Frontier spaces

territorialization and resource control

Rasmussen, Mattias Borg; Lund, Christian

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Frontier Spaces: Territorialization and Resource Control

Introduction
The cover picture depicts an Indonesian palm oil plantation. Dubbed a green desert for its barren, monocultural transformation of the forest, it is not only the biophysical properties of the landscapes which are radically reconfigured. Preceding this violent transformation of space, ideas about who can make use of what kinds of resources and the cultural understandings of these landscapes have systematically been undermined, dismantled and erased by a number of legal, discursive and violent operations. This case is not unique. The global expansion of markets produces frontiers of contestation over the definition and control of resources. In a frontier context, new patterns of resource exploration, extraction, and commodification create new territories. A recently published collection (Rasmussen and Lund 2018) explores this emergence of frontier spaces as transitional, liminal, spaces in which existing regimes of resource control are suspended, making way for new ones. We argue that the new territorializations of resource control in a frontier space represent a set of processes that precede legitimacy and authority, fundamentally challenging and replacing existing patterns of spatial control, authority and institutional orders.

The argument
The notion of frontiers is increasingly relevant: the commodification of nature, the scramble for land and resources, the imaginaries of self and others, the erasure of existing orders, and the establishment of new patterns of governance and regimes of regulation. While frontiers used to be seen as linear movements across space, we see them as the discovery or invention of new resources. This reconfigures the relationship between natural resources and institutional orders. Rather than a ‘tidal wave’, frontiers mushroom across the globe. A frontier is not space itself. It is something that happens in and to space. Frontiers take place. Literally.
Frontier dynamics are intimately linked to their seeming opposite: territorialization. They dissolve existing social orders – property systems, political jurisdictions, rights, and social contracts – whereas territorialization is shorthand for all the dynamics that establish them and re-order space anew. Frontiers and territorialization seem to us to be co-constitutive.

A frontier emerges when a new resource is identified, defined, and becomes subject to extraction and commodification. The ‘discovery’ of new resources – oil, gold, new crops like soy or oil palm, carbon storage, or ‘scenery’ – opens frontiers and challenges established rights. New resource frontiers emerge in different places around the globe. They do not exist as a function of geography per se, but are brought about because new possibilities of resource extraction and use prompt new and competing claims to authority, legitimacy, and access. Frontiers are linked to processes of land control and are actively created through social and political struggles. Frontiers are the discursive, political, and physical operations that classify space and resources as ‘vacant’, ‘free’, ‘ungoverned’, ‘natural’, or ‘uninhabited’. This happens by expunging exiting systems of right and use, and often by the dislocation of previous users. Frontiers, thus, pave the way for acts of territorialization.

Territorialization, in turn, is the creation of systems of resource control, – rights, authorities, jurisdictions, and their spatial representations. However, when new resources are discovered or come within reach, new acts of frontier-making are mobilized to undo established territorial orders. This sequence is, in principle, cyclical: frontier–territorialization–frontier–territorialization …

This constant process of formation and erosion of a social order of property rights, socio-legal identity, and political institutions constitute a dynamic where governing institutions build, maintain, or lose their authority, and people become, or disappear as, enfranchised rights subjects. This process transforms nature into resources and commodities. Collectively, the collection of articles pursues a double argument related to the frontier spaces. The articles look at resource frontiers as dynamics of spatial control that fundamentally challenge existing institutional arrangements in a non-linear fashion. As new types of resource commodification emerge, institutional orders are sometimes undermined or erased outright, and sometimes ‘taken apart’ and then reinterpreted, reinvented, and recycled. In resource frontiers, the ideas of what constitutes the nature of resources, as well as the rules that govern their use and control, are reworked. We direct the attention to the vernacular political forms that constitute emergent institutions and struggles over legitimate rule.

This double argument relates to the ways in which the mushrooming of frontier spaces transforms the nature of resources in fundamental ways. Frontier spaces are intimately connected to commodification through processes of dispossession involving enclosures, land grabbing, and other forms of primitive accumulation. New technologies such as genetic modification of seeds in soy production or chemical procedures for extracting minerals ensure that particular geographical spaces can host recurrent frontier moments of capitalist extraction. Yet, despite mutating forms of dispossession, the replacement of systems of knowledge, the undoing of the commons, the valorization of nature, and its formalization into the uniform, legible commodification of resources seem to be ubiquitous.

The Empirical Evidence
We examine two different processes of environmental commodification: extraction and conservation. In all their difference, they share some important traits. Both share a largely absurd and unrealistic vision of a people-less and non-economic world to colonize, where past activities and people are erased as new valuations are enacted. Both are related to a central government, transnational networks, and national imaginaries. They establish alternative values of the environment and link local affairs to a wider national and global political economy context through the commodification of natural resources.

A frontier therefore signals the replacement of existent regimes of property. For example, the world’s demand for rubber, or the ‘discovery’ of the utility of palm oil has, both in Laos and Indonesia, led to a massive growth in government-issued land concessions to companies and the subsequent annihilation of the previous smallholder land use, rights, and way of life. Similarly, the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in Nigeria meant that local rights to land were erased by the government in favor of oil extraction. Previous rights may seem to have been quite entrenched, but, with the dramatic restructuring of relative commercial value of resources, farm fields and pastures yield to mono-cropping, mining pits, and oil wells, and village forests give way to carbon stocks traded in the global market.

Extractive industries tend to expand within the growth of the capitalist market. Even in the countries of the Latin American ‘pink tide’, extractivism continues to take center stage in the framing of national development. In Ecuador, as elsewhere, the global demand for oil translates into local impacts on biodiversity, indigenous groups, and land tenure systems. As these pressures increase, local forms of resistance emerge and new forms of political organization are born. Struggles over resources therefore entail questions concerning political communities, and the relationship between citizenship, territory, and nation.

Whereas extraction and agro-industries both transform landscapes by way of technology and physical force, conservation hinges upon ideals about wilderness, biodiversity, and sustainability as well as the physical policing of space. Conservation entails significant institutional rearrangements. By redefining and enclosing the environment, conservation turns native homelands into attractions, environmental services, and other kinds of...
Policy Implications

These research results may have a number of implications for policy-making. They include:

1. The discovery and exploitation of new resources not only alter physical landscapes but fundamentally change institutional arrangements for resource control. Development interventions in areas of resource extraction or conservation must therefore take into account the dynamic and shifting political terrain and acknowledge the multiple claims to resource control, and incorporate them into their designs.

2. New resources represent particular valuations of the environment. When drafting policies in areas of resource commodification it is therefore important to pay attention to the possible erasures of local values implied by the new extraction regimes in order to secure the continued inclusion of local populations’ needs, values, aspirations and development priorities.

3. Frontier zones are often violent spaces. Non-state actors and organizations, too, have territorializing capabilities. In contexts where authority is under radical negotiation, development interventions must carefully analyze these violent environments and the territorializing techniques that underpin them in seeking to enforce and authorize resource control. Consequently, policy makers should acknowledge their own potential role in the conflict. Failure to do so enhances the risk of inequitable and unjust development outcomes which support those actors who succeed to advance their claims and to territorialize them.

Conclusion

Frontier dynamics and territorialization are intimately linked as destructive and constructive efforts at spatial resource control. Frontier and territorialization dynamics do not occur only in ‘remote’ regions. The dynamics that link space and resources are not a function of mere distance, but a particular configuration of values and institutions related to the commodification of nature. The discovery of new resources often takes place in populated places and leads political authorities like governments to disconnect people from place and to disenfranchise them. When frontier moments offer new opportunities of wealth capture, where institutional competition is intense, and where political power is skewed and livelihoods precarious, old established rights give way to the struggles for the reconstruction of new ones.