

AFTERWORD: FRONTIER EFFECTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Witnessing the unprecedented effects of industrial land-use in sparsely populated areas throughout the world has brought the frontier back into the vocabulary of social science. ‘The frontier’ was originally a metaphor for the wave-like advance of settler agriculture and civilization across the North American continent. For a historian like Frederick Turner (1893), this wave could be observed as a sudden drop of demographic density as one crossed the frontier from east to west. The force driving the wave was the conquest of Native American groups by a population of European origin, which gradually ceased to identify with the East Coast states of the USA and found a new center of gravity in the resource-rich areas of the West. In Turner’s interpretation, the dynamic of the frontier was not merely the political and economic expansion of the conquering political system, but the transforming effect of the frontier on this system itself. When Turner proposed the concept, the final outcome of the frontier was already known, since the American frontier was no longer there. The concept of frontier offers a way for describing the modern USA as the final outcome of a linear, historical development that started from the Civil War—a retrospective interpretation of American history which led those believing in the exceptional historical mission of America to expect this history to repeat itself in other parts of the world.

The linear, teleological account of the USA of its own history is hardly a viable resource for analyzing contemporary processes in the Global South. Why, then, do we choose to talk about

frontiers, rather than focus on the political economy of marginal areas? One argument for keeping the concept in the vocabulary is that it seems to describe a special dynamic of center-periphery relations, one that is typically related to extractive resource economies, but not explained by them. Frontier implies that expanding industrial agriculture, mining, or cattle keeping is only an element, or perhaps a temporal phase, in a more complex historical process. In this usage, the frontier concept goes beyond political economy, highlighting military control, extractive activities, the expansion of settler populations, and the conservation of nature as historically successive or simultaneous ‘frontier frames’ (Acciaioli and Sabharwal 2017: 33).

Another current use of the concept of frontier centers on the sudden, displacing effects of global capitalism that take place on diverse scales (Tsing 1999). Frontiers are made by reducing and eliminating the dynamics that constitute a specific locale through making it extractable (Cons and Eilenberg 2019: 12). Former ways of imagining the encompassment of the frontier site as a national or colonial periphery cease to work, making space for alternative imaginations of the forces at work. As Anna Tsing (2003: 5101) puts it, frontier is a ‘travelling theory’ about the exploitation of nature, changing shape as it moves. The measure of the frontier is its instability, caused by multiple, conflicting ideas of how to save, possess, and profit from it.

From this point of view, frontiers are a privileged window to contemporary capitalism

and how it reorganizes space. Frontier-making is the opposite of using maps and census counts to create a legible territory. It works through unmapping and erasing any residues of social order that hinder extraction. This process is not merely driven by export-oriented resource extraction (even if it seems to be the common denominator of what we identify as today's frontiers). Reforesting lands 'degraded' by previous human use anticipates their takeover by plantation economies and conservation areas (Tsing 2003: 5101); at the same time, remote spaces are transformed into new kinds of productive sites through infrastructure projects, export processing zones, ecological reclamation zones, and speculative locations for carbon storage (Cons and Eilenberg 2019: 1).

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Recent frontier discussion puts on the table two understandings of frontier-making: a story of the colonization and exploitation of peripheral space by powers that derive from the political center, or a practice of 'extrastatecraft' (Easterling 2014): the creation of spaces and infrastructures for unregulated extraction, production, and commerce. State effects are essential for both kinds of analysis but in the latter view, state involvement in the frontier takes the form of projects, not a coherent exercise of policy or power. In 2012, on my first visit to a new oil palm site in West Kalimantan, I found that village boundaries in the area had never been drawn on any official map. The need for such maps arose when people started to ask village heads to help them sign off their land to the oil palm company. At this point, the provincial government sent a professional surveyor to draw the maps in consultation with villagers. Although entities under the national government—the Forestry Department and the Armed Forces—had been active in the

area much earlier, their interest in the frontier was focused on logging concessions, and they were happy with maps that did not show the location of human population and settlements. The maps outlining extractive activities only showed natural features, such as rivers and mountains, as the limits of concession areas. The new municipal government, on the other hand, found it vital to make land available to corporate actors that it saw as a new, potential source of tax income. The maps of village boundaries were relevant for a property regime that turned former rubber farmers into 'stakeholders' in the oil palm scheme.

Local people had a legal claim on the land, which they had cleared and used for rice cultivation and rubber farms. Replacing the rubber trees with oil palms nominally continued this claim because the former users owned part of the oil palm estate. After sixty years—the usual limit for the company's lease on the land—the land would return to state ownership as unused forest land. But the fact that the land changed hands through a private transaction means that the state was never directly involved in creating the profound territorializing effects of oil palm agriculture. This would seem to support the view of frontier as a complex 'assemblage' of several, simultaneously operating imaginations and projects (Cons and Eilenberg 2019: 6). Yet, as Anu Lounela's (this special issue) case of Central Kalimantan shows, the territorializing effects of recent, local projects had a precedent in earlier, state-led programs of transmigration and industrial agriculture. In West Kalimantan, the precedent was the 'nucleus' estates created by the government as a model of technologically advanced rubber-farming (Dove 2011: 31) that provided a livelihood to Sumatran transmigrants. In Central Kalimantan, as discussed in Lounela's article, the government was similarly involved in draining peatland into

land that could be farmed by transmigrants from Java. In this light, the territorializing efforts by the central state in the 1960s and 1970s created a classic settler frontier that continued along a more 'neoliberal' or extractivist trajectory after 2000.

The chaos of overlapping projects illustrated in Tsing's account of the frontier rings true for anyone who has witnessed frontier development at its most intense moments. In this special issue, the authors highlight the strategies by some participants to influence their fate, either by following some state-promoted method of creating an ordered space, or by saturating space with lived social and ecological relations. Tania Murray Li (2014: 18) argues that frontier situations confront people as historically constituted fields of force, and their response is less an imaginative 'project' than it is an enactment of routines, habits, and material configurations that represent stability. This does not mean that people's response to commodity economy is determined only by sociocultural practices, such as the Melanesian *kastom* or the Kalimantan festivals of 'work' (*gawai*). Landscapes and technologies, for instance those associated with different cash crops, represent specific material configurations that can either revitalize social relationships or alienate people from them. Tuomas Tammisto (this special issue) shows that different crops and production regimes can serve social reproduction in very different ways. Copra production creates periods of intense community work that creates the resources for church building; cocoa farming creates land claims that can be inherited; even oil palm cultivation—in spite of involving workers in unpleasant hierarchies and chains of command—is engaged to 'keep the door open' to the outside market.

In Li's argument, the alienating effect of commodity economy is not necessarily tragic.

Depending on the specific frontier history, a cash crop or extractive activity can either become an emblem of indigeneity or settler colonialism, and governments as well as small-holding farmers participate in the making of the frontier (Peluso 2017: 840; Kaartinen 2020: 240). Indigenous people who turn into peasants may still be able to practice a viable livelihood if they have alternative sources of income and food when crops or markets fail. In the case of the Skolt Sami discussed by Panu Itkonen (this special issue), the shift from fishing to reindeer herding in the 1920s created a 'path dependency' on fixed grazing areas and a reliance on state subsidies that eventually posed a serious threat to this livelihood half a century later.

One issue to watch is what happens to the social categories that point to territorial rights and claims in such situations. Itkonen describes how the *sijd*, or groups that used to carry out coordinated transhumance in the past, turned into internally differentiated peasant communities after their relocation in fixed grazing areas. The matrilineal clans of the New Britain cultivators described by Tammisto seem to have avoided an encompassment of their identity under such categories as 'peasant' or 'agricultural laborer' by re-inventing the meaning of the clan and the relations that constitute it in each new context.

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If capitalism is understood as a condition that allows the exploitation of the surplus value of human labor, the complexities of frontier situations boil down to issues of political economy. Recent anthropology of capitalism has argued that the classic labor theory of value ignores the 'heterogeneous processes through which people, labor, sentiments, plants, animals, and life-ways are converted into resources

for various projects of production' (Bear et al. 2015). Today's capitalism is based on diverse logics of the accumulation of value, and many of these have nothing to do with contractual employment or the use of proprietary technology. One implication of this is that a frontier is not a specific type of 'economy', but a scene of extracting value from nature. 'Frontier society'—its ethnic and social structures and center-periphery relationships—becomes a secondary concern when we witness the mining of forests and the conversion of jungle into tree plantations. Instead, the focus is on life: the diversity of living beings, their dependence on other living beings, and their productive relations of collaboration.

For mainstream natural science, the 'tree of life' consists of species. This thinking has been useful for creating agricultural systems that allow a particular tree or plant to live without the help of specific other organisms in its environment. An oil palm monoculture is purposely emptied of other vegetation before planting the palms. The straight, numbered rows of trees in commercial estates demarcate rectangular and round plots of land: their territorializing effect is *designed* into this mode of agriculture. It stands for a standard of rational land use and promises a calculable return from investment.

Kröger's contribution to this special issue points to the 'wild' frontiers of cattle-raising and gold-mining that expand side by side with the 'order' of giant agro-industrial estates. The gun violence of the frontier and the chemical poisons of large-scale agriculture pose a double threat to human as well as other-than-human life. The sustainability issues that arise from chemicals that deplete the land of weeds and small organisms are beginning to get their due attention: the people I talked to in West Kalimantan were also aware of them. What may

be less easy to internalize is the fact that both the ordered and the wild side of the frontier are sites of accumulation. If tilling the land is the primordial way of ordering space, cattle is the original metaphor of capital, or accumulated wealth. The 'double nightmare' of excessive order and wildness is not unique to Brazil: it is also present in the urban neighborhoods of California as well as on the Kalimantan frontier (Tsing 2003: 5101). Instead of feeding sustainable social life, entrepreneurial frontier activity turns all other-than-human forms into resources and objects. If nothing else remains on either side of the line, life in its diverse forms is indeed finished and beyond the bio-political abilities of state power to protect it.

Tsing's recent work famously seeks reasons for optimism from inter-species collaboration in capitalist ruins (Tsing 2015) and argues that 'weeds'—the forms of life that recolonize disturbed landscapes—are helpful for reassembling a space that allows human and other-than-human projects to overlap (Tsing 2017: 14). Landscapes destroyed by capitalism turn into a frontier for other-than-human agents (the 'weeds'), and help translate certain human ideas, such as 'freedom' or the aristocratic aesthetic of hunting, in a way that does not look back towards old social forms.

An anti-extractivist politics has to redefine the relationship of human beings to the massive amounts of natural resources that signify the ability of the current, capitalist, economy to produce value. The equation between bulk objects and economic value is particularly pronounced on the frontier, where commodities are produced through salvage, not creative labor. The argument, from a couple of decades ago, that immaterial rather than material labor should be seen as the baseline of human existence and solidarity (Hardt 1999), does not provide a good answer to this dilemma. A more recent position

is to denounce the distinction between human and other-than-human in favor of indigenous ontologies in which human existence itself depends on mutual respect and recognition between human and other-than-human beings (de la Cadena 2010). Tsing turns to Martin Heidegger—a thinker of the opposite camp—to reflect on this claim. Ontologies, or theories of being, must be unique to humans, she argues, because one cannot have one without having language. But animals and other beings are still capable of making communicative gestures, and thus coordinating their being with that of humans (Tsing 2017: 16; Kohn 2013). From this point of view, allowing other-than-human life-forms to play their part in rewilding industrial wastelands is more promising than restoring the human meanings and values of such sites.

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I have reviewed recent arguments suggesting that frontiers are more than an extension of colonial history or the global political economy. In addition to the complex effects of financial capitalism, frontier situations are shaped by government actions and development policies, demographic shifts, and ecological interactions. An argument borne out by this special issue's ethnographies of peripheral labor, settler, and commodity frontiers is that people caught in frontier situations participate in new territorialities, infrastructures, cultivated species, and other material conditions shaping the frontier, and sometimes use them to advance their own projects (Tsing 2005, 32). Some of this agency derives from the 'travelling theory' about what frontiers are, but it is also based on the ability to recycle and recontextualize some categories, institutions, and forms of organization that preceded current frontier events (Rasmussen and Lund 2018: 395). Such observations of local strategy and practice are

valuable because they risk being ignored when the discussion begins to emphasize frontiers as an arena for global environmental and resource conflicts, decentering the earlier focus on frontier as a historical process.

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