-N-EN-EL-DEPARTAMENTO-DEL-CESAR/hm5v-7rsx>, latest access 20 February 2020.

^bAgencia Nacional de Minería, 2019; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH), 2013, 2018.

Source: CNMH, 2018; Torres Bobadilla et al., 2015.

correct, both Drummond Ltd and Grupo Prodeco (Glencore) have stressed that they have bought land mainly from large-scale landowners and not from smaller scale farmers (ibid.; Interview with sustainability officer of Grupo Prodeco, 30 July 2019).

6 | MINING, COERCIVE DISPOSSESSION AND THE ROLE OF THE RURAL ELITE

What role did the landowning class, in this case, the landowning rural elite and the narcobourgeoisie, play in the dynamics of appropriation and commoditization of land for mining? In the following, I will discuss how and to what extent members of these groups have acted as 'land brokers' for the coal corporations.

In interviews held in March 2019, mining company representatives stated that they had mainly bought land from large landowners and not from peasant families in areas where peasant families became the beneficiaries of agrarian

reform. At first glance, this is not wrong, but it obscures the process of transformation of property rights that occurred before the companies bought the lands. As a lawyer from a human rights organization that supports displaced peasants in their struggle for land restitution emphasized, ‘companies cannot start operations where there is a peasant population. In many communities in the mining district there was a dense peasant population, there was a peasant world there that had to disappear’ (Interview, 14 March 2019). When coal mining started in the region in the 1980s and 1990s, the peasantry was seen as the local base of the guerrilla movement, which posed a threat to the rural elites. ‘The paramilitary displacement policy in Cesar was based on a phrase: “you have to attack the masses, where the guerrillas are hiding”’ (ibid.). Displacing the peasant population in the mining district thus meant both erasing support for the guerrillas and facilitating access to land for mining. For the mining companies, the displacement of the peasant population eliminated a crucial barrier to investment, namely, the legal requirement to recognize multiple land rights holders (for a similar argument, see Capps & Mnwana, 2015, p. 620).

The displacement and coercive dispossession of peasant families was carried out by paramilitary units, who were either (financially) supported or staffed by the cattle ranching elite. A case in point is Hugues Manuel Rodríguez, a cattle rancher from the region, known for his role in the paramilitary as ‘Commander Barbie’, who owns 8000 ha of land in the same area as Drummond Ltd’s Descanso Norte mining project (Carbon y sangre, 2010). Much of Rodríguez’s land includes areas that other elite agrarian families lost during the cotton crisis due to bank debts. In the 1980s and early 1990s, parts of these lands were either squatted by landless peasants or purchased by INCORA and then distributed to them.

Peasants who lost their land to people like Rodríguez either abandoned it or were forced to sell ‘voluntarily’ for prices below fair market value. The latter occurred particularly in areas where revenues from land sales were expected to be high due to the prospective development of coal mining. As a human rights lawyer stated, ‘Behind the arrival of paramilitarism was the interest in coal. If this had not been the case, why the need for violence? The motivation behind it was mining’ (Interview, 14 March 2019; see also Carbón y sangre, 2010). According to Alejandro Reyes (2009, pp. 207–208), between 1997 and 2007 nearly 75,000 ha of land were abandoned in Cesar due to paramilitary and guerrilla violence. In a witness statement before the Justice and Peace Unit of the Colombian Attorney General’s office in 2009, an ex-member of a paramilitary group who had been based in La Jagua de Ibirico explained that he had been ordered to pressure as many people as possible to sell their land, because it was known that there was coal in the ground (cited in Moor & van de Sandt, 2014, p. 75).

An emblematic case is the hamlet of El Platanal in the municipality of Agustín Codazzi, which today is the property of Drummond Ltd (Anaya Flórez, 2015; Campesinos de Platanal, 2018; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas [CCJ], 2015; El reto que, 2016). At the beginning of the 1980s, peasant families occupied the lands of the abandoned private farm in El Platanal, and in 1984, each family was assigned 22.5 ha of land by INCORA (CCJ, 2015, p. 12). Between the late 1990s and 2010, following threats and the murder of family members, the peasants vacated their farms or sold them to frontmen and/or intermediaries. As a displaced peasant from El Platanal and a member of a peasant victims’ organization remembered, ‘Often there were other peasants or “second occupiers” who took the land after we had left. We believe they were hired. Perhaps they were also formerly displaced persons’ (Interview, 20 March 2019).

In other cases, intermediaries bought the plots from the displaced peasants. One such intermediary was the cattle rancher Ramiro Quintero Zuleta, who ‘had information about the carbon deposits in the area’, asserted Yamile Salinas, a lawyer and scholar on land issues in Colombia (Interview, 11 March 2019). Between 1992 and 2009, Quintero Zuleta bought several plots of the El Platanal farm, selling them on—in some cases to family members or other relatives—who then sold the land to Drummond Ltd (Campesinos de Platanal, 2018; CNMH, 2018, pp. 160ff.; Proceso Declarativo, 2020). This supports what Counter (2019, p. 179) has observed in other regions in Colombia, namely, that in many cases of ‘land purchases’ from the peasantry, the rural elites were not the first but the second or third buyers in a ‘chain of transactions’. Levien (2011) also argues in this direction. He underlines that in the case of the SEZ in India, the accumulation created by land dispossession operated through the establishment of ‘chains of

speculative rentiership' (ibid., p. 473) that absorbed actors (middlemen, corrupt bureaucrats, better positioned farmers and large landowners) according to their class position unevenly.

Before the lands were sold to Drummond Ltd, they had been speculated on and the land titles legalized in the land registry under the name of the last buyer. A member of a human rights organization referred to these buyers as 'families of formalization' (Interview, 28 March 2019). The prices paid to the peasant families when the lands were first purchased by intermediaries ranged from around US\$1800 to 2500 per farm (CNMH, 2016a, p. 95). Fear lowered the costs of dispossession and increased the revenues for the elite land brokers. Drummond Ltd then bought these same lands between 2010 and 2013 from the last owners at overvalued prices, varying between US\$68,000 and 1.1 million per farm (CNMH, 2016a, pp. 94–97; CNMH, 2018, pp. 164–165). In a comparison of the 32 Colombian departments, average land prices in Cesar are in the top third of the price scale (Bonilla Sebá & González Borrero, 2016, pp. 87–88). According to Héctor Mondragón (2012), land prices in Colombia are among the highest in Latin America, a phenomenon that he attributes to the high concentration of landownership and increasing land speculation.

Due to their greater bargaining power, members of the rural elite can usually extract higher rents when negotiating with mining firms compared with small- and medium-scale farmers. As a peasant farmer from La Jagua de Ibirico confirmed, 'When the elites sell land to the mining companies, they always get more than what is offered to us' (Interview, 25 July 2019). This confirms Levien's (2015) argument that successful speculation or participation in 'the social game of land speculation' (2011, p. 470) depends on the social position and bargaining qualities and powers of the landowner in relation to mining capital investors.

A mechanism that has influenced land accumulation by the rural elite in mining areas is coercive land-grab-induced displacement based on 'privileged information'⁵ or 'illicit insider knowledge' (Levien, 2011; Velasco, 2014, p. 298). Knowing where coal deposits and mining concessions are located means being in a privileged position in terms of prospective land appropriation and speculation. In particular, state actors and those with good connections to them have early access to such privileged information. Related to land deals in the concession area of Drummond Ltd's Descanso Norte mine, Rodolfo Campo Soto, a member of one of the traditional rural elite families and former mayor of the provincial capital Valledupar (1992–1994), is alleged to have benefited from such privileged information. In 1996, only 2 years after he left office as mayor, the national government authorized the state company Ecocarbón to organize a public tender to award concessions for the Descanso mining deposits, which was won by Drummond Ltd (Campesinos de Platanal, 2018). According to Juan David Velasco (2014, p. 300), the Campo Soto family used prior knowledge of this to buy around 2300 ha of land from crisis-hit cotton farmers at prices below fair market value, with the aim of later selling the land on to a mining firm.

During fieldwork, journalists, peasants and members of human rights organizations from Bogotá and Cesar reported that in order to successfully transform agricultural lands into rentier capital in the context of mining, the collusion of state officials, politicians, armed actors, mining companies and members of the traditional landowning class is crucial. A well-documented and legally prosecuted case of 'administrative dispossession' (CNMH, 2018, p. 149), namely, the reallocation of plots to third parties through the issuing of forged title deeds, in the municipality of La Jagua de Ibirico, shows the significance of such 'local collusive networks' (Grajales, 2011, p. 785). In 1994, INCORA bought a large estate of more than 4000 ha (the Mechoacán farm) from a member of the rural elite who had gone into debt during the cotton crisis. In 1996, INCORA divided the estate into smaller plots that were assigned to landless peasants, who received title deeds for them. However, the plots were located close to Drummond Ltd's La Loma-Pribbenow mine, and it was clear that, at some point, the company would try to acquire the plots for mining. In 2008, Drummond Ltd obtained the property rights for most of the plots on the Mechoacán estate through a memorandum of understanding between INCODER and the landowners. Many of the latter were not the farmers who had originally received the title deeds in the 1990s. Between the end of the 1990s and 2004, many of the peasant families on the estate had abandoned their farms due to threats of violence. In order to appropriate the expected

⁵Privileged information means information that is not public and can only be accessed by certain groups and persons based on their offices and positions within the state apparatus. Having such knowledge can be used to enrich oneself or others (CNMH, 2018, p. 109; Superintendencia Financiera de Colombia, 2007).

rent generated from these ‘abandoned’ plots through the expansion of the La Loma-Pribbenow mine, the then-director of INCODER arranged for the legalization of the plots by bribing a local notary and issuing false papers to third parties. Two of the beneficiaries were former mayors of La Jagua de Ibirico (Amaya Navas et al., 2015; Carbón y sangre, 2010; CNMH, 2018). Other studies on the institutional mechanisms of land grabbing by displacement in Colombia point to ‘strategic alliances’ (Ballvé, 2013, p. 239) between paramilitary groups, politicians, rural elites, notaries and civil servants, which mutually reinforce and recognize each other, and enable the rural elite to legalize lands they have acquired through opaque channels (Reyes, 2009).

7 | AGRARIAN CHANGE AND LANDED PROPERTY IN CESAR

What are the effects of the accumulation of land in the hands of the rural elite through dispossession, and its selling to mining companies, on land-related property relations, the distribution of wealth and the wider agrarian social structures in central Cesar? In the following, I will discuss this question by studying the configuration of the regional economy, land-related property relations and land use before and after the onset of the mining boom.

Since the end of the 1990s, coal mining has become the dominant driver of the rural economy in the district of La Jagua. Between 2000 and 2016, Cesar's GDP registered an average annual growth rate of 5.4%, higher than the average national growth rate of 4% (Bonet-Morón & Aguilera-Díaz, 2018, p. 31). In 2000, coal mining accounted for less than a fifth of the regional GDP; in 2012, this share rose to nearly 50% and declined slightly to 42.7% in 2018. At the same time, the share of agricultural GDP declined from around 20% in 2000 to 8% in 2012 and has remained constant since (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2019). Other sectors of the rural economy, such as services, trade and rural industrial production, generally stalled during this period. Thus, it can be observed that while mining has flourished in the region, it has generated few economic opportunities for other sectors of the rural economy (ibid.; Rudas Lleras & Espitia Zamora, 2013). With the consolidation of the enclave economy model based on coal mining, a process of reconcentration of landed property relations began (see Table 2; Bernal Castillo, 2004, p. 78; Carlson, 2019, p. 687; Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo [PNUD], 2011).

By the end of the cotton boom, the distribution of land in Cesar was somewhat more equal; in particular, the very large-scale landholdings had lost their dominance. Compared with in 1970–1971, before the cotton boom had made a significant impact, when more than 50% of the land in Cesar was occupied by very large farms (500–1000 ha and more), by 1980, this share had declined to less than 30%. At the same time, middle-sized farms of 10–100 ha occupied 23.6% of the land and large farms of 100–500 ha 45.9%; this is compared with 14.4% and 33.4%, respectively, in 1970–1971.

In general, however, the cotton boom did not result in more equitable land distribution in all municipalities. In 1980, in the municipalities of Becerril and Chiriguaná, more than 70% of agrarian land was still concentrated in properties larger than 200 ha (Barrera & Victor, 2014, p. 254; Table 2). And by 2013–2014, the share of land occupied by 348 very large-sized farms had increased again to 42.4% of total agricultural land, the vast majority of which was used for cattle ranching. In 1970–1971, farms between 10 and 50 ha comprised 112,013 ha, representing 6.6% of the department's total agricultural area; in 2014, their total area expanded to comprise 231,561 ha, representing 15.7% of Cesar's agricultural land. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that some of these so-called middle-sized farms (>10 ha) might be smaller than one agrarian family unit (Unidad Agrícola Familiar [UAF]). The UAF was introduced in the 1961 Agrarian Reform Act (Law No. 135) to define a minimum land area that a family household requires to cover farming expenses and earn a monetary surplus to reinvest in the farm (see Coronado Delgado, 2021). The UAF differs regionally, based on a property's social, institutional and physical characteristics (access to markets and infrastructure, population density, soil fertility etc.). For central Cesar, one UAF was calculated to be between 41 and 55 ha (INCORA, 1996), which is relatively large compared with regions in the Colombian Andes, such as the department of Cauca, where the UAF is 4–7 ha in some areas. The Gini index of land distribution for Cesar of 0.7 indicates high rates of inequality, although it is below the national Gini index of 0.87 (IGAC, 2012, p. 294).

TABLE 2 Land distribution in Cesar by number of farms and size in hectares. Comparison between 1970–1971, 1980 and 2013–2014.

Farm size (ha)	1970–1971				1980				2013–2014			
	Number of farms	% of farms	Area (ha)	% of area	Number of farms	% of farms	Area (ha)	% of area	Number of farms	% of farms	Area (ha)	% of area
<5	7720	40.9	10,314	0.6	3479	18	6675	0.4	10,349	30.3	13,611	0.9
5 to <10	1116	5.9	7648	0.5	1318	6.8	9532	0.5	4279	12.5	23,833	1.6
10 to <50	4437	23.5	112,013	6.6	6546	33.9	180,116	10.3	12,244	35.9	231,561	15.7
50 to <100	2131	11.3	140,201	8.3	3463	17.9	231,155	13.3	4287	12.6	173,630	11.7
100 to <500	2779	14.7	565,480	33.4	3998	20.7	798,598	45.9	2599	7.6	409,393	27.7
500 to <1000	394	2.1	275,978	16.3	405	2.1	268,094	15.4	222	0.7	114,848	7.8
>1000	294	1.6	581,138	34.3	124	0.6	246,187	14.2	126	0.4	510,908	34.6
Total	18,871	100	1,692,772	100	19,333	100	1,740,357	100	34,106	100	1,477,786	100

Source: Own elaboration, based on Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (1972, 2016) and Barrera and Victor (2014, p. 253).

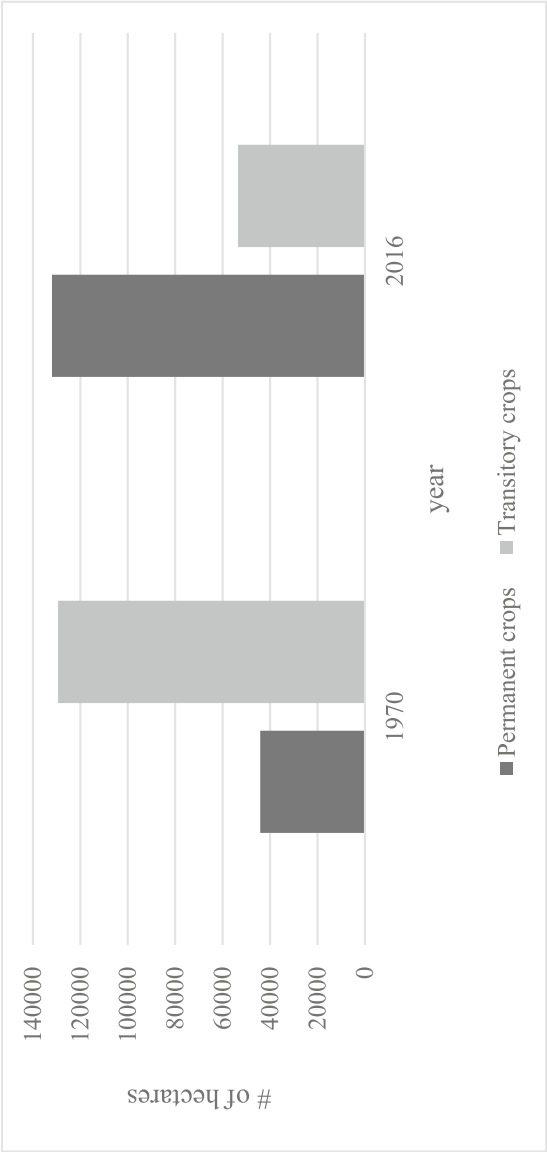


FIGURE 2 Variation of cash and staple crops in Cesar, 1971–2016. Source: Own elaboration, based on Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (1972, 2016).

In terms of land use, Cesar has experienced a sharp decline in the cultivation of staple crops and an expansion of cash crops (such as oil palms) and pastures. According to the 2014 National Agricultural Census, 67.3% of the total farming area in Cesar is dedicated to cattle ranching; of 1,477,787 ha of agricultural land, 957,942 ha are covered by pastures (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE], 2016, p. 52). In 1971, the area dedicated to cultivating cotton and staple foods covered 129,406 ha, while in 2014, it decreased to 53,545 ha (see Figure 2). What is striking is that compared with the 1970s, the area used for cattle ranching and cash crops such as oil palms has increased, although since the 1980s, the total number of livestock has declined by 40%. Parallel to this, the area used for cotton and staple crops has decreased substantially (DANE, 1972, 2016; Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario, 2017).

Based on these land use changes in the centre of Cesar over the last four to five decades, I argue that under the condition of a commodity boom, the monopoly over land in a resource-rich region turns—sooner or later—in a guarantee of making a profit for the landowning class through speculative land sales, whereas the importance of land ownership for production seems to decline. In Cesar, the rural elite traditionally dedicated to cattle ranching has regained a powerful position within the department's agrarian structure through its control of land and its capacity for profitable land speculation.

8 | CONCLUSION

Critical debates on agrarian change have recently paid little attention to the particular meaning of mining capital for rural transformation. I have argued in this paper that under the conditions of a global resource boom, with high prices for mineral resources on world markets, the expansion of mining in the countryside impacts agrarian social structures and agriculture in a particular way: It leads to the reconcentration of landed property and the revitalization of the landowning rural elite. This in turn results in the perpetuation of land-based social inequalities in the countryside, the decline of small-scale agriculture and staple food production, the expansion of pastoral and cash crop production, and a redistribution of land-based wealth from the bottom to the top. In the context of rising land values and extractivism, landowning groups from the traditional rural elite and narco-landowners seek to expand their exclusive property rights over land, as it is their monopoly over land that guarantees them a share in the mining boom. As shown in the case of Cesar, different mechanisms of land-grab-induced displacement and legal dispossession (similar to the practice of *grilagem* in Brazil) are applied, ranging from forced displacement to the falsification of title deeds.

By gaining and exercising a monopoly over resource-rich land, the rural elite provides capitalist firms with access to land for mining. At the same time, landowners participate in the resource boom as land brokers for mining companies and through speculative land dispossession. Through the coercive appropriation of land, the rural elite reduces the number of land proprietors with whom mining companies must negotiate to gain access to the land they want to mine, thus facilitating mining capital in overcoming a potential barrier to accumulation, namely, landed property. Although selling the land means losing its monopoly over it, the rural elite gains from mining through the high revenues they receive from land speculation. This is in contrast to the former peasant landowners, who were often forced to give up their land, either for nothing or for minimal compensation, and end up landless and penniless. The more profitable the coal mines, the higher the profits for the companies and the more likely they are to take risks and pay high prices for land, which means higher revenues for land sellers. From this, I conclude that beyond the profit outlook of the companies, it is the prospect of revenues from speculative land deals that triggers processes of dispossession of small landholders in resource-rich rural areas.

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