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Land Rights for Change?

On the Impasses of Cultural Politics for Economic Change

Caroline Cornier

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Land Rights for Change?

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Abstract

Property relations have long been at the centre of social justice considerations and efforts for socio-economic change. Since the 1990s ethnic minorities who often happen to live in particularly biodiverse regions of the planet have started to challenge these often exploitative relations by claiming formal property rights based on territorially defined cultural identities. Originally celebrated by various critical schools of thought as a turning point in global neoliberal hegemony and a promising manifestation of grassroots resistance against extractivist capitalism, the "territorial turn" appears today far less revolutionary. In a context where culturally orientated poststructuralist approaches for change are increasingly reassessed by political economy perspectives, such as the concept of Racial Capitalism, this paper aims at contributing an empirically grounded outlook on the interconnection of cultural and material conditions by revisiting the cultural politics of land titling through two ethnographic case studies in the Colombian Pacific region.

Keywords: Racial Capitalism; Post-development; Political Economy; Colombia; Collective land rights; Afro-Colombian communities.

1 Introduction

"Political emancipation certainly represents a great progress […] not the final form of human emancipation […] but the final form […] within the framework of the prevailing social order." (Karl Marx, 1978, p. 35)

If the Social Sciences are characterised by one major division it is the eternal debate on the relation between economic structure and culture, the material versus the immaterial, base and superstructure. Currently, booming anglophone Racial Capitalism literature is questioning this division by showing based on the work of Black Marxists such as Cedric Robinson and CLR James that the notion of class has never been exclusively economic nor the notion of race exclusively cultural in nature but that both notions represent the two sides of the same coin if one considers that capitalism is inherently founded on the extraction of social and economic value from racialized people or, in other words, the "unequal differentiation of human value" (Melamed, 2015, p. 1). This structural differentiation is not a new discovery in the Latin American context either where authors such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) have equally long pointed to the centrality of race in class struggles and the need to combine emancipatory cultural ideology with material demands, most importantly the reclaiming of land.

Just like the Panafrican theorists Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral after him (c.f. Fanon, 1961; Cabral, 1974), Mariátegui considered that any analysis of material inequality in formerly colonized countries must take into account the structural specificities of its peasant and indigenous communities. This is because according to him poverty is first and foremost a political rather than a cultural phenomenon principally linked to the uneven distribution of property (Mariátegui, 1928).

These structuralist considerations laid the foundation for a postcolonial epistemology further developed by authors such as Dipesh Chakrabarty that recognizes the global effects of capitalism in a - since colonialism - unified world market while acknowledging regional (cultural) differences (Chakrabarty, 2011). Mariátegui's Marxist focus on property relations as the source of inequality has, however, limited explanatory power in relation to neoliberal capitalism which started to integrate property formalization for ethnic minorities into its policy agenda in the 1990s (Bryan, 2012). As part of this policy shift marginalized groups in Latin America, such as Afro-Colombian communities in the Colombian Pacific region, were gradually granted collective land rights (Van Cott, 2000). By reevaluating the link between

cultural politics and economic circumstances in two of those communities, this paper will ask to what extent land rights can address socio-economic inequality and help replace destructive extractivism by more sustainable development practices.

2 Why the Colombian Pacific?

The paper draws on my master thesis for which I undertook four months of fieldwork between July 2019 and February 2020 among two Afro-Colombian communities in the Colombian Pacific region with collective land titles. Colombia seemed a particularly fitting case for this research concern as in 1993 it became the first Latin American country to grant collective land rights to a non-indigenous ethnic minority and hence initiated what has been considered one of the most ambitious processes of land titling in Latin America (Offen, 2003) as well as a particularly powerful black identity movement in a region that had been neglected by the state for centuries (Grueso, Rosero, & Escobar, 1998).

The two communities I chose for my master thesis represented well-fitted complementary case studies to investigate the role of land rights in communities' socio-economic development as the first one, Yurumangui, was considered a bastion of strong culturalist resistance against palm oil and coca cultivation as well as extractivist mining activities as it had recently won a land restitution sentence against a mining company (Lobo & Vélez, 2020) whereas the second community known as Alto Mira and Frontera was infamously known for uniting the highest amount of coca fields and extrajudicial killings and a hot spot of the powerful palm oil industry (Agudelo, 2001).

The decision to study these local communities in relation to larger phenomenon of collective land titling for ethnic minorities political and economic evolutions implies the scientific conviction that there are different scales of observation of social reality (micro/meso/macro) as well as different scales of mobilization (local/national/international), which are often inherently intertwined (Allain, 2016). Therefore, global phenomena like collective land titling must be studied from both, a macro and micro scale. This dissertation will combine these two scales in order to analyse how a global economically incited phenomena of land titling impacts local actors. However, while the international economic context limits and shapes local actors' claims, they are not predetermined by it. Instead, this work is interested in revealing the dialectical relationship of local actors' actions according to their ideological convictions and personal means as well as global economic agendas. To explore these entanglements, this dissertation combines macroeconomic history, the study of social actors' local perceptions and the accounts of intermediate actors. The generalizability of this work's micro sociological

findings (Hamidi, 2012) lies in the assumption that macro sociological facts (such as global economic policies) cannot be dissociated from the local processes (here local black mobilisation) that make them describable (Barthe, Blic, Heurtin, Lagneau, & Lemieux, 2013).

During my first fieldwork stay in August 2019 in and around Tumaco, the regional city close to Alto Mira and Frontera, I mostly met with people linked to the local palm oil industry including smallholders, local civil servants and community leaders, including leaders from the Community Council of Alto Mira and Frontera. Given the difficulty of accessing information on the ground in a context of pronounced violence, at my second stay in January and February 2020 I started by interviewing Afro-Colombian activists in Colombia's capital Bogotá before travelling to Yurumangui where I had the opportunity to assist the community's General Assembly and to conduct interviews with its community's leaders in between its working sessions. Back in Bogotá, I completed these local insights by interviews with civil servants and human rights defenders who had worked with and on these two community councils [National Land Agency (ANT), Land Restitution Unit (URT), Human Rights Commission of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) etc.].

My data collection was based on qualitative methods including ethnographic observation in and among members of the two communities I was investigating, field notes and thirty-three open and semi-structured interviews, which I recorded and transcribed for their subsequent analysis. For complementary background information, I used newspaper articles, legal documents, and internal documents of the two communities.

This paper is organised in two parts. The first part sets the theoretical framework at the intersection of materialist and culturalist research schools and traces the historical emergence of Afro-Colombian identity and rights in a context of increasing international concern with biodiversity protection. The second part of the paper is then dedicated to evaluate the leeway and constraints that these developments have for Afro-Colombian communities by analysing qualitative evidence from two communities. Both, Yurumangui and Alto Mira and Frontera, face similar challenges but for geographical and historical reasons - Alto Mira, has been integrated to a certain extent into the market economy since the 1960s, while the other, Yurumangui, has not yet been exposed to this reality, have adopted different approaches to face them.

3 The materialist-culturalist binary in Latin America

The materialist-culturalist binary has a long tradition in the Latin American context. As anthropologist Sian Lazar (2021) has shown there has been a tendency since the beginning of the 20th century to oppose a culturalist *indigenismo* that stresses indigenous alterity by insisting on their particular cosmology and opposition to the nation state to a Marxist political economy perspective that has historically dismissed ethnic peoples' particularity by adopting an exclusive class focus.

While in the early 20th century the celebration of indigenous identity in anthropology and the arts such as by the already mentioned sociologist José Carlos Mariátegui, the Peruvian photographer Martín Chambi, as well as the anthropologists Luis Valcárcel and Manuel Gamio in México still allowed for a creative mix with Marxian ideas (e.g. Mariátegui, 1928) a tension between the different world views gradually developed in the middle of the past century. On the one hand, creole nation-building projects tended to mobilize romanticised images of past indigenous empires (Inca, Maya, Aztecs) while promoting race mixing (*mestizaje*) not to say "whitening" known as *transformación inducida* (induced transformation) as the only possible way to modernity (Wade, 2017). On the other hand, Marxist scholars, and activists increasingly stressed indigenous peoples' subordinate position as peasants within the creole societies (Lazar 2021).

The divergence further deepened with the emergence of dependency theory in the region and its conviction that gradual internal modernization was inherently impossible (e.g. Gunder Frank, Wallerstein) so that only the revolutionary destruction of capitalist class structures could possibly induce any change. This orthodox conviction culminated in Maoist terrorism such as by the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) in Peru while non-Marxists started cherishing alternative, Non-Western forms of knowing demanding "magic to be considered on a par with reason" (de la Cadena, 2005, p. 22).

According to Lazar (2021) this cultural-material split culminated in the Latin American world in the 1990s when anthropologist Orin Starn (1991) accused culturalist approaches of naive orientalism that obfuscated ethnic minorities' political and economic situation while his opponent Enrique Mayer (1991) declared the claiming of cultural specificity to be a vital act of resistance in a context in which cultural divergence has traditionally been branded as archaic and consequently almost completely exterminated.

At the same time, so-called Post-development research started to denounce the world's post-war obsession with linear "modernization theory" and "developmentalism" meaning the one-

sided focus on the newly independent world's economic catch up. Adopting a Foucauldian lens the authors denounced a Eurocentric discourse, rooted in eighteenth century Western Enlightenment ideals of progress through reason, that constructs the 'Third World' as "underdeveloped" and in need of Western intervention (Escobar, 1995, see also Mitchell, 1991; Ferguson, 1994) and viewed ethno-territorial social movements as vital forms of resistance to exclusively growth focused initiatives.

Drawing on the work of various postcolonial theorists (e.g. Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, Chandra Mohanty, Timothy Mitchell and Homi Bhabha), one of the research school's main representatives, Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, declared European 'expert knowledge' to be the foundation of destructive extractivist capitalism. Even though he agrees with previous dependency and world-system theories' argument that the global economic system takes possession of local knowledge and resources, he laments that they do not investigate "how external forces - capital and modernity - generally speaking, are processed, expressed, and refashioned by local communities" (Escobar 1995, p. 98). According to him, Latin America's indigenous and ethnic social movements' alternative ontologies which equivalise human, natural and spiritual actors and defend a cyclical rather than evolutionary vision of time will provoke "the end of development as a regime of representation" by producing "different subjectivities" and hybrid alternatives to "the Western economy as a system of production, power and signification" (1995, p. 216-17).

Referring specifically to Afro-Colombian communities in the country's Pacific lowlands for concrete examples of these hybrid alternatives, he claims that their 'cultural politics of difference' which insist on the particularity of their traditional mode of living, acquire a powerful contesting force when combined with matters of biodiversity and sustainable resource management (Escobar, 1997, 1998, 1999). In short, he sees real possibilities in the Colombian Pacific region, where development initiatives have traditionally centred on natural resource exploitation (Agudelo, 2005), for an alternative, post-development modernity through a recovery of 'cultural difference'.

Escobar and others have admitted that activists' alignment with dominant discourses on biodiversity and nature conservation can potentially have essentialising effects (Escobar, 1997). Post-development research, just like other culturalist approaches, has been heavily criticised for its essentialist representation of traditional culture and romanticised view of 'the local' that does not sufficiently include Marxist critiques of capitalism and development. Some authors also expressed their uneasiness with the activist register of much research and the promotion of

ancestral knowledge as the source for economic alternatives, contributing to what they consider "the problematic notion that 'natives will save us'" (Asher & Wainwright, 2019, p. 27) while insufficiently considering how communities' practices are potentially transformed by their interactions with the market. These accusations can be seen as the extension of an internal Latin American debate between a national anthropological research tradition that was interested in interethnic contact and 'friction' (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1972) as opposed to the Lévi-Straussian 'astronomer's approach' that saw sheltered cultural continuity as a precondition for 'authentic' indigeneity (Ramos, 1990).

Many Post-development advocates now acknowledge that most ethnic and indigenous communities in the Global South have not necessarily abandoned the concept of development and are effectively longing for a stronger inclusion in the market to increase their access to basic services and consumer goods (Matthews, 2017; Ziai, 2015). We will see, however, that given the potentially emancipatory nature and political effectiveness of cultural essentialism activism around collective land rights has reactivated concepts of alterity and cultural authenticity for political ends.

4 Becoming Afro-Colombian: The Latin American ethnicisation process

Colombia's recognition of territorial rights for Afro-descendants is based on its 1991 constitutional reform. Recognizing for the first time the existence of ethnic minorities, the Constitution was part of a new regional multiculturalism which gave room to indigenous and black identity claims. As a tool for Colombian blacks' liberation from century-long invisibility in a society in which the role of "the Other" was traditionally reserved for the indigenous, the notion of ethnicity became a key mobilizing factor for new Afro-descendant territorial organizations (Escobar & Pedrosa, 1996; Grueso et al., 1998; Hoffmann, 2000; Restrepo, 1997; Villa, 1998; Wade, 1993).

Indeed, while Colombia has a long history of at least formally recognizing indigenous distinctiveness[1], the country's Afro-descendants were traditionally considered *mestizos*, that is regular citizens with all political and economic rights. In reality, however, racial discrimination remained strong and since the abolition of slavery in 1851, most Afro-Colombians remained isolated from mainstream society and its potential benefits. Explanations for this situation and

[1]Since Law 83 of 1890, Colombia's indigenous people have been granted collective lands (*resguardos*) as well as administrative autonomy which is exercised by their traditional councils (*cabildos*).

the specific cultural-symbolic beliefs and practices it led to, vary (see Taussig, 1980; Arocha and Friedemann, 1986; Wade, 1991), but it is clear that black communities had never legally been considered a culturally distinct group and were granted no special rights.

Thus, to achieve land rights which would allow them to protect their lands from destructive agrobusiness and mining activities and to prevent their cultural assimilation, Afro-Colombian communities had to consolidate black cultural difference along indigenous lines. Traditionally organised around small and dispersed family farming units that combined subsistence and exchange practices along the region's rivers including farming, fishing, and harvesting of forest products (Hoffmann, 2004) they operationalized these traditional practices as a way to prove cultural difference from 'national culture' and a special connection to land which nourishes this difference (Ng'weno, 2007, p. 101).

This ethnicization process of Afro-Colombian communities was directly linked to Colombia's economic liberalization efforts and the local protest it provoked. In 1959, a new Forest Law had declared most of the Pacific region as state forest reserves and *tierras baldías* (empty or uninhabited lands), turning the black inhabitants of these rural zones into illegal squatters (*colonos).* At the same time, the Colombian government continued issuing exploitation permits to private firms, thus suspending lands' status as forest reserves whenever necessary. Fearing for their livelihoods local black peasants started to organise themselves in Peasant Associations with the support of the Catholic Church in the early 1980s (Arocha, 1994; Gutiérrez & Restrepo, 2017). This local grassroot organizing inspired activist students from the region's urban centres and gradually also from the Atlantic Coast and Bogotá. These groups drew on the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States as well as African independence movements (including the *négritude* ideology of Senegal's president Léopold Senghor), to mobilize rural communities in the Pacific (Wade, 1995). This activist groups of which the still active *Proceso de Comunidades* (PCN) is certainly the most important one, developed a new form of culture politics which aimed at "challeng[ing] the conventional political culture harboured in the practices of traditional political parties and the state, unsettl[ing] the dominant project of national identity construction, and defy[ing] the predominant orientation of develop-ment" (Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar 1998, p. 197). Their proposal for black rights in the country's 1991 Constitutional Reform centred around two closely tied demands:

(1) Recognition of black cultural difference which is reflected in specific culturally inflected production practices
(2) Territorial autonomy

5 Becoming guardians of the forest: The rise of international biodiversity protection aims

Simultaneously, global pressures for political and economic reform formed the decisive backdrop for these ethnic mobilizations. As a result of the growing environmental crisis and the increased concern for human rights which followed the end of the Cold War, multi- and bilateral aid and lending organizations such as the World Bank pressured national governments to protect their natural habitats and politically include their marginalized populations (Brysk & Wise, 1997; Gros, 1997; Van Cott, 2001).

The new global concern for biodiversity conservation contributed to further strengthening the discursive force of the 'ethnicization process' in the Colombian Pacific region as well as elsewhere in Latin America. Originally considered a purely scientific concern, from the 1990s onwards ethnic communities all over the Americas were gradually explicitly involved in the preservation efforts as 'guardians of the forest' whose 'traditional practices' were seen as being in accordance with international protection goals (Hoekema, Haar, & Assies, 2000). In this context, land-titling initiatives for indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants emerged all over Latin America, most importantly in Amazonian countries such as Brazil, Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, and the eastern watersheds of Central America.

In Colombia the Natural Resource Management Program (PMRN) and Proyecto BioPacífico were meant to regulate natural resource use through property rights and enhance local participation for more effective nature conservation (Leal, 2015). Yet, even though Afro-Colombians represent approximately 9 per cent of the country's population (DANE, 2021) as opposed to an indigenous population that only represents 1 per cent, the programs originally focused exclusively on indigenous *resguardos* not considering the newly constitutionally granted Afro-Colombian territorial rights (Ng'weno, 2000). It was only thanks to renewed Afro-Colombian activism that in the end US$4 million of a US$39 million World Bank loan was assigned to land titling for the region's black communities so that today almost 6 million hectares have been titled in favour of Afro-Colombian communities representing the largest amount of collectively titled lands to black communities in the Americas (Herrera Arango, 2017).

Much has been written about the curious paradox of the 'territorial turn' (Offen, 2003) whereby the emergence of cultural rights for ethnic minorities coincided with world-wide neoliberal economic reforms "along the lines of decentralization, trimming down of the state, affirming

basic human rights, and calling for minimally functional democracies" (Hale, 2002, 2005, p. 12; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2004; Postero, 2007). For Charles Hale this "neoliberal multiculturalism" (2011) has been so successful because, contrary to Marxism that comprehends all political struggles in terms of class, it legally recognizes ethnic peoples as particular political actors by substituting territorial encompassment pretensions of the state by a "spatially differentiated logic" that declares certain ('ethnic') areas to be located "outside the market".

Collective territories of indigenous and black communities in Latin America are legally excluded from the land markets by being declared inalienable, inseverable, and imprescriptible, meaning that they cannot not be sold, divided into smaller land plots or used as a collateral for investment. However, this protection mechanism does not apply for subsoil resources (e.g. gold, petrol, gas etc.) which remain property of the State and hence can be exploited by the latter but not by the communities themselves. The same applies for wood. While it can be used by local communities for their personal use, its commercialization generally requires an official exploitation permit issued by the state.

The limitations indicate collective rights' ambivalent position within broader processes of marketization and the functioning of Racial Capitalism. They represent a compensatory justice mechanism for "disadvantaged" ethnic groups supposed to limit destructive capitalist resource extraction. But, far from resolving the question of ethnic people's livelihoods, they seem to simply relocate capitalist accumulation practices to other regions by creating local political responsibilities without financial means for implementation (Anthias and Radcliffe, 2015). This mirrors Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of "el indio permetido" (the permitted Indian) whose new territorial rights based political agency is inherently limited (Hale & Millamán, 2005).

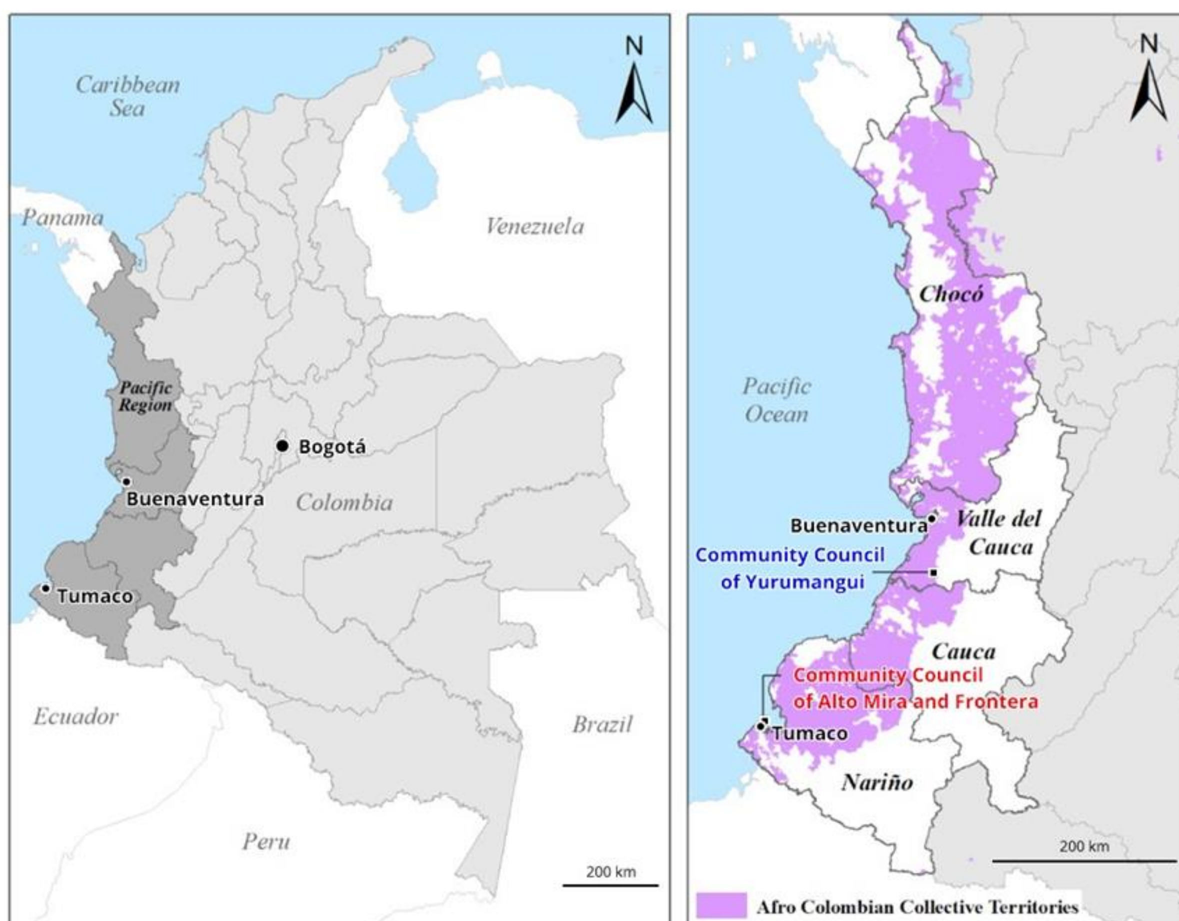
Within a racial capitalism framework as advocated by Cedric Robinson one could argue that this development reflects the natural working of capitalism whereby its expansion pursues genuinely racial directions, establishing racially founded exclusion and exploitation rather than liberating those in racially oppressive positions (Robinson, 1983).

Focusing on two Afro-Colombian communities the paper wants to show empirically how the linkage of territorial rights to cultural identities limits Afro-Colombian communities' possibilities to drive economic transformation and to challenge larger economic arrangements.

6 Case study: Collective land rights for Afro-Colombian communities

This section will start by presenting the socio-economic opportunities and obstacles of the strongly politicized and economic sovereignty seeking community of Yurumangui located in close proximity to Colombia's port city Buenaventura before comparing it, in a second step, two the situation of the community of Alto Mira and Frontera next to the Ecuadorian border which has, on the contrary, now mostly accommodated itself with the demands of the region's drug- and agribusiness.

Figure 1 - The Colombian Pacific region and the two Community Councils of this study



Source: Lobo and Vélez (2020)

6.1 Yurumangui: The Political Essentialisation of Alterity

> *"I'm black, I need a territory. They're almost symbiotic elements. [...] If there is no territory, we are doomed to disappear as a collective subject. It is on the territory where we become what we are. This is our banner of defence."*[2]

[2] Interview with Felipe Guazá*, 23 January 2020, Bogotá. (*name changed)

In the first community the local council that was created to manage the land titling process had the official mandate to promote and defend the Afro-Colombian culture and identity and its territory.[3] *The concept of territory plays a pivotal role in defining and justifying this cultural identity. As one leader from the community explained their 'territory of life' is a territory where "you can still drink the water, where people can still bathe on the beaches, where we still see what we are" and where people are not 'poor' as long as they had a place to plant a banana plant or to put it in the words of another emblematic leader of the community where "the rich are not the ones who have the most but the ones who need the least."*[4]

Rejecting to consider themselves as poor is one of the community leaders' various resistance strategies against their incorporation into an assimilative economic system. Concretely, they resist against the discourse of agribusinesses such as the palm oil industry that has been shown to delegitimise subsistence agriculture as "the economy of the poor" as opposed to palm oil cultivation which supposedly guarantees employment and a stable income (Mol 2016). Hence, rather than declaring themselves "excluded from development" which according to Alvaro Pedroso "opens the political and institutional space required for the State, international cooperation and entrepreneurs to take on the task of modernising it" (1996, p. 81) the community leaders have taken on the task of revaluing their natural habitat.

Yet, in my interviews with Afro-Colombian community leaders and activists on their political vision it also became clear that they had to conceive an alternative to a "neoliberal model" whose "accumulation of capital destroys and takes away everything that reflects [their] culture and identity", they did not reject state intervention in principle. While they considered "western culture", "mass media" as well as the educational system and state development projects incompatible with "the traditional cultural vision" of their communities, they nevertheless defined "development" and "living well in the territory" as having [a] "little house, health, education, water service, energy service".[5]

Due to their experience with coca cultivation, leaders also had concluded, however, that monetary income alone would not better their living conditions but rather destroy their communitarian organization. Therefore, they adopted a discourse which values the territory by insisting on Afro-Colombian's cultural specificity rather than to acknowledge its material

[3] Stated in Law 70 of the 1993 Constitution.
[4] Interviews with Isabela Mezí* and Conti Congo*, 12 February 2020, Buenaventura.
[5] Interview with Isabela Mezí*, 12 February 2020, Buenaventura.

deficiencies - a vision that is not shared by all community members. In fact, particularly the younger generation is demanding access to the promises of global capitalism. Community leader Isabela Mezí emphasized accordingly:

> *"Unfortunately, the money from drug trafficking has made people lose their habits and their tastes have risen [...] Many young people don't see the territory as a life option anymore, the planting of the papa china."*[6]

Even though she admits that the decrease in subsistence agriculture also has to do with the regional rise of violence, inciting people to move closer together and to abandon their arable lands, she mainly sees 'modernity' as a driving force for this migration.To counteract these trends, leaders invest a lot of time and energy in building a cultural identity that ties community members to the territory. At Yurumangui's general assembly in January 2020 they emphasized repeatedly the importance of standing together in the fight against coca cultivation and industrial mining and repeated slogans such as *"La tierra es la vida y la vida no se vende, se ama y se defiende"* [The territory is life and life is not for sale, it is loved and defended) or *"Alerta y camina, hasta la victoria siempre. Cómo? Luchando, quedando. Conciencia al pueblo"* [Be alert and move, until victory always. How? By fighting, by staying. Conscience to the people]. Besides, identarian slogans decorated much of the village.

Figure 2 – Sign outside of the Assembly Hall in the Community Council of Yurumangui

Photo taken by the author

"Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. No one else than ourselves can liberate us from it"

[6] The papa china is a regional root-vegetable originally introduced from China.

Figure 3 - General Assembly of the Community Council of Yurumangui

Photo taken by the author

At the same time cultural projects like the construction of a memorial centre for killed community members and cultural artifacts were given considerable attention by the leaders and have received unusual governmental support. In September 2019, the Ministry of Culture accorded 20 million Colombian pesos alone to the construction of a memorial centre in one of Yurumangui's seven villages and in February 2020 construction works were almost completed. In 2015, when the region's marimba music and traditional dances were inscribed as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by the UNESCO, the Community Council was visited by five directorates of the Ministry of Culture with whom they established a plan over four years (2015-2018) for conserving and promoting the region's music. The activities included, among others, the construction of informal meeting places in various villages, so-called *mentideros,* as well as a TV show on three traditional female singers from Yurumangui, which was broadcasted on national TV under the name of *Matronas* in March 2018.

As the community's legal representative remarked these initiatives are supposed to protect the community's culture, *el mundo de adentro* [the inside world], against *el mundo de afuera* [the outside world], meaning all the spaces that are already "imbued" with hegemonic Western culture.[7] While scholars like Escobar and Pedroso (1996, p. 14) argued that "the intense

[7] Private conversation during Yurumangui's General Assembly on 30 January 2020 in the village Veneral.

encounter between hegemonic modernity" (which they define as the progress-focused European enlightenment ideology) "and marginalized communities" can ultimately help the latter to develop a clear political standpoint to overcome the encounter's oppressive elements and modify it according to their own values, the leaders in Yurumangui seem to doubt this local transformative capacity and are promoting a clearer separation of both worlds instead. Yet, as seen earlier the leaders' strategic focus on a specific cultural identity is not necessarily shared by the whole community. This became apparent as one of the various external participants started to distribute wax fabrics. While external leaders almost exclusively started dressing in these prints local participants stuck to their tight jeans and American-branded t-shirts and sneakers. The incident unwittingly revealed the constructed character of the movement's cultural dimension as wax clothing in Africa is itself a relatively recent 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) as the prints were introduced to the continent by the Dutch at the end of the 19th century after sales had failed in their Asian colonies (Grosfilley, 2015).

The constructedness of the leaders' discourse is also evident in relation to the topic of food sovereignty. One leader insisted that when he was a child, people on the river were organised self-sufficiently but that due to the arrival of more powerful boat engines, which significantly reduced travelling times to Buenaventura, and the general rise in consumerism, 60 percent of their food supply are now imported. As evidence he cited his grandmother, Rosalita Congo, who had told him that during the *War of Thousand Days*[8] , people in Yurumangui survived for three years without travelling to the harbour of Buenaventura. Yet, given the high national and international demand for natural materials such as gold and other precious metals, tagua (vegetal ivory), rubber and wood since Colombia's independence from Spain peasants have nevertheless long adopted a double support model under which they dedicate only part of their time to cultivating their lands for private needs while collecting forest products for sale the rest of the time (Leal & Restrepo, 2003).

This historical fact reflects Penelope Anthias' and Sarah A. Radcliffe's findings in relation to land titling for indigenous peoples in Bolivia in which they point out that there is a "disjuncture between idealized visions of ethnodevelopment and the complex, often less than ideal realities of indigenous livelihoods" (Anthias & Radcliffe, 2015, p. 265). They explain that indigenous people are typically represented as "traditional, isolated and un-acculturated ethnic groups" whereby collective land rights are presented as the means which protects them from destructive acculturation. Hence, collective territories are declared "non-market spaces" in which people

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[8] The Thousand Days' War (Spanish: Guerra de los Mil Días) was a civil war fought in Colombia from 17 October 1899 to 21 November 1902.

live exclusively off subsistence practices. Yet, in reality, these peoples have long lost their self-sufficiency, and are therefore even if they have legal control over their territory, are involved to varying degrees with the market as agricultural producers, providers of primary goods, wage labourers and consumers.

The dismissal of these economic entanglements, including in the legal framework of collective land titling itself which forbids the use of Afro-Colombian lands as collaterals to protect them from commoditisation and "land grabbing" is ironically increasingly believed by certain leaders to increase their economic exclusion:

> *"No one wants to invest in the territories of the black communities, no private investor because they have no guarantee of their money. Because the first guarantee is the land. But the black communities cannot be dispossessed of their land, and they do not have other assets of any value, that is why no private investor is associated with them. We must think of other models that allow a partnership so that others come to invest what we need to reach an agreement."*[9]

They point to the exclusionary effects of collective land rights' environmental ambitions:

> *"There are some people who say that we were purposefully put in charge of the forest by the state. [...] That the state's strategy was to collectively title [certain] areas as environmental reserve zones while making sure that the lands of the state's members, sons of traditional aristocratic families, were not chosen for collective titling. They said: "I want to continue exploiting my lands, my lands have to be productive. The lands we're going to use for collective titling are the lands of the black people." I'm not saying that. That's the thesis I heard from several people who believe that this was the state's strategy: to establish natural reserve zones precisely where the weakest live, to exclude them from business. Sometimes I do believe it. It is not crazy. That thesis isn't that crazy. [...] I think [collective land titling was the result] of black people's claims, who were dispossessed of their lands. That they were losing their livelihoods and the state capitalized on that."*[10]

These economic pressures confront the leaders with a dilemma. On the one hand, they have to legitimate their culturally founded territorial rights based on little profitable subsistence

[9] Interview with Interview with Felipe Guazá*, national leader of the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN), a national Afro-Colombian organisation and member of the Community Council of Yurumangui, 23 February 2020, Bogotá.
[10] Ibid.

agriculture and cultivate a strong community spirit that is able to resist long-term monetary dependence from external donors. And on the other hand, they have to face the fact that communities are nowadays dependent on monetary incomes. Given the limited possibilities for monetary income on the territory, community members are easily attracted to socially and environmentally destructive coca cultivation and mining. On observation, the cultural aspect seems to prevail, particularly among the leaders, with the prospect that the community would thus achieve greater autonomy than by exploiting natural resources. This is seen as doubly beneficial, as it would enable them to preserve the traditional practices that justify their rights to the land. According to my observations for the moment. As a result, cultural aspects of Afro-Colombian livelihoods are stressed while the material and monetary necessities of the community are side-lined. During the community's general assembly, for example, no economic or financial projects were addressed, not even the community's planned participation in a REDD pilot project[11] which a leader laid out with all its details in a subsequent private conversation and an unsuccessful USAID-funded fish-and chicken farm stayed unmentioned.

At the same time, the environmental goals of collective land titling are receiving little attention. According to one community leader 70 percent of the community's inhabitants continue to live off the forests' wood which is sold illegally to merchants in Buenaventura. And even though the leader seemed rather enthusiastic about the REDD project he admitted that while they made it among the finalists for funding, they would probably drop out of the project as it required too much administrative effort and personal commitment. Instead, it was simply assumed that once the territory was shielded from external development interventions through land titles, economic alternatives would naturally emerge as the assessment of an Afro-Colombian activist in Bogotá shows:

> *"I don't know if it would be a dichotomy, but we believe that if we have access to land from there, we can also generate progress for the community. It has to do with how the community's own development (desarrollo propio) can create its own dynamics of income, of food security within the territory."*[12]

Yet, exposing the typical ambiguity of neoliberal multiculturalism that promotes communities' self-administration to justify a political and financial retreat of the state, Luis Carabali, an Afro-Colombian activist from the national organisation CONPA, pointed out that "*on the one hand they give us a lot of state responsibilities through the self-government structure, but on the other*

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[11] Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. UN-funded forest management program in developing countries to reduce carbon emissions based on emissions trading.

[12] Interview with Juan Popó*, 22 January 2020, Bogotá.

hand the self-government structures don't give us any mechanism or resource to exercise those functions" creating great expectations in the work of local leaders who don't "even have enough to say: 'Let's travel from here to downtown in a taxi'".[13]

Consequently, leaders had to start looking for alternative financing, an endeavour which was cynically enough aided by a new wave of violence that reached the region in the early 2000s. Non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups concerned with human rights as well as social and environmental justice, such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) started providing regular coverage on the impacts of the on-going Colombian conflict on indigenous and black communities. During my two months of fieldwork in January and February 2020 alone, WOLA chaired three conferences with Afro-Colombian activists in Washington D.C. Furthermore, Afro-Colombian movements started connecting with the black diaspora in Latin America and specifically with the Black Caucus of the US Congress to draw attention to the devastating effects of US war on drug policies on Afro-Colombian communities. One Afro-Colombian activist even claimed that it was their "*most important political ally"* in a country where "the opinion of the US matters".[14]

In her doctoral thesis on Colombian peasant organisations, Mathilde Allain (2016) shows that this internationalisation was not restricted to Colombia's ethnic movements but has become a common strategy among the country's community actors to gain the government's attention. Indeed, since two Afro-Colombian activists, Libia Grueso and Francia Márquez, the country's current vice president, were awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize the movement's international recognition and its financial support increased significantly, but they also indirectly exacerbated its internal contradictions.

In fact, while the regional reality of violence had helped to attract international attention and financial aid to the region, it also made it even more difficult for community organizations like the PCN, which started out as an anti-statist movement rejecting the participative framework of the neoliberal civil society agenda, to attain its goal of effective self-government. Often unable to reach the Pacific's rural areas, the PCN was forced to engage with proliferating apolitical peace and sustainability projects which emphasized the provision of punctual help rather than pushing for structural change. In an interview with Indian American researcher Kiran Asher, well-known PCN activist Carlos Rosero explained the situation as follows: "With so many killed or displaced, social movements are weaker, and leaders co-opted. Those of us who resist

[13] Interview with Luis Carabali*, 25 February 2020, Bogotá.
[14] Interview with Luis Carabali*, 25 February 2020, Bogotá,

are few and are getting fewer and organising focuses more on projects than politics." (Asher 2018, 10). This perspective once again mirrors Mathilde Allain's (2016) findings showing that while international organizations are eager to provide humanitarian help, they are reluctant to back more political claims, especially if they openly critique the state or the economic system.

In sum, while economic initiatives are largely absent from the internal political discourse, they make up a large part of the leaders' individual efforts. This is because, on the one hand, the leaders' focus on cultural cohesion is restricting the possibility for open economic advocacy and, on the other hand, the Colombian government is also keen to limit local political involvement to the cultural sphere. Consequently, the leaders find themselves obliged to apply for all types of private initiatives often almost secretly, only to find that the great majority of the projects fail due to a lack of funding as well as a lack of communication and collective commitment.

It is this irresolvability which the feminist Joan Wallach Scott (1996, p. 5-6) defined as "a set of truths that challenge but don't displace orthodox beliefs" that theorist Wendy Brown (2000) identified as the limiting paradox of liberal rights systems in her article "Suffering Rights as Paradoxes". Drawing on Foucault she reveals that while generic rights that do not consider the specific basis of legal subjects' subordination (such as their gender or skin colour) are likely to simply stabilize the status quo by sustaining their invisibility, affirmative legislation is necessarily essentialising and hence can only mitigate but not resolve the foundations of subordinating power. In other words, rights, according to Brown (2000, p. 239) "articulate a need, a condition of lack or injury, that cannot be fully redressed or transformed by rights, yet can be signified in no other way within existing political discourse". The first case study of this paper therefore aims at challenging the political idealizations of culturally justified land rights by revealing their practical difficulties in driving socio-economic change while the second case study which will now follow is meant to help evaluate their diverging effect in a depoliticised context.

6.2 Alto Mira and Frontera: Depoliticised survival within

> *"Here land titling mostly concentrated on preserving the land and also the cultural part, but this was lost when the land came, and the communities couldn't sustain themselves. They began to immigrate, and traditions were lost. Fortunately, in other communities the culture and tradition were well preserved and that sustained them, but here the war has been very*

intense. So here it was all about survival, hiding and keeping quiet. And those who talked too much, most of them have died. It's a culture of fear. [...]" [15]

The community of Alto Mira and Frontera south of the Ecuadorian border which is known for being since the 1990s one of the hotspots of Colombia's armed groups' drug traffic and paramilitary violence and whose vast majority of inhabitants today either cultivate coca or work for one of the nearby palm oil companies turned out to be an illustrative example of the ineffectiveness of territorial rights for profound socio-economic transformation in a context of political repression and violence. Indeed, while highly profitable coca cultivation has allowed for a proliferation of cement houses that replace the traditional wooden equivalents as well as a remarkable amount of flat screen TVs, the villages still lack access to sanitation facilities and drinking water.

Various local actors lamented the social effects of people's involvement in the drug industry. Eugenio Estupiñan, a local mestizo palm cultivator who switched to cacao as a result of a palm tree epidemic and director of the Agency for Territorial Renovation (ART) in Tumaco, identified people's related loss of values as the foundation of the region's plights. He said:

"We have to work on the issue of values, the issue of legality, because today our young people are only looking for fast money: "Five years to study for what? I make one trip [smuggling cocaine] and that's it." This mentality has taken over our youth."[16]

Arnulfo Mina, a joyful Catholic priest from the Diocese of Tumaco summarised the cultural and material changes that the new profit sources have brought upon local communities as follows:

"Before, people cultivated bananas, cacao, went fishing for their own needs. But that didn't allow for major development. It was only for subsistence, but people wanted progress. For example, before, they couldn't buy strong engines for their boats. The one who could afford the most bought a 15 [PS engine], the others had 6 [PS engines] and that's slow... Then after the arrival of coca some people bought a 40, a 150, a 200. And that's rapidísimo [laughs] Before, travelling to another village took all day, now with coca, with a 200, it takes half an hour. These are the contradictions of life. A lot of suffering but also …[laughs]."[17]

[15] Interview with Arnulfo Mina, Catholic priest in Tumaco, 12 August 2019, Tumaco.
[16] Interview with Eugenio Estupiñan, 15 August 2020, Tumaco.
[17] Interview with Arnulfo Mina, 12 August 2019, Tumaco.

The absence of a politicised cultural discourse that counters the pursuit of material enrichment like in the first community has two reasons. Firstly, contrary to Yurumangui which until now has been spared from direct intervention of agri- and mining businesses on its territory, in Alto Mira and Frontera the palm industry had been present since the 1960s when ethno-territorial organizations started to promote discourses of cultural difference in the late 1980s. And secondly, the community continues to be lot more affected by high levels of violence which has also severely limited the influence of activist networks like the PCN which has contributed to large parts to the politicisation of community leaders in Yurumangui.

> *"The land titling has brought us deaths, disappearances, displacements little by little drop by drop - not massively but drop by drop."*[18]

As a result, the remaining community leaders have retreated into resignation and more or less at least financially profitable cohabitation with external economic actors. One of Alto Mira's current young representatives explained this new social reality cautiously in politically correct terms as follows:

> *"Despite of what happened in the past, today we have a good relationship with these companies, there is communication. With some of these companies we organise round tables and agreements to carry out some activities with communities. With that we have made progress. Previously it was not like that. [...] Look at the Community Council of Alto Mira that has had many deaths because of this issue. So, you don't go into this with great depth to uncover this situation because if you put your thumb on it you start getting into things that … So, it's better to try to dialogue and adapt to the situations that we are facing every day."*[19]

During an interview in Bogotá human rights activist and co-founder of the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN) Libia Grueso confirmed that in such circumstances of co-optation, land titling could not fulfil its original purpose of protecting Afro-Colombians' traditional livelihoods.[20] In a context of limited economic opportunities and alternative socio-economic visions, collective land titles granted little support for the local communities in resisting the powerful economic interests in the region. In fact, as palm companies had served the government's interest in territorial control, national development institutions like the FES (Foundation for Education and Social Development) and the Foundation Carvajal (a name often whispered by my interviewees) representing the country's powerful political right which owns large parts of the country's palm oil business, quickly found new ways to maintain and extend

[18] Interview with Carlos Rana*, Community leader in Alto Mira & Frontera, 11 August 2019, Tumaco.
[19] Interview with Petro Sanchéz*, new generation of community leaders in Alto Mira & Frontera, 13 August 2019, Tumaco.
[20] Interview with Libia Grueso, human rights activist, PCN founder and Goldman Environmental Prize laureate, 14 February 2020, Bogotá.

the sector's regional influence. Promising poverty reduction and development in 1999, together with the municipal administration and the private palm sector they founded the small grower cooperation CORDEAGROPAZ which encouraged small growers to form "productive alliances" with palm oil firms allowing the latter to continue controlling the land without formally owning the lands. Backed by international organisations like the Interamerican Development Bank as well as national public funds, palm oil cultivation was now promoted as a productive alternative for peace and economic stability (Mol, 2016, p. 85) so that between 1999 and 2007 the area under cultivation rose from 20,996 hectares to 34,610 hectares with small growers accounting for 40 percent of the production (Lemaitre, 2011). Consequently, "*the title was no longer a problem [for the palm industry], because the effective occupation of land is assured through its use, not through its titling"*.[21]

The land title was also of little help for the community to resist pressures from the FARC-EP guerrilla (*Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia- Ejército del Pueblo)*, which until its disarmament as part of the national peace accord in 2016, was very active in the region. Indeed, in 2008, two years after Alto Mira had finally been officially titled, the initiation of manual coca eradication resulted in death threats against all the members of the community's directive board forcing them into several months of exile in Bogotá and Cali. The palm oil firms, on the other hand, arranged themselves with the FARC by retreating to certain areas of the territory while still benefiting from important governmental tax breaks and financial incentives for the promotion of biofuels foreseen by the National Development Plan (2006-2010) (Lemaitre, 2011).

The case of Alto Mira and Frontera reveals that rather than being "bounded spaces of cultural difference" (Anthias and Radcliffe, 2015, p.264) many black territories accommodate a vast range of actors with diverging economic interests who arrived due to different waves of colonisation, economic development, settlement, and agrarian reform. Making these "entangled landscapes" (Moore, 2005) intelligible through land titling does not resolve conflicts over territorial and resource sovereignty nor does it provide alternative economic options to those already entrenched on the territory. Instead, it is the effective occupation of the territory that assures actors' political control. Yet, without external investment and support, local communities like Alto Mira and Frontera cannot compete with neither the agri-business nor the coca industry in establishing this territorial occupation. Besides, the context of the armed conflict and the fading influence of collective organizing structures like the PCN contributed to

[21] Ibid.

a gradual disappearance of their political project of autonomy and made them vulnerable to co-optation.

7 Conclusion: Identifying the culturalist-materialist divide to help overcome it?

Collective land rights have become a gateway for ethno-cultural politics. The latter have been commonly seen as a means to promote cultural difference that disrupts capitalist power structures and overcomes depoliticizing development narratives. Yet, as the Colombian Pacific continues to struggle with destructive extractivism, territorial conflicts and a lack of alternative economic opportunities, the question whether land rights can potentially represent a means to overcome those vices gain in force. Yet, while much academic work has treated the culture politics of the Afro-Colombian territorial movement, so far very little interest has been taken in its economic aims and implications.

Based on two case studies this article finds that while the region's ethno-territorial movement's quest for cultural autonomy based on legal rights creates puts leaders into financial impasses the absence of a political vision creates risks of political disintegration and co-optation.

Community leaders in Yurumangui originally rejected cooperating with NGOs and international cooperation and their technical development approaches that aspire to consensual political neutrality to avoid losing the culturally based political vision and the territorial entrenchment nourishing their resistance. Yet, in a context of acute political violence, poverty and the increasing presence of the profitable drug, agri- and mining sector this political position became increasingly difficult to defend. The example of the community of Alto Mira shows, however, that retreating completely from political principles bears the risk, just as material deprivation, of co-optation and organisational disintegration. The theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from these observations are double.

Firstly, it becomes apparent that the concept of Racial Capitalism represents a means to grasp the dual nature of race as at the same time economically and culturally underpinned. Hence the research strand allows to understand that material demands, such as the reclaiming of land, must be combined with a cultural ideology in order to be politically successful as well as socially sustainable. Yet, while associated rights can convincingly signify those demands they cannot, paradoxically, address their underlying, inequality generating foundation. Quite on the contrary the 'territorial turn' and related 'neoliberal multiculturalism' has, in the long run, contributed to deepen the materialist-culturalist divide on a practical level by bringing about the '*indio*

permetido', a culturally defined subject whose leeway is legally limited to the local level and cultural matters.

Secondly, the paper hopes to have shown that while ontological languages that stress cultural alterity have allowed for powerful developmental and environmental critique (e.g. Escobar, 2010; de la Cadena, 2015) they struggle to inform structural change as they fail to engage with the political economy of ethnic minorities in the extractive capitalist system. In addition, they have difficulties to overcome the longstanding political and analytical problem of exoticizing the Other. Yet, while relying on strategic essentialism by insisting on cultural sophistication can be necessary in a context where Blacks and Indigenous people's humanity continues to be questioned, structural change can only be achieved on the long run by an upfront challenge of extractive capitalism's political economy. The encouraging news is that this next stage of ethnic minorities' socio-economic struggle has already been reached in Colombia were environmental and social leader Francia Marquez currently serves as the country's first Afro-Colombian vice president. It remains to be seen whether the hope generated by this rise will come up to communities' expectation.

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