

Lessons from the ‘Unruly Edges’ of Markets in the Cambodia-Vietnam Borderlands

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Abstract: *This essay considers how insights into the dynamic, interconnected, and high-stakes nature of frontier markets resonate with current disruptions in global commodity networks. In the book *Unsettled Frontiers* (Cornell University Press, 2022), I argue that the tangled social and material networks that constitute frontier markets are prone to rupture—a characteristic that holds significant implications for frontier landscapes and communities. Such processes of rupture—consequential and unequal in their effects—are evident in the disruptions we now see in the wake of Covid-19 and the broader unfolding of our current nature-society crisis.*

Keywords: *Frontiers, Rhizome, Rupture, Mobility, State*

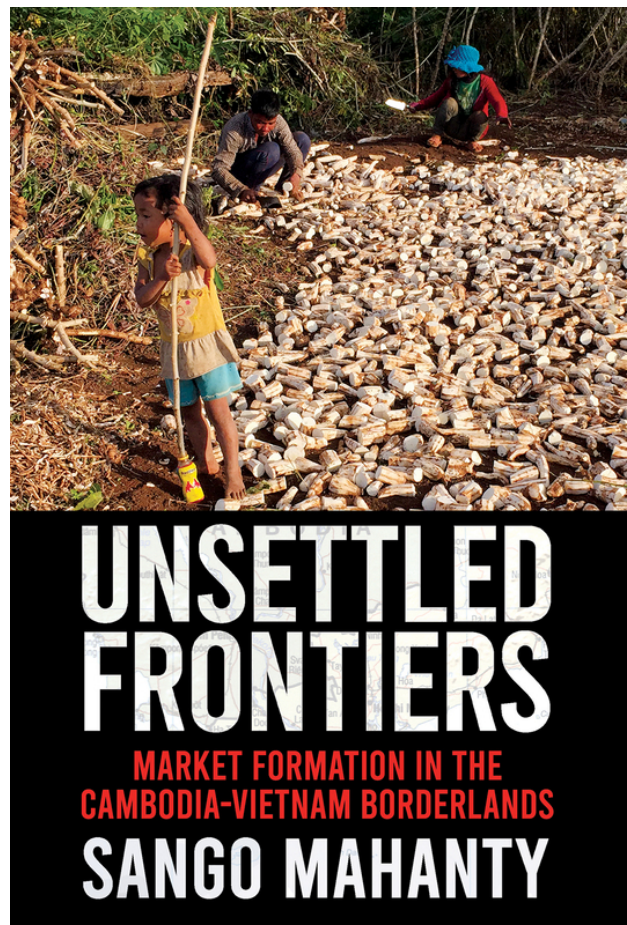


Figure 1: Cover of *Unsettled Frontiers: Market Formation in the Cambodia-Vietnam Borderlands* by Sango Mahanty, published by Cornell University Press in 2022.

What wider lessons can be drawn from frontier markets? The Cambodia-Vietnam borderlands

represent the ‘unruly edges and seams of imperial space’ (Tsing 2012) on two counts. Since the time of French colonisation, the region has been a frenetic commodity frontier feeding resources such as timber, rubber, and cassava to global markets. At the same time, this is a space at the ‘margins of the state’ (Das and Poole 2004)—a borderland where states have long vied for authority and territorial control. As a borderland frontier and a busy space of market exchange, ‘edges’ of this kind provide unusual clarity on how markets for new commodities emerge and evolve, their reliance on nuanced social and material networks, and how these processes intersect with state formation. My latest book, *Unsettled Frontiers: Market Formation in the Cambodia-Vietnam Borderlands* (Mahanty 2022), examines these themes, based on an understanding that markets are far more than a forum for the exchange of goods and services for money. It considers how markets are constituted by interconnected networks that are deeply embedded in, and shaped by, physical, social, and political-economic relationships (Applbaum 2012: 264).

For critical geographers, frontiers are spaces of incorporation into global markets through unequal relations of extraction, production, and exchange (Watts 2012). This characterises the Cambodia-Vietnam borderland—a source of resources for regional, Chinese, and ultimately, global markets. To say that frontiers are ‘loosely governed’ (Hall 2013) might be an understatement in this part of the world, where the routine seizure of land, selective implementation of regulations, and mundane forms of exploitation and violence are an uncomfortable norm (Mahanty 2019). As in other borderlands, the French, followed by the Vietnamese and Cambodian states, tried to enhance and assert their territorial and political authority—albeit in contingent ways (Mahanty 2018). Historical legacies continue to frame contemporary markets, but so do rapid changes like the appearance of novel cultivars

and new actors. In studying this region, I have often reflected on whether a view of markets from the ‘edge’ provides insights that are specific to frontiers, or whether there are parallels with broader market processes. In this essay, I make some tentative propositions on this question at a time when the global Covid-19 pandemic and the nature-society crisis echo the disruptions that characterise frontiers.

A Rhizomic View of Market Networks

In my book, I deploy a rhizomic lens to understand commodity networks that are in a continual state of flux. Rhizomes are a class of plant that propagates through a sprawling underground stem and root system. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 23) use the rhizome as a heuristic device to explain the tangled and unbounded character of various social phenomena that lack clear organisational hierarchies and points of ‘culmination’. The rhizome heuristic speaks to the tendency of market networks to sprawl without a distinct node of control and without an end point or climax. This absence of centralised control does not imply the absence of power, but rather that power is often exercised in indirect ways by actors who hold resources and specialised knowledge and have the capacity to frame institutions and terms of exchange (Bignall 2008). The rhizome resonates with other network analytics, such as actor-network theory (Latour 1987) and commodity-chain analysis (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986). However, a rhizomic lens especially illuminates the persistent and expansive character of market networks, as well as their susceptibility to significant disruptions or ‘rupture’—a tendency that holds relevance for our contemporary context.

In the Cambodia-Vietnam borderlands, rupture occurs within specific commodity networks and can also escalate across commodities to

reconfigure material and social relationships. For instance, cassava pathogens such as cassava mosaic disease and witches' broom disease impacted crops, but also trader-farmer relationships and debt repayments, and even contributed to land loss. Rapid and dramatic price shifts for commodities had similarly significant impacts. The concept of market rupture echoes ideas such as 'dissonance' in actor-network theory (Callon 2010: 167), Marx's 'metabolic rift' between society and nature (Foster 1999), and Schumpeter's (1994) 'creative destruction'. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of rupture is a relatively open framing that, when applied to markets, points to inherent instability.



Figure 2: Disease-affected cassava plant in Tay Ninh Province, Vietnam. Photo credit: Sango Mahanty.

Market ruptures hold dire implications for some groups but can also play a generative role in driving new market trajectories. For instance, cross-border traders would introduce new cultivars and techniques when conditions for specific crops became unfavourable. Farmers would then experiment with these new crops, but typically only the middle-income and

wealthier households were able to abandon the declining crop and adopt new cultivars. The poorest families lacked the resources and labour to plant new crops amid escalating livelihood stresses. In some locations, rupture became more pervasive, extending beyond specific commodities to squeeze local livelihoods and resources more broadly, as I elaborate on in my book. Some villagers found ways to survive at the 'edges' of this decline (Tsing 2015), while others left to find land or work elsewhere. Overall, processes of rupture intensified the precarity of the poorest families, adding to their existing disadvantages in terms of access to land, household composition, and debt levels (see also Rigg et al. 2016).

The notion that markets have a predisposition towards rupture resonates with the contemporary notion of disruption as a 'new normal'. We have all become familiar, for instance, with the supply-chain disruptions wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic (Moosavi et al. 2022). In the Cambodia-Vietnam borderland, these disruptions can impact specific commodity networks or cut across multiple commodities to deeply impact social and material conditions. These disruptive processes resonate with what some are calling an emerging 'crisis of capitalism' that the pandemic has catalysed and laid bare (Stevano et al. 2021). The rhizomic and frontier lens shows the fragility and volatility of the social and material networks on which capitalism depends.

The frontier experience starkly reveals that those with assets and resources are better able to cope with disruptions—for instance, by redeploying their land and labour in new ventures—while others are pushed beyond their coping capacity. Similar inequalities have emerged in the context of Covid-19 (see, for instance, van Barneveld et al. 2020). However, an appreciation of unequal outcomes and capacities is notably absent from intervention proposals, like the call to use pandemic-related

market disruptions to reorient markets towards a ‘green recovery’ (see, for instance, Rowan and Galanakis 2020; Barbier 2020). Frontier insights into market rupture and how it can deepen inequalities need to be considered here.

The Significance of Labour Mobility

A second theme that emerges from my examination of frontier markets is the significance of labour and labour mobility. The French colonial administration promoted labour migration to regions targeted for commodity production. The administration viewed these areas as sparsely populated, although they were home to longstanding indigenous communities. In the contemporary context, migration to this upland border region has continued without active state encouragement—mainly from lowland areas and on to indigenous lands. This mobility has played a crucial role in expanding market networks, through the claiming and clearance of land and the introduction of commercial cultivars. Indigenous communities are both displaced from customary lands and incorporated into market networks. While critical scholars note that these land dynamics are a key mechanism to produce frontiers for global capital (Hall 2013), there is more to be said on the role of mobility here. In the Cambodia-Vietnam borderland, mobility has had a highly multidimensional and networked character. It stems from a complex mix of individual, family, and community imperatives, as well as the desire for land and a better life. High (2014) observes that personal and collective desire are powerful and consequential sources of action—and this has been starkly visible along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. Ultimately, the same land commodification processes that sustained upland migration then escalated the price of land beyond the reach of subsequent

settlers. These later arrivals were then consigned to precarious labouring roles within emerging commodity networks, on a seasonal or long-term basis. I flesh out these processes further in my book but make the point here that settlers and temporary migrants—all with complex motivations, networks, and stories—have continuously provided the labour to animate frontier markets.



Figure 3: Phum Buon seasonal labourers.
Photo credit: Sango Mahanty.

Covid-19 is reminding us that capitalism’s reliance on labour mobility extends well beyond frontier spaces. Pandemic-related border restrictions have ‘instigated the largest and fastest decline in global human mobility in modern history’, potentially creating long-term shifts in migration and legacies for future labour availability (Boucher et al. 2021: 617). The impacts on existing market systems are both dramatic and highly uncertain (Miller et al. 2022). Migrants’ unequal and uncertain circumstances, and the role of individual, family and community motivations and networks, are also relevant to international migration (Thorsten 2020). Analysts are recognising the labour shortages associated with pandemic-driven ‘immobility’ and seeking measures to redress this (Barker et al. 2020;

van Barneveld et al. 2020). However, this commentary has yet to acknowledge the broader dependence of global markets on mobility, and the complex desires and dynamic social webs that sustain it.

The Role of States

Finally, I turn to the state's role in markets. In *Unsettled Frontiers*, I argue that states have played a central role in market formation, and people turn to the state for support when markets falter. Taking the case of Indochinese rubber, the French colonial administration played a central role in the development of rubber production and trade to meet its political, economic, and developmental goals. Rubber served French interests in expanding its Indochinese revenue base, while helping the administration to enhance territorial control at the margins and to subjugate frontier populations. The French supported the rubber industry by mobilising land, labour, and capital, but the colonial administration ultimately struggled to effectively govern it, especially as large European investors became involved. The inherent tendency of frontier markets to misfire and rupture discussed earlier turned this dynamic market into a testing ground for state legitimacy. Simmering labour unrest on Indochinese plantations—and the state's inability to control them—ultimately contributed to the revolutionary uprising that brought down the colonial administration. The rubber example highlights both the close involvement of states in mobilising frontier markets and the fact these same markets can then pose a challenge for states because of their inherent volatility.

Times of disruption, as seen with the current pandemic, can cause states to take on a stronger role in the economy and society, and elevate societal expectations regarding this role. Some suggest that greater state intervention represents a 'recalibration' of

societal expectations about the role of government in the economy and society (Lima de Miranda and Snower 2021). Stevano et al. (2021: 2), however, argue that the state's role has not changed, but instead has been exposed and made visible, and the pandemic 'has made it impossible to downplay the active role that the state plays in capitalism'—a role that was clear in the frontier context. This holds crucial significance for state legitimacy, as Hartley and Jarvis (2020) observe. They suggest that Covid-19 has tested states' capacities to respond to a crisis, but this capacity in part relies on the level of legitimacy that states enjoy. In other words, they suggest that state legitimacy is a precondition for crisis management. The frontier experience suggests the reverse may also be true: state failures in addressing market disruptions can also reduce state legitimacy. Writing from Australia, the notion that markets can become an uncomfortable testing ground for states became starkly evident during Covid-19. The government of the day was severely criticised when it failed to manage the supply of vaccines, rapid Covid-19 tests, and other pandemic-related supply-chain disruptions—a pattern seen in other parts of the world.

Learning from the Market's Edges

At the market's 'edges', we can gain a clear appreciation of the nuanced social and material networks that sustain markets. A rhizomic view of markets also helps us to understand that these networks seem expansive and persistent but have an inherent tendency to rupture—features that now speak to our current and larger-scale 'crisis of capitalism'. I suggest that these insights from capitalism's 'edges' have broader significance. This is not to detract from the importance of understanding the 'edges' (or frontiers) in their own right. As I discuss in *Unsettled Frontiers*, these sites of resource extraction for global markets are

consequential, are rupturing the landscapes and lives of frontier communities, and require urgent attention. I add here that this view from the market's edge may also hold useful insights for the broader instabilities that we currently face.

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