

The neoliberal borderscape: the precarious future of the migrant social system along the Thai-Myanmar border

Abstract:

This paper addresses literature on neoliberalism and borders by discussing the effects of neoliberalism on migrant lives in Mae Sot, a town on the Thai-Myanmar border inhabited by approximately 200,000 migrants from Myanmar. Mae Sot has been an area peripheral to centres of state power since the 1980s. Hence despite being subject to periodic immigration crackdowns, undocumented migrants were able to establish a semi-legal social system along the border comprising schools, clinics, and community organizations, which allowed migrants to access functions ordinarily provided by a state. However, since Myanmar's transition to a nominally civilian government in 2010, neoliberalism has dismantled this quasi-state system in two ways. Firstly, Mae Sot has acquired an unprecedented centrality to the Thai state's border development agenda: the once-marginal border area is positioned as a key node in transport networks stretching across mainland Southeast Asia, while migrant labour has been framed as a draw for foreign investors. Secondly, Western donors that have long supported the migrant social system are rerouting their resources to Myanmar's central government, thereby threatening informal processes of social reproduction along the Thai-Myanmar border. Overall, the neoliberal agendas of these actors rearticulate migrants as naked labour: they are increasingly recognised for their ability to work but cut adrift from the social systems they have long relied on. Whereas existing literature argues that neoliberalism has imbued borders with a filtering function through which the mobilities of migrant bodies are managed according to their perceived value to processes of capital accumulation, the full extent of neoliberalism's effects on the Thai-Myanmar border can only be apprehended when one considers how the quasi-state system is being reconfigured—and indeed, rendered increasingly precarious. In other words, the current situation of migrants in Mae Sot compels geographers to consider the effects of neoliberalism on a *borderscape* constituted by relations between migrants and other borderland actors.

Keywords: migrants; neoliberalism; borders; naked labour; Thai-Myanmar border

INTRODUCTION: FROM BACKWATER TO BOOMTOWN

The Thai action film *Salween* (1994) opens with a comical scuffle between the police and local thugs in a market on the Thai side of the Thai-Myanmar border. In the thick of the action, a newly appointed police chief arrives from Bangkok in a crisply ironed uniform. In shock, he drives his motorcycle straight into a muddy pigpen. That night, he writes to his grandmother, telling her: “this is a real frontier town. People and places here are really wild.”

Salween can be read as a riff on a popular imaginary of the border between southeast Myanmar¹ and western Thailand during the 1990s: the border as a wild, lawless frontier at the edge of state territory. These perceptions appear anachronistic today. Since the Karen National Union (KNU) signed a ceasefire in 2012 after six decades of war in Myanmar’s southeast, trade through the Mae Sot-Myawaddy checkpoint has grown every year, amounting to 66.8 billion baht (USD1.8 billion) in 2015, making Mae Sot-Myawaddy the most important overland crossing point between Thailand and Myanmar (Assawin, 2015). Such changes are testament to the Thai state’s plans to transform the once-volatile frontier area into a hotbed of investment, chief among which is a proposal to develop Mae Sot as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with tax breaks for investors and improved infrastructure that connects Mae Sot to regional highway networks (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; Gray, 2015). Official narratives therefore imply a sea change in the political geography of the border: from an area peripheral to centres of state power to a site that is the target of neoliberal state interventions. In the process, Mae Sot will transform from ‘backwater to boomtown’ (Gray, 2015).

How does this implicate a large population of migrants from Myanmar that have arrived in Mae Sot *en masse* since the 1980s? At 200,000² to 100,000, the estimated number of Myanmar migrants vastly outnumbers the number of Thais residing in Mae Sot (Lee, 2011). They comprise garment workers—who are in the majority—agricultural workers, domestic workers, construction workers, CBO/NGO workers, almost all of whom work informally and accept wages that are far below the Thai minimum (Arnold, 2007; Campbell, 2018). The migrant population also consists of a sizeable number of children (CPPCR, 2009). Over the past three decades, migrants and their families have relied on an informal social system comprising NGOs, CBOs, and religious organisations to access education, healthcare, and other social services, even though these organisations themselves remain mostly unregistered with the Thai government (Lee, 2007; Soe Lin Aung, 2014). By offering migrants some measure of support in exile, this social system has allowed migrants to approximate a normal life outside the organizing frameworks of the state (see Greenberg, 2011; Jansen, 2015). Migrants were able to have attain some access to healthcare, register the births of children, acquire locally-recognised ID cards, and seek help from CBOs/NGOs when workplace problems arose. Provided that there was a migrant school nearby and that parents were willing, children growing up on the border could attain an education and the hope of social mobility. This quasi-

¹ The choice between the use of *Burma* or *Myanmar* has been politically charged since the military government changed the country’s name in 1989. For practical purposes, I will use *Burma* to refer to the country prior to 1989, and *Myanmar* thereafter. *Burmese* refers to people who identify as citizens of Burma/Myanmar. *Burman* refers to the majority ethnic group in Burma/Myanmar.

² Estimates vary from 150,000 to 300,000. Compare e.g. Campbell (2012); Lee (2011); Soe Lin Aung (2014).

state system grew because the Thai state has historically left its border with Myanmar largely unregulated, while organisations acquired funding from Western donors keen to utilize these aid flows as a critique of the Myanmar government. Today however, the Thai state is seeking to extend its reach over migrants in an unprecedented way, insofar as a main draw for investors to the area is the existence of a pool of docile migrant labourers. The SEZ, for instance, is intended to combine the ‘excess, cheap labour of Myanmar’ with ‘the higher value-chain manufacturing in Thailand’ to maximum effect (Kalin Sarasin, quoted in Gray, 2015). The heightened presence of the Thai state in Mae Sot threatens the quasi-state system, which has flourished precisely because of an absence of state regulation. Moreover, Western governments seeking closer ties with Myanmar have withdrawn funding from NGOs and CBOs on the Thai-Myanmar border. This is motivated by both geoeconomic interests in Myanmar and broader trends in international development.

This paper argues that neoliberalism offers a powerful lens for explaining these changes *in toto*. Furthermore, because of the centrality of the quasi-state system to migrant lives in Mae Sot, a full understanding of neoliberalism’s effects on the border must account for the relations between migrants and non-state actors that constitute this social system. This necessitates understanding migrant lives as enacted within a borderscape that facilitates ‘varied and differentiated encounters’ between a range of non-state actors (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007: xxx). I argue that Mae Sot is presently being transformed into a *neoliberal borderscape*, in which these organized encounters are being reconfigured in order to accomplish ‘utopian geoeconomic visions of spreading free-market freedoms’ (Sparke, 2007: 338). This paper builds on a total of nine weeks of fieldwork in Mae Sot in May, June, and December 2016. Inspired by political geographers’ calls for ethnographic, ground-up approaches to state-making and border studies (Megoran, 2006; 2017; Reeves, 2011), I volunteered at a local organisation, teaching daily English classes to twenty-five undocumented migrants. I supplemented participant observation with semi-structured interviews, pursued to reflect the diverse positions individuals could occupy within the quasi-state system. Interviewees (n=47) thus included migrants supporting other migrants in the capacity of say, a teacher or health worker, NGO workers from Thailand or Western countries, students, and a property developer leading a condominium project in Mae Sot. These interviews were either conducted in English or with the help of a Burmese-speaking community interpreter. Whenever possible, I followed CBO workers on their daily routines, allowing me to access migrant workers who were living out of the view of the state, while also offering me insight into how CBOs were embedded in the lives of migrants and their families. Pseudonyms are used to protect my interviewees’ identities.

This paper is split into five subsequent sections. I begin by positioning this paper within existing literature on neoliberalism and borders. Although this literature has explained how neoliberalism accords borders with a filtering function, it does not address the contradictory location of border-crossing labourers, who are not welcomed by host states although their labour power is central to state-led neoliberal designs. To understand neoliberalism’s effects on these subjects, I bring it into conversation with the concept of the borderscape. The third section briefly explains the historical reasons for the Mae Sot’s marginality to both Thai and Myanmar state power, how the quasi-state system came to rely on

Western donors, and the extent to which both the Thai state and Western donors are now guided by neoliberal agendas in their engagement with the border area. The fourth section discusses the implications of the Thai state's heightened interest in the border for migrants in Mae Sot. Despite the integrality of migrant lives to Thailand's border development agenda, migrants continue to perceive that they have been *abandoned* by the state, even as they express *anxiety* over the future of the quasi-state system. The fifth section then focuses on the withdrawal of Western funding from the border area. Using the example of migrant schools, I show that the quasi-state system is coming undone and speculate on how these changes erode the familial and communal relations between migrants that constitute the Mae Sot borderscape. Finally, I return to the theoretical contributions of this work.

NEOLIBERALISM AND STATE BORDERS

David Harvey (2005: 7) defines neoliberalism as:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced... within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.

To achieve this, neoliberalism reconfigures the workings of the state. Despite deploying a 'rhetorically antistatist' language about the need to remove barriers to the circulation of commodities and capital (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 281), states advance neoliberalism by way of *re*-regulation rather than deregulation (Sparke, 2006). Authors have shown how the practice of citizenship (Ong, 2006) and possibilities for political dialogue (Brown, 2006) have been refashioned so as to redirect all aspects of statehood towards attaining neoliberal ideals. Neoliberalism has also reconfigured the relations between states. Roberts *et al.* (2003: 886) therefore identify a 'geopolitical world vision... closely connected to neoliberal idealism about the virtues of free markets, openness, and global economic integration'. They argue that geopolitical rivalries have not withered away since the Cold War, but that imperialism is now nestled in neoliberal rhetorics that ascribe peace and prosperity to areas well-integrated within the global economy, and danger to places that are not. This vision is exemplified in Thomas Barnett's strategic vision for the US, which lends justification to the use of US military might when it is directed at "shrinking" large swathes of the globe perceived as dangerous and fearful because of their "failure" to embrace a global free market (see also Morrissey, 2011). Overall, neoliberalism and state power must be seen as co-constitutive rather than as mutually opposed. Moreover, one might ask how the borders between states are managed in order to contain spaces designated as "fearful" for their putative reluctance to conform to neoliberal ideals.

At first blush, neoliberalism's 'global vision of almost infinite openness and interdependence' (Roberts *et al.*, 2003: 888) seems to advance freer flows across international borders. Indeed, political geographers have examined various landscapes produced to generate connectivity, including bridges, roads and tunnels that span two states and/or regions (Lin and Grundy-Warr, 2012; Sparke, 2000) and—on a larger scale—cross-border economic zones that facilitate trade between cooperating states (Bunnell *et al.*, 2006; Pavlakovich-Kochi, 2011; Sparke *et al.*, 2004). However, geographers have also pointed out that interstate borders remain integral to a neoliberalising world. Borders are not eroded but are reconfigured to

‘reconcile security with mobility and sovereignty with economy’ (Amoore, 2011: 64). This is usually done by asserting that borders are increasingly performing a filtering function: they enable certain forms of mobility while excluding others (McNevin, 2007; Coleman, 2005; Sparke, 2006). Various logics and mechanisms underlie this filtering function. The smooth mobility of goods is, for instance, facilitated by dual logics of interconnection and securitisation, evident in the interplay between advanced approaches to supply chain management and adherence to the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (Martin, 2012). Similarly, several policies facilitate the smooth mobility of a kinetic elite, whose knowledge, expertise, and experiences are accorded disproportionate value within the context of advanced capitalism. Expedited crossing schemes for business travelers exemplify these, such as the NEXUS programme for frequent travelers across the US-Canadian border (Sparke, 2006), the Privium scheme that allows “known” travellers at Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport to breeze through security checks (Adey, 2004), and the status of a “Well-Known Person” accorded to individuals crossing into the Schengen Area via Finland (Prokkola, 2013). Geographers also note that mobilities are increasingly sorted through biometric profiling and other technologies, such that border control is rendered a matter of technology, rather than politics; evidence of the neoliberal state ceding control of its borders to the rationale of the market (Adey, 2004).

On the flipside of these privileged mobilities are the slowed, halted, and sometimes violently disrupted mobilities of a global underclass of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants. The US-Mexico border is a quintessential case in point, given that it marks vast disparities in wealth between two adjacent states while also being a key site along which the implications of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a neoliberal economic policy *par excellence*, play out. Here, the economic connectivity engendered by NAFTA has compromised rural livelihoods in Mexico, creating significant push factors for migration into the USA (Nevins, 2007). Yet, although NAFTA has allowed for an increased mobility of goods across the border, a hardened border enforcement regime instituted by the US has curtailed the ability of Mexican migrants to cross into the US. Through Operation Global Reach, the US has sought to pre-empt the movement of undocumented migrants and smugglers before their arrival at US borders (Coleman, 2007). On the border itself, the US has sought to redirect migrant journeys towards remote areas that feature harsh desert terrain, in the hopes of deterring prospective migrants from undertaking the journey. This strategy of prevention through deterrence has made the border a lethal space, characterised by rising deaths due to dehydration and extreme heat, while obscuring the state’s hand in creating the conditions for such seemingly “natural” deaths. In this sense, the deserts of the US-Mexico border function as a space of exception (c.f. Agamben, 1998; 2005). Migrants are reduced to bare life in that their lives are taken without apology; conversely, the state acquires an exceptional moral immunity for the acts of killing that it performs (Doty, 2011). Indeed, borderlands in general can be considered spaces of exception where the state condones extreme violence against “unauthorized” border-crossers, such that the state’s sovereign power becomes visible in its most raw, unadulterated forms (Jones, 2009; Salter, 2008). Crucially, in some instances and certainly in the case of the US-Mexico border, neoliberalism provides the ‘capitalistic context and some of the structuring order’ for such spaces of exception (Sparke, 2006: 175), insofar as neoliberal logics provide justification for border regimes that halt the movements of a global

underclass while also encouraging the frictionless movement of goods, capital, and a privileged transnational elite.

However, a striking omission in most of these analyses of neoliberalism and the border is the contradictory location of migrant labourers that are desired for the labour power they offer to their host countries' economies, even if they remain excluded from political belonging (Rajaram, 2015). As Anne McNevin (2006: 141) shows in her analysis of the *Sans-Papiers* in France, neoliberalism has created a class of irregular migrants that are 'incorporated into the political community as economic participants but denied the status of insiders.' However, McNevin's (2006; 2007) focus is on how the *Sans-Papiers* and irregular migrants in US cities actively mobilize and assert claims to belonging in spite of their lack of official status; she does not deal in-depth with the ways in which borders themselves are being reconfigured for labouring bodies. This, however, is a salient question in the case of the neoliberal designs being imposed onto the Thai-Myanmar border given the sheer tens of thousands of migrants—already present in Thailand, albeit without passports or stamps—that will be affected by them. In addition, given that these migrants are paradoxically both needed (for their labour power) and unwanted (as human beings), it is not enough to examine the border as mechanism that sorts migrants into categories of inclusion and exclusion. Instead, it is necessary to bring neoliberalism in conversation with the idea of a borderscape, a conceptual tool originating in border studies that is used to understand international borders not just as territorial and political, but as social, cultural, economic phenomena (Brambilla, 2015). Borderscapes are constituted by relations between non-state actors through which these actors resist the territorializing impulse of the state (Perera, 2007; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007).

Mae Sot must be read as a thriving borderscape, insofar as the imposition of neoliberal designs onto the area is predated by a lengthy period in which the Thai state did not seek watertight control over its periphery. This state of abandonment has allowed numerous undocumented migrants to reside in Mae Sot over the past three decades and has also allowed an entire "border social system" to take root that facilitates migrant lives regardless of their lack of legal status (Lee, 2007). Existing literature in area studies and anthropology is rife with examples of how migrants in Mae Sot have been able to pull together communities that afford them a measure of agency in exile. For instance, migrants have engaged in the smuggling economy (Lee, 2011; 2015), formed grassroots organisations along gender and ethnic lines (Anderson, 2014; Røthe, 2013), and put forth labour demands (Campbell, 2012; 2013; 2018). All of these are testament to the existence of a lively borderscape that predates the imposition of neoliberal agendas for Mae Sot, through which migrants sought out some semblance of protection from their relations to other borderland actors in the space vacated by the state. Hence whereas existing work on neoliberalism and borders has tended to treat migrants as bodies that encounter the border alone (e.g. through deportation) or as part of a massified whole (e.g. as part of a "global underclass"), the case of Mae Sot's border social system also provides an interesting standpoint to identify how relations between migrants and between migrants and other actors are reconfigured because of neoliberal impulses.

THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER: FROM MARGINAL PERIPHERY TO GEOECONOMIC CENTRE

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the location of present-day Mae Sot lay between the political centres of Ayudhya and Burma, belonging to neither kingdom but central to trading routes between them (Pitch, 2007). In 1885, when Britain annexed Burma following the third Anglo-Burmese war, a boundary between British territory to the west and Siamese territory to the east was delineated for the first time (Thongchai, 1994). Yet the area continued to function as a *de facto* ‘open zone wherein passports, visas, customs, and other accoutrements of boundaried countries [held] little value’ (Renard, 1987: 92; cited in Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002: 98). A growing Karen³ village on Siamese territory was designated as Mae Sot district in 1898. An early account of the town portrays it as a few hundred houses nestled in a forest, with a minority of Siamese people and a majority of Shan and Burmese people, although Chinese, Indians, and Karens were also passing through (Lajonquire, 1904, cited in Pitch, 2007). Throughout the 20th century, people continued to migrate to Mae Sot, drawn to its location between Rangoon and Moulmein (Lower Burma’s major port) to the west and Chiang Mai and Bangkok to the east (Pitch, 2007). However, Mae Sot’s burgeoning economic importance was disrupted by the second World War and subsequent political upheavals in southeast Burma/Myanmar.

When Burma acquired independence in 1949, over forty percent of its territory comprised ethnic minority-dominated territories that had largely retained indigenous systems of political organisation (Smith, 1999). For the Karen, residing in areas adjacent to Mae Sot, Burma’s independence meant that they began to be cast as enemies of the newly-formed nation-state. The Karen had fought alongside the British in WWII against Burman nationalist leaders allied with the Japanese, trusting that the British would grant them self-determination after the war. However, when petitions to the colonial government were left unanswered, the Karen National Union (KNU) was formed in 1947 to address the political grievances of the Karen (Gravers 2015). Two years later, perceiving that communal relations were worsening, the KNU’s armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) initiated the Karen rebellion. It took the KNLA only ten years to take control most of Burma’s mountain borderlands to the east. In the 1960s, as Burma’s military government pushed it into economic isolation, the KNU prospered by imposing a flat 5% levy on smuggled goods crossing the Thai border (Smith, 1999). Mae Sot became the centre of this illicit economy. Thailand turned a blind eye to this trade, conceiving of KNU territory as a strategic buffer between themselves and socialist Burma during the Cold War.

The tides turned in the 1980s. The Burmese Army (*Tatmadaw*) intensified its counterinsurgency campaign, causing the first large-scale displacement of Karen people across the Thai border in 1984. Karen people continued cross the border *en masse* throughout the 1980s and 1990s for a mixture of reasons encompassing direct encounters with armed conflict, fears of forced displacement, forced labour, and arbitrary taxation enforced as part of the *Tatmadaw*’s counterinsurgency strategy, and livelihood struggles (Pollock, 2011; South, 2007). Although the Thai state distinguishes between migrants “tolerated”

³ The Karen are considered an ethnic group in both present-day Thailand and Myanmar. However, the term “Karen” itself is problematic since the term refers to several highland tribes consolidated by the British (Rajah, 2003).

for living in nine refugee camps along the Thai border and a far more numerous population of “illegal” migrants working outside the camps, such as in Mae Sot, this distinction reveals little about migrants’ actual reasons for leaving.⁴ As the migrant population grew, so too did the number of organisations supporting migrants, often founded by well-connected and well-educated political leaders fleeing into exile from Myanmar. Many of these organisations began to receive funding from Western donors during the 1990s, by which time the quasi-state system was flourishing under the Thai state’s radar, providing healthcare, education, and birth registration to migrants in Mae Sot. However, the late 1980s also marked a turning point in Thailand-Burma relations. When the Burmese government opened the country to foreign investment in 1989, Thailand became the *Tatmadaw*’s ‘first international friend’ when the government reestablished diplomatic relations with the junta to seek timber and fishing deals for Thai companies (Hyndman, 2001; Smith, 1999: 396). In contrast, throughout the 1990s the KNU lost most of its bases along the border and the income it derived from customs gates, including the devastating loss of its headquarters at Manerplaw (Brenner, 2018). This sent even greater numbers of Karen people across the border, who were increasingly joined by Burmans, Karens, and Mons from central Myanmar escaping the junta’s economic mismanagement.

In 2012, the KNU signed a controversial ceasefire with the *Tatmadaw* that brought the entire Thai border under the ambit of the Myanmar state for the first time. This allowed Thailand to capitalize on Mae Sot as a gateway into Myanmar’s once-volatile southeastern borderlands through the inauguration of various neoliberal schemes. For one, Thailand is supporting several transcontinental transport projects that encompass the highway adjacent to Mae Sot, including the East-West Economic Corridor, a 1,320km continuous route between the ports of Da Nang in Vietnam and Mawlamyine in Myanmar, the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway network, and the Asia Highway (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; see Florento & Corpuz, 2014). The 896-hectare Mae Sot SEZ—mentioned earlier—aims to lure foreign investors towards Mae Sot’s integration into these regional networks, alongside the easy availability of migrant labour (Soe Sandar Oo, 2013; Thame, 2014). The plan for the SEZ, approved in 2013, appears to have been well-received by investors for precisely the reasons set out above. Khun Fa, a Bangkok-based property developer, explains that the project she was leading was directed at leveraging on the Thai state’s neoliberal agenda. ‘I see the potential of Mae Sot growing,’ Khun Fa tells me,

The government has some big projects in the area, so our project prepares to serve these. Many people will come here from the outside, and they will need an apartment... Many people think that if you set up a business by the border, you can use the advantage of the Burma side, like workers. (interview, 15 December 2016)

To illustrate what she means, she gestures to a large map on the wall of the sales office, pointing out not only the existing domestic airport, but also areas proposed for the development of an international airport, a rail link to Myanmar, and the SEZ. Her project is due for completion in 2021. Khun Fa is not alone:

⁴ Today, although Thailand is not signatory to any international conventions concerning refugees, nine camps continue to exist along the Thai-Myanmar border, housing about 100,000 refugees in total, in comparison with an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 migrants in Mae Sot alone.

because property developers anticipate Mae Sot's geoeconomic potential, real estate prices have skyrocketed 500% over ten years (Mellor, 2015).

Whereas Thailand's geoeconomic interests in Myanmar are premised on its shared land border with Myanmar, the Thai-Myanmar border is also being shaped by economic interests operating on a much larger scale as Western governments begin to articulate Myanmar as a "frontier" for investment where foreign corporations can reap lavish profits by seizing the Myanmar's fresh entry into the global economy (see Imamura, 2015). This renewed interest in Myanmar—after years of treating the country as a "pariah" state for its refusal to adopt democratic ideals—was precipitated by the election of a nominally civilian government in 2010 and accelerated by the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy in 2015. Myanmar's relations with various Western governments has duly improved. The US lifted all sanctions on Myanmar on 14 September 2016 in response to 'Burma's tremendous progress toward democratic consolidation' (U.S. Mission Burma, 2016); two days later, the EU announced that they would not put forward a resolution calling attention to human rights shortcomings in Myanmar at the UN General Assembly for the first time in 25 years. Given criticisms that these shows of support are premature—particularly in the light of the Rohingya crisis and a resurgence of conflict in Myanmar's northeast (see e.g. ALTSEAN-Burma *et al.*, 2016; Lintner, 2017)—geoeconomics provides compelling explanation for Western governments' eagerness to reestablish ties with Myanmar. Although these interests are not directed at the border per se, they have had a marked effect on Mae Sot insofar as the majority of the CBOs and NGOs in the quasi-state system rely on Western donors. Aid flows to Myanmar grew nearly tenfold between 2010 and 2015, with a total of USD 13.7 billion pledged to the country between 2011 and 2015 (Asia Foundation, 2017); in the same period however, border-based organisations have increasingly struggled to renew grants (Décobert, 2016). Western geoeconomic interests in Myanmar are tightly linked to the Mae Sot-based quasi-state system (Mostafanezhad, 2017).

In sum, Mae Sot has experienced two parallel transformations in recent years. Firstly, the Thai state has brought Mae Sot, once a relatively unregulated area, swiftly to the centre of its plans to capitalize on the formal regional economy. This transformation rests on Mae Sot's history as a border area populated by thousands of undocumented migrants. These migrants will provide the cheap labour sought after by investors and will produce consumables to be transported to ports on either side of mainland Southeast Asia over Thai-funded transcontinental highways. Secondly, the resources offered by Western governments to migrant organisations have diminished as a result of their desire for rapprochement with the Myanmar government. Crucially, these disparate changes can be traced to the synchronized motivations of various actors, all of whom have 'largely sublimated geopolitical within a geoeconomic frame based in the market triumphalism and economic connectivity of neoliberal globalization' (Cowen & Smith, 2009; Essex, 2013: 86; Moisio & Paasi, 2013). The next two sections will identify how this reconfiguration of the border-based geopolitical economy impinges on migrant lives.

THE PRODUCTION OF NAKED LABOUR: THAILAND'S REACH OVER THE BORDERSCAPE

The Thai state's neoliberal agenda for Mae Sot capitalizes on the labour power of migrant workers but remains silent about how migrants might relate differently to other borderland actors as a result. This section discusses two effects on these relations: firstly, the persistence of migrants' experiences of *abandonment*; and secondly, *anxiety* over the future of the quasi-state system that migrants have long relied on.

Davies *et al.* (2017) argue for the importance of probing the connections and disconnections between top-down state policies directed at abandonment (or retracting this state of abandonment) and their manifestations in individual experiences of physiological violence. Similarly, I argue that even as Mae Sot comes into the ambit of state power, migrants continue to experience state abandonment in various forms. At first blush, experiences of abandonment in Mae Sot are remarkably varied. Precisely because the state does not impose a coherent framework within which migrant lives relate to authority and to one another, one migrant's experience of abandonment can be enormously different from another's. In spaces vacated by the state, a range of organisations fill the gap, from insurgent organisations, to NGOs/CBOs, and individual do-gooders (see Davies and Polese 2015). One Karen migrant settlement I visited consisted of zinc huts on an empty plot of land in a middle-class Thai neighbourhood (see **Figure 1** for another example).

In the space of a bungalow are corrugated iron shacks, with holes cut out as windows. There are clothes hanging out, and women sitting around outside. It is midday and it is hot. 'Can you think what it's like during the hot season?' [my interviewee] asks me. 'It was forty degrees for forty days.' There is no fence. How is a space like this allowed to exist next to manicured lawns and paved roads? (fieldnotes, 24 June 2016)

I find out several months later: the land is rented by their boss, who bribes the police to keep them away. Each day, the migrants ride a bicycle to work at the same up-and-coming condominium development. Not only is the area abandoned by the state, this abandonment is deliberately prolonged to keep this small community of migrant workers under tight surveillance by their employers. It is also common for a plethora of CBOs to hold talks and "trainings" in these communities about, say, personal hygiene, family planning, or workplace safety. In doing so, they regulate the lives of migrants by offering ideas and worldviews that migrants may accept or reject. I observe Yin Yin, both a migrant and a CBO worker, gently chiding a young lady for expecting her fourth child (fieldnotes, 16 July 2016). In another instance, Aung Naing, likewise a migrant and a CBO worker, explains how he runs a Burmese radio station directed at migrant workers. The radio station runs a full daily programme featuring Burmese news, Burmese music, religious talks, and information sessions relating to various topics (e.g. education, women's rights, child rights, and labour rights) in collaboration with NGOs and CBOs (interview, 11 December 2016). The comprehensiveness of the quasi-state system is clear from the radio station's programme alone, along with the extent to which migrants been exposed to rights-based agendas pushed by international donors.



Figure 1. Migrant settlements are made of makeshift materials, tucked away behind main roads.

However, it would be unrealistic to romanticize the ‘creativity of the margins’ (Das and Poole 2004, 19) without clarifying its limits. Tracey, an American CBO worker, tells me that the forty or so cases of violence per month (predominantly sexual abuse) that she encounters in her work with children remind her of the sociological concept of anomie:

Have you heard that term? It means a sort of normlessness. There’s no checks and balances for behaviour... But what I also think is that the experience of being stateless, not having any power, not having any job—I mean, every single theory of rape says that rape is about power, not about sex. And so, I think we have these people, every sense of power has been stripped from them... and so you strike out at the most vulnerable. (interview, 24 June 2016)

Tracey raises two points. Firstly, she suggests that direct violence is at least partly motivated by a desire to reclaim power that has been systematically wrested away. Although migrants can approximate a normal life in the absence of a state (see Jansen 2015), they are unable to redress their fundamental condition of human insecurity. Organisations like Tracey’s can offer support for victims, but they cannot address the root of this problem. Secondly, she suggests that there is a “normlessness” on the border that makes this violence permissible. Similarly, Agamben (2005: 60) uses the term anomie to refer to a ‘juridical vacuum’ that is positioned in contradistinction to nomos, or a principle of ordering that produces legible political subjectivities imbued with certain rights and protections under the law (see also Diken & Laustsen, 2005). Tracey’s narrative therefore makes the limits of migrant agency brutally clear. Regardless of the support that migrants corral through the quasi-state system, which encompasses the CBO that Tracey works for, they continue to find themselves without protection when the threat of violence is most imminent. This state of abandonment has long existed in Mae Sot, and persists today in spite of the geoeconomic hopes that have been pinned to the border. This is unsurprising as neoliberal designs have much to do with ‘connectivity and pace’ (Sparke, 2007: 340), but little to do with rights and protections. By virtue of

remaining unrecognized by the state as political subjects, bare life remains a horizon towards which migrants are driven (De Genova, 2012; following Agamben, 1998).

Furthermore, these plans have generated anxiety among migrants who perceive that the quasi-state system will be threatened by the state's incursions into the border area. Several interviewees reiterated that the SEZ would be controlled not by local officials but by the central government in Bangkok. This has created anxieties for CBOs, most of which do not have legal status, but are merely tacitly tolerated by local authorities. As Zaw Min, a migrant school principal, puts it, 'we are, yes, illegal, but are running by understanding. Recognized by local people' (interview, 13 December 2016). The central government's deepened power over the SEZ threatens these long-term informal relationships of "understanding".

Furthermore, Naing Lin, representing an informal migrant labour union, states that:

For the SEZ, the problem is that the government does not have transparency. One of our members has attended the meetings, but they do not share a lot. All we know is that the people in charge of the SEZ, they will make their own rules. And the SEZ will be controlled by the central government, not the local... The SEZ can threaten our organisation because are not legal. Without us, if the workers have any problem, they cannot ask help from other organisations. Not even from the local government. They have to just deal with the central government and the employer. (interview, 16 December 2016)

I read two significant points from Naing Lin's insights. Firstly, he demonstrates the centrality of his organisation to migrant lives, stating that without the existence of the informal labour union, workers will be subject to the unadulterated power of the central state and their employers. The same point can be made about other aspects of migrant life. For instance, in terms of health, migrants rely on a large CBO-run clinic in central Mae Sot and/or CBO-run mobile clinics that rotate around migrant settlements for everyday medical ailments as well as birth and death registration. In contrast, migrants find it difficult to access the Thai healthcare system. Despite a 2014 announcement that all migrants would be able to purchase national health insurance regardless of documentation status, hospitals are reluctant to "assist" undocumented migrants—or, as the government puts it, "illegal aliens" (Mekong Migration Network 2016). Crossing back to Myanmar to seek healthcare is also untenable given the dire state of healthcare in Eastern Myanmar, so much so that CBO-run clinics in Mae Sot often receive residents of Eastern Myanmar as a significant portion of their caseload (see e.g. Mae Tao Clinic 2017).

Secondly, Naing Lin tells me that he knows little about plans for the SEZ. Likewise, even though the SEZ cropped up spontaneously during interviews, interviewees could offer few details:

For us, the SEZ is just a rumour. (Ye Myint, migrant teacher, 12/12/16)

We met with many researchers, that is how we gather information [about the SEZ]. We do not get information directly from the government or from the Ministry of Education or whatever. (Win Tin, migrant teachers' association, 19/12/16)

There was a clear contrast between the inability of these migrants—even though they held relative positions of power within the borderscape—and the depth of knowledge that Nok, a Thai citizen and a worker at a Thai NGO, possessed about the SEZ. As we spoke, she expounded (with scepticism) about the

business regulations and land laws that govern the SEZ (interview, 19 December 2016). Likewise, Khun Fa, the Thai property developer mentioned above, was able to embark on a speculative property development because of detailed information she had received from connections with the city government (interview, 15 December 2016). Clearly then, the SEZ is a top-down project, accomplished with little regard for the many migrants whose labour power has made Mae Sot an attractive site for the imposition of the Thai state's neoliberal agendas. Migrants, of course, find ways to bypass this (selective) lack of transparency. Naing Lin tells me about what SEZs in Indonesia and Cambodia portend for Mae Sot's future, while Win Tin gathers information from researchers that visit his organisation from Thai and overseas universities, who ironically have greater access to information than "local" actors in Mae Sot. Another interviewee tells me that he learns most from being hired to interpret for researchers (San Win, CBO worker, 23 December 2016). Yet once again, the limits of migrants' agency are clear. The "meetings" that Naing Lin refers to are information-sharing sessions that gather CBOs/NGOs and local authorities, but they are about disseminating information rather than consultation—and even then, authorities 'do not share a lot,' emphasizing that migrants are meant to cope with decisions that have already been made, rather than being granted a meaningful stake in their own future. Overall, migrants perceive that the quasi-state system they have long relied on is being edged out by the Thai state's neoliberal plans; even then, they are not privy to what these plans entail. Migrants already living beyond the ambit of the state are incorporated into neoliberal designs merely as "naked labour" (Whyte, 2009): bodies that are formally valued for their labour power, but not as legitimate political subjects to whom the state is responsible. Whereas the context of an unregulated borderscape offered migrants the latitude to form relations with other non-state actors, neoliberalism disaggregates the migrant subject, drawing its labour power into the state's purview while diminishing the capacity of migrants to fulfil the political, civil, and social aspects of their lives.

Moreover, the rearticulation of undocumented migrants as naked labour is premised on the fact that migrants will remain in Mae Sot in spite of perceived improvements to the political and economic situation in Myanmar. Strikingly, every Burmese person I interviewed in Mae Sot stated that it was "not yet" time to return. Firstly, migrants felt that there were few opportunities for meaningful employment and/or education in Myanmar, particularly in rural areas where migration is the norm for able-bodied young people. CBOs relayed anecdotes about migrants who had returned to Myanmar, only to come back to Thailand several months later. Secondly, even as Myanmar citizens were theoretically entitled to protections that they did not receive in Thailand, they continued to feel that state protections were dismal. Migrant workers in particular were concerned that Myanmar's labour laws were poorly enforced and highly outdated. As Aung Naing, a CBO worker, asks rhetorically: 'if an actual thing happens, who will help them?' (interview, 11 December 2016). Finally, migrants perceived that Myanmar's political situation was still unstable. These sentiments were articulated from actors occupying diverse positions in the Mae Sot borderscape, from a migrant student who told me that 'real peace' was still elusive (interview, 9 December 2016), to an agricultural worker who mentioned that his family preferred to 'stay here and watch what is happening in Burma' (interview, 16 December 2016). Both did not have legal status in

Thailand; only the former had a locally-issued student ID. CBO workers who were well-versed in the specifics of Myanmar's political situation often pointed to the breakdown of the Kachin ceasefire in Myanmar's northeast to show that the government could not be trusted. 'Our own government sends air strikes to destroy them,' a Karen community health worker told me, 'I don't think I can trust them' (interview, 20 December 2016). This final point is particularly striking given that Western donors' reasons for vacating the border area premised on the hope they see for Myanmar's political transition, even if migrants unanimously perceive this hope as enormously misplaced.

IMPOSSIBLE RESPONSIBILIZATION: MIGRANT EDUCATION AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF WESTERN DONORS

Whereas the previous section explored the effects of the Thai state's neoliberal agenda for the border, this section discusses Western donors' departure from the border and its effects on the quasi-state system. My argument is not only that the quasi-state system is threatened by the withdrawal of Western aid money, but firstly, that the manner in which this withdrawal is accomplished is congruent with neoliberal norms within the international development regime; and secondly, using the example of migrant schools in Mae Sot, that the changes above cumulatively threaten the conduciveness of the Thai-Myanmar borderscape to processes of social reproduction.

In his ethnography of USAID, Jamey Essex (2013) identifies a turning point in the agency's mandate in the 1990s when a geoeconomic rubric began to be applied to both the objectives of aid and to countries deserving aid. Firstly, development came to aim at transforming entire countries, building up their "capacity" to weather the vagaries of neoliberal globalization. Secondly, countries deserving of aid began to be selected according to whether or not they were on their way to appropriate economic and political reforms. Even though so-called fragile states were deemed most deserving of aid, a preoccupation with accountability and effectiveness meant that USAID was keen only to disburse aid to countries that were already demonstrating a commitment to building up sound neoliberal institutions. Within this rubric, Myanmar emerges as top contender for receiving aid, particularly since the election of the NLD in 2015. Conversely, Western donors' geopolitical impetus for supporting border-based organisations, with its origins in a critique of Burma/Myanmar's military government, has waned (see Décobert, 2016). This is true not only for USAID, but for other Western aid agencies active in Mae Sot (e.g. AUSAID, DFID, EuropeAid) caught up in a wider trend towards the neoliberalization of aid (Overton and Murray, 2011). When asked about how Western donors have altered their attitude towards the border, CBO/NGO workers almost unanimously raised two points. Firstly, they traced a decline in funding to the early 2010s, the point at which Myanmar reverted to nominal civilian rule, thereby lending credence to the argument that aid withdrawals are geoeconomically motivated. Tim, a British humanitarian worker with more than two decades of experience on the border, takes the 'last five or six years' as evidence of an 'international political shift, in terms of seeing the Burmese political leadership as legitimate to engage with' (interview, 28 July 2016). Secondly, interviewees stated that donors did not merely withdraw aid, but "moved" it into Myanmar. This language was adopted in almost every interview with CBO/NGO workers, who identified

it as the main problem their organisations were currently facing. Some had already opened branches of their organisation in Myanmar to appease donors, while others were being pressured to relocate entirely. In effect, well-established but informal organisations developed over decades of exile were being asked change their beneficiaries from migrants to citizens to align themselves with donors' intentions to develop the country from within.

What are the implications of these aid withdrawals on the quasi-state system? The case of migrant schools provides an apposite entry point for discussing these issues. After all, education aligns closely donors' narratives about developing a country's internal "capacity"; conversely, migrant education remains excluded from this homology between education-citizenship-future. As of June 2016, there were a total of 67 schools serving 12,000 students. Many were set up by pre-existing entities that were already well-established within the borderscape, such as health organisations, labour unions, and political organisations, who were concerned about the sizeable migrant child population. In 2005, the local branch of the Thai Ministry of Education allowed schools to register as "migrant learning centres" (MLCs) (Nongyao, 2012). MLCs were disallowed from describing themselves as "schools" and were technically still illegal, but they were at least recognized by local authorities. Concomitantly, local authorities began issuing semi-official ID cards to teachers and students that allowed them to escape some harassment from authorities, although they were disallowed from riding motorbikes and travelling beyond the vicinity. Besides providing education for migrants, the MLCs therefore perform an important security function. They grant local ID cards to children in the absence of pathways towards legal belonging, keep children from staying at home alone during their parents' working hours, and often provide transport to school since undocumented children cannot risk travelling alone. Moreover, schools provide a range of psychosocial functions in lieu of the state by offering opportunities for socialization through day-to-day school activities and inter-school sports tournaments (Pyne, 2007). Although the number of migrant schools has grown continuously since the 1990s, most are in a precarious position today because of their reliance on Western donors, who channel funds through schools to INGOs and local NGOs (e.g. Child's Dream, Help Without Frontiers, Save The Children, World Education). Win Tin, the leader in a migrant teachers' association, jokingly calls 1995 to 2010 the 'golden age of migrant education,' when donors actively encouraged local leaders to open a school (interview, 19 December 2016). Conversely, Win Tin tells me that donors nowadays are unwilling to support schools unless its leaders are interested in relocating schools to Burma.

School closures are the most blatant effect of these withdrawals. My interviewees estimated that of 61 MLCs, between ten to twelve had closed in the last two to three years due to their inability to procure funding. Numerous others are at risk, pending their ability to secure funding for the new academic year. Zaw Min, a migrant school principal, expresses this plainly when he states that his school has faced a 'financial crisis' every year since 2010. His school has enough funding to 'finish the academic year, but next year, we haven't decided if we will continue or not' (interview, 13 December 2016). Although students are offered the opportunity to transfer school in the event of school closures, this opportunity is not realized for the majority of students, particularly since traveling further away poses a significant security risk. Holders of a student or teacher card are prohibited from owning a motorbike license,

therefore necessitating that the location of students' homes must match a school's ability to provide transport. In particular, the risk is not deemed worthwhile for parents whose children are seen as old enough for work. Nwe Nwe, another migrant school principal, states that dropping out to work is the norm along the border. Already, within a single school year, her school has lost 48 students of her 420 students. There is also a great disparity between the number of students in Grade 1 (48 students) and in Grade 8 (3 students). Hence even as neoliberal narratives about the purpose of development aid refer to the necessity of building up "human capital" (see Essex, 2013: 98), migrant children are denied this very opportunity because they are aberrations in a state-centric cartography of neoliberal development.

In the face of dwindling funding, donors often propose that schools devise cost-sharing strategies such that they might be able to attain self-sustainability. This can take several forms. Whereas entry fees in Nwe Nwe's school were 30 Thai baht (USD 0.90) in 2007, they had risen to 600 baht (USD 18.01) by 2016. The school's income was further supplemented by the sale of mushrooms grown in the school compound and foraged fruit. I also found other schools acquiring income by setting up small convenience stores, growing vegetables, and introducing monthly fees. Furthermore, in fifteen of 67 migrant schools, cost-sharing is accompanied by the establishment of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in a bid to enroll parents in making schools more "self-sufficient" and "sustainable." Nwe Nwe, for instance, uses twice-yearly PTA meetings to explain the need to increase entry fees and to persuade parents to assist in growing mushrooms for sale. Despite having to implement cost-sharing strategies themselves, my interviewees were uniformly pessimistic about their viability. One principal stated that the 300 baht a month (USD 9.00) that donors demanded of each student at his school was unrealistic for migrant parents that could not earn 300 baht (the Thai minimum wage) a day. Another perceived that there was a serious disjuncture between the timeframe in which donors expected schools to reach self-sustainability, and the fact that migrants' wages are unlikely to increase substantially—if at all—regardless of how long they have been working.

Even the local migrant teachers' association has its doubts, despite being one of the key proponents of PTAs. Among other things, the association works to support the establishment of PTAs in a greater proportion of migrant schools, driven by reports of the underpayment and non-payment of teachers' stipends due to funding pressures. In their office,

I notice a large poster with various pictures of PTA activities... In the centre is a white card that says [in English]: '[the organisation] completed 18 PTA meetings/trainings in 15 migrants schools in 2015. Parents will understand the value of education and cost sharing'... The young lady showing me around says that 'most donors are moving to Myanmar so now they [parents] need to participate.' (fieldnotes, 8 December 2016)

Clearly, PTAs are meant to replace the role that donors once played in supporting migrant education. In the face of a diminishing alignment between the geopolitical priorities of donors and the needs of migrant schools, the teachers' association has sought to foment a new alignment between teachers and parents. Yet as Win Tin, a leader in the same association, explains to me later, the circumstances that migrants in Mae Sot face render this alignment precarious. He estimates that 80% of parents are supportive, and the remaining 20% are willing to work with the school but that they 'cannot pay the money'. They are

suspicious and possibly embarrassed that schools may demand more of them than they can offer. ‘In my experience,’ he tells me, ‘parents can cover mostly [at most] 30% of the school budget’ (interview, 19 December 2016).

The rhetoric of self-sufficiency used to legitimise cost-sharing resonates strongly with relationship between neoliberalism and responsabilisation. The demise of welfare state collectivism (at least in the West) has meant that not only are citizens made responsible for themselves and their own futures, but that the state has also devolved responsibility for others perceived as incapable of being responsible for themselves (Ilcan and Basok, 2004; Rose, 1999). Although I refer to migrants and not citizens, a similar intention to transform leaders in migrant education into actors that are responsible for others in their community in the absence of state protections and foreign aid can be detected here. Unlike in the case of citizens however, these ideals are fundamentally out-of-step with the realities of being an undocumented migrant. Ironically even as neoliberal norms in development hinge on ‘discourses and practices of capacity building’ aimed at generating ‘responsible members of open, market-based communities’ (Essex, 2013: 98), these norms are likely to curtail the ability of migrants to achieve these goals, given that they render the future of migrant schools increasingly threatened. Furthermore, these changes compromise the psychosocial and security functions of schools, thereby threatening the ability of migrant children to assemble a bearable life outside the grids of the state. Returning to the Thai state’s plans for the future of Mae Sot, it is important to note that these plans rearticulate migrant workers as naked labour without consideration for the existence of migrant children that reside with their families, many of whom attain some measure of protection by attending school while their parents go to work. The future of school-going children, who offer no labour power to the local economy, are left forgotten and highly precarious. Threats to the quasi-state system enacted under the auspices of neoliberalism therefore threaten not only individual migrant workers, but also the familial and communal relations that constitute the Mae Sot borderscape.

CONCLUSION: A FRAGMENTED BORDERSCAPE

This paper demonstrates two ironies of neoliberalism that emerge when the neoliberal agendas of two sets of actors coincide with the lives of undocumented migrants on the Thai-Myanmar border. For one, incursions of the Thai state into the once-peripheral area do not entail their protection, but rather perpetuate their abandonment. Because migrant lives are enrolled into neoliberal plans as mere labouring bodies, state power threatens the semi-legal quasi-state system that has provided migrants a sense of community, support, and a limited form of collective agency in exile while denying them any meaningful forms of protection. Secondly, even as Western donors re-route aid into Myanmar in support of the country’s “future,” undocumented migrants in Mae Sot—who find it unviable to return to Myanmar in the near term—find their own futures curtailed as a result. Migrants are denied the resources that once enabled processes of social reproduction beyond the remit of the state.

These insights can only be apprehended by taking the concept of the borderscape as a starting point. By foregrounding the relations between migrants and non-state actors that were fomented prior to

various actors' neoliberal agendas for Mae Sot, the full effect of neoliberalism on migrant lives becomes clear. In this context, neoliberalism fragments the borderscape. It whittles away at forms of social organisation that have allowed migrants to approximate a fulfilling life in the absence of state protections, rearticulating migrants as atomized subjects that are incorporated into state agendas purely for their labour power. Whereas literature on citizenship and neoliberalism has shown the productive dimensions of neoliberalism insofar as citizens are compelled to mould themselves into responsible and entrepreneurial subjects, migrants in Mae Sot find themselves denied the social relations required to sustain the civil, social, and political aspects of their lives. The effects of neoliberalism on migrant lives reach far beyond the filtering processes discussed in existing literature on neoliberal borders.

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