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Governing large-scale farmland acquisitions in Québec: the conventional family farm model questioned

Frantz Gheller[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that the definition of land grabs in public debate is a politically contested process with profound normative consequences for policy recommendations regarding the future of the family farm model. To substantiate this argument, I first explore how different definitions of land grabbing bring into focus different kinds of actors and briefly survey the history of land grabbing in Canada. I then introduce the public debate about land grabbing in Québec and discuss its evolution from its beginning in 2009 up until the provincial public inquiry on land grabs in March 2015. Here, I make critical observations regarding each participant's position, showing how different definitions of land grabbing has significant implications for policy recommendation and the promotion of different agricultural business models. More specifically, I emphasize how these discussions crucially fail to consider indigenous people's land rights and ignore the constraints imposed by the corporate food regime on family farms. I conclude by suggesting that the adoption of a food sovereignty approach to land governance helps redirect attention to these important issues and provide insight into imagining more sustainable alternative models of agriculture.

Keywords Land governance · Family farm · Food regime · Food sovereignty · Canada · Québec

Abbreviations

AIMco	Alberta Investment Management Corporation
BN	Banque Nationale
CDPQ	Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec
CIBC	Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce
CIRANO	Centre interuniversitaire de recherche en analyse des organisations
CPPIB	Canada Pension Plan Investment Board
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCC	Farm Credit Canada
ILC	International Land Coalition
IREC	Institut de recherche en économie contemporaine
MAPAQ	Québec Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
UPA	Union des Producteurs Agricoles

✉ Frantz Gheller
gheller.frantz@gmail.com

[1] Department of Geography, Université de Montréal, 2900 Edouard Montpetit Blvd, Montreal, QC H3T 1J4, Canada

Introduction

Case studies, thematic studies, and regional overviews by academics and research institutions around the world have explored the risks posed by the recent wave of large-scale, international farmland acquisitions to peasant communities and smallholder producers (Borras et al. 2013a; Edelman et al. 2013; Hall et al. 2015). One such report on commercial pressures on land published in 2012 by the International Land Coalition (ILC) in collaboration with more than 40 organizations concluded that large-scale land acquisitions threaten the land and resource rights as well as livelihoods of rural communities. It also pointed out that the negative impacts of these acquisitions are primarily felt by the poor, especially when governance frameworks and legal protections are weak, and thus more action needs to be taken by public authorities to mitigate these negative impacts (Anseeuw et al. 2012).

While the risks posed by land grabs in fragile states of the Global South are well-documented, more attention is being paid to large-scale farmland acquisitions in the Global North, as the literature has made it clear that Europe, Australia and North America are profitable markets for powerful transnational agricultural investors who operate across polycentric axes of power (Cotula 2012; Margulis and Porter 2013; van der Ploeg et al. 2015). This is due in large part because "flex crops and commodities" with multiple uses across food, feed, and fuel complexes (e.g. corn) grow in both tropical and temperate countries (Borras et al. 2016). Another reason for the interest in Northern farmland is its comparatively high profitability and low volatility when compared to other asset classes. Compiled data retrieved from Morningstar, NCREIF, Savills, and Bloomberg show that between 1994 and 2013, U.S. and British farmland have shown both significantly higher annual returns and lower volatility than gold, commodities, U.S equity shares and international equity shares (The Economist 2015). This makes farmland in the Global North particularly attractive for investment.

In post-Soviet Eurasia, for instance, countries that have large under- and unused agricultural land reserves such as Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan have attracted much agricultural investment in the past few years; however, the weak institutional environment that makes property rights to land far from secure has remained to this day a significant risk for investors (Visser and Spoor 2011; Visser 2017). In the Australian case, investment risk arises not from insecure property rights, but rather from the concerned response of the public to foreign investment, which has pushed foreign investors to tap into both the discourse of food (in)security and that of "commercial investment" to legitimate their engagement in agricultural production (Larder et al. 2015; Sippel 2015).

Public concern is also shaping the debate in Canada. In 2009, for instance, rumours of Chinese investors seeking to buy over 10,000 ha of land near Montréal, in the province of Québec, became news in the business media (Mesly 2009), a story that gained broader attention when it was picked up by Canada's national public radio and television broadcaster in the following months. Since then, land grabbing has continued to raise public concern in the province, to the point that, in March 2015, the Québec Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPAQ) decided to initiate a public inquiry on land grabs. Twenty stakeholders ranging from agricultural investment funds to farmers' unions and municipal authorities submitted briefs to the commission. For social scientists, this inquiry offers a unique snapshot of the state of the debate and insights into the specific form the global land rush is taking in Québec. Since the family farm has remained to this day the dominant model of agriculture in the province, it is an exemplary case study for reflecting on the future of the family farm model in the Global North. According to the agricultural census of 2011, 84% of Québec's agricultural land is still owned by farm operators, one of the highest proportions in the Global North. By comparison, in Canada as a whole, the percentage is roughly 64%, while it is below 40% in Germany and Belgium and below 30% in France (Brodeur et al. 2012).

Keeping in mind that the definition of land grabs in public debates is a politically contested process, this article examines two main research questions. First, how are large-scale acquisitions of farmland by financial actors changing the portrait of Québec's conventional agriculture and family farms? Second, how do the principle stakeholders mobilize various definitions of land grabbing to push different—and sometimes opposing—policy recommendations in the public sphere? To investigate these questions, this article draws on media reports, web-sources, and publicly available research reports, complementing these with a qualitative content analysis of the twenty briefs (in print) submitted to MAPAQ during its 2015 public inquiry. Informed by a tradition of interpretative sociology that seeks to understand sociopolitical processes through an analysis of their meanings for the actors involved in their making, this analysis brings attention to the contextual meaning of the public inquiry's stakeholder briefs in order to examine the discursive positions from which they interpret land grabbing. This analysis is also informed by both the food regime and food sovereignty approaches, which, I argue, help to uncover some of the blind spots of the current debate by calling attention to the dynamics of capitalism and neo-colonialism.

By addressing the public debate about land grabbing in Québec and discussing its evolution from its beginning in 2009 up to the establishment of the provincial public commission on land grabs in March 2015, I make critical observations about each stakeholder's position, showing how whether land grabs are defined in terms of "foreignization" or "financialization" has significant implications for the nature of their policy recommendations and the promotion of different farm ownership models. I also examine the briefs submitted to the commission on land grabs in order to highlight that the discussion on how to define land grabbing is not a value-neutral debate, but a politically contested process in which agricultural actors confront each other on the paradigmatic battlefield. Adopting both the food regime and food sovereignty approaches to land governance, I emphasize how these discussions ignore the important issue of indigenous dispossession as well as the constraints imposed by the corporate food regime on the conventional family farm model, a particularly concerning phenomenon given the ageing state of the Canadian farming population. Retiring farmers, faced with nothing but their farms as a retirement pension, will often sell their farm assets to the highest bidder, creating an unprecedented buying opportunity for investment funds with considerable financial means. While sales could in principle be good news for young farmers ready to take over the older generation's farms, the presence of new agricultural investment funds on the market creates upward pressure on land prices. With higher prices, access to land is made more challenging for the younger generation who do not have the financial means to compete with agricultural investment funds. The trend toward bigger farms also reduces population density in rural areas and threatens the conventional family farm model, ultimately changing the fate of local farming communities.

Defining land grabs

Problem definition plays a fundamental role in shaping the conditions of possibility for debate and policy recommendations. As such, the struggle to define social problems and make them apparent in the public sphere is of utmost importance for social actors trying to better the world. The study of contemporary food and agricultural issues is no exception. Here, proponents of market solutions face community-oriented researchers and activists in a clash of models that opposes the vested interests of global capitalists to local people's well-being. Since the late 1980s, this clash has been usefully theorised with the help of Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael's (1987) concept of "food regime," which takes as its object the politically contested processes by which the world capitalist economy integrates agriculture within its orbit.

Despite some disagreement between Friedmann and McMichael over the labeling of the current food regime and its degree of stability—Friedmann (2005) refers to this regime as an emerging "corporate-environmental food regime," while McMichael sees it as a consolidated "corporate food regime"—both authors recognize that it is dominated by transnational agrifood corporations. Integrated by commodity circuits, these corporations attempt "to regulate agrifood conditions, that is, to organize stable conditions of production and consumption which allow them to plan investment, sourcing of agricultural raw materials, and marketing" (Friedmann 1993, p. 52). In this perspective, global financial flows also reshape agriculture and the circulation of food by taking hold of land for productive and speculative purposes, with detrimental consequences for small producer rights across the world. The key here is that the corporate food regime endangers human livelihoods and ecosystems through the preponderance it gives to industrial agriculture. This agriculture is not only intensively dependent on non-renewable sources of energy, it also accounts for a large proportion of the world's GHG emissions, it depletes soil and it destroys biodiversity. It is moreover a threat to "cultural and ecological knowledges about living and working with natural cycles by wiping out smallholder diversified farming" (McMichael 2009, p. 153).

Social movements around the world have fought to defend their land against various forms of violence and dispossession, many associated with industrial agriculture and the increased pace of capitalist extractive activities worldwide, including the rapid expansion of plantations and industrial cultivation (Escobar 2001). These activities fuel the massive acquisition of land, water, and other resources for exploitation by agribusinesses (Bont et al. 2016). This, in turn, forces states to rethink their approach to food security while seeking to secure resources and acquire new land through state-backed agencies (McMichael 2013a).

Given the political implications of choosing one terminology over another, the concepts used by both social actors and scholars to describe these acquisitions have been the object of heated debate between competing interests. While corporate investors and state agencies tend to use relatively neutral terms such as "land transactions" and "land deals" to designate their purchases, activists and non-governmental organisations denouncing these deals generally prefer to speak of "land grabs" to attract attention to the problematic aspects of the global land rush. Having long been associated with colonialism, the concept is fraught with negative connotations for those fighting dispossession and exploitation.

The difficulty of defining "land grabbing" is widely acknowledged in the literature (Scoones et al. 2013). In earlier writings, Borras et al. noted that the concept was "a catch-all to describe and analyse the current explosion of large-scale (trans)national commercial land transactions" (2011a, p. 210). The use of parentheses here suggests that the transnational aspect of the phenomenon is optional: land grabs can be either national or transnational, depending on specific circumstances. The purpose of land grabs is also the subject of much controversy. Should the concept be restricted to designate cases where a state is buying land overseas to increase its own food security at home? Should it rather designate only cases where financial speculation is the goal of the transaction? Should it be used solely in cases where land is destined to commercial agriculture, or should it also encompass cases of real-estate development, recreational activities, and environmental conservation? Others still base their definition of land grabs on the sort of tenure involved. Should the concept of "land grabs" be reserved for public (or communal) lands being privatised? Should it include different types of natural resources (from forests and mines to marine resources) or should it be limited to agricultural resources, strictly speaking? Among the most interesting answers given to these questions in the literature are those that insist that what is ultimately at stake behind land grabs is *control*: control of land ownership and the value chain (Borras et al. 2011b), of people and resources (Peluso and Lund 2013), and of labour (Li 2011). In other words, the entities behind land grabbing would have in common an interest in taking "hold of land resources in order to change the meaning and purpose of land use" (Borras et al. 2011b, p. 411).

Peasant communities and smallholder producers in the Global South were the first to voice their concerns about land grabbing. Given the legacies of colonialism, early debates were very much shaped in terms of the "foreignization" paradigm, which insists on the centrality of foreign forces as the driver of land transactions—for instance, state-backed agencies or corporations purchasing land in another country. This paradigm continues to inform much of the debate today, including the position of international organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The FAO tends to use a very narrow definition of land grabbing as large-scale acquisitions of foreign lands for the production of food by sovereign nations, leaving aside land grabs undertaken for other purposes by private actors. Civil society organisations are more keen to recognise the centrality of private actors in the global land rush. According to GRAIN, an international non-profit organisation that has been particularly vocal in denouncing land grabs in the Global South:

> On the one hand, "food insecure" governments that rely on imports to feed their people are snatching up vast areas of farmland *abroad* for their own *offshore* food production. On the other hand, food corporations and private investors, hungry for profits in the midst of the deepening financial crisis, see investment in *foreign* farmland as an important new source of revenue (2008, p. 1; italics added).

While GRAIN's description of land grabbing is broad enough to encompass both foreign governments and private actors, the use of terms such as "abroad," "offshore," and "foreign" points to the importance of spatial criteria in identifying land grabs. GRAIN's insistence is on the foreign origins of the actors driving land grabs and the cross-border character of their actions. Other civil society organisations such as OXFAM, Stop Africa Land Grabs, La Via Campesina, and the ILC similarly tend to insist on the international/transnational dimension of land grabs in their definitions, although they do also often denounce domestic or national forms of land grabs (e.g. ILC 2011). Many scholars have followed suit. For Zoomers, land grabs refer "to large-scale, *cross-border* land deals or transactions that are carried out by *transnational* corporations or initiated by *foreign* governments" (2010, p. 429; italics added).

In response, others have pointed out that this kind of definition leaves aside a whole range of land-grabbing activities undertaken by domestic actors, especially "national elites or outsiders from different parts of the same country" (Holmes 2014, p. 549). To account for these domestic actors in conceptualizing land grabbing, it is possible to acknowledge the international character of many actors involved in the global land rush without, however, making "foreignness" (or other spatial characteristics) an essential criterion of the definition. As Jan Douwe van der Ploeg et al. (2015) have insisted in their study of land grabbing in Europe, the foreignisation of land is "only one of several critical land issues" associated with land grabbing. Other issues, such as the issue of land concentration, are just as urgent. Here, focusing on "the rise of finance and large-scale investors in food provisioning and farmland operations" (Visser et al. 2015, p. 541) provides a promising area of research to better understand the agro-food investments of private equity firms, merchant banks, hedge funds and pension funds—in addition to state-backed agencies—without succumbing to state-centric, inside/outside, or domestic/foreign dichotomies. The consequences of the financialization of the agro-food sector include the increased subordination of agro-food actors—including food retailers—to the dictates of finance capital, as well as the increased vulnerability of farm owners and food workers to intensified exploitation, higher market volatility, and extreme competition (Clapp 2014; Isakson 2014).

Whether one insists on the territorial aspect of land deals or on the socio-economic nature of the actors involved, it is important to keep in mind that "foreignization" and "financialization" are not mutually exclusive: they are very much intertwined at the global level, with "land grabbers" being often both foreign and financial (Hall 2011; Borras et al. 2013b; Clapp 2014; Visser et al. 2015). In most cases, reducing land grabbing to any one of these two aspects without accounting for the other will thus likely fail to appreciate the complexity of the actors, processes and dynamics involved (Fairbairn 2015).

Land grabbing in Canada

Land grabbing in Canada has a long history going back to the arrival of white settlers in North America. With European colonial ventures began a protracted process of dispossession of indigenous peoples through a series of violent clashes that continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The French and the British competed for control over land and the fur trade while forming shifting military alliances with the indigenous First Nations, whose support was essential in these bloody wars.

After its victory over the French, the British Empire recognised indigenous peoples' title on territories west of the white settlers' colonies established by the Royal Proclamation of 1763, but their land was nevertheless gradually acquired by British authorities in subsequent decades through treaties and surrenders (Borrows 1997; Foster 1999). The process of dispossession of indigenous peoples continued in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when nine treaties concluded between 1815 and 1825 almost entirely extinguished indigenous titles to land in the territory between Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and Lake Huron. Later in the century, Canada's nation-building process proceeded through the brutal repression of the Métis revolt in the then-Northwest Territories and the monitoring of reserve communities under the Indian Act (1876) and the Pass Laws (1885). As Gordon explains, the Pass Laws imposed strict controls over indigenous movement off reservations and kept "them from pursuing traditional forms of subsistence off of state designated reserve land, even if the reserve land was unsuited to support an entire community, as it often was by state design" (2006, p. 53). The Canadian government also imposed cultural assimilation by separating indigenous children from their families, forcing them to attend prison-like religious residential schools—a cruel uprooting that has profoundly damaged the social fabric of indigenous communities.

Even though the process of dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land and their culture takes less explicitly violent forms today, it still continues to unfold. As Native American environmentalist and economist Winona LaDuke remarks, "[w]hile Native peoples have been massacred and fought, cheated and robbed of their historical lands, today their lands are subject to some of the most invasive industrial interventions imaginable." In the United States alone, more than 300 reservations "are threatened by environmental hazards, ranging from toxic wastes to clearcuts" (1999, p. 2). Similar threats exist in Canada, where Native lands are flooded for the production of hydroelectric power, destroyed by mining activities or encroached upon by forest logging and urban growth (Churchill 1994). Land dispossession of indigenous peoples has also reached new heights in the Canadian North, as governments and companies scramble for ownership and exploitation of hydrocarbons and minerals, infringing upon the rights of many northern communities to use the land and its resources in the process (Samson 2003; Sale and Potapov 2010).

Canadian farmland does not escape the increased pace of extractive and speculative activities seen elsewhere. It is viewed with growing interest by both private investment funds and even public pension funds, now purchasing large land holdings in Canada, especially in the vast and fertile Prairies (Sommerville and Magnan 2015; Magnan and Sunley 2017). The Canadian government has itself taken an active stance in facilitating purchases of the country's farmland by non-farmers through Farm Credit Canada (FCC), a Crown corporation that acts as Canada's largest agricultural term lender to farmland investment companies. Among them, Assiniboia Capital Corp.—one of Canada's largest farmland investment management company—obtained over $10 million in mortgages from FCC (Assibonia Farmland LP 2012). Assiniboia had about 115,000 acres under management until it sold its farmland portfolio for roughly $128 million in January 2014 (Pilger 2014). Most of this land was rented to farm operators "through a variety of rental arrangements with the objective of maximising long-term total returns from the capital appreciation of the farmland portfolio" (Assiniboia Farmland LP 2014). That farmland portfolio is now owned by the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB), which also bought, earlier in 2013, the farmland portfolio of North American Agricultural Investments LLC.

Canada's national public pension fund is not the only public pension fund that has its eyes on farmland. *Provincial* pension funds are also on the lookout, although much of their activity has thus far targeted land abroad. The Alberta Investment Management Corporation (AIMco) and its partners, for instance, completed one of the largest forestry estate transactions in Australia with the purchase of 2500 km^2 of timber land for AU$415 million in 2011 on behalf of 26 Alberta pension, endowment, and government funds (AIMCo and New Forests 2011). Another example is the *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec* (CDPQ) and the British Columbia Investment Management Corporation's financial involvement with TIAA-CREF Global Agriculture LLC, which has raised US$2 billion to invest in farmland in the United States, Australia and Brazil (Financial Services 2012). In April 2017, the CDPQ, together with the pension plan of the *Fédération des travailleurs du Québec*—the province's largest labour federation—have announced an investment of $10 million each in Pangea, the most active agricultural investment fund in Québec (Canadian Press 2017).

With pension funds and private investors actively speculating on land, some Canadian policy makers have grown increasingly aware of the potential impacts of the land rush on Canada's farmland. Regulatory actions are, however, unlikely to be taken by the federal government because the responsibility for regulating farmland purchases falls under provincial jurisdiction. Each province has its own regulatory framework regarding the matter and variations occur across the country. In some of the Prairie provinces—Alberta and Manitoba—as well as in Québec, agricultural land can be bought by non-residents and foreign-controlled entities, but the area is capped at specific acreages (40 acres in Manitoba, 20 in Alberta, and 10 in Québec). Provincial boards can grant exemptions to these caps under conditions specific to each province. In the province of British Columbia, foreign ownership of agricultural land is unrestricted while non-agricultural uses of certain farm lands are regulated. Since 2015, the province of Saskatchewan has adopted new restrictions on the purchase of land by pension plans, administrators of pension fund assets and trusts, as well as new regulations compelling farmland purchases to be made through a financial institution registered to conduct business in Canada.

The politics of research

In Québec, foreign investors have shown interest in buying land in the province for quite some time now. Examples include the purchase of 450 ha near Montréal by Hancock Agricultural Investment Group, an American fund, in 2009. That same year, rumours circulated about a group of Chinese investors coming from Shanghai with $300 million already deposited in Québec banks to buy between 10,000 and 40,000 ha of land near Saint-Hyacinthe. According to some of the local farmers interviewed by journalists, the investors' intention was to use the land for hog and pig farming, which was in high demand in China (Mesly 2009). A real estate agent, Pierre Bergeron, was quoted in the national news saying that "For them, it is the Klondike here" (Perreault 2010).

However, when the Banque Nationale (BN)—Canada's sixth-largest commercial bank—decided to buy 3277 ha of farmland in Lac Saint-Jean in 2011–2012, it became apparent that large-scale purchases by financial investors were not limited to foreign investors. BN sold its land a year later to a private, Canadian-based, agricultural investment fund, Pangea, raising doubts that farmland would ever come back into a farming family's hands once bought by a financial investor. All of these cases testify to the diversified territorial/spatial nature of the actors driving land grabs, some of them foreign and others domestic. They also demonstrate that financialization and foreignization are often deeply intertwined, and need to be conceptualized as such by researchers.

With these various events taking place between 2009 and 2012, concerns about land grabbing in Québec began to emerge in the public sphere, with major stakeholders and think tanks eventually adding their voices to the debate through media appearances and the publication of major research reports. The first of these reports was written by the *Institut de recherche en économie contemporaine* (IREC) for *l'Union des Producteurs Agricoles* (UPA) in March 2012. UPA is the largest farmers' union in the province, representing 42,000 farmers through 92 local unions, 12 regional federations, 130 specialised unions and 26 specialised groups. The report sounded the alarm on the existence of land grabbing in the province. Depicting a struggle between financial institutions and family farms for land ownership, it concluded that even though land grabbing was still marginal in Québec today, the public should nevertheless be concerned regarding the future. The report's author expresses his worries that current legislation does very little in terms of restricting large-scale acquisitions of farmland by financial actors and mitigating the negative impacts of these acquisitions on farming communities (L'Italien 2012).

A tentative rebuttal to the idea that land grabbing is a threat to the province's farmland was not long in coming. In October 2012, Groupe AGÉCO, an expert consulting firm specializing in the agro-food sector, published a study of land value and ownership commissioned by La Coop Fédérée, Québec's most prominent private actor in the agro-food business, with operations across New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. According to AGÉCO, there are good reasons to worry about the rise of land prices, for it creates barriers for aspiring young farmers and threatens the survival of family farming. AGÉCO argued, however, that financial institutions are not responsible for this, since land prices began to rise well before the appearance of specialized agricultural investment funds in the province. What is more, they claim, land transactions are still dominated by sales of small plots of land between farmers themselves. AGÉCO also emphasized the protection offered by Québec's strong regulatory framework compared to the regulatory framework of many countries in the Global South, where weak governance leaves the door open to the purchase of vast areas of land by foreign investors, potentially encroaching on small farmers' rights. This led AGÉCO to recommend more public support for Québec's young farmers while rejecting the idea that land grabs are a threat to the province's farmland.

A second rebuttal came in February 2013 from the *Centre interuniversitaire de recherche en analyse des organisations* (CIRANO), a think-tank with formal associations to corporate partners such as commercial banks, investment managers, and insurance companies. The study was commissioned by MAPAQ. Interestingly, while AGÉCO sought to contradict the IREC research on its own grounds by discussing land grabs in terms of the financialization paradigm, CIRANO sought to shift the terms of the debate away from this paradigm and toward the foreignization paradigm. To do so, it did not identify the main protagonists of land grabs as farmers and financial investors, as previous research had done, but as Québec "residents" and "non-residents" instead.

Among "residents," CIRANO made no distinction between family farms, agricultural investment funds, and non-agricultural investors, such as pension funds and commercial banks. By centering the debate on the foreignness of investors, CIRANO downplayed the importance of the socio-economic nature of the actors in favour of their territorial origin. It defined land grabbing as the purchase of Québec's farmland by "non-residents"—a nonissue given the province's strict regulatory framework on the matter.

Indeed, there exists a statute in the Act Respecting the Acquisition of Farmland by Non-Residents that limits the size of agricultural land that can be bought by non-residents to 4 ha, with the exception of individuals and corporations that are not controlled by Québec residents but acquire the authorization of the *Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec* (AAFNLR 1979). This "authorization is automatically issued when the land in question is not suitable for cultivation of the soil or the raising of livestock or when a non-resident demonstrates the intention to settle in Québec and become a Canadian citizen or permanent Canadian resident" (Heminthavong and Lavoie 2015, p. 7).

Given the existence of this regulatory framework, CIRANO's finding that non-residents are not massively buying the province's farmland is, to say the least, a foregone conclusion. The opposite would have been surprising. What CIRANO's research fails to point out is that nothing in Québec's current regulatory framework prevents domestic financial investors from making large-scale purchases of farmland. Given this omission, CIRANO's report appears to be a performative act aimed to divert public attention away from the issue of the financialization of agriculture by refocusing the discussion around the resident/non-resident divide. Ultimately, CIRANO's conclusion that existing laws are sufficient to protect Québec's agriculture overlooks the weakness of regulations based on territorial or residential criteria.

Traditional state-centric tools of territorial control are indeed limited in their ability to deal with land grabbing which is a de-territorialized and financialized threat. Finance capital's mobility and fungibility allow it to bypass regulatory restrictions through creative business structures that involve numerous actors ranging from financial management companies and holding companies to tax havens, pension funds and domestic operating companies (Fairbairn 2015). In Canada, this mobility has been facilitated over the last few decades by the reshaping of the traditional tools of territorial control by a neoliberal state more interested in "attracting financial investment based on the potential for monetary returns" than in fostering "deliberate strategies to encourage social investment in farmland and rural communities" (Desmarais et al. 2017, p. 163).

In the politics of research on land grabbing in Québec, the insistence on the opposition between "residents" and "non-residents" serves to shift the terms of the debate away from the threat that financialization poses to the family farm model of agriculture. The implicit assumption is that domestic investments are necessarily better than foreign investment. The same assumption informed the "food sovereignty" policy announced by the Québec government in May 2013. The policy—quickly abandoned in 2014 by the next government—aimed to increase the share of Québecois produce and food products on Québecois plates by promoting the food and food processing industry in the province, as well as educating consumers about the benefits of home-grown over imported food. This strategy was anchored in a state-centric understanding of food sovereignty that is arguably in contradiction with the original demands of the international coalition La Via Campesina.

Created during the Food Summit organised by the FAO in Rome in 1996, the coalition popularized a grassroots interpretation of the meaning of food sovereignty as a countermovement to the corporatization of the food regime (McMichael 2013b). The countermovement supports the defence of producers' rights and autonomy, the promotion of community-supported agriculture, the fight against poverty, and collective resistance to land dispossession. Ecological initiatives and political ecology are also at its centre (Massicotte 2014). What is more, its pursuit of social and environmental justice aims at a radically *democratic* food system in which the people who produce, distribute, and consume food are the ones who make the decisions around it. As such, La Via Campesina promotes a "bottom-up" approach to food sovereignty that puts into question the growing power of corporations and market institutions over the agro-food regime. It demands that we rethink the way we collectively produce, consume, and share the resources that nature has endowed the human community (Patel 2009; Wittman et al. 2010). It also demands that we rethink what forms democratic land control can take, for land control "influences and shapes the character and degree of autonomy of a prospective or actual producer and whether s/he can go into food production or can transition to a food sovereignty-inspired production system" (Borras et al. 2015, p. 614). None of these issues were addressed by the Québec government's food sovereignty policy (MAPAQ 2013), which adopted a "top-down" approach aimed to strengthen the province's industrial agro-food sector by promoting domestic corporate interests in the face of international competition.

The public inquiry into land grabs

Since concerns about land grabbing continued to be publicly expressed, MAPAQ eventually decided to establish a special public commission to inquire into land grabs in March 2015. Public commissions are a means used by the government to inquire into issues connected with the good of the province, the conduct of public affairs, the administration of justice, or matters of importance relating to public health or the well-being of the population. When a public inquiry is launched, nominated commissioners may use the legal means deemed best suited to the matter under investigation. "Special" consultations like this inquiry into land grabs are limited to individuals and organizations invited by the commissioners for their knowledge of the matter being studied. The chosen stakeholders are invited to submit a brief and present their opinion before the commissioners, who complete the investigation, report the results and make recommendations to the government concerning the adoption of measures justified by the evidence received. Public commissions are a central tool of public governance and an important aspect of policy-making processes. As such, the decision of MAPAQ to initiate a public inquiry on the issue of land grabbing is a testament to the importance that the matter has gained in the public sphere.

The commission asked stakeholders to focus their interventions on ten specific questions, including: "How does land grabbing affect family farms?" and "Should we move to other business models for agriculture?" (CAPERN 2015, p. 9). In response, twenty briefs were submitted by private sector representatives, civil society organisations, local and regional farmers' unions, as well as municipal and regional public authorities. Among these stakeholders, UPA highlighted four reasons to take action now against the financialization of agriculture (2015). First, land prices have risen more than 600% since 1990, making the purchase of land by aspiring or existing farmers difficult. Second, the number of farmland transactions continues to grow considerably: it is up 67% since 2010, meaning that land changes hands more frequently. Third, the last decade has seen the emergence of new financial actors whose roles are not yet understood well, especially since each group or partnership follows a different business model. Fourth, these new investors concentrate their actions in specific regions. For instance, Pangea, a Québec-based agricultural investment company that submitted a brief to the commission, concentrates its activities in the Lac St-Jean region, where it alone was responsible for more than 50% of all the transactions made in 2013 and 2014 (UPA 2015).

Founded in 2012 by Charles Sirois, former Chief Administrative Officer of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC)—one of the five largest banks in Canada—Pangea also develops joint ventures with regional agricultural partners in the regions of Lanaudière, Estrie, Bas St-Laurent and South Eastern Ontario. The company actively promotes the financialization of agriculture through a new business model of agriculture revolving around renewable 9- to 12-year partnership agreements with farmers, which Pangea describes as a bridge between non-speculative financial capital and agriculture (Pangea 2015). These partnerships take the form of co-enterprises called "*Sociétés opérantes agricoles*," wherein each stakeholder retains ownership of the land it brings in while a shared company operates the farm. Pangea (2015) aims to create farms of at least 800 ha, which it considers the optimal size for using up-to-date technologies. As of June 2017, Pangea and its agricultural partners were farming more than 15,000 acres of farmland in Québec, of which Pangea owns 8956 (Pangea 2017).

UPA criticizes Pangea's business model for saddling farmers with most of the risk while the company collects steady streams of income in the form of rents and royalties (UPA 2015). Yet Pangea argues that its business model favours the establishment of young farmers by giving them more access to arable land as well as the capital, the expertise, and the mentoring they need to optimise their operations. The model is even said to allow partner farmers to be less indebted while operating farms of "optimal" size, which translates into greater economies of scale and more profits for the farmers. Moreover, Pangea argues that it provides its partners with better access to new markets and commercial networks, resulting in more purchasing power for farm inputs, implements, and high-tech technologies. Pangea also encourages the diversification of operations by expanding farm activities beyond agriculture to include storage, commercialization, and grains and oilseeds processing. In its brief, Pangea insists that the majority of the company's partners are 40-years-old or younger, in contrast to the current state of family farms in the province (2015). It also insists that its model favours the production of food for human consumption rather than livestock, contrary to most of the province's farms. What is more, according to the company, a great portion of the land now cultivated was lying fallow before its intervention.

According to UPA, the activities of agricultural investment funds such as Pangea jeopardize small- and medium-sized farms, whose expansion is made difficult by the rising costs of new acquisitions. They also threaten to transform the current entrepreneurial model of agriculture into wage-labour farming: unable to buy their own farms, young farmers might be led to either lease farmland or become wage labourers on other people's or agricultural funds' farms. Many simply abandon the agricultural vocation altogether and leave the countryside. This exodus of young farmers, together with the disappearance of small farms, results in lower demographic density and the devalorization of rural areas. To face these challenges, UPA recommended better tools to collect information on land ownership and land transactions, a 3-year limit of 100 ha/year on non-inter-generational transactions, obligations and incentives for buyers to cultivate the land, a fund for agricultural development, the establishment of land trusts, more help for start-ups, and a program to promote the agricultural profession (2015).

Many of the commission's stakeholders shared a similar viewpoint to the one defended by UPA, including Québec's Federation of Municipalities and regional public authorities. Two of the latter noted that a considerable portion of new investments is made on prime agricultural land—not, as agricultural investment funds often claim, on marginal ones (MRC de Kamouraska 2015; MRC de Lac-Saint-Jean Est 2015). Moreover, because they often have access to their own larger external suppliers and do not reside in the region where they buy land, financial investors tend to channel income out, a phenomenon known as "income leakage." Together with the exodus of young families, income leakage contributes to the devitalization of rural areas, as it makes fewer resources locally available to pay for local commerce and community services (Fédération de la relève agricole du Québec 2015; Fédération de l'UPA de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue 2015; Fédération de l'UPA du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean 2015).

Studies of land grabbing in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean (Borras et al. 2013b; van der Ploeg et al. 2015) have pointed out that increased land concentration—the creation of ever fewer, bigger farms controlled by a few corporate entities—is another frequent outcome of the new investment funds' activities. A recent study of patterns of farmland ownership in the province of Saskatchewan between 2002 and 2014 provides evidence that this is occurring in Canada as well: the share of farmland owned by the largest four private owners increased sixfold during that period (Desmarais et al. 2017). Many of the commission's stakeholders have suggested that the concentration of farmland ownership is occuring in Québec as well. According to one regional farmers' federation, while the average farm in the Bas St-Laurent region is 164 ha and the average farm in the Kamouraska region is 117 ha, Pangea's projected farm size is a minimum of 809 ha—that is, between fivefold and sevenfold current averages, and well above the 650 ha size of the average farm in Saskatchewan, home of Canada's largest farms (Fédération de l'UPA du Bas-Saint-Laurent 2015).

The family farm idealized?

In addition to Pangea, two other agricultural investment companies participated in the public inquiry. One of them is Partenaires Agricoles (2015), which insisted on distinguishing its business model from that of American pension funds, such as the California Public Employees' Retirement System and the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association. Contrary to these funds, Partenaires Agricoles does not just own equity in the land but runs farms in conjunction with farm operators. Partenaires Agricoles describes its business as making money through profitable agricultural production, not speculation, which it achieves by providing more capital, more expertise, better management and better governance to local farmers. It also defines its model as one of a "socially responsible agro-capitalism" that favours big crops (soy, canola, corn, oat, potatoes and hemp) and provides a "necessary solution" to contemporary agricultural challenges (2015, p. 2).

To defend its business model, Partenaires Agricoles points out that land has been gaining value at a rapid pace since 1995—that is, well before the appearance of the new agricultural investment funds (2015). New financial actors thus cannot be considered responsible for the rising price of land. However, according to Partenaires Agricoles, they do play a major role in modernising agriculture by promoting business models better adapted to the current global economy. By providing more capital to farmers, they offer them the means of improving their profitability and long-term sustainability. In Partenaires Agricole's view, fears about land grabbing are evidence of the inadequacy of the existing familial model in the current business environment: the family farm structure does not facilitate entrepreneurial succession, it rests on a working population of ageing farmers, and it forces these farmers to live with extremely high levels of indebtedness.

The province of Québec, Partenaires Agricoles argues, offers a case in point: while it boasts one of the strongest familial farm models in North America, it is also the region where farms are the most indebted. Moreover, the familial character of family farms has long been transformed by the recourse to foreign workers. In the company's view, fewer children, ageing operators, and heavy debts all point to the unsustainability of the current family farm structure (2015). Like the other two agricultural investment companies, Agriterra, the third agricultural investment partnership that submitted a brief to the commission, put into question the current model of ownership, rhetorically asking: why, if this model is so great, do all the problems we encounter today exist (2015)?

Among the stakeholders defending the conventional family farm model of agriculture against the critiques leveled by agricultural investment companies, IREC argued that the family farm is not only efficient but also best defends the public good. Claiming that there is no need for more capital-intensive and concentrated models of agricultural business, IREC urged the government to take vigorous action to protect the province's familial structure of ownership. It recognized that the Act Respecting the Acquisition of Farmland by Non-Residents constitutes an efficient barrier to land grabs by foreign investors, but asked why public authorities do not apply to domestic investment the same criteria used to protect the province's farmland against foreign grabs. Why, indeed, do public authorities not ask domestic buyers the same questions they ask non-resident investors when they assess their demands? Should not domestic buyers be subjected to questions about the projected use of land? The impact of their purchases on regional land prices? The impact on regional economic development? The valorization of agricultural products? The implications for the occupation of the rural territory? In short, IREC argued that when financial investors directly engage in agricultural production, rural communities should take into consideration the impact of these investors' activities on local livelihoods to determine the legitimacy of their projects. In the absence of such criteria to assess domestic investment, the protection against foreign land grabs offered by the existing regulatory framework gives a false sense of security (IREC 2015).

Interestingly, IREC and UPA's defence of the familial farm during the commission was criticised on the left of the political spectrum by Union Paysanne, a small organisation with both urban and rural roots representing small-scale farmers and gardeners promoting alternative ways of producing food centered on life and dignity. The founding of Union Paysanne was inspired by the actions of French activist-farmer José Bové and the Confédération paysanne. It is a member of La Via Campesina and actively promotes a grassroots approach to food sovereignty. In its brief, Union Paysanne (2015) criticized UPA for defending the status quo and argued that the creation of new agricultural investment companies such as Pangea had to be expected: according to Union Paysanne, these companies are merely additional "integrators" in an agro-food chain that is already highly integrated. While the family farm still provides decent livelihoods to many families and is arguably preferable to a strictly corporate agriculture, they have nevertheless long been transformed into large agro-industrial businesses under the institutional guidance of the neoliberal state, whose quotas, regulations, programs, and incentives favour integration into the corporate food regime at the expense of alternative ways of farming. They have also long ceased to be the coherent, unified entities centred around family labour that they once were. Today, these farms have complex ownership structures that often involve ownership by different family members and legal entities (including one or several numbered companies) and hundreds of thousands or millions in financing. While the defence of family farms goes some way toward maintaining the "human dimension" of agriculture, in Union Paysanne's view, there is something hypocritical in denouncing the rise of new agricultural investment companies without denouncing the broader system as a whole (2015).

The system that Union Paysannes denounces at the provincial level has much to do with the corporate food regime that structures agriculture globally, including the predatory constraints that force farmers to follow farming practices detrimental to human and ecological well-being (Akram-Lodhi 2008; McMichael 2009). Québec's family farms are not impervious to these constraints: they follow ecologically destructive practices such as monocropping and the intensive application of commercial fertilizers, while farmers who wish to do things differently face huge hurdles. In the words of an agricultural producer, "the industry always pushes you [the farmers] to perform better, to get the most performance and have the cleanest fields as possible" (Heidi Asnong, quoted in Gerbet 2015). Although many conventional farmers are environmentally conscientious and actively try to reduce their environmental impact, within the current agri-business environment, structural pressures call for the heavy use of pesticides, including neonicotinoids, which use has recently reached record levels in Québec despite the government's pledge to reduce their use in the province (Gerbet 2015; MDDELCC 2015). They also encourage the widespread adoption of herbicide-tolerant and insect-resistant genetically modified crops by family farmers. According to Statistics Canada, in 2014, 84.5% of all the grain corn grown in Québec and 79.5% of grain corn in Ontario were genetically modified, while 58% of soybeans grown in Québec and 61.5% of soybeans grown in Ontario were genetically modified (CBAN 2015). All of this is happening under the current family farm model.

Toward alternative modes of agriculture

To move away from the current industrial agro-food system, Union Paysanne (2015) demands more freedom to divide farmland into smaller plots to allow for peasant ways of farming; greater flexibility in regulations to encourage part-time farming, multiple land uses, and agro-tourism; the end of cartels in representation; and greater production allowances outside quotas, which only the big players can afford. It also asks for the elaboration of a clear agricultural policy for the province, no more financial support to integrators, and a shift of funding away from big producers toward young farmers and families. Many of these recommendations echo those that had been made—to little avail—in the Pronovost report published by the Commission on the Future of Agriculture and Agro-Food in Québec in 2008, the most comprehensive inquiry into the matter to have occurred in decades in Quebéc. They also echo those made by other organizations—such as the National Farmers Union, Food Secure Canada, and several indigenous organizations—who are vigorously engaged in communities all over Canada in implementing alternative approaches to rural development and working to achieve more autonomy and justice within the agricultural and food sectors (Wittman et al. 2011; Desmarais and Wittman 2014). These organizations seek to create much-needed opportunities for family farms to take part in networks of knowledge to grow *sustainable* food systems—that is, food systems that are "socially just, economically robust, ecologically regenerative and politically inclusive" (Blay-Palmer et al. 2016).

Spearheaded by farmers, NGOs, peasant communities, indigenous peoples, and academic institutions across the world, the movement for sustainable and biodiverse food systems gives us a glimpse of the transformative potential of blending modern agroecological science and indigenous knowledge systems (Desmarais 2007; Wittman et al. 2010). The latter is a particularly rich source of wisdom and awareness for the promotion of community-based agroecological practices:

> The persistence of millions of agricultural ha under ancient, traditional management in the form of raised fields, terraces, polycultures (with a number of crops growing in the same field), agroforestry systems, etc., document a successful indigenous agricultural strategy and constitutes a tribute to the "creativity" of traditional farmers. These microcosms of traditional agriculture offer promising models for other areas because they promote biodiversity, thrive without agrochemicals, and sustain year-round yields (Altieri 2009, p. 103).

Unfortunately, most of the stakeholders in Québec's public commission on land grabbing have missed the opportunity to raise public awareness about this potential. Moreover, in a silence that speaks volumes, none of the twenty briefs submitted to the commission made reference to how land grabbing has profoundly affected the life of First Nations. Nor did the stakeholders address the high rates of food insecurity in their communities. The briefs' performative constitution of identity as either family farms (read: white entrepreneurial farmers) and financial investors; or "resident" farmers (read: white entrepreneurial farmers and agricultural investment funds) and "non-resident" investors (especially American and Asian investors), testifies to a deeply ingrained indifference to the fate of indigenous peoples. It also testifies to the shortcomings of any approach—be it informed by the foreignization or the financialization paradigm—that does not address the issue of food sovereignty and its key determinants, such as democratic land control by those who inhabit the land.

Concluding remarks

By examining the politically contested process underlying the definition of land grabs in MAPAQ's public inquiry, this article has shown that an engagement with the food regime and food sovereignty approaches helps to identify important blind spots in current policy recommendations regarding the future of farming in the province. More specifically, these approaches draw our attention to the imperatives of competition, profit maximisation and accumulation at the centre of the predatory corporate food regime, as well as to the larger context of colonialism and indigenous dispossession. In doing so, they call to our attention the importance of moral spaces in shaping debates, particularly with respect to the identities that are mobilized through the dichotomies of inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign, as they are constituted through different paradigmatic choices. The way the boundaries of these moral spaces were articulated by the commission's stakeholders made it still possible in 2015 for a public inquiry into land grabbing in Québec to make no mention at all of the historical process of dispossession that indigenous peoples have resisted for centuries. Given the abundance, since 2012, of teach-ins, rallies, and protests denouncing land dispossession as part of the Idle No More movement—one of the largest Indigenous mass movements in Canadian history—the irony could hardly be greater.

This article has also shown that the food regime and food sovereignty approaches help us take a critical look at the problematic aspects of the trend toward ever bigger and more capital-intensive family farms. Here, the promotion of a sustainable food system arguably benefits from the recognition that even though the idea of family farming evokes romantic images of humans living in harmony with nature, the agri-business model favoured by the Canadian government has placed huge levels of stress on farming families, and has failed to address the ecological and health impact of industrial food and environmentally catastrophic agro-industrialisation. The human cost of this model, which expects farming families to operate highly leveraged, multi-million dollar industrial farms, is seen in the rural exodus of young families, the reduction of rural population density, the disappearance of local services and the devitalisation of rural communities. What is more, isolation on the farm plays an important role together with the financial adversity of farming in explaining high levels of distress among farmers—who are plagued with the highest rates of suicide of any occupation worldwide (Farkas 2014; Roy et al. 2014). The idea that conventional family farms are well-adapted for the twenty-first century makes sense only if one ignores the way agricultural markets push producers to embark on a destructive quest for profits at whatever the ecological and human costs. It also squanders the subversive impulse and political possibilities found in alternative modes of agriculture like agro-ecological communities, part-time farming, urban gardening, peasant agriculture and agricultural practices informed by indigenous knowledge.

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Frantz Gheller PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Geography of the Université de Montréal. He previously conducted research at Wilfrid Laurier University with the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems and the SSHRC funded partnership: Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (FLEdGE). Drawing on geography, political economy and sociology, his research offers global perspectives on farmland markets, carbon markets, finance and agriculture, sustainable development, agroecology, climate change, land uses and commodities.