Whenever I saw the word frontier, I used to think of it as an “out-of-the-way” place or a hinterland. I also thought of the place where I hail from, India’s Northeastern borderlands, as a frontier. This was because of the kind of literature, mostly colonial administrative writings, where the term is commonplace. One example of such projection is the British geographer Col. Thomas Hungerford Holdich’s (1916) monograph, *Political Frontiers and Boundary Making*. Wrote Holdich, the earliest “necessity for a frontier and lines of partition only arose when men turned from the lordly enjoyment of wide pastoral domains to the relatively humble pursuit of agriculture and the tillage of the soil” (Holdich 1916: 7). His argument follows that frontiers are an artificial boundary-making process, a separation that is not naturally occurring. To that end, Holdich and other early colonial administrators believed that frontiers were necessarily racial. For colonists like Holdich, it was perceived that “the racial unit should as far as possible coincide with the geographical unit, especially if that racial unit has proved incapable of assimilation” (Holdich 1916: ix). Frontier was a territorial strategy.

The above idea of frontier went on to transmute itself to specifically refer to certain borderlands, or edges of empire, that served as a gateway to other places of colonial interest. Writing about the British East India Company (EIC), the historian Gunnel Cederlöf wrote that frontiers were thought of as “expansion zones that would connect them [the British] with profitable markets and sources of wealth” (Cederlöf 2014: 11). As such, until the turn of the twentieth century, the exploitation of frontiers, at least in the colonies, was possibly not through the extraction of the resources there per se. Instead, frontier spaces were to be exploited as corridors of trade and commerce between perceived thriving locations, through the building of roads, maps, and bridges.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the meaning of frontier dramatically changed. A space designated frontier came to be seen, in Tsing’s classic definition, as “an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet — not yet mapped, not yet regulated” (Tsing, 2003: 5100), for resource extraction. On the spur of the moment, regions once considered remote and far-off were forcibly and violently turned into resource frontiers to be exploited and appropriated. Tsing’s (2003) ethnography details how the Indonesian government gave away vast swathes of land in Kalimantan to corporations because of the New Order for logging, mining, and oil palm plantations. The upshot was a socio-ecological upheaval, disrupting the lives and livelihoods of highland Meratus Dayaks, who primarily relied on foraging, shifting cultivation, and other pastoral activities for their survival. “The frontier, indeed, had come to Kalimantan,” Tsing proclaimed. “It had not always been there” (Tsing 2003: 5101).

Within academia, Tsing arguably re-inaugurated fresh interest in frontier imaginaries, paying particular attention to places that are endowed with rich natural resources and that have exponentially attracted huge corporate investments. Yet, as Michael Watts (2018) observed, most of these emergent frontier scholarships foreground land, intensifying discussions and debates around the “global land grab” (Borras et al. 2011). As for Watts (2018), his interest in decentering land from frontier literature was to underscore “forms of rule and authority, and multiple sovereignties [that] are in question” (Watts 2018: 480). Moreover, Watts also offers
important insights into the regimes of frontier labor, especially those nested in militarized and conflict-ridden contexts. Based on two contextually different insurgency-ridden regions in Nigeria, Watts shows how labor insecurity, against the backdrop of the state’s legitimacy crisis, and socially precarious life conditions, persisted in an oil frontier.

The anthropologist Tania Li’s (2014) ethnographic rendition of labor regimes on the frontier is perhaps one of the most telling accounts of labor transformation. In Land’s End, Li (2014) shows how Lauje highlanders in central Sulawesi actively sought to alleviate their living standards through the transitioning of their livelihood strategies to their own choice. In pursuit of a capitalist promise, and in “the hope that they too could prosper,” indigenous highlanders started growing a “lucrative new crop” (Li 2014: 13). As a result, land relations changed, but also in the ways they perceived and positioned themselves for work. More specifically, capitalist wage relations ushered in new social relations, characterized by awkward mixtures of polite gestures—mutual care and reciprocity were very much part and parcel of communal ethics. With the emergence of a yawning socio-economic divide and more people becoming landless, wealthy farmers started to treat landless laborers and labor relations differently. The former became more extractive and driven by profit; it became “less necessary for employers to treat workers as whole social persons” (Li 2014: 144). Said otherwise, capitalist incursions into the indigenous frontier led to a gradual erosion—an erosion of communal ethics, of mutual care, but also of choices for the newly created proletariat. Work not only became scarce, but the resultant distress became an avenue for profit-making.

Such proletarianization, along with changes in property relations, typify the making of a frontier. Another case in point is Jonathan Padwe’s (2011) work on Cambodia. Set in a border village, between Cambodia and Vietnam, Padwe’s (2011) ethnographic account tells the story of how the transition from a subsistence economy to a market ushered in profound socio-ecological transformations that wrought the livelihood of the Tang Kadon villagers in Northeast Cambodia. Following a steep dip in coffee prices and a converse rise in global demand for cashew, in the early 2000s, Vietnamese investors and processors hastened to grow cashew as an alternative crop in the highlands of Vietnam. But Vietnam had very few lands available for the new crop as most of its highlands were already growing coffee, which had earned them huge profits in the early 1990s. This made Vietnamese investors and processors turn to Cambodia, especially its border region, for raw cashew nuts. Variously incentivized by the Vietnamese government and investors, including improvements in connectivity infrastructure and direct financial returns, Cambodian farmers resorted to intensifying cashew cultivation.

This shift affected their ecological cycles insofar as their practice of leaving land fallow for a few years was abandoned. Cambodian farmers also readily switched to only cultivating cashew to strategize efficiency. Rice, their staple, was now purchased instead; it was cheaper for them to do so. As farmers moved away from cultivating their staple, they had to strongly (or only) rely on the income generated from cashew cultivation. This switch to cashew cultivation as their preferred livelihood strategy also meant moving away from a largely self-sufficient village economy to a dependent and globally integrated market economy, now subject to
commodity price fluctuations. Through such dynamics, labor regimes in the frontier become tightly knit to the precarity of a commodity and the prices with which it is associated.

Frontiers, accordingly, are an outcome of capitalist desire, characterized by precarity, erosion, and dependency. They are not just imagined spaces that are inherently divisive in spatial terms but are imbued with busy activities. In the anthropology of work, frontiers present themselves as a key space of active speculation and future-making.

References


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