

The politics of social justice movements around land, water, and territory
in the era of climate change

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Social justice movements across the world have long been at the forefront of resistance to the multiple crises of extractive capitalism. Today, both forces are consolidating. Land and water grabbing and climate chaos reveal one complex convergence while the efforts of movements to change course reveal another. Agrarian, and to a lesser extent, environmental scholarship offers critical tools for grappling with the political agenda of movements struggling for redistribution and recognition in the face of overlapping crises. However, most studies remain focused on a particular sector or locality – thus presenting a challenge of more fully grasping the extent to which varied movements respond to crises at different levels, not as separate components but as interconnected parts. This thesis seeks to understand how the intersection of the issues of land and water grabbing, extractivism, and climate change mitigation and the intertwining of social movements occur – and with what political outcomes and implications. For grassroots movements, inherently established to defend localized and sectoral interests, combining different forms of contention at different levels is an increasingly visible tactic – but are they effectively able to scale out and up? These are political questions that require careful empirical investigation. I outline an intersectional approach to the exploration of these relationships, which is grounded in class, race/ethnicity, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression under which social movements organize. This subsequently informs a conjunctural analysis of capitalism and converging global crises and of converging political struggles.

I then apply the intersectional approach to six geopolitical movement vignettes, which are divided into two empirical parts – taking political interactions within and across social movements as a unit of interaction. First are three cases of movement-led struggles against land and water grabbing in Indonesia, Mali, and Honduras. Second are three instances of movement-led struggles against colonization and extractive industry in Palestine, Zimbabwe, and the United States. The diversity of these vignettes from Asia, Africa, and the Americas reveals important considerations about how political collectives organize, including how they relate to not only one another, but also to other sets of actors such as states, corporations, and intergovernmental institutions. Each case shows at least a partial ability to scale movement resistance out and up, by targeting varied levels at once. This work is sometimes carried out across sectors that have been historically divided, yet have found some degree of common resonance in political frameworks such as food sovereignty, ecological justice, or grassroots feminisms – as part of a shared political project of system change. Exploring the vignettes concurrently uncovers key implications. At a theoretical level, it is important for scholarship to contribute to a more fluid conversation between agrarian and environmental studies – especially as they relate to social movements. This pushes us to adapt more intersectional methodological approaches to our work. Doing so is part of a longer process of bridging the divide between scholarship and activism – reinforcing the political efforts of both camps along the way.