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The Land Grabbers: The New Fight over Who Owns the Earth

Fred Pearce

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“Raises complex and urgent issues.”—*Booklist*, starred review

How Wall Street, Chinese billionaires, oil sheiks, and agribusiness are buying up huge tracts of land in a hungry, crowded world.

An unprecedented land grab is taking place around the world. Fearing future food shortages or eager to profit from them, the world’s wealthiest and most acquisitive countries, corporations, and individuals have been buying and leasing vast tracts of land around the world. The scale is astounding: parcels the size of small countries are being gobbled up across the plains of Africa, the paddy fields of Southeast Asia, the jungles of South America, and the prairies of Eastern Europe. Veteran science writer Fred Pearce spent a year circling the globe to find out who was doing the buying, whose land was being taken over, and what the effect of these massive land deals seems to be.

The Land Grabbers is a first-of-its-kind exposé that reveals the scale and the human costs of the land grab, one of the most profound ethical, environmental, and economic issues facing the globalized world in the twenty-first century. The corporations, speculators, and governments scooping up land cheap in the developing world claim that industrial-scale farming will help local economies. But Pearce’s research reveals a far more troubling reality. While some mega-farms are ethically run, all too often poor farmers and cattle herders are evicted from ancestral lands or cut off from water sources. The good jobs promised by foreign capitalists and home governments alike fail to materialize. Hungry nations are being forced to export their food to the wealthy, and corporate potentates run fiefdoms oblivious to the country beyond their fences.

Pearce’s story is populated with larger-than-life characters, from financier George Soros and industry tycoon Richard Branson, to Gulf state sheikhs, Russian oligarchs, British barons, and Burmese generals. We discover why Goldman Sachs is buying up the Chinese poultry industry, what Lord Rothschild and a legendary 1970s asset-stripper are doing in the backwoods of Brazil, and what plans a Saudi oil billionaire has for Ethiopia. Along the way, Pearce introduces us to the people who actually live on, and live off of, the supposedly “empty” land that is being grabbed, from Cambodian peasants, victimized first by the Khmer Rouge and now by crony capitalism, to African pastoralists confined to ever-smaller tracts.

Over the next few decades, land grabbing may matter more, to more of the planet’s people, than even climate change. It will affect who eats and who does not, who gets richer and who gets poorer, and whether agrarian societies can exist outside corporate control. It is the new battle over who owns the planet.

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