

Book Review

Stephen Campbell (2018) *Border Capitalism, Disrupted: Precarity and Struggle in a Southeast Asian Industrial Zone*

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Reviewed by

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Border Capitalism, Disrupted: Precarity and Struggle in a Southeast Asian Industrial Zone by Stephen Campbell is a significant contribution to the ethnography of migrant workers' precarity in border capitalism, and to studies of migrants' micro-practices of resistance against capital and state. It presents the everyday resistance of precarious migrant workers from Myanmar in Thailand's territory of Mae Sot, the "border-as-wall" and the "economic dam" of the migrants that prevent them from "polluting" the Thailand body politic. It argues that Myanmar migrants in Mae Sot industrial zone have carried out particular forms of struggle through which they have contested, disrupted and transformed the border capitalism. More interestingly, *Border Capitalism* uses the methodology of action research and militant investigation, not merely ethnography; the author was immersed with the migrants during the fieldwork, providing them with various forms of support. Throughout this excellent oeuvre, it narrates interesting ethnographic notes on various aspects of class struggle, as well as the transformations that occurred in Mae Sot's regulatory and industrial landscape.

The narratives of *Border Capitalism* begin with a historical overview of the transformation of Thailand's territory of Mae Sot from a quiet backwater during the 1980s into a busy centre for garment manufacturing firms since the late 1990s. For Myanmar migrants, Mae Sot became the primary point of entry into Thailand; it is estimated that as many as 90 per cent of the migrants have entered via Mae Sot. At the beginning of the 1990s, Myanmar migrants in the Mae Sot border area found jobs primarily as agricultural labourers, domestic workers, independent market sellers and petty traders. There were initially no factories, as the first of these was established only in 1995 (pp. 25–26).

Labour activists in the region suggest that the Mae Sot industrial zone is a territory in which a peculiar exploitation pattern is the main reason for its existence. A repressive labour regime and coercive policing outside the workplace have served to reproduce the racialised structures of segmented labour on which Mae Sot's border capitalism has come to depend. The Myanmar migrants are stigmatised in Thailand as historically, and essentially, "evil and aggressive", a belief which has been used to justify the low pay and poor working conditions (p. 84). Notably, the companies in the Mae Sot industrial zone, primarily for garment exports, have produced for such international brands as Adidas, Lee Jeans, Muji and Tommy Hilfiger (p. 29).

The word "border" as it is used throughout the book does not only refer to the fact that the Mae Sot industrial zone is located on the geopolitical border dividing Thailand and Myanmar. More importantly, it is employed "to highlight the ways by which various state authorities and private employers have creatively employed borders as technologies of rule to regulate a spatially delimited

population of migrant workers” (p. 22). The border is not meant to restrict migrants’ entry into Thailand but only to establish a reserve army of cheap labour from Myanmar. Moreover, there is the internal border around Mae Sot territory with which state authorities impose various restrictions on the migrants. This internal border has been created in the form of police checkpoints, which serve to obstruct migrants’ travel to other towns and cities in order to ensure a local concentration of cheap labour and distinct migrant populations with specific conditions of exploitation. Thus, internal borders are established to suppress any contests to Mae Sot’s role as a low-wage economic dam. *Border Capitalism* describes how migrants in Mae Sot experience subordination and exploitation in various settings by the structures and agents that reproduce their precarity and social inequality. One of the migrants reflects on the situation for migrants in the border area: “Myanmar workers in Mae Sot are like ATM [automated teller machines] for the police” (p. 84). Nevertheless, such experiences provide some common grounds for working-class solidarity among the migrants.

What is most interesting in *Border Capitalism* is that it presents a broader understanding of the movement of capital as well as labour, and how the two are continuously intertwined and reshaped in the changing situation of the border. The movement of capital does not only mean the geographical movement of money, but also involves the changing social relations through which a particular sort of social labour is imposed, constructed and negotiated. Moreover, the movement of labour does not solely mean “migration”, as that is only one of the ways in which labour “moves”. Migrants are no longer at the margins of labour markets or viewed as a peculiarity, but they are now considered paradigmatic workers, part and parcel of broader labour trends in global capitalism. *Border Capitalism* addresses this long debate in migration studies by showing how state, capital and labour in the context of the Mae Sot industrial zone are continuously negotiated, and how class struggles emerge within the migrant communities.

Border Capitalism’s main argument uses the theoretical and political tradition of Marxist Workerism in Italy (known as *Operaismo*, or often glossed as autonomist Marxism). It revisits the methodology of militant investigation and its theoretical principle – that class struggle is just the beginning, and should be extended beyond the factory walls. Unlike many scholars who would mostly see the regulatory arrangement of economic zones as being fixed in advance by capital and state policies, *Border Capitalism* analyses the Mae Sot industrial zone as a dynamic social space – a politically charged space in the Lefebvrian notion. Its movement is born of the border’s internal contradictions, and persistently threatens to disrupt its existing social relations, whose conditions of possibility were, in part, emerging from previous class struggles (p. 26). *Border Capitalism* is built upon the primacy of workers’ struggles in catalysing capitalist development. It perceives workers’ mobility and migration as a powerful form of class struggle. The migrants play a role in constructing an alternative hegemony, in which they normalise mobility and movement and consider the globe as a common space.

Referring to Hardt and Negri’s (2009) *Commonwealth*, *Border Capitalism* emphasises that “workers’ struggles force capital to restructure; capitalist restructuring destroys the old conditions for worker organization and poses new ones; new worker revolts force capital to restructure again; and so forth” (p. 12). Capital is reactive; that is, it responds to the demands of labour rather than the other way around. Every spatial tactic of labour has created new spaces for labour agency to emerge over time, forcing the state and capital to respond. Over time, workers undergo class re-composition, specifically, the forms of “subjectivity, affect, and sociality” (p. 111) that sustain cooperative micro-practices of resistance within and outside factories.

Class struggles in Mae Sot have never been entirely spontaneous outbursts, automatically generated by the area’s regulatory arrangement. Rather, they have emanated as results of continuous

processes of migrants' recognition of their exploitation, class formation and everyday re-composition that are grounded in their relations and experiences along the border. Mae Sot's border regulation has been transformed as a result of a series of class struggles which have involved countless agential moments in which individuals have intervened directly or indirectly. One of the conditions that has enabled class re-composition is the use of worker dormitories, which has entailed a spatial concentration of workers, providing a space for labour socialisation that developed among Mae Sot's migrants through bonds of friendship, mutual aid and certain cooperative forms of everyday resistance. (p. 133).

Interestingly, *Border Capitalism* uses the Bourdieusian notion of "class habitus" (p. 87) to convince how the dominated working class has transformed itself into recognising their subjugation, and realising everyday confrontations against the dominant groups as class struggles that endured in the form of everyday practices, dispositions and values. *Border Capitalism* explains that the dynamic of social relations between migrants and state authorities have highlighted the ways in which the everyday contestations and negotiations between variously situated actors have functioned to symbolically shape migrants' self-identification and to materially shape their place within the border's hierarchically structured social order. These intertwined symbolic and material struggles have played out in migrants' refusals to accept their continued subordination and the logic of authority's extortion (p. 108). It is important to note that Bourdieu (2000) himself contends that class struggle would effectively not take place due to the "class habitus" – micro-practices are conditioned by and reproduce macro-structures (for example, of class inequality). He also examines how objective macro-structures (for example, the education system and the social class system) become internalised into the working classes' everyday habits and dispositions. Moreover, Bourdieu considers the dominated class, which is the working class, as incapable of comprehending the conditions of their own subjugation.

Bourdieu, who introduced the notion of precarity in the early 1990s, argued that the working class suffers from "collective misrecognition" of the conditions of their own subjugation. This is referred to a symbolic violence exerted on the working class by the capitalist class – that is, a domination not understood as such. For this reason, he points out that class struggle, if it takes place, will be hardly so influential as to radically change the established institutional "fields" (education, culture, religion, law) characterised by institution-specific rules and practices reproducing inequality. In fact, the working class is barely active inside any significant and dominant institutional fields. Rather, it is mostly located in the periphery or outside those fields. Contrary to such Bourdieusian views, *Border Capitalism* argues that, for a long time, the class habitus of the migrants in the Mae Sot industrial zone did not recognise that the conditions of their own subjugation are subject to change and modification, and even reversal through a series of pedagogic works, training, new experiences and collective resistances. Recognising migrants' mobility and everyday resistance as a form of class struggle allows an understanding of the nature of such struggle as a spatial praxis, with the potential to eventually disrupt the capitalist landscape.

Unfortunately, *Border Capitalism* limits its analysis to the migrants in Mae Sot's factories around the industrial zone, while it considers that the class struggle of the workers should be extended beyond the factory walls. There are equally important Myanmar migrants in Mae Sot working in different economic sectors who experience even harsher exploitation. An example is agriculture, clearly impacted by border regulations and its technologies of rule. I think that including a brief analysis on the intersection of these migrants' struggles would enhance the significance of *Border Capitalism*.

It is important to note that other than migrants in Mae Sot's factories, migrant communities working in several agricultural locations in the territory have been trying to challenge Mae Sot's

role as a low-wage economic dam. They struggle against its control by absconding from one workplace to another searching for better jobs, which builds workers' strength to disrupt the border. Workers' mobility by fleeing from one agricultural location to another, disregarding their documents, is powerful form of class struggle. They normalise mobility among the migrants and develop spatial tactics, which consider every place as a common space. Agriculture remains an important sector of the Thai economy, employing 35 per cent of the country's workforce, and contributing 8.65 per cent of the country's GDP in 2017. More importantly, Thai agriculture is increasingly reliant on migrant workers from neighbouring countries, especially Myanmar, to plug labour shortages in the sector (MMN, 2020). These migrants, who have been subjugated for a long time, also belong to the working class, the proletarian collective, the subaltern and revolutionary subject, by whom mobility, spatial praxis and resistance might be allowed to occur to disrupt the capitalist landscape in the border.

Border Capitalism is a well-researched and detailed oeuvre, and is a valuable resource for scholars and activists working on borders, migrants, precarity, special economic zones and the ethnography of labour resistance.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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