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The rise of authoritarian corpopulism under convergent global crises

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Abstract

The current debate on populist political regimes has rightly focused on the ultra-conservative authoritarian wave sweeping Latin America and the world. Does this mean authoritarian forms of government are only reserved for those living in countries under charismatic right-wing populist leaders? And is it only through such iron-fist rulers that authoritarian populism unfolds? In short, no; there is more to authoritarian populism today, and the role of transnational financiers and corporations intimately linked to the state and hegemonic classes is an important part of the story. Authoritarian populism today is rooted in, and unfolds under, convergent climate, energy, environmental, food and financial global crises. And authoritarian populism and the convergent global crises are not unrelated phenomena but rather mutually shape and express each other.

In Guatemala, a long history of despotic and violent populist rulers embarked in a transition to liberal democracy some 30 years ago. Since 2005, and amid convergent global crises, sugarcane and oil palm plantations and processing plants have spread like wildfire. This is led by national white oligarchic-bourgeois owners of flex cane and palm companies with thick ties to foreign capital. The restructuring of the agricultural relations of production that results from the rise of these flex crops and commodities complexes, as well as the political dynamics behind such an occurrence, underpin what I call the agro-extractive capitalist project. This form of agrarian capitalist of extractivist character is enabled by an authoritarian corpulist political agenda. This agenda recasts flex cane and palm commodity production from just another business project into a response-able phenomenon capable of tackling vital threats for humanity and the planet. By legitimizing flex cane and palm commodity production through consent-seeking strategies, and recurring to force when needed, dissent is suppressed and accommodations forged. The result is a new politics of racialized class domination, namely authoritarian corpulism, which trajectory is still to be seen.

Keywords

Agro-extractive capitalism, authoritarian corpulism, convergent global crises, politics of agro-environmental change

I. Introduction

The current debate on populist political regimes has rightly focused on the ultra-conservative authoritarian wave sweeping Latin America and the world. Does this mean authoritarian forms of government are only reserved for those living in countries under charismatic right-wing populist leaders? And is it only through such iron-fist rulers that authoritarian populism unfolds? In short, no; there is more to authoritarian populism today, and the role of transnational financiers and corporations intimately linked to the state and hegemonic classes is an important part of the story. This is because authoritarian populism nowadays is rooted in, and unfolds under, a world-historic conjuncture of convergent crises. Climate, energy, environmental, food and financial crises detonate in 2007-2008 and smolder for years to follow. A global, yet uneven, resurgence of natural resource extractivism and consolidation of environmental services in capital accumulation and climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies both drive and express the convergent crises conjuncture in the early 21st century. In this context, global demand for agro-commodities soars, expanding beyond traditional food, fiber and feed uses to include liquid fuels, bio-materials and carbon sinks, and thereby contributing to the rise of the ‘flex crops and commodities complexes’ (Borras et al. 2016).¹ Corporate flex crops and commodities complexes consolidate and upgrade within former strongholds, and set off to conquer uncharted territories.

But how is the early 21st-century extractivist fever unfolding? Particularly in the realm of biomass extractivism, what is the political agenda that enables for the rise of flex crop and commodities complexes? And what does this political agenda include? These are the overarching interrogations this manuscript deals with. My examination of these questions in Guatemala during the 2006-2014 period offers a series of insights that may resonate elsewhere. In Guatemala, a long history of despotic and violent populist rulers embarked in a transition to liberal democracy from 1986 onward. Since 2005, and amid convergent global crises, burgeoning flex cane and palm complexes fuel the rise of a distinct form of biomass extractivism. I call this the *agro-extractive capitalist project*. This is led by national white oligarchic-bourgeois owners of flex cane and palm complexes with thick ties to foreign capital, and particularly by a new generation of “young although smartly-trained executives” (YASTEXES) within the oligarchic-bourgeoisie. A distinct form of organizing labor, land, money-capital, knowledge and external nature into agro-commodity production, the agro-extractive capitalist project is capitalist in nature,

¹ These involve crops (e.g. corn, soybean, sugarcane or oil palm), but also trees, with ‘multiple uses (food, feed, fuel, fibre, industrial material, etc.) that can be flexibly interchanged’ (ibid, 94).

extractivist in character, and underpinned by a new politics of racialized class domination that I call *authoritarian corporatism*. It is, precisely, on the discussion of authoritarian corporatism's rationale and modus operandi that this manuscript focuses.

Supporters of the agro-extractive capitalist project use an authoritarian corporatist agenda to recast cane and palm commodity production. Instead of just another business project, this is carefully molded into one that claims to be able to feed the world, generating green energy and cooling down the planet, while at the same time sponsoring employment and stimulating economic growth in Guatemala. The authoritarian corporatist agenda involves two strategic shifts. First is the "multistakeholderization" of flex cane and palm commodity chains. And second is swapping out the "bullets and beans" agenda of authoritarian-paternalistic military regimes, once used to counter the communist threat during the Cold War era. Instead, authoritarian corporatism relies on persuasion—and selective violence cloaked in the rule of law—to counter critique and opposition to the agro-extractive capitalist project. But in addition to the policy concessions to the underclasses (i.e. public grants and multi-stakeholder governance) that are part of populist political regimes elsewhere, authoritarian corporatism brings in actual concessions in labor, land, financial, knowledge and ecological relations of production. As a result, flex cane and palm companies gain recognition as "pro-social" businesses, while simultaneously increasing labor and land productivity, expanding plantations, accessing new funds, reducing production costs, and contributing to the reproduction of their businesses' personal and natural conditions of production.²

The authoritarian corporatist agenda relies on four core strategies which unfold through multiple tactics, means and forms of contention. These include, first, the "Trojan horse strategy" to generate consent to flex cane and palm companies at the grassroots, and to co-opt opposition. This strategy unfolds through a "divide and rule" tactic, advanced via discursive and advocative means, which are developed in organized and both overt and covert forms of contention. Second is the "discursive flexibility strategy". The "young although smartly-trained executives" (YASTEXES) play a leading role in creating and using forms of discursive flexibility to upgrade the flex cane and palm complexes from basic sustainable brands through corporate responsibility, to pro-social brands through commodity chain response-ability. To this end, they rely on discursive means, deployed in organized and interchangeably overt and covert forms, through two main tactics,

² O'Connor understands production conditions in the original Marxist sense, and thereby *natural conditions* 'are discussed in terms of the viability of ecosystems, the adequacy of atmospheric ozone levels, the stability of coastlines and watersheds; soil, air and water quality; and so on'. *Personal conditions* 'in terms of the physical and mental well-being of workers; the kind and degree of socialization; toxicity of work relations and the workers' ability to cope; and human beings as social productive forces and biological organisms generally'. And the *general conditions* of production 'in terms of "social capital", "infrastructure", and so on [...] In short, production conditions include commodified or capitalized materiality and sociality excluding commodity production, distribution, and exchange themselves' (O'Connor 1988, 17).

“selective representation” and “strategic choice of use-discourse”. To practice what they preach, flex cane and palm companies implement a series of labor, land, financial, knowledge and ecological fixes. These are behind the third strategy of the authoritarian corporalist agenda, or the “staying alive” strategy. Fixes in productive relations lessen the burden of intensive, large-scale agro-industrial production on people and the environment, and thereby serve a similar function to a pressure relief valve. But fixes on productive relations also help flex agribusinesses increase labor and land productivity, expand plantations, access new funds, reduce production costs, and reproduce their personal and natural conditions of production. The staying alive strategy is pursued through using two tactics, namely “response-ability by decree” and “response-ability by market compulsion”. Whereas both tactics unfold through organized and overt forms, the former mobilizes statutory means of contention, while the latter relies on voluntary, private ones. Nonetheless, violence, or the threat thereof, underpins the authoritarian corporalist agenda’s three other consent-seeking strategies from the very beginning. Such is the aim of the fourth core strategy of the authoritarian corporalist agenda, namely the “iron fist in velvet glove”. This authoritarian and violent strategy relies on “rule of law” and “jungle law” tactics, advanced through advocative, judiciary and violent means, which are carried out in organized and alternatively covert and overt forms of contention.

Ultimately, by legitimizing flex cane and palm commodity production through populist moves, and recurring to force when needed, dissent is suppressed and accommodations forged through an authoritarian corporalist agenda. The result is a new politics of class domination which trajectory is still to be seen.

2. Convergent crises in Guatemala: Sugarcane and oil palm as favorites of the “Almighties”

The rise of the flex crops and commodities complexes under convergent global crises in the early 21st century has contributed to the re-centering of natural resources and agriculture in capital accumulation and climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies worldwide, even if unevenly. In this context, two major and traditional participants in world trade multi-commodity crops namely, (sugar)cane and (oil) palm, have advanced into two leading global flex crops with multiple uses (McKay et al. 2016, Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2016).

Global demand for flex cane and palm commodities has quickly grown from a green gold fever to a pandemic in Guatemala. Since 2005, sugarcane and oil palm plantations and processing plants have spread like wildfire, and the small Central American country has been thrust into the position of a leading world producer and exporter of multiple cane and palm commodities (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011). By

2016 Guatemala became the fourth largest Latin American palm oil producer and the tenth worldwide, as well as the largest palm oil exporter in Latin America and the fifth in the world (USDA. 2016). Furthermore, by that year Guatemalan flex palm agribusinesses will show ‘the world’s largest increase rate in palm oil exports in the last 20 years’ (GREPALMA. 2016a). Also by 2016, Guatemala became the third largest sugar producer in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico but ahead of Colombia, and the ninth worldwide (USDA. 2016). It will also be the second largest sugar exporter in Latin America after Brazil, and the world’s fourth (ibid.).

The rise of corporate flex cane and palm complexes in Guatemala cannot be explained without a proper understanding of who is behind them. Hence, a key diagnostic tool of the current green gold pandemic concerns the flex cane and palm complexes’ ‘scale of capital’ (Edelman et al. 2013, Franco et al. 2013). Involvement of foreign capital notwithstanding, the main vector of this green gold pandemic is the hegemonic fraction of the Guatemalan oligarchic-bourgeoisie. This is a very compact and tight-knit group made up of white, European descendant men—and to a lesser extent women. Whereas the older among them are the ultimate authority, a new generation of “young although smartly-trained executives” (YASTEXES) between 25 and 45 years old take over key executive positions in their family businesses in the early 21st century. They are usually alumni of elitist and libertarian Francisco Marroquin University in Guatemala,³ or European and US ivy-league universities from where they often also hold post-graduate degrees in a variety of fields—ranging from agronomic and industrial engineering to law, business administration, marketing and finance.⁴ As the avant-garde of the oligarchic bourgeoisie’s business intelligentsia, the YASTEXES are the leading force behind the upgrade of domestic agro-industries into transnational agribusinesses.

Embedded within oligarchic-bourgeois family corporate groups, flex cane and palm complexes combine plantations with financial services, agro-inputs and farm machinery upstream with farming and processing, circulation and consumer goods manufacturing downstream. This corporate structure is easily prone to cartelization. There are 12 active flex cane companies in Guatemala (ASAZGUA.

³ This private university is the training center and core think tank of the Guatemalan oligarchic-bourgeoisie. Every three years, the UFM grants the “Rober Nozick Award for Academic Excellence”. On the libertarian ideology among the Guatemalan oligarchic-bourgeoisie in the early 21st Century see Velásquez (2013).

⁴ The following bio of an Executive Director in her early thirties who straddles the flex cane and palm complexes is enlightening: ‘Born and raised in Guatemala moved to the United States to pursue college education where she earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration and an MBA with specialization in finance at Harvard University. Worked at Safra Bank in New York for 8 months to get the flavor of the financial world and then move back to Guatemala to work in the family business. She was CFO [chief financial officer] of Agro Industrias HAME [the largest flex palm company in Guatemala] and also was a member of the board of directors of Ingenio Santa Ana [large flex cane company]. After 8 years she retired from the executive role in the company (HAME) and stay in the board of directors and she moved to work in what she called her true love, RUM!!!! She is now the first female member of the executive board of directors of Industrias Licoreras de Guatemala [part of the same family business group as Santa Ana flex cane company]. She is actively involved in Fundacion Licorera which is the social arm of the company and its main focus is to work with women, and with children’s education’ (Chopra Foundation. n.d.).

2012) owned by 10 corporate groups and under control of the same number of oligarchic-bourgeois families. Since 1957, the flex cane complex has been organized through the Guatemalan Sugar Producers Association (ASAZGUA). This is part of the Chamber of Agriculture (CAMAGRO), which is in turn a key member of the powerful trade and political organization of the Guatemalan oligarchic-bourgeoisie, the Coordinating Committee of Financial, Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Chambers (CACIF). In the case of the flex palm complex, only five oligarchic-bourgeois corporate groups, one of which also owns a major flex cane company, control the six flex palm companies active in the country. Since 2008, flex palm companies are also organized as a business cartel through the Guatemalan Palm Growers Guild (GREPALMA).⁵ GREPALMA is part of the Chamber of Industry, and like ASAZGUA, it is also member of CAMAGRO and CACIF.

Additionally, flex cane and palm companies have a say in the Renewable Fuels Association (ACR), the oligarchic-bourgeoisie's think tank Foundation for the Development of Guatemala (FUNDESA), the libertarian Francisco Marroquin University (UFM), and CentraRSE (the World Business Council for Sustainable Development in Guatemala). Furthermore, the spectrum of social actors supportive of the agro-extractive capitalist project stretches beyond those formally within the ranks of the oligarchic-bourgeoisie. These include the Guatemalan Social Organizations' Movement (MOSGUA), the National Peasant Union (UNAC), private Guatemalan universities (other than the UFM) and mass media outlets (though these are often part of oligarchic family business groups).

Furthermore, flex cane and palm complexes in Guatemala also gather much support from state actors. With the exception of those on the left, all political parties are linked in some way—including through funding—to the Guatemalan oligarchy (Palencia Prado 2014). This allows oligarchs to influence the Government and the Congress in a way which, although neither overwhelming nor uncontested, is strategic for the hegemonic pretensions of the agro-extractivist bourgeoisie. In addition to appointing the “Presidential Commissioner for Competitiveness”, CACIF has strong veto rights regarding the appointment of the Ministers of Economy, Finance, Energy and Mines and Transport and Infrastructure.⁶ Furthermore, CACIF has “a stake” in all relevant multi-stakeholder governance platforms (e.g. the FONTIERRAS Land Fund), including those in which no other private social actor has a seat (e.g. the Monetary Council of Guatemala's Central Bank). Also, CACIF maintains good terms with the judiciary through its cohort of corporate lawyers' offices and political sinecures for retired judges,⁷ and has long-standing bonds with the military (Rubio Castañeda 2017).

⁵ Despite this branding, GREPALMA includes only flex palm agribusinesses, not independent growers.

⁶ Interview with lawyer, newspaper columnist, and Executive Director of the Guatemalan Coordination of NGOs and Cooperatives (CONGCOOP), June 2010.

⁷ *Idem* to footnote 6.

Finally, regional and international financial institutions like the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and Central American Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI) also figure within the ranks of those actively supporting the Guatemalan flex cane and palm complexes.

In this context, the restructuring of the agricultural relations of production that results from the rise of flex cane and palm complexes, and the political dynamics behind this phenomenon, underpin a distinct model of resource extractivism in Guatemala after the turn of the century. I call this the *agro-extractive capitalist project*. This particular form of organizing labor, land, money-capital, knowledge and external nature into agro-commodity production is capitalist in nature, extractivist in character, and underpinned by a new politics of racialized class domination. I discuss the first two socio-ecological dimensions of the agro-extractive capitalist project elsewhere (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 2015, and especially 2019 (forthcoming)). Here I focus on the third ideological-political dimension behind the agro-extractive capitalist project.

3. Authoritarian corporatism as the political backbone of agro-extractive capitalism

Driving and expressing broader efforts by the oligarchic-bourgeoisie to reproduce its dominant class position in the Guatemalan society, supporters push for the agro-extractive capitalist project to become the hegemonic life project in the countryside. They present it as a development project capable of linking individual interests to a '*national-popular* interest that *also serves* the long-term interests of the capitalist class and its allies in the power bloc' (Jessop 2011, 42 emphasis added). To push for this reality, the agro-extractive capitalists and allies rework their political agenda in a highly sophisticated way. In brief, the agro-extractive capitalist project stands for a new politics of racialized class domination, which I call authoritarian corporate populism, or *authoritarian corporatism* in short.

The agenda of agro-extractive capitalist project supporters initially zeros in on building a favorable policy structure, and milking the national budget through public-private-partnerships to reproduce the general conditions of production required by rising flex cane and palm complexes (i.e. energy and transport infrastructure mega-projects). Social legitimation is sought through the modernization and progress narrative that has been commonplace since the times of coffee rule in the countryside from the 1870s onward. Nonetheless, grassroots unrest sparks heightened mobilization against flex cane and palm companies' expansion as early as 2008-2009. Amid high profile convergent global crises during those years, negative responses at the grassroots catches the eye of national and foreign journalists, (trans)national social justice organizations,

scholars, international development agencies, and the (trans)national NGO community (Alonso-Fradejas 2015, Mingorría 2017). Following the early global airing of grievances, supporters of the agro-extractive capitalist project refine their political agenda. As the GREPALMA President explains, ‘our big mistake was we were very quiet’.⁸

Thus, from 2009 onward supporters gradually recast their agenda so they keep watch over the policy structure and the reproduction of their businesses’ general conditions of production, while focusing on the ideological-political debate over agro-extractive capitalism’s “goods and evils”, and the reproduction of the personal and natural conditions of flex cane and palm commodity production. Initially, this new focus privileges state and social actors in flex agribusinesses’ expansion zones. Then, it broadens to include (trans)national state and social actors with the power to enable or constrain the political conditions for the flex cane and palm complexes to thrive. Key to this evolving political agenda is the recasting of flex cane and palm commodity production from just another business opportunity into an extraordinary *response-able* phenomenon capable of tackling vital threats for humanity and the planet. In other words, cane and palm are not just the latest booming cash crops that promise to end rural backwardness. Rather, they are promoted as productively efficient and environmentally sound means of feeding the world, generating green energy and cooling the planet, while sponsoring employment and stimulating economic growth in Guatemala. I now briefly expand upon these claims.⁹

First, cane and palm are depicted as global food security champions. Food security is a highly sensitive issue that agro-extractive capitalism supporters must deal with, especially when flex cane and palm companies are widely blamed for land grabbing to substitute food for fuel crops. In countering this critique, supporters use narratives that are mutually reinforcing. One epitomizes cane and palm as “food”—not fuel. To disseminate this narrative, supporters cherry-pick ‘spectacular figures’ (Li 2014) from global reports like those published by the World Bank and the FAO to construct neo-Malthusian arguments on the need to increase food production to feed an ever-growing world population. For instance, GREPALMA’s President uses FAO data to argue that ‘150 million tons more of edible oil need to be produced to feed the world by 2050’ (ACAN-EFE 2013). He personally adds ‘large-scale agro-industrial projects are the answer to food insecurity in Guatemala and the world, and this is something multi-stakeholder efforts to feed the world should keep in mind’ (ibid). The other counter-narrative presents cane and palm as the most efficient among all sugar and oilseed crops. This is a key message delivered by the Executive Director of the International

⁸ Interview by Luxner (2014).

⁹ The discussion that follows on legitimating discourses for cane and palm builds on work by the author published in Hunsberger and Alonso-Fradejas (2016).

Sugar Organization, himself a Guatemalan.¹⁰ It is also a critical argument upon which GREPALMA's President leans to promote its business complex. He claims that 'to produce the extra 150 million tons of edible oil to feed the world by 2050, it is necessary to plant 333 million hectares with soy or 217 million hectares with rapeseed, but only 36.5 million hectares with palm. Hence, *palm is more oil on less land*'.¹¹

Second, supporters argue that cane is a sustainable crop because it only has to be replanted every two or three farming seasons rather than yearly.¹² When there is a need to underscore its abilities to fight climate change, palm is represented as a "tree" through narratives such as 'the life environment created by a *palm forest* is very positive for climate change mitigation'.¹³ Likewise, cane and palm are portrayed to be more than just the next biofuels feedstocks. They are the 'most efficient biofuel feedstocks' according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) (Horta Nogueira 2004), and the Inter American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) (Reyes et al. 2010).

Third and finally, supporters argue flex cane and palm commodity production sponsors rural employment and drives national economic growth.¹⁴ ASAZGUA welcomes visitors to its website by saying 'cane agro-industry is one of the main sources of foreign currency and employment in Guatemala. It is key for the development of fifty townships and more than a million people, and thus for the progress of Guatemala' (2016). GREPALMA makes a similar argument on its homepage: 'everyday, in everything you do, palm oil is with you creating thousands of jobs in Guatemala' (2016c). In his inaugural address to the I Latin American Congress of Oil Palm Growers, GREPALMA's President claims 'that supporting the palm eco-industry means contributing to the real development, prosperity and wellbeing of rural families' (October 2013). A former Minister of Economy and now GREPALMA's advisor takes a similar tone while defending flex palm companies in oil palm-haven Sayaxché municipality with the press. He argues, 'if the palm companies weren't here, these people wouldn't have any work [...] Most of the adults have not gone to school, and the type of soil here is not suitable for growing other crops' (in Luxner 2014, emphasis added).

Therefore, in animating, legitimizing and mobilizing support for the flex cane and palm complexes, the agro-extractive capitalist project is framed as an extraordinarily response-able phenomenon to feed the world, generate green energy and cool the planet, while boosting employment and economic growth. And to make sure everyone, and especially consumers, gets the message, the "young

¹⁰ Interview by Bollman (2014).

¹¹ In I Latin American Congress of Palm Growers, October 2013, emphasis added.

¹² Interview with owner, head agronomic engineer, and security manager of Polochic Chabil Utzaj flex cane company, February 2008.

¹³ Colombian FEDEPALMA's President in I Latin American Congress of Palm Growers, October 2013.

¹⁴ But see Dürr (2016) for an informed review of this claim.

although smartly-trained executives” (YASTEXES) embark on a pro-social branding campaign from 2009, and especially 2012, on. Pro-social brands ‘are more *politically disruptive and inspiring* than basic sustainable brands. Instead of focusing on what a brand has done internally to drive a better world, pro-social brands look outward to take a stand on key moral issues’ (Sachs 2015, emphasis added). In their efforts to present the agro-extractive capitalist as a response-able phenomenon and sell it through pro-social branding, supporters develop an authoritarian corporopulist agenda that involves ‘certain strategic shifts in [...] political and ideological relationships between the ruling bloc, the state and the dominated classes’ (Hall 1985, 119 in Scoones et al. 2017). Supporters’ authoritarian corporopulist agenda involves two interlinked and strategic shifts. The first one is the “multistakeholderization” of flex cane and palm commodity chains. Contributing to and resulting from changes in the “governance” policy dogma under the World Economic Forum’s “Global Redesign Initiative”,¹⁵ the YASTEXES switch their corporate governance approach from shareholder- to stakeholder-centered, while ensuring that shareholders remain at the center. And the second shift is swapping out the “bullets and beans” of authoritarian-paternalistic military regimes, once used to counter the “communist threat” during Cold War times. Instead, authoritarian corporopulism relies on persuasion, and selective violence cloaked in the rule of law, to counter critique and opposition to the agro-extractive capitalist project.

Therefore, as agro-extractive capitalism’s political backbone, authoritarian corporopulism leans on pro-social branding and the state’s ‘strategic selectivity’ (Poulantzas 1978, 32) to pursue and reproduce the racialized class hegemony of the agro-extractivist bourgeoisie. This is mostly done through political concessions, especially those made to the under-privileged through public grants and multi-stakeholder governance.¹⁶ But in addition to policy concessions, authoritarian corporopulism involves concessions in private relations of production. These are connected to a series of fixes that cane and palm companies implement, affecting labor, land, financial, knowledge, and ecological relations of production to soften the blow on people and the environment, even if in ways that do not compromise the fundamental ideological pillars of the agro-extractive capitalist project or the agribusinesses’ rate of profit. Political and socio-ecological concessions act to upgrade flex cane and palm corporations as pro-social businesses, while simultaneously increasing labor and land productivity, expanding plantations, accessing new funding sources, reducing production costs, and contributing to the

¹⁵ This governance model is advanced in a 2010 report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) entitled “Everybody’s Business: Strengthening International Cooperation in a More Interdependent World. Report of the Global Redesign Initiative” (WEF. 2010). Here, WEF calls to ‘redefine the international system as constituting a wider, multifaceted system of global cooperation in which intergovernmental legal frameworks and institutions are embedded as a core, *but not the sole and sometimes not the most crucial, component*’ (WEF. 2010, 7 emphasis added).

¹⁶ Certainly, post-Washington Consensus economic reforms in 2006-2014 Guatemala swap out neo-classical *laissez-faire* for neo-institutional subsidiarity. This suggests that neoliberal capitalism today is not that of 30 years ago.

reproduction of their businesses’ natural and personal conditions of production. Indeed, as Friedmann explains, ‘what was formerly resisted except by a handful of pioneering capitals—sustainability—is now embraced rhetorically *and also selectively in practice*’ (2016, 675 emphasis added).

4. Authoritarian corporealism in action

The authoritarian corporeal agenda relies on four main contention strategies, namely the “Trojan horse”, “discursive flexibility”, “staying alive” and “iron fist in velvet glove” strategies. I discuss these strategies in detail shortly, including their tactics, means and forms of contention, after summarizing them in table 1.

TABLE 1 STRATEGIES, TACTICS, MEANS, AND FORMS OF CONTENTION IN THE AUTHORITARIAN CORPOPULIST AGENDA

Strategies	Tactics	Means	Forms
Trojan horse	Divide and rule	Discursive and advocative	Organized and covert
			Organized and overt
Discursive flexibility	Selective representation of cane and palm	Discursive	Organized and overt
	Strategic choice of cane's and palm's use-discourse	Two discursive mechanisms: 1) conflation of multiple use-discourses; 2) dissociation from some use-discourses	Organized and overt
Staying alive	Response-ability by decree	Statutory regulation	Organized and overt
	Response-ability by market compulsion	Discursive and voluntary self-regulation	Organized and overt
Iron fist in velvet glove	Rule of law	Advocative, judiciary, and violent	Organized and overt
	Jungle law	Violent	Organized and covert

Source: Author elaboration

4.1. Trojan horse strategy

This contention strategy has a two-fold purpose, to build flex cane and palm companies’ legitimacy at the grassroots, and to co-opt opposition. On the one side, the agro-extractivists use “corporate coyotes” to broker land for cane and palm

plantations and villagers' consent to the agro-extractive capitalist project. Coyotes originate from fragmented dominant and subordinate classes alike, and enjoy local economic, political and/or symbolic authority.¹⁷ On the other side, agro-extractivists ally with leaders of labor unions, peasant and indigenous organizations and NGOs who can claim a civil society "stake" in multi-stakeholder governance institutions and processes at different geographical scales. All of these brokers share the political abilities necessary to encroach into key village institutions from which flex cane and palm companies are either banned or invited as the outsider corporate actors they are. This is why I call this strategy as the Trojan horse.

4.1.1. Divide and rule tactic

Once "in", corporate coyotes come out of the Trojan horse to divide and rule in the community. They understand that 'institutions do not embody intrinsic legitimacy; their legitimacy must be actively established' (Sikor and Lund 2009, 7). And so corporate coyotes encroach upon village educational, property or religious institutions to steer common values and ideas of well-being towards agro-extractive capitalist project-friendly stances. To this end, coyotes work through class, gender, generational, religious or other cleavages among villagers to erode or reframe community consensus on a shared life project. As soberly expressed by a Maya-Q'eqchi' man in his late fifties, 'we are going through a serious problem these days. Our mind and our thoughts are being dominated. This is the result of the way of thinking of the "big rich" spread in our communities through their coyotes only to fool us and take the land from our hands again'.¹⁸

Similarly, social organizations supportive of the agro-extractive capitalist project are strategically deployed in multi-stakeholder governance platforms at the local, regional, and national scales. There are two iconic such cases. First, is that of the Turcios Lima Foundation (FTL) in the Polochic sub-region of the Guatemalan northern lowlands. A charismatic ladino man in his late sixties who enjoys a good reputation among Polochic villagers directs FTL. Formerly, he was the FAR guerrilla Commander-in-Chief, and then an advisor to the Land Fund's (FONTIERRAS) General Manager during 2005-2008. Aware of these facts, the companies involved in extractivist projects in the Polochic lean on their former class enemy to broker land and villagers' consent, and to legitimize their corporations as development actors in the eyes of the national and international communities. In Polochic, FTL's Director arrives in corporate helicopters to visit villages and haciendas where the companies covet land. He offers FONTIERRAS' support in cases where villagers or hacienda-tenants agree to withdraw their own land purchase bids over estates coveted by companies and/or resettle elsewhere,

¹⁷ Including preachers, teachers, community leaders, local radio announcers, NGO staff, "patrones", ranchers, traders, usurers, and even civil servants and elected politicians (Alonso-Fradejas 2015).

¹⁸ In group meeting in Sayaxché municipality, July 2010.

promises employment and progress, and publicly scolds anyone daring to challenge him or the companies.¹⁹ In seeking legitimation beyond Polochic's regional borders, the Guatemalan Nickel Company (subsidiary of Canadian mining giant Skye Resources), MayaNickel (subsidiary of British-Australian mining and oil giant BHP Billiton), Baleu rubber company, Maderas El Alto into industrial tree plantations, Chabil Utzaj flex cane company, NaturAceites flex palm company, and FTL are all behind the "Polochic Foundation for the Promotion of Natural Resources and Sustainable Development"—and are backed with the blessing of the Vice-President of Guatemala.²⁰

The second case is the national negotiations on comprehensive rural development that have been taking place since 2002 between the government and peasant, indigenous peoples', women's, conservation, environmental justice, human rights and research organizations, universities and Catholic Pastoral all part of the "Alliance for Comprehensive Rural Development" (ADRI). The ADRI alliance drafts a Comprehensive Rural Development Law between 2002 and 2005, which becomes a focal point during the "National Dialogue for Comprehensive Rural Development and Agrarian, Environmental and Labor Conflict Settlement", convened by President Colom in 2008. This time, nonetheless, supporters part of the Social Organizations' Movement of Guatemala (MOSGUA), the National Peasant Union (UNAC), and former challenger National Indigenous-Peasant Coordination (CONIC), claim a seat at the negotiation table. Dragging on for years, the rural development negotiations that were already complex, time- and energy-consuming become even more so with the disruption caused by the latecomers, and the Comprehensive Rural Development Law is still frozen in the Congress by the time of writing.

Building a favorable consensus on the agro-extractive capitalist project, however, is only part of the supporters' corporalist agenda, as there is then a need to mobilize the new consensus (Tarrow 1998, 175). This consensus is first paramount to exist within and across fragmented subordinate class villagers, so that they willingly engage in land, labor or contract-farming deals with flex agribusinesses, or at least do not hinder corporate activities. And second, mobilization occurs among policy- and opinion-making actors in state and society, at multiple geographical scales. Thus, the Trojan horse contributes to and benefits from the discursive flexibility strategy.

4.2. Discursive flexibility strategy

Supporters frame the agro-extractive capitalist project as an extraordinary response-able phenomenon providing solutions for economic, food, energy,

¹⁹ Participant observation in one such meeting in a Polochic village, November 2006.

²⁰ Participant observation in the constitution ceremony of Polochic's Foundation at Guatemala's National Palace, August 2007.

environmental and climatic crises. But these ‘flex policy narratives’ (Borras et al. 2016) are not simply bundled together in a way that everyone can use at any possible occasion. Rather, flex narratives on the response-ability of flex cane and palm complexes are cherry-picked. Supporters strategically switch between plausible narratives to be able to construe the most meaningful representation and significance of cane, palm or any of the crops’ multiple commodities and uses—according to whom they address, when, and where. In other words, flex policy narratives are used in a ‘discursive flexibility’ fashion (Hunsberger and Alonso-Fradejas 2016). The “young although smartly-trained executives” (YASTEXES) play a leading role in creating and using forms of discursive flexibility to upgrade the flex cane and palm complexes from basic sustainable brands through corporate responsibility, to pro-social brands through commodity chain response-ability. To this end they rely on discursive means, deployed in organized and interchangeably overt and covert forms, through two main tactics, “selective representation” and “strategic choice of use-discourse”.²¹

4.2.1. Selective representation tactic

Selective representation involves casting and recasting cane and palm as different “things” to best suit the circumstances at hand. Usual representations of cane and palm include those as “crops”, “plants” and “commodities”. They are represented as crops to support the discourse presenting them as world food security champions and/or in lauding their abilities to boost employment and growth. Indeed, I advanced cane and palm’s representation as food crops helps to counter the “food-for-fuel” critique in Guatemala. Denying time and again that cane and palm expansion leads to food crops’ substitution, supporters maintain the argument that cane and palm are superior among all crops to offer the carbohydrates and oily fat needed by a growing world population, while at the same time protecting land and generating employment and revenues. Alternatively, cane and palm can be represented as “plants”, and in extension, plantations as carbon sinks and biodiversity-friendly agro-ecosystems. This is the case when the aim is to home in on flex cane and palm complexes’ abilities to generate green energy and fight climate change. Finally, cane and palm can also be represented as “commodities” with multiple uses. This is advantageous in attracting financiers and/or eluding competing representations of cane and palm that constrain their circulation as commodities. The latter is especially the case in transnational negotiations on trade, investment, intellectual property rights or

²¹ The discussion on discursive flexibility tactics builds on work by the author published in Hunsberger and Alonso-Fradejas (2016).

public procurement, in which cane and palm's representation as industrial commodities helps bypass restrictions in the areas of agricultural produce and biodiversity.

4.2.2. Strategic choice of use-discourse tactic

Strategic choice works through two discursive mechanisms, namely “conflation” of multiple cane and palm use-discourses, and “dissociation” from some use-discourses. Conflation involves the simultaneous use of two, or all three, types of cane and palm representations and legitimating discourses previously discussed. This is the case, for instance, when flex cane companies are promoted for producing ‘food *and* electricity’,²² or flex palm companies for ‘creating jobs, generating green energy, and capturing CO₂ in POME anaerobic decomposition lagoons’.²³

Dissociation from cane's and palm's use-discourses works through two mechanisms. The first one involves strategically choosing one or two out of the three competing representations and use-discourses according to the circumstances at hand. The discarded representation(s) and use-discourse(s) is/are simply ignored or outright denied. The second mechanism is especially useful to outwit critique, even though it is more unusual than the first. A good example is the argument for a new biofuels law in Guatemala. While supporters of the 1985 law on biofuels stressed the benefits of ethanol and petrol blends over the fuel imports' bill, in 2006-2014 this discourse is buried under one that pinpoints biofuels' contributions to employment and climate change mitigation.²⁴ Taking strategic dissociation a step further, GREPALMA claims that ‘the ultimate goal of the Guatemalan oil palm complex is to strengthen the edible oil industry and thus *food sovereignty*’ (April 2012, 4 emphasis added).

Furthermore, “conflation” and “dissociation” as mechanisms of strategic choice for cane and palm's use-discourse are not mutually exclusive. The same actor can deliberately lean on one or the other mechanism to best fit the circumstances. For example, at the I Latin American Congress of Oil Palm Growers in Guatemala in October 2013, GREPALMA conflates all 3 representations of oil palm as crop, tree and commodity to portray the flex palm complex as an extraordinary response-able phenomenon. But when addressing outraged villagers, GREPALMA cleverly chooses to neglect palm's representations as tree and commodity, and focus on its representation as a developmental cash-crop. Finally, it should be noted that discursive flexibility does not work only at the level of “ideas”. By informing ideological-political standpoints, it also helps in mobilizing funds, legitimizing

²² Interview with ASAZGUA' Executive Director by Luxner (2013)

²³ Interview with GREPALMA's Executive Secretary, April 2009

²⁴ Interview with Biofuels Coordinator of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, May 2008

favorable policies and manufacturing workers' and consumers' consent. In other words, the discursive flexibility strategy reinforces the high material multiple-ness and flexible-ness of the flex cane and palm complexes.

4.3. Staying alive strategy

The “young although smartly-trained executives” (YASTEXES) recognize that the actual changes achieved through discursive means need to be reinforced and expanded if accumulation is to be sustained and hegemony achieved. This realization comes in response to heightened ecological, economic and ideological distribution conflicts sparked by flex agribusinesses' expansion (Alonso-Fradejas 2015), and to the very limits intensive, large-scale agro-industrial production of cane and palm commodities impose on the reproduction of the personal and natural conditions of production for flex agribusinesses. In other words, the YASTEXES come to see material concessions as a means to reproduce the ‘unstable equilibrium of compromises between the dominant classes and the dominated’ (Poulantzas 1978, 31), rather than as a sign of weakness as their elders used to do. As the YASTEXE CEO of the large Guatemalan flex cane company “Magdalena” argues, ‘we are *required* to incorporate important elements like bioterrorism or social and environmental sustainability issues into the productive process. We face a much more demanding market, and we have had to transform our company to address these new demands’ (interview in Jaramillo 2016). Additionally, YASTEXES in Guatemala realize they need to differentiate themselves from their business peers elsewhere of ill repute (e.g. in Brazil or Indonesia).²⁵ To these ends, flex cane and palm companies gradually implement a series of labor, land, financial, knowledge and ecological fixes from 2009 and especially 2012 on. I have advanced these fixes in productive relations help flex agribusinesses increase labor and land productivity, expand plantations, access new funds, reduce production costs, and reproduce personal and natural conditions of production. But fixes on productive relations also serve a similar function to a pressure relief valve, since such fixes address somehow several of the adverse socio-ecological impacts of cane and palm commodity production.

Thus, supporters rely on the staying alive strategy to keep ‘underproduction crises’ (O’Connor 1988) at bay,²⁶ and to increase the agro-extractive capitalist project’s

²⁵ “Magdalena” flex cane company CEO (in Jaramillo 2016), and plenary addresses by Presidents of the Guatemalan, Colombian and Ecuadorean palm growers’ guilds at the I Latin American Congress of Palm Growers, October 2013.

²⁶ While Marx extensively elaborated on the contradictions between capital and labor to develop his theory of capitalism as a crisis-ridden system, he did not elaborate a structured theory on the contradictions between capital and external nature. O’Connor explains that these contradictions concern the ways ‘capital limits itself by *impairing its own social and environmental conditions*, hence increasing the costs and expenses of capital, thereby *threatening capitals’ ability to produce profits*, i.e., threatening economic crisis’ (1988, 13 emphasis added). For O’Connor this stands as the second fundamental contradiction in capitalism ‘between capitalist production relations (and productive forces) and the *conditions* of capitalist production’ (1988, 16 emphasis in original). Considering the high—and growing—costs of reproducing the general, and especially the natural and social conditions of production under convergent global crises, this contradiction pushes towards an economic crisis which ‘assumes the form of a “liquidity crisis” or *under-production of capital*’ (O’Connor 1988, 18 emphasis added).

social legitimation by “practicing what they preach”. In doing so, the YASTEXES draw in a wide range of state and social actors at multiple geographical scales to help them upgrade flex cane and palm complexes—from basic sustainable brands to pro-social brands. Flex agribusinesses’ response-ability is pursued through using two tactics, namely “by decree” and “by market compulsion”. The former mobilizes statutory means of contention, while the latter relies on voluntary, private regulatory ones. In both cases, it is paramount the role of what I call *response-ability gatekeepers*. These are state and social actors that seize flex agribusinesses’ interest in fixing productive relations as an opportunity to hold them accountable on ethical, environmental and social terms.

4.3.1. *Response-ability by decree tactic*

A series of (trans)national state actors is the driving force behind this contention tactic. I have explained the authoritarian corporatist agenda still includes assuring an oligarchic-bourgeois-friendly national policy structure in the realms of land, labor, environment, trade, investment, property, finance, and fiscal and monetary policies. Among these, three are central to flex cane and palm companies’ response-ability discourse. First, national development plans behind the reproduction of the general conditions of flex commodity production adhere to the ‘green economy’ (UNEP 2011) policy paradigm (PRONACOM 2005, PRONACOM 2012). As a result, public support for green finance and bio-economy projects (i.e. biofuels, bio-materials and bio-energy) becomes a national development priority. Second, the ‘land good governance’ policy paradigm²⁷ is upgraded to fit the context of escalating flex cane and palm complexes. This means, on the one hand, underfunding the Land Fund/FONTIERRAS’ land purchase program and funding its land lease program—reflecting a priority shift in land policy, from freehold to leasehold forms of land access. On the other hand, “emergency funds” are allocated to purchase land when there is a need to expedite the resolution of conflicts that disrupt flex cane and palm commodity production.²⁸ Third, the public-private small-scale palm contract-farming program (PROPALMA) is pumped with national food security funds, and framed as a ‘pro-poor policy to stop land-grabbing’.²⁹

Notwithstanding, the main contribution to flex cane and palm companies’ response-ability by response-ability gatekeepers located within the state involves social grants and multi-stakeholder governance initiatives. Mirroring the capitalist state’s role in the ‘reproduction-management of labour-power’ (Poulantzas 1978, 185), public conditional cash transfers from 2008 on are a timely survival subsidy for the latent, and especially the stagnant, sections of the population surplus to the agro-extractive capitalist project. But unlike elsewhere (e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador),

²⁷ Deininger (2003). In Guatemala see Garoz et al. (2005) and Grünberg et al. (2012).

²⁸ Interview with Head of Research of the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (SAA), January 2007.

²⁹ Interview with PROPALMA Director, September 2009.

where social grants are funded through tax revenues and natural resource extraction rents—and thus perform as a wealth redistribution mechanism—in Guatemala they are funded through public debt. In addition to socializing debt rather than wealth, this favors especially domestic, but also foreign, financiers in control of public debt bonds. As a result, (trans)national financiers not only profit but also increase their political leverage over Guatemalan state powers.

4.3.2. Response-ability by market compulsion tactic

This tactic is spearheaded by large international conservation and development NGOs acting as private response-ability gatekeepers. They rely on voluntary self-regulation mechanisms to enhance the response-ability of flex cane and palm complexes. These mechanisms include codes of conduct and performance certification schemes of their own (i.e. the Rainforest Alliance Seal), or developed through multi-stakeholder platforms such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and Better Sugarcane Initiative (BONSUCRO). The RSB claims to offer ‘trusted, credible tools and solutions for sustainability and biomaterials certification that *mitigate business risk, fuel the bioeconomy*, and contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals that enable the *protection of ecosystems and the promotion of food security*’ (2017 emphasis added). The US Vice-President of RSPO co-founder World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) argues that ‘when done right, oil palm can be carbon positive, and improve biodiversity and livelihoods’.³⁰ And BONSUCRO claims to ‘believe in the power of sugarcane. In fact, we believe it could play a valuable role in *solving many of the 21st-century problems*’ (2016b emphasis added). Performance certification schemes drive and express flex agribusinesses’ pro-social branding efforts. For instance, in its ‘Programme for Certification of the Palm Oil Industry in Guatemala’, Dutch NGO Solidaridad includes

‘Production and environmental support activities, to be implemented by WWF; decent work and operational support activities, to be implemented by CentraRSE [World Business Council for Sustainable Development in Guatemala], and national interpretation for small producing countries (SPC), to be implemented by Proforest Initiative (PFI)’ (Solidaridad. 2014).

In fact, certification by response-ability gatekeepers becomes a *sine qua non* condition for flex cane and palm companies supplying transnational consumer goods manufacturers when subject to social scrutiny. Together with sugar producers, BONSUCRO includes the largest transnational manufacturers and distributors of sugar-based consumer goods (BONSUCRO. 2016). Similarly, most transnational companies that manufacture, transport and distribute consumer goods including palm oil or any of its fractions, have also committed to 100% RSPO-certified palm oil from 2015 on.³¹ Furthermore, initially informal and

³⁰ In 4th Latin American Conference of the RSPO in Honduras, August 2013.

³¹ GREPALMA’s President in I Latin American Congress of Palm Growers, October 2013.

voluntary certification schemes gain statutory recognition as powerful states abide by them. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK committed to 100% RSPO certified palm oil by 2015 (RSPO. 2017).

Additionally, public international financial institutions also contribute to enhancing the response-ability of flex cane and palm complexes via corporate codes of conduct. Two of these necessitate attention here because of their relation with the global resource rush under convergent world crises. The first one is the 2010 “Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respect Rights, Livelihoods and Resources” (known as PRAI) put forward by the World Bank in collaboration with FAO, IFAD and UNCTAD. The rationale behind the PRAI is especially evident in its statement that ‘even when investments seem to hold promise of raising productivity and welfare and are consistent with existing strategies for economic development and poverty reduction, it is important to also ensure that they respect the rights of existing users of land, water and other resources, that they protect and improve livelihoods at the household and community level, and that they do no harm to the environment’ (World Bank 2010, 1). The second one is the “Biofuels Sustainability Scorecard” initiated by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2008, and upgraded in 2009 to meet ‘the sustainability criteria of the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels (RSB³²)’ (IDB. 2016). The scorecard is described as a ‘tool to better anticipate the impacts of potential biofuel projects on sensitive issues such as indigenous rights, carbon emissions from land use change, and food security’ (IDB. 2016). According to one of its architects, ‘the Scorecard is helpful for both investors on biofuel projects, and civil society organization trying to hold them accountable’.³³

4.4. The iron fist in velvet glove strategy

The authoritarian corpopulist agenda’s efforts to inculcate villagers with a “culture of progress” are secured—and in some cases advanced altogether—through a “culture of fear”. This means that rather than to fill the gaps left by ideological domination mechanisms, violence, or the threat thereof, underpins the authoritarian corpopulist agenda’s consent-seeking strategies from the very beginning. Such is the aim of the “iron fist in velvet glove” strategy. The openness of the YASTEXES to public grants and productive relations’ fixes to soften the blow on people and the environment is one thing. Yet it is another—very different—thing to make concessions regarding the supremacy of the rights to property and freedom of enterprise over any other political right, let alone over customary, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. This authoritarian and violent strategy mainly targets transformative challengers, especially the leftist and/or ‘insurrectionary Indian[s]’ (Hale 2004) among them. But the iron fist in velvet glove

³² Currently the Roundtable on Sustainable Bio-materials.

³³ Interview with IDB official in Guatemala City, December 2008.

strikes hard at anyone who dares to contest the agro-extractive capitalist project—and the hegemony of the oligarchic-bourgeoisie more generally—be it a state, corporate or social actor, national or foreign. To do so, it relies on “rule of law” and “jungle law” tactics.

4.4.1. Rule of law tactic

Considering ‘law [as] an integral part of the repressive order and of the organization of violence’ (Poulantzas 1978, 77), this tactic entails the mobilization of the state’s ideological and repressive apparatuses in the defense of the agro-extractive capitalist project. Since this translates into making “national interests” the interests of the agro-extractivists, it is key for supporters to build and reproduce a favorable balance of forces within the state. To this purpose, flex cane and palm companies mobilize their trade and political organizations. ASAZGUA and GREPALMA join forces within the Chamber of Agriculture (CAMAGRO). From there, this alliance works in the authoritative political organization of the Guatemalan oligarchic-bourgeoisie, the “Coordinating Committee of Financial, Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Chambers” (CACIF).

Rule of law serves the iron fist in velvet glove strategy through advocacy, judiciary and violent means of contention, which are deployed either sequentially or simultaneously. A notorious example of rule of law advocacy is the fast-track approval by the Guatemalan Congress in February 2013 of eight new laws on investment protection and labor flexibility promoted by the CACIF. This takes place at the same time that Congress freezes, once again, the discussion of the Comprehensive Rural Development Law. Other relevant cases of rule of law advocacy include CACIF’s efforts to: i) shape the 2005-2015 and 2012-2021 “National Competitiveness Agendas” (PRONACOM 2005, PRONACOM 2012); ii) secure privileges in the negotiation of the Association Agreement with the European Union, ratified by the Guatemalan Congress in June 2013, and; iii) preempt any serious redistributive measure in the series of farming, rural development and land policies approved from 2009 on to support subordinate agrarian classes. The case of the 2014 land policy is quite telling. When questioned about the reasons for the major differences between the initial and final drafts of the land policy, one of the Sub-Secretaries of Agrarian Affairs explains: ‘it is not exactly what we aimed at, right? But as the saying goes, where a captain rules, a sailor has no sway!’³⁴ Supporters also lobby town mayors in areas of cane and palm expansion—although at times they do so in ways that bear a stronger resemblance to bribery than advocacy. In 2013, a group of flex palm companies invites all the mayors from the South Petén and the Northern Transversal Strip sub-regions to learn about the benefits of flex palm commodity

³⁴ In small group conversation following the land policy consultation with peasant organizations convened by the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs and the FAO, March 2014

production for their townships during a week-trip to an all-inclusive luxury resort in Cancun.³⁵

If advocacy fails, is not timely carried out, or the situation calls for an exemplary response, judiciary litigation ensues. To this end, CACIF works with a cohort of well-trained (and even better paid) lawyers, most often part of law firms within the network of oligarchic-bourgeois families' business groups.³⁶ Three such type of judiciary processes help to illustrate the working of this means of contention. First, after ruling against the government's plans to dictate how community consultations should be conducted in 2011, the Guatemalan Constitutional Court rules in 2013 against the binding character of 61 self-organized community consultations on mining and development mega-projects carried out between 2005 and 2012. As officials of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) explain in this regard, 'although the Constitution acknowledges constitutional hierarchy to international human rights treaties, including ILO convention 169 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Constitutional Court rules against their pre-eminence over domestic law'.³⁷ Second, CACIF's lawyers are involved in the arbitration panel to which the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) brings Guatemala in November 2014 for violations of labor rights under the labor chapter of the free trade agreement between the two countries (DR-CAFTA). Of the 16 companies the US Government faults for the systematic violation of labor rights, 4 are flex palm companies (Véliz 2015). And third, in January 2013, the municipality of Raxruha imposes extraction fees on flex palm companies to 'cover a small part of the costs of restoring what the palm companies destroy and pollute'.³⁸ Unexpectedly, one month later the mayor receives a court notification stating the Agricultural Chamber (CAMAGRO) is suing the municipality for illegal taxing. The facts that neither the flex palm companies in Raxruha nor CAMAGRO inform him beforehand—and especially considering the negative ruling by the Constitutional Court in May 2014—outrage Raxruha's mayor along with the other 56 auxiliary village mayors. As a result, they declare flex palm companies "persona non grata" in Raxruha.

And when advocacy and litigation take too long, or do not render the expected outcomes, the authoritarian corporatist agenda mobilizes state violence to advance flex cane and palm companies' interests as rule of law. This is exactly what Polochic's Chabil Utzaj flex cane company demands from the state in 2011 to evict 769 Maya-Q'eqchi' families from the cane fields they were occupying since 2010. The occupation had been organized as a form of protest against the way in

³⁵ Interview with Raxruha mayor, July 2013

³⁶ Interview with Congress member and founder of the Mayan Lawyers Association, July 2013.

³⁷ Interview in March 2013.

³⁸ Interview with Raxruha mayor, August 2013. The extraction fees include US\$ 1,25 per ton of palm fresh fruit, US\$ 0,03 per cultivated palm, and US\$ 0,03 per liter of palm oil produced.

which the company hoarded land in the area. As the original company owner argues on camera during our coverage of the mass evictions: ‘we bring employment and wealth; how are they [evicted families] going to progress with those tiny corn plants [“maicitos”]? And who else do you think would be willing to invest US\$ 50 million in this petty valley [“vallecito de pipiripau”]? We are here to enforce rule of law in the name of real development’ (author interview in Revenga 2011). Some 1.500 police and military troops are involved in the violent evictions that result in a Maya-Q’eqchi’ occupant man killed, dozens injured, and houses, harvests and crops burned to ashes. As the owner’s son and CEO of Chabil Utzaj explains while our camera is rolling, ‘we must burn down their cultures and shacks, otherwise they will be back tomorrow morning!’ (ibid). It is always striking to witness firsthand how the oligarchic-bourgeoisie exerts its power over the state. Chabil Utzaj’s owner happens to receive a phone call during my filmed interview. Mr. Carlos Menocal, the Minister of Interior, is at the other end of the line—personally checking in with the company’s owner to get an update on how the evictions are progressing. Chabil Utzaj’s owner duly excuses himself and starts walking away from the camera to talk to the Minister. Nonetheless, his words are clearly recorded: ‘Hey Carlitos! [...] no, no, no, I told you already! You must proceed with the arrest warrants!’ (ibid).

The call for rule of law violence by Polochic’s Chabil Utzaj flex cane company resembles GREPALMA’s demand of the President of the Republic during the labor conflict that sparks in 2011 in Sayaxché palm plantations. In addition to respecting ‘rule of law’ and deploying ‘combined police and military forces’, GREPALMA pushes the Guatemalan President to ‘carry out civil and military intelligentsia work to take *definitive measures* against the protest organizers and their funders’ (GREPALMA 2012 emphasis added). Indeed, rule of law violence unfolds through direct repression as well as through the criminalization of protest and protestors. Disruptive collective action is crushed using the Anti-terrorist Bill as justification. Land occupations, in particular, are treated as criminal offenses of ‘aggravated usurpation’.³⁹ As a result, ‘a multitude of labor and peasant organizers are put in jail for defending human rights’.⁴⁰

In order to map protest and identify disruptive forces, oligarchic-bourgeois think tanks and universities support state intelligentsia—just as they did during the armed conflict. Two good examples of this collaboration are the two reports leaked online and authored by Miguel Castillo Girón, a faculty member of the Institute of Political Studies and International Relations of Francisco Marroquin University (EPRI-UFM. 2013). In 2010, he writes a report for the National Association of Power Generators entitled: ‘Analysis of actors mobilizing against power

³⁹ Interviews with Operations’ Director of the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs, April 2006, and Head Lawyer of the Legal Team of the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC), July 2011.

⁴⁰ Interview with OHCHR officials, March 2013.

generation projects and strategies to confront them' (Castillo Girón 2010). In 2012, he pens another report, this time 'for the President of the Republic and government authorities on security, justice and power generation', entitled: 'Organizations promoting social conflict in Guatemala. Networks of domestic and international organizations putting rule of law at risk and discouraging private investment' (Castillo Girón 2012). The actors identified in these reports are largely social justice-oriented organizations, and their national and foreign allies.⁴¹

Furthermore, the government uses the 1965 counter-insurgent 'Decree 7 on Preventive States of Emergency' to deploy the army where there is a protest against flex cane and palm companies.⁴² Renewed light is shed on yet another open secret in Guatemala under convergent global crises: the close links between the oligarchic-bourgeoisie and the military. For instance, on May 10 2013, a Guatemalan court convicts General Ríos Montt of genocide and crimes against humanity. Two days later, CACIF demands nullification of the court's verdict. ASAZGUA's President and Board member of CACIF claims that Ríos Montt was sentenced 'due to international pressure', and thus the sentence should be nullified since 'there was no genocide in Guatemala, and our demand is not against the trial but for respect to the *due process*' (Todanoticia 2013 emphasis added). Similarly, GREPALMA's President, also President of the CACIF at the time, calls on the Constitutional Court to 'effectively guarantee the rule of law' (ibid). Only 8 days later, the Constitutional Court buckles under the pressure and nullifies the sentence against General Ríos Montt. Moreover, in 2012 and with funding from 'the big businessmen in the country' (FaT's President in Gamazo 2013), the extreme-right "Foundation against Terrorism" (FaT) emerges in response to the wave of trials against army officials accused of genocide. According to FaT's President, these trials are a new 'offensive by the Marxists in the guise of human rights defenders' (ibid).

Indeed, in his 2017 best-seller, Guatemalan army Colonel Rubio Castañeda blames his institution for being a pawn of the oligarchy. He offers a list of the military garrisons deployed to protect oil companies in Petén, the cement quarrel in San Juan Sacatepéquez, mining companies in the western highlands, flex palm companies in the northern lowlands, and flex cane companies along the southern coast. He also reveals that the Canadian mining company behind the controversial Marlin Mine in San Marcos and Huehuetenango departments pays each army official US\$ 9,5 and each soldier US\$ 5 per day to protect its mining operations (2017, 264). Similarly, the owner of Polochic's Chabil Utzaj flex cane company

⁴¹ Including 'human rights, alternative media and research organizations, Catholic Pastorals, national and international development NGOS, the Norwegian and Dutch development cooperation agencies, etc.' (Castillo Girón 2012, 11).

⁴² Or against mining, timber and oil companies, or power and infrastructure development mega-projects.

explains he had to pay petrol, food and lodging for the some 1.500 army and police forces involved in the forced evictions.⁴³

4.4.2. Jungle law tactic

Despite their large numbers, it is not only military and police forces that evict Maya-Q'eqchi' families from Polochic's Valley cane fields. The security chief of Chabil Utzaj flex cane company is in command of some 50 men tasked with burning down the crops, harvests and houses of the evicted families. The police officer in charge allows them to participate in the eviction 'under the condition they do not carry any fire guns'.⁴⁴ So instead, this time they are equipped with iron batons. Whereas police and military troops are brought in from other regions to avoid any potential bonding with the families to be evicted, the private security taskforce is recruited from nearby villages. This taskforce includes Maya-Q'eqchi' men—just as landless and jobless as those they are evicting—who cover their faces and make sure to avoid our camera. Bosses apart, most of these “barefoot thugs”—some of whom will agree to a murder for only US\$ 15—are usually men pushed to the margins of the agro-extractive capitalist project by constrained farming abilities and lack of employment.⁴⁵ In other words, they come from the latent and stagnant sections of agro-extractive capitalism's surplus population.

Barefoot thugs are the cannon fodder of the jungle law tactic. This tactic is branded after the generalized context in early 21st-century Guatemala, where it is not the fittest but the strongest that prevails. Jungle law involves the use of illegal violence in organized but covert forms to eliminate selected challengers. It is only when the aim is to intimidate (e.g. to force a land sale), or deal with large groups of disruptive challengers (e.g. forced evictions), that jungle law violence is overt. In Guatemala, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission reveals that in 2014 alone, 814 attacks 'have been directed at human rights defenders who work the main problems affecting the country's human rights, such as those dedicated to defending the rights of indigenous peoples, territory, land and environment' (IACHR 2015, 18).

5. Conclusion

There is more to authoritarian populism in the early 21st century than the charismatic, right-wing political leaders featuring day in, day out in news headlines. Authoritarian populism today is rooted in, and unfolds under, convergent global

⁴³ Interview with the original owner and the CEO of Chabil Utzaj flex cane company, March 2011, in Revenga (2011).

⁴⁴ Interview during the evictions in March 2011

⁴⁵ Interviews with Head of legal Affairs of “Defensoría Q'eqchi'” (April 2008); women sex-workers in Sayaxché, (June 2011), and; bodyguard and former member of the Guatemalan army special forces (November 2011).

crises. And my contention is that these are not unrelated phenomena but rather mutually shape and express each other.

In particular, I argue that dominant directions of agro-environmental change following the global resource rush amid convergent crises are underpinned by a distinct politics of (racialized) class domination. Building on the Guatemalan case in 2006-2014, I argue that the restructuring of agricultural relations of production behind the rise of flex cane and palm complexes results in a historically distinctive form of organizing labor, land, money-capital, knowledge and external nature into agro-commodity production. This I call the agro-extractive capitalist project. And this contemporary form of agrarian capitalism of extractivist character is enabled by an authoritarian corpopulist political agenda. By legitimizing flex cane and palm commodity production through consent-seeking strategies, and recurring to force when needed, dissent is suppressed and accommodations forged. The result is a new politics of racialized class domination, namely authoritarian corpopulism, which trajectory is still to be seen.

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