

SOJOURN Symposium

***On Unsettled Frontiers: Market Formation in the Cambodia-Vietnam Borderlands* by Sango Mahanty. New York: Cornell University Press, 2022.**

Review essays by Courtney Work and Alice Beban, with a reply from Sango Mahanty.

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Review Essay I: Courtney Work

The landscapes of Cambodia are unsettled indeed, and Sango Mahanty captures the frenetic and precarious effects of market formation in the state-created borderlands delineating (or connecting) Cambodia and Vietnam. After a careful, historically situated study, she puts forward the vital argument that markets are ungovernable, and as such, unsuitable for the hopeful transitions to climate-sensitive, socially and environmentally just practices.

To support this bold claim, she documents the intimate and interdependent relations between state and market formations through time. Beginning with colonial rubber and proceeding to contemporary cassava production, Mahanty shows how current political economic frameworks reproduce the colonial forms from which they emerged, but not exactly. New extraction regimes shape themselves to contemporary landscapes, but retain important elements of colonial logic. This is drawn out through historical analysis, through intimate discussions with villagers in market-transforming landscapes, and through an impressive collection of voices from border guards,

market traders, company managers and development donors. Taking data from these varied sources, Mahanty weaves a multilayered but unfinished story from the borderlands of late capitalism. This is not just a story of capital, however, and she shows how the land and the plants act and also shape the processes of market formation, based on a market that she presents as an animated thing. This is more than a multi-species perspective. Mahanty helps us see that the market is organic and evolving, which is precisely why it is ungovernable.

Understanding the self-organizing elements of market spread is of vital importance. Mahanty clearly demonstrates how states and their laws create the broader frame in which rhizomatic market formations spread. Chapter 1 attends to the foundations laid by French colonial projects and chapter 5 focuses on contemporary development institutions. These “bookend” chapters also demonstrate the important role of financing for private business projects and international development schemes and the extent to which they operate with strong support from state institutions. The structural support necessary for unruly market forces to operate are multiple. Not only are the actants many and the outcomes unpredictable, but the logics and ethics that justify the frame are inconsistent with the outcomes. In the first place is the inevitable dispossession of local resource users in the colonial era that “increased social differentiation and land shortages”, starving the local population through the destruction of their livelihoods (pp. 31–32). The precarity and lack in these landscapes of development remain visible in recent years. Mahanty documents the occurrence of “dead traders” whose capital and networks collapsed (p. 88), of factory-poisoned waterways (p. 89), and the serial migration of Khmer villagers whose networks and capital are insufficient to ground them in the land (p. 113). At each point of rupture, we see how government and donor interventions fail to relieve the pressure on local people and continue to support market expansion.

It is from this unsettled ground that Mahanty levels her two-part critique. The first is that markets are ungovernable, which is visible in the ways that governments lose legitimacy and the interests of

private owners and investors “took precedence” and “challenged ... state formation” (p. 46). The second and more powerful argument, although only put forward in the conclusion, is that because of that ungovernability, the deployment of market mechanisms to facilitate market transitions towards more ecologically sound practices is untenable. With this second position I agree fully. Mahanty’s particular organization of the cassava story aligns with her other work on climate policies (Mahanty, Milne and Bradley 2015; To, Dressler and Mahanty 2017) to show this without dispute.

I intervene into the first claim, however, which seems to blame market madness for the ways that governments get forced to privilege private over both public and state interests. I suggest an alternate reading of the excellent data Mahanty provides us. While it is true that the social and environmental instability of colonial rubber projects did destabilize the colonial state, this was not necessarily detrimental for either business or states. The colonial government and the rubber plantation translated the landscape towards the state-market form. By incarcerating the *Hevea brasiliensis* species of rubber tree in previously forested landscapes and developing the market networks through which workers, capital and rubber moved (p. 28), shifting networks of actants self-organized into new forms within which the state persists. This is not the colonial state, but that particular style of state-market formation becomes almost inevitable.

The persistence of the state form might be governed, or even made possible, by the ruptures inherent in the markets they “animate” (p. 143), markets that “unfurl and evolve” (p. 134), creating both opportunities and justifications for ongoing state governance. Perhaps the market is better analysed as a fetish, at once created by and exerting control over states.

Along this line, I have a tangible question about the relationship between the traders and the factories and exporters they serve. Traders are the key node in the assemblage that brings villagers into market relations. I am curious about whether traders are entirely freelance, or if they engage in patronage relations or start-up contracts with large factories or exporting entities.

With this small question about traders and my larger provocation about states and markets, I want to thank Mahanty for her important contribution to our collective understandings of our persistent misunderstandings about market formations.

Review Essay II: Alice Beban

Sango Mahanty's *Unsettled Frontiers* is an excellent addition to literature on Southeast Asian agrarian studies. This concise text focuses on processes of market formation along the Cambodia-Vietnam border, drawing on six years of ethnographic research in the Cambodian border provinces of Mondulkiri and Tbong Khmum, and interviews in Vietnam. Mahanty skilfully connects the colonial history of plantation markets with the contemporary stories of the people and places caught up in Cambodia's recent cassava boom. She is able to make these connections through attention to the rhizomatic character of markets in which multiple human and non-human actants are enmeshed. The analytic of the rhizome (drawing from Deleuze and Guattari) is a heuristic that highlights frontier markets' connectivity, their tendency to fracture and reformulate with interconnected networks, and their unruly nature.

The first substantive chapter examines how French colonial rulers transformed the frontiers into concessions that supplied rubber to global markets. Mahanty dwells on the role of the colonial state in facilitating the growth of the rubber industry (which went hand in hand with state formation) and its ultimately unsuccessful attempts to control price volatility in cash crop markets. This history reverberates in subsequent chapters as she shows how the "institutional and social ghosts" (p. 48) of colonial conceptions of private land ownership, commodity speculation, seeds and migration flows shaped later commodity booms.

Chapters 2 and 3 elaborate on the findings from Mahanty's extensive fieldwork in Cambodia. While the materialist ontology of rhizomatic markets that Mahanty deploys risks sidelining questions of

how sociopolitical power shapes networks, the fine-grained analysis in these chapters illuminates how social cleavages of class, political status and ethnicity are implicated in rhizomatic networks. The passages that best showcase Mahanty's extensive fieldwork are the stories of landless labourers, small-scale farmers and larger-scale farmers that Mahanty places alongside tables showing these groups' divergent pathways in each case study site. These stories place the cassava network within contextual relations of family ties, debt, sociopolitical histories, and individual and collective desires. Mahanty introduces the reader to the stories of migrant farmers—who are sometimes dismissed as land grabbers in work on agrarian change in the Cambodian uplands—with the same sensitivity with which she articulates stories of Indigenous villagers and landless labourers. This sensitivity allows the reader to go beyond an over-simplified causative argument of “good” and “bad” actors to a more complex rendering of agrarian change.

Mahanty sets out these stories as a corrective to suggestions that we can understand how cash crops spread among farmers through attention to either their resources (i.e., with wealthier farmers more likely to risk experimenting with new crops) or their personal characteristics (i.e., with some people being more risk tolerant). She finds that both resources and personal characteristics are important, and draws attention to the contingency of cross-border relations, debt and labour exploitation in spreading cassava networks. For example, cross-border traders with knowledge of the Cambodian language played key roles in providing the seed, knowledge, market access and inputs to farmers to spread cash crops across the highlands. The importance of traders and farmer-farmer networks helps explain why recent development interventions to establish disease-resistant cultivars failed, for farmers were far more likely to take up the practices of trusted traders and neighbours than government officials.

Chapter 4 discusses ruptures of the market rhizome. I found this chapter to be the book's most powerful theoretical contribution. Mahanty's stories of market rupture are a useful corrective to the tendency in agrarian change scholarship in Cambodia to focus

analysis on the expansion of capitalist relations; here, she focuses our attention on moments of market contraction and breakdown. She describes how government regulation, global market shifts, plant disease and soil exhaustion created a perfect storm in 2016, sending cassava prices crashing. I vividly recall this time, as I was working in Western Cambodia, where cassava had spread across thousands of hectares of concession land in what seemed like an endless boom. And then: Bust. The crop sat in the field, the tubers rotted. The “market corpses” (p. 88) left behind by the breakdown of commodity networks included struggles with debt, out-migration and limited livelihood options. Mahanty notes that with the downturn of cassava in her upland study site, eighty per cent of people in one community turned to the dangerous illegal timber trade to survive. These insights are important, for the Cambodian state and development agencies routinely ignore the way in which cash crop market volatility and indebtedness are implicated in the criminalization of smallholder livelihoods.

Chapter 5 returns to the central role of state institutions in attempting to control frontier markets, ultimately concluding that these markets are too unruly to be fully governed by the state. This chapter’s discussion of Vietnam’s ill-fated national policy to promote biofuels by building factories near the border and importing Cambodian cassava illuminates how policy directives in one country (even if not realized) create ripple effects for farmers across the border. This chapter also provides a sharp critique of development agencies’ attempts to intervene in cassava value chains in Cambodia. I found myself nodding along in agreement when Mahanty recalled her encounter with a development policymaker who said that her fieldwork findings were “fake news” (p. 124). I have had the same response from Cambodian government and donor officials when sharing findings on continued land tenure insecurity among upland people who have received land titles. This blatant dismissal of research is worth lingering on; there is something in the “unsettled” nature of frontiers that Mahanty has hit upon here that is deeply troubling to the development project. If markets are essentially

ungovernable, what does this mean for the infrastructures of state and development industry planning and resource management? I would have been interested to see this developed further, perhaps building on the recent work of Ian Scoones and others on the politics of uncertainty. Mahanty is careful to note that she is not advocating full market liberalization, but I wonder what a useful policy approach that acknowledges ungovernability looks like?

Theoretically, there was also less focus on expanding the concepts of borderlands and frontiers in the process of rhizomatic market formation than I expected. The book provides an excellent analytical strategy for examining market formation as rhizomatic, but more could be said about how this relates to capitalist expansion more broadly. What is it about the borderland frontier that produces the unsettled, ungovernable character of markets? Or, as Mahanty alludes to in brief citations of work by Marx on the metabolic rift, is this unruliness a feature of markets everywhere?

I was also left wondering about the aspects of the rhizomatic market that impede market spread through collective mobilization and the persistence of non-market land and labour relations. While Mahanty briefly mentioned Indigenous resistance, and noted that people engaged in reciprocal labour groups, these did not feature largely in the analysis. In research I recently undertook with a team in Ratanakiri province (near Mahanty's Mondulkiri field sites), I found that some farmers had responded to the breakdown of the cassava market by investing greater family and community labour in their cassava crop as they can no longer afford to hire labourers. Mahanty's focus on agency as capacity to act may not capture the ways in which collective mobilization and non-market relations shape rhizomatic networks.

Finally, and connected to the point above, I applaud Mahanty's attention to the affective dimensions of market formation when she discusses the feelings of loss that motivated Indigenous Bunong people's resistance to deforestation and land grabs, and hinted at the anxieties of market rupture. However, I would have appreciated a deeper analysis here. There is a tendency among political ecologists to

associate emotion with Indigenous people's attachments to land, which risks reifying a binary of rationality/emotionality corresponding to ethnic majority/Indigenous minority identity. This could be overcome with attention to the ways in which desires, anxieties, and feelings of loss and attachment are socially constructed in market formation; that is, how do affects pulse through rhizomatic networks?

Overall, this is an excellent book that deserves a wide readership among scholars from geography, development studies and related disciplines.

Author's Response: Sango Mahanty

Untangling the Rhizome

The reviews of *Unsettled Frontiers* by two eminent Cambodia scholars, Alice Beban and Courtney Work, have sparked many valuable insights and important questions that I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on. I focus here on three of these points—the first two are discussed in both reviews, while the last relates more specifically to Beban's. I start by discussing what it means—theoretically and in policy terms—to understand frontier markets as a rhizome with “ungovernable” qualities. Second, I delve further into the role of states in market formation, which speaks to the borderland-frontier context addressed in my book. Finally, I respond to Alice's question on whether the book's insights on frontier markets hold broader lessons about capitalist expansion and intensification.

My proposition that frontier markets have a strong streak of “ungovernability” is an extension of the book's core argument that these markets are rhizomic. I weave Deleuze and Guattari's heuristic of the rhizome throughout the book, repeatedly using it to compare markets to other expansive, networked and complex social phenomena—from rubber in French Indochina to contemporary cash crops. Because of their rhizomic character, I find that markets tend to take on an unpredictable and volatile life of their own. This volatility comes from the complex and contingent networks that

constitute markets and that, taken together, are beyond the control of specific actors within that network. I also document the tendency of these rhizomic markets to reach points of fracture or “rupture”. A contemporary example in the book was the ruptured landscape of Phum Prambei, which reflected legacies of resource extraction within illicit economies, intensive and unsustainable forms of cash cropping, and intransigent debt.

Beban asks, “If markets are essentially ungovernable, what does this mean for the infrastructures of state and development industry planning and resource management?” This is an important question that I speak to briefly in the book’s conclusion and that warrants further reflection here. Recognizing markets as rhizomic and unruly means that we need to think twice before using markets as a go-to option to address all manner of environmental and developmental constraints. My own work on forest carbon markets in this border region, cited by Work, documents such risks. Market-based mechanisms, such as carbon markets, are becoming a ubiquitous model for addressing environmental challenges within the broader rubric of “nature-based solutions”. As Work states, there is mounting evidence on exactly how fraught such environmental markets are. The architects of such schemes have a very limited capacity to control their disruptive trajectories, leading to poor environmental outcomes and significant social risks.* The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and United Nations Development Programme cases in the book hit similar limitations and risks, but this time in a context where markets were promoted for developmental goals.

As Beban rightly observes, finding better intervention options is a key challenge. One potential approach from the analysis presented in my book is to look beyond direct interventions in specific markets to their framing conditions. If Cambodia’s fraught history with land policies and interventions shows anything, it is how these institutions set the terms of engagement for farmers, as well as shaping credit access and livelihood opportunities more broadly. What has been missing perhaps is attention to meaningful, nuanced and secure land rights—most importantly for Indigenous communities, and also for

the land poor and landless families discussed in the book. These kinds of approaches may be more productive than the current trend of fetishizing and promoting markets for specific commodities and boom crops (see also Castella et al. 2023). Furthermore, it seems crucial to recognize and support diverse farmer livelihoods, based on local needs and aspirations, complex and conflicting as they may be. More broadly, as Beban suggests, principles such as those discussed by Scoones and Stirling for governing uncertain futures—such as “creative care” instead of “calculative control”—seem ideal. It might be more feasible for these ideas to gain traction with donor and civil society actors than with Cambodian state actors. Beban and Work will both know very well the challenges involved in the latter case, though dialogue remains important.

This brings me to the important question of the state’s role in market formation, which also speaks to the significance of borderlands and frontiers in the book. In the introduction, I discuss borderlands and frontiers as the “edges” of states and therefore crucial to state formation. This in part explains the mutually reinforcing role of states in market formation and markets in state formation that I elaborate upon in the book. In Cambodia, there is a natural tendency for agrarian change scholars to emphasize the role of state and elite power, for instance, in illicit economies for timber, land and other resources that underpin market formation for cash crops. This pivotal state role is undeniable. In this book, however, I am especially interested to consider fractures and limitations in state power when it comes to markets. For instance, the facilitation of cross-border land leases by border police and other officials can benefit certain state actors while creating pressure on the central government with respect to breaches of territorial integrity (Mahanty 2018). This is why I talk about markets potentially posing a challenge for state authority and power, as much as states have also been integral to sustaining markets. This is the fundamental paradox that rhizomic markets represent.

I agree with Work that this does not mean states—more specifically the Vietnamese and Cambodian states—have been neutered by

markets. As Work observes, states persist and continue to “translate” the landscape in ways that enhance state authority and power. In illustrating the unsettled nature of state authority vis-à-vis market processes, I intend to show how and why state power can become partial and contingent. In my view, this recognition is important if we are to understand spaces for change, and the kinds of collective mobilizations that Beban raises in her review.

Finally, I would like to respond to Beban’s question about whether the book’s insights on markets only hold for frontier spaces or speak more broadly to capitalist expansion and intensification. In the book, I use the term frontier in a critical sense to refer to spaces of incorporation into global markets through unequal relations of extraction, production and exchange (after Watts 2012 and others); they are spaces at the “edges” of global capital as noted earlier. The term “frontier market” is then a descriptor for the processes that facilitate the incorporation of diverse commodities into global networks. As busy sites of production, extraction and exchange, frontiers are key spaces where the nuanced social and material networks that sustain markets, everyday forms of exploitation and violence, and the tendency of markets to “rupture” can be readily witnessed. Importantly, this region is not just a capitalist frontier but also a borderland where state formation and territorialization are at play. I therefore suggest that the nexus between state formation and market formation are especially relevant to a borderland-frontier, while other aspects of market formation may resonate more broadly.

The concept of market rupture is a case in point. In the book, I show how major shifts in the conditions and relationships for specific commodity networks could escalate across multiple commodities to disrupt landscape-level social and material conditions. Beban observes similar boom-bust cycles in Northeastern Cambodia. Similar tendencies towards market rupture have also emerged beyond frontier settings during the pandemic, leading some to ask whether we are seeing a broader “crisis of capitalism” (Stevano et al. 2021). The rhizomic and frontier lens reveals how the intricate social and material networks that capitalism depends on are ultimately fragile and volatile.

The frontier experience also starkly shows 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. The frontier context thus helps us to understand the fragile and deeply consequential character of market networks.

Through their commentaries, Beban and Work remind me that the rhizome metaphor also pertains to my manuscript. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote, “the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is a parallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book” (1988, p. 11). Like the markets discussed in *Unsettled Frontiers*, the book too takes on a life as the ideas it presents are interrogated, reinterpreted and spark new directions of inquiry. As an author, this opportunity for dialogue offers a very valuable window into this interpretive process.

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NOTE

* For a synthesis of these findings, see Milne et al. (2019).

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