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FORUM ON ILLICIT DRUG CROP ECONOMIES

OPEN ACCESS

Drugs, frontier capitalism and illicit peasantries: towards a comparative research agenda

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ABSTRACT

A defining character of drugs-affected frontier regions is their dynamic instability and their boom-and-bust cycles. These are violent and disturbed landscapes, in which illicit drug economies play a transformative role. But not all frontiers are the same, and nor are the 'illicit peasantries' who inhabit the 'narco-frontier'. In this article we explore the complex dialectical relations between frontiers, drug economies, illicit peasantries and peasant politics. In doing so we develop a new comparative framework, that provides a heuristic for studying the commonalities and differences across narco-frontiers and the mechanisms behind these differences.

KEYWORDS

Illicit peasantries; narco-frontiers; frontier capitalism; illicit drug economies

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of work on the role that illicit drug economies play in transforming frontier spaces and borderlands[1] into violent sites of intense capital accumulation, where local peasants are dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods (Ballvé 2020; Eilenberg 2014; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Lu, Dev, and Petersen-Rockney 2022; McSweeney et al. 2018; Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Watts 2018). Plantation agriculture, and/or extractive industries, can be integral to these turbo-charged agrarian transformations, a process which pushes peasants to the margins of the drug-fuelled frontier economy (Hough 2019; Li 2023; Li and Semedi 2021; Peluso 2017). They become a semi-proletarianised reserve army of labour for the large-scale 'legal' industries, which provide only precarious employment for peasants, and/or they scrape by, cultivating illicit drug crops. Often, the only 'licit' lifeline on offer comes from deeply flawed alternative development programmes, which

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[1]Borderlands are defined here as inter-connected zones that straddle an international border. Frontiers are understood as less clearly delineated zones of transition and contact, that are inherently unstable, but which have distinct spatialities of rule and sovereign power (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, 10). Whilst recognizing that they are different, frontier and borderland dynamics frequently overlap in the drugs-affected margins of states. For the purpose of this article, we will use the terms frontiers and borderlands interchangeably and the term 'narco-frontier' is used to denote drugs-affected frontier/borderland regions, predominantly, but not exclusively on the state's geographical margins. The pre-fix 'narco' is of course one that comes with ideological baggage; we do not use it here in a pejorative way, but instead deploy it as a descriptive term to denote frontier/borderland regions in which illicit drug economies play a significant role within the agrarian political economy and beyond. For further discussion on frontiers, borderlands and narco-frontiers see: Ballvé 2019; 2020; Eilenberg 2014; Goodhand 2021; Grandin 2019; Li 2014; Moore 2015; Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Tsing 2004; 2015; Watts 2018.

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rather than providing genuine alternatives to the 'illicit peasantry', tend to depoliticise their relegated status, and reinforce their structural disposability as surplus life. This article focuses on the ways that illicit drug economies produce, and are shaped by, particular *places*, *peasantries* and *politics*. We explore the dialectical relationship between drug economies, narco-frontiers and illicit peasantries, the agrarian paths associated with illicit drug economies, their distributional outcomes for frontier populations and the kinds of politics that are generated by these processes. We ask: How are drug economies generative of particular frontier *places*? How and why do illicit *peasantries* emerge in some narco-frontiers and not others? What kinds of *politics* and claim making are associated with the emergence of illicit peasantries?

'Illicit peasants' are defined by Gutierrez-Sanin (2021a) simply as growers and workers within illicit crop economies. They rely – to varying degrees – on illicit crops for their livelihoods, and they tend to be stigmatised and criminalised for doing so. As a result they face significant risks linked to the threats of eradication and enforcement, and the high levels of violence surrounding illicit drug economies (Acero and Thomson 2021; Lone and Cachia 2021; Luong 2022; Tamariz 2022). However, the boundary between 'licit' and 'illicit' peasantries is rarely clear and fixed, whilst many, perhaps most, drug cultivators do not self-identify as an illicit peasantry.

We argue that that a common feature of narco-frontiers is the way in which the violent economies of the drug trade, and development agencies' failed attempts to mitigate their effects, play mutually constitutive roles in the production and maintenance of illicit peasantries as illegible and surplus populations. In other words, we aim to reveal how drug-fuelled capitalist (little d) development and the (big D) Development industry turn peasant communities into expendable life.[2]

We make this argument by drawing on empirical material, primarily, but not exclusively, from our research in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.[3] The article proceeds as follows: First, drawing on the formative literature on resource and commodity frontiers, we argue that narco-frontiers are best understood as a 'sub-species' of such frontiers. Second, we advance a tentative typology of narco-frontiers, which sub-divides them into three ideal types, according to the role played by illicit drugs, their relationships to little d and big D development and the character of the peasantry. Third, we explore in further detail the characteristics and roles of illicit peasantries within these different

[2]For discussion of little d, Big D development see (Cowen and Shenton 1996; Lewis 2019; Hart 2009; Mawdsley and Taggart 2022). For the purpose of this article, we understand little d development as an imminent process associated with the expansion and deepening of capitalism. Big D development is defined as formal, intentional measures by international and national development agencies. Drawing on Hart, Big D Development serves little d development in two ways; First as a palliative, to offset the dislocations brought about by development and second in ensuring/enhancing the ongoing process of uneven accumulation (Mawdsley and Taggart 2022, 5)

[3]This article draws primarily on two bodies of fieldwork: Firstly, the empirical research conducted by Goodhand and Meehan and other members of the 'Drugs and (dis)order' UKRI-funded research project (2017–2022). This involved research in nine drugs-affected borderlands/frontier regions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, working in collaboration with national research partners. The dataset produced by the Drugs and (dis)order programme included more than 2000 key informant interviews with farmers, traders and users in addition to policy makers and practitioners involved in the drugs, development and peacebuilding/security fields. It also included a set of life histories with people whose lives have been affected by the drug economy, and GIS analysis of spatial data on drug-affected borderlands in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. These datasets have been deposited in the UK Data Archive and further information on data coverage and methodology can be found for each dataset through the UK Data Service catalogue. Secondly, it draws upon the long-standing ethnographic research of Ballve in the frontier region of Uraba in northwest Colombia.

narco-frontiers. Fourth, we conclude by asking what kinds of political struggles and subjectivities emerge from illicit peasantries living in narco-frontiers.

Our comparative framework represents a first attempt to systematically compare narco-frontiers, in terms of the interactions between drugs, development and illicit peasantries. In doing so we aim to firstly provide a new analytical lens for studying, through comparative ethnography, the processes of agrarian change at the 'illicit margins', and secondly, we hope that this approach can contribute to policy responses that engage with illicit drug economies in more contextualised and humane ways.

2. Resource and commodity frontiers: the cutting edges of capitalism

Rather than viewing narco-frontiers as 'exceptional' or 'distorted', we see them as being emblematic of, and a subspecies within, the broader phenomenon of resource and commodity frontiers. In this section, drawing upon the wider literature on frontiers as well as our own research, we make the argument that the margins are central to how states and markets operate in many parts of the world. This provides a necessary starting point for understanding the particular dynamics of narco-frontiers, which we address in the subsequent section.

Scholarship on the uneven geographies of capitalism has increasingly focused on the site-specific expansion of resource and commodity frontiers.[4] These are places where dramatic expansions of resource extraction and commodity production – specifically, via plantation agriculture and extractive industries – are causing widespread environmental destruction.

A related body of literature on 'narco-frontiers' has documented how the economies of the illicit drug trade contribute to those socially and ecologically destructive dynamics (Ballvé 2019; 2020; Goodhand 2021; Gootenberg and Davalos 2018; Meehan 2022; Torres 2018). A central claim of this research is that narco-frontiers are spaces of turbo-charged agrarian transformations, because of the way the illicit economies of the drug trade (and efforts to combat drugs) act as accelerants for the intensification and expansion of 'legal' commodity production – such as palm oil, beef, gold, and jade.

Frontier zones are socially produced spaces shaped by both the limits of state power and the brute force of capitalist accumulation (Eilenberg 2014; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). Dominant geopolitical imaginaries portray them as wild and barbaric spaces populated (if at all) by uncivilised, often racialized locals, which is why they have often been what national territories and identities have been formed *against* (Grandin 2019; Scott 2009). Indeed, discourses about frontier zones as spaces of barbarism have been part and parcel of the hyper-exploitation of their people and resources. Although these may be 'rough and tumble' spaces (Watts 2018), they nonetheless exert a strong pull on those seeking land, resources, windfall profits, or political sanctuary.

[4]See Kroger and Nygren (2019), who elaborate on the differences and overlaps between resource and commodity frontiers. The former involves creating natural resources out of nature, based on the idea of 'unused nature' and 'free land' which provides the material and ideological conditions for frontier expansion. The latter are characterized by large scale commodity production for markets, and the capture of abnormal rents based on a capitalist logic of commoditization, profit making and spatial expansion. Resource frontiers may precede a commodity frontiers in some contexts – for example in Amazonia, de-forestation and cattle ranching are followed by land sales leading to soy bean or tropical fruit production – - and in others, resource speculation and resource commoditization may coincide – for example jade mining alongside commercial agriculture in Kachin State, Myanmar. See also Beckert et al. 2021; Changon et al. 2022; Eilenberg 2014; Moore 2015; Li 2014.

As Tsing (2004, 27) notes, '[f]rontiers are not just edges, they are particular kinds of edges where the expansive nature of extraction comes into its own … frontiers create wildness so that some – and not others – can reap its rewards.' They thus provide a privileged vantage point for exploring the connections between centres and margins, the rural and urban, capital and labour, production and consumption. Far from being residual places that have been left behind, frontiers are zones of rapid change and innovation that play out over long historical periods.

Frontiers arise not only from capitalist expansion, but also from the unevenness of that expansion (Harvey 2001; Moore 2015). Commodity booms can quickly go bust, sending capital in search of the next frontier. Frontiers are privileged sites for extractivism, involving 'socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion and non reciprocity' (Changon et al. 2022, 1). Seesaw cycles of investment and disinvestment perpetuate uneven development (Barbier 2012; Kroger and Nygren 2019; Ye et al, 2019). Capitalism's frenetic movements are further driven by its repeated crises of over-accumulation, whereby investors lack a productive outlet for their capital. The solution to these crises is spatial: surplus capital finds new under-commodified places (new frontiers) where the accumulation process can begin again – the 'spatial fix' (Harvey 2001). As capital whipsaws around from boom to bust, it leaves an uneven landscape of wealth and ruin.

The corresponding set of winners and losers tends to fall along racial lines. Indeed, the cultural politics of racism and other '-isms' of difference are not incidental to this uneven development; they are what makes frontier spaces 'available' and their populations 'expendable' in the first place (Prasse-Freeman 2022; Sauls, Dest, and McSweeney 2022). The primitive accumulation at the heart of the making of frontier spaces is thus always a cultural as well as an economic process.

After being violently stripped of their lands, peasants will often flee 'deeper' into the frontier finding new lands to clear and settle (Hough 2019; LeGrand 1989; Torres 2018). Unfortunately, the transition ends up paving the way for their own re-dispossession as the moneyed interests at the helm of the spatial fix follow in after them, seising the newly 'available' lands. But there can come a point in which peasant communities may have nowhere else to go; they are stranded at 'Land's End' (Li 2014). They face only undesirable options: join the new semi-proletarianised rural workforce of miners and plantation labourers, scavenge around the edges of the new commodity enclave, or migrate elsewhere.

In spite of their apparent unruliness, frontiers are not ungoverned or stateless spaces (Ballvé 2020; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Watts 2018). They are, rather, spaces where state-led projects of accumulation and rule are openly contested. The problem is not the absence of the state, but rather an excess of state-building projects vying for dominance. As these projects clash, state formation plays out through a violent and complex amalgam of actors: rebel groups, corporations, traffickers, international agencies, government entities, and foreign powers among many others. One reason these processes are so fraught is because, as Greg Grandin (2019) notes in relation to the United States, elites have historically used frontiers as societal safety valves, places where the accumulated pressure of pent-up political contradictions can be geographically displaced – *a spatial fix for politics*. He argues, for example, that class violence was repeatedly deflected out onto the frontier. Similarly in Colombia, the existence of an 'empty'

land frontier acted as political safety valve, enabling elites to evade redistributive land reforms (LeGrand 1989).

However, this is not to say that frontiers are passive receptors of every action and dictate emanating from centralised forms of power. Though often portrayed as peripheral or residual spaces, frontiers are central to broader networks of power and profit (Goodhand 2021; Watts 2018). As frequent spaces of exception subject to emergency measures, they are places of governmental experimentation and innovation; they can be testing grounds for practices of rule that later boomerang back for deployment into the self-appointed 'centre' (Hopkins 2020).

If a frontier zone also happens to be a space of illicit drug production or transit (or what we have elsewhere dubbed a narco-frontier (Ballvé 2019; Goodhand 2021)), then it becomes problematised in even more sensationalist ways. Whilst not arguing that narco-frontiers are necessarily peaceful, orderly places, their representation as ungoverned chaotic spaces, justifies and enables interventions that that can make these problems worse (Goodhand 2021). This sensationalism feeds into policies that combine extreme military force (counterinsurgency, interdiction, eradication, etc.) with programmes aimed at boosting alternative livelihoods, institution building, good governance, and the rule of law.

Policy designs ultimately provide a set of solutions or antidotes to the assumed pathologies of the margins – promising a virtuous circle of ameliorative measures to address the vicious circle of violence and illegality (Goodhand 2021). But one of the many faults of these programmes is their failure to address underlying political-economic dynamics. As elaborated below, militarised development, rather than addressing the forms of adverse incorporation (Hickey and du Toit 2013) that push the illicit peasantries into the margins, instead becomes an integral part of the narco-frontier economy, enabling its operation and perpetuation.

3. Narco-frontiers: commodity frontiers on drugs?

Rather than being exceptional outliers, narco-frontiers, as already noted, are better understood as part of a broader family, or a 'subspecies,' of commodity frontiers. It is therefore important to ground the study of narco-frontiers, within the broader work on commodity frontiers. This leads to questions about whether narco-frontiers are all that different from drugless commodity frontiers. What difference do drugs make to the dynamics of frontier capitalism? And how can we account for variation between narco-frontiers?

What makes narco-frontiers distinct is perhaps the catalytic role of the drug economy, often alongside extractivism, in the expansion or intensification of capitalism in these spaces through land-grabbing and il/licit commodity production. Scholars working in Afghanistan, Central America, Colombia, and Myanmar have meticulously documented the drug economy's role as an accelerant for large-scale forms of agrarian change (Ballvé 2020; Goodhand 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021b; McSweeney et al. 2018; Meehan 2022; Sauls, Dest, and McSweeney 2022).

Today's narco-frontiers share some common antecedents, having spent the final decades of the Cold War being torn asunder by proxy wars that drew on longer histories of colonial and neo-colonial violence. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents (along with their foreign partners) in these wars drew funds and logistical help from drug-trafficking (McCoy 1972). The construction of these networks – again, often with foreign help, as in

the case of the US in Central America – helped lay the social and material foundations for what became a more globalised drug trade (Gootenberg 2008).

Cold War militarisation primed these places to become drug war hotspots. As the Cold War ended, countries found themselves with bloated security apparatuses staffed by easily corruptible specialists in violence who were on the lookout for new internal enemies and challengers. This all happened as globalisation and neoliberal restructuring were gutting rural economies and driving peasants off their land through further impoverishment. These policies, combined with the escalating war on drugs pushed political and economic refugees deeper into remote frontier regions that had a 'comparative advantage in illegality' (Goodhand 2021). Here they turned toward illicit crop production to make a living, supplying the boom in global demand for drugs (Gootenberg 2008). Capitalising on the immiseration of the peasantry and on deep-seated legacies of political violence, the drug trade gravitated to these conflict-affected and state-challenged spaces.

Despite their similar histories and shared contemporary patterns, narco-frontiers display significant variations, depending on the specific ways the drug economy becomes intertwined with the licit economy. The temporality of drug-related frontiers can also vary. For instance, the slow evolution of the Chapare coca frontier began more than a century ago (Grisaffi 2021; Gootenberg 2008; Millington 2018), whereas the dramatic drug-fuelled transformation of the Bajo Aguán in Honduras (McSweeney et al. 2018), or parts of southern Colombia, took only a few years (Acero and Thomson 2021; Torres 2018).

Although we use 'narco-frontier' to describe the spaces of drug-related agrarian transformations, we do not mean to flatten the complexity and diversity of such spaces. In fact, drawing on our own research, we see three distinct drug-related dynamics that help drive the broader forces of agrarian change in narco-frontiers. While these three patterns can be parsed out analytically, we should make clear that any single one of these patterns can be intertwined with the others. Furthermore, the relative importance or even the presence of these relationships can change over time. Within these different frontier spaces, we argue that the drug economy can act as a *pusher, follower* or *financier* – or, more likely, some combination of these, often in the same space – driving processes of rural and urban transformation at the margins. As Rasmussen and Lund (2018, 340) remind us, frontiers are not only spatial constructs, but are also a political, economic and social *dynamic* linked to capitalist appropriation of space.

In Table 1 we set out a tentative typology which summarises the interrelationships between drugs, different narco-frontier types, the dynamics of little d and big D development, the kinds of (il)licit peasantries associated with these spaces and the forms of peasant politics that emerge from these frontier configurations. These interrelationships, as we will argue, are not assumed to be fixed and clear cut – instead, we see the table as a heuristic for exploring commonalities and differences across cases, and for setting out potential lines of inquiry for future research. In particular we hope the framework can contribute to a comparative ethnographic research agenda on narco-frontiers, as well as stimulating debate on how policies towards drug economies can be better contextualised.

3.1. New settlement frontiers; drugs as pusher

In these cases, the drug economy pushes its way, into un- or under-commodified spaces. War economies are often a driving force for the expansion of drug crops into frontier

Table 1. Typology of narco-frontiers.

Frontier type	Key features	Role of drugs	Dynamics of little d and big D development	(Il)licit peasantry	Frontier politics
New settlement frontiers	New land frontier. Drug crop cultivation fuels new rounds of frontier expansion and settlement.	Drugs as the *pusher:* drug cultivation and processing generate rents to fund land settlement, support livelihoods, as well as investments in social and physical infrastructure.	Drugs as employer of last resort and means of maintaining a foothold on the land. 'Big D' interventions work at cross purposes with or undermine drug-supported coping strategies.	Drug farmers a key population and constituency within the frontier, solidified by policies and discourses that target the 'illicit peasantry'.	Evasion, resistance, exercise of voice in response to CN efforts.
Extractivist frontiers	New resource/ commodity frontier, sometimes in the context of a post war transition. Extractivism fuels displacement and dispossession, and frontier populations turn to illicit drug production.	Drugs as *follower* expanding in the wake of extractivism. Those dispossessed are absorbed into the illicit peasantry or become labourers (with drugs often acting as a currency). Drug use may become increasingly prevalent.	Boom and bust cycles. Little d extractivist development generates a surplus absorbed into illicit crop production. Big D efforts geared to supporting extractivism, or ameliorating its effects.	Illicit peasantry emerges, but its voice and identity is diluted by other constituencies within the frontier	Political agency more diffuse and tactical. Where drug use prevalent, community mobilisation can emerge to address this issue.
Trafficking frontiers	Drug trafficking capital funds land grabs and new forms of extractavism	Drugs as *financier*. Emergence of a narco-bourgeoisie who invest in land acquisitions/ grabbing, agro business, ranching along trafficking corridors.	Drugs money as the handmaiden of little d development. Big D development largely focuses on drug interdiction, border.	No illicit peasantry in 'pure' trafficking frontiers.	No illicit peasantry and frontier politics shaped by coalitions between traders and politicians.

regions; armed conflict opens up opportunities and imperatives for revenue generation, whilst propelling land-hungry peasants into new areas for the purpose of cultivating illicit crops like coca or poppy. These new arrivals are often the orphans of war, or the collateral damage of failed development schemes elsewhere (Gootenberg and Davalos 2018). The frontier though may not necessarily be empty, or drug crops a new arrival; indigenous communities living in the frontiers of Colombia or Peru for example have a long history of coca cultivation and use for medicinal and cultural purposes (Torres 2023; Paredes and Pastor 2023). What is new is the commodification and large-scale production of coca for an external market.

Peasants push into hard-to-reach and socially and ecologically marginal regions, having been dispossessed by conflict and 'licit' forms of development, often involving land concentration, elsewhere – they move to the 'edges' such as the desert spaces of Farah and Helmand, Afghanistan, or Putumayo, Colombia, partly to avoid detection, and because

other forms of agriculture are not viable in such spaces. Unfortunately, in settling under-commodified areas, they may literally clear the way for far more destructive forces to seise their precariously possessed land, meaning that those who arrived after being expelled from elsewhere are now dispossessed a second time (Gutierrez-Sanin 2021a). Drug crops are often simply the spearhead for the extractivist mining and agribusiness that can follow in after them, as seen in particular in Colombia (Ballvé 2020; Torres 2018).

This does not mean that, as a matter of course, illicit peasantries are displaced directly by agribusinesses and mining. In Colombia, for instance, it has been argued that coca played a role in slowing down the expansion of the cattle/oil palm frontier in the south, enabling the peasantry to hang on to the land, and break the cycle of dispossession and displacement (Molano 2005; Ramirez 2011). In Myanmar, extractive industries and illicit peasantries occupy different niches within the frontier with China and Thailand, linked to topography. The drug economy has been a 'pusher' in the sense of opening up a valued commodity frontier, exerting a gravitational pull on other economic players and generating investment capital. Large scale dispossession by agribusinesses has been concentrated in fertile valley lands whereas drug cultivation has traditionally centred in marginal upland areas. Nonetheless, the increasing reliance of rural populations on upland areas less threatened by land grabs has magnified the importance of poppy to the dispossessed.

Once established in the frontier, illegal peasantries may develop a collective political identity if they must fight for their claim on the land and to protect their only means of livelihood as is the case of many 'cocalero' communities across the Andean-Amazonian subtropics (Gootenberg and Davalos 2018; Grisaffi 2021; Gutierrez-Sanin 2021a; Torres 2018). Unwittingly, state militaries and international actors reinforce peasants' identities of resistance through 'big D' development measures that target their crops for eradication. In some cases, eradication initiatives have even greater blowback by enabling rebels to position themselves as protectors of the peasantry whilst simultaneously regulating and taxing the drug economy (Gutierrez, Antonio, and Thomson 2020).

Therefore, illicit drugs can act as a 'prime mover', or an accelerant, in opening up new land frontiers. But the dynamics of, and inter-relations between drugs and development vary across different settlement frontiers. In the desert spaces of Farah, Afghanistan, for example poppy cultivation, supported by investments in solar power technology and tube wells, enabled the large-scale migration and settlement of landless peasants into a new land frontier – many of whom were displaced by failed counter narcotics and Alternative Development efforts in nearby Helmand (Mansfield 2016). However, drug-fuelled settlement has not been the 'pusher' for new forms of extractive development – ongoing conflict, the lack of 'commodifiable nature', in the form of valued resources, and the absence of a recognised state, means that Farah will remain a drug frontier of limited interest to agribusiness and extractives. In fact with climate change, lowering water tables, and salinisation, it is more likely to become a receding frontier that will no longer be viable, even for drug crop cultivation.

3.2. Extractivist frontiers; drugs as follower

In other narco-frontiers, the drug economy gains traction and expands *after* legal commodity production is well underway. In other words, resource and/or commodity

frontiers, precede the narco-frontier. Colombia's two banana frontiers are examples of this: in the region of Urabá, coca cultivation emerged after the United Fruit Company's arrival in 1964; in Santa Marta, coffee and bananas long pre-dated campesinos' shift to marijuana cultivation in the 1960s and then later to coca (Ballvé 2020; Britto 2020). In other parts of the country, coca has followed closely behind the development of gold, timber, and oil frontiers. Therefore, legal commodity booms (and busts) were frequently the primary driving force behind the expansion or intensification of production. Coca production arrived after the frontier had been opened up – for cattle ranching, oil extraction or failed development schemes – with displaced and impoverished peasants turning to coca as a new means of survival and a way of diversifying their livelihoods strategies.

In Myanmar's Kachin State the sequence was slightly different, but the dynamic similar, with poppy cultivation – though long a feature of the frontier – expanding in the wake of the extractive development that followed ceasefire agreements between the government and rebel groups (Meehan 2023). These agreements opened up the frontier to 'ceasefire capitalism' (Woods 2011) in the form of major infrastructure projects, commercial agriculture, logging and mining. Borderland 'development' led to indebtedness and dispossession and the creation of a surplus population who could no longer maintain a foothold in licit agriculture, and with nowhere to turn beyond the drug economy or labour migration. The expansion of the drug economy was also fuelled by the Myanmar Army's willingness to grant counter-insurgency militia a free rein to participate in the drugs trade at a time when the demand for heroin across the border in the consumption markets of China was rapidly growing (Meehan and Dan 2023). Millington (2018) describes a similar process in what he calls the 'establishment phase' of the coca frontier in Chapare, Bolivia, in which the fertile and productive valleys were taken over by sugar cane and biofuel conglomerates, leaving no space for the development of the legal peasantry – forcing them to migrate into the illegal sector, growing coca in more inaccessible and steeper areas.

A symbiotic relationship can emerge between frontier extractivism and illicit drugs – for example drugs become a substitute currency, subsidising the wages of labourers employed in mines or plantations, enabling them to work long hours whilst creating new markets of addiction (Meehan 2023). In this way, extractive development is symbiotically linked to the expansion of drug markets in frontier society – particularly where there are frontier boom town dynamics, as for example in the towns of Zaranj and Muse, on the Afghan-Iranian and Myanmar-China borders respectively. These once sleepy outposts have been transformed into vibrant cities in which agglomerations of illegality – drugs, people trafficking, casinos, prostitution, local markets of addiction – subsidise and fuel licit economies and infrastructures from tea houses, to hotels, construction companies, containerised licit trade, formal and informal banking and credit providers. The border, in turn, exerts a gravitational pull on state officials who 'cobble together arrangements of rule' (Chalfin 2010, 58) to regulate and tax (il)licit flows. Boom towns also become magnets for labour migrants. For example, in Kachin State, paddy farmers from the south of the country, who couldn't hold onto their land, make the long journey north to work in the jade mines – part of a recurring labour dynamic of extrusion and re-inscription into precarious and damaging work (Prasse-Freeman 2022).

Therefore, in these extractivist spaces, drugs form part of the broader commodity frontier, less as a driver of these transformations than as a residual effect, albeit one that

becomes deeply embedded in the agrarian economy, absorbing surplus labour created by extractivist dynamics.

3.3. Trafficking frontiers: drugs as financier

For some narco-frontiers, the catalyst for rapid agrarian change is not drug *production* but rather drug *money*. The case of Central America – especially, Guatemala and Honduras – is particularly striking because it shows that drug *transit* can be just as much an agent of agrarian change as drug *production*. Central America does not produce coca but it's an entrepôt for 90 percent of the cocaine entering the United States. The region is a stark example of what happens when a massive amount of narco-capital starts pumping into a rural area through money laundering and investment (Blume 2022; McSweeney et al. 2018).

What we see in these spaces is that windfall drug profits give the emergent (or well-established) narco-bourgeoisie the money to accumulate vast amounts of lands where they then develop profitable agribusiness plantations and cattle ranches (McSweeney et al. 2018). The logic behind the drug-fuelled transactions driving the land-use change is two-fold. First, like any over-accumulated capital, drug profits will rush toward the most productive, profitable use available following a path of least resistance (in this case, local agribusiness). Second, plantation agriculture and ranching in these spaces defy the laws of capital because the necessity of money-laundering means these investments and capital-intensive activities can operate *at a loss*. The narco-cum-landowners will accept, say, a 70-cent return on a dollar as long as they can now use those 70 cents legally. The land acquisitions also help traffickers consolidate their territorial control over smuggling corridors and other geostrategic areas (Ballvé 2019).

Of course, drug money is never working entirely on its own – or, at least, not for very long. Legal and illegal networks of capital fuse into a single circuit. The drug trade simply piles in more money than would otherwise be available. The legal/illegal symbiosis becomes particularly apparent in narco-frontiers where peace agreements or new political settlements have brought a measure of stability. The combination of drug-capital and 'order' pry open new spaces with new possibilities for profit (Woods 2011).

Proximity to trafficking frontiers may also be associated with new drug production hotspots[5] and/or growing levels of drug consumption, and an increasing diversity of the types of drugs in circulation – for example the growth of heroin, as well as opium, consumption along Iran's and Tajikistan's trafficking routes (Ghiabi 2021; UNODC 2012) or the increase in crack cocaine consumption in Guinea Bissau (Vigh 2019).

To conclude this section, the above typology provides a heuristic for unpacking the role of drugs, in producing or adapting to distinct frontier spaces; from the desert frontier of Farah province in Afghanistan (*pusher*), to the extractivism frontier of Kachin State, Myanmar (*follower*), to the trafficking frontier of Honduras (*financier*). But the reality is more complex than this and in many well-established narco frontiers, these three frontier dynamics play out simultaneously within the same space. In Nimroz and Kachin State for example drugs firstly fuel settlement and investment in marginal land, secondly, extractivist development drives large-scale dispossession, forcing peasants into the illegal

[5]See Silverstein (2022) on Loreto, in the northeastern Amazonian region of Peru, a trafficking route for illicit coca that developed hand-in-hand with the petroleum industry, and then became a hotspot for coca production.

economy as well as embedding drug consumption in frontier society, thirdly, narco capital generated by drug trafficking fuels land acquisition and provides the start-up capital for new business investments, whilst seeping its way into local politics.

4. The making (and unmaking) of illicit peasantries in narco frontiers

4.1. Defining and characterising illicit peasantries

We turn now to the character and role of the 'illicit peasantry', drawing upon, and fleshing out our typology of narco-frontiers. In doing so, we explore firstly how narco-frontiers can be productive of a distinct 'illicit peasantry', and secondly, how these dynamics may vary according to whether illicit drugs play the role of 'pusher', 'follower' or 'financier'. There has been limited research on illicit peasantries – with the exception of a few notable case studies (Grisaffi 2021; Gutierrez-Sanin 2021a; Morris 2020; Tamariz 2022) and almost nothing comparative – for a range of reasons; researchers find it difficult to talk to drug farmers who live in remote areas, have a well-founded suspicion of outsiders and whose survival strategies depend upon remaining illegible. Policy discourses and popular portrayals of drug farmers also cloud understanding; drug farmers are presented simplistically as profit maximising opportunists, or powerless victims exploited by criminal groups.

There has also been very limited comparative research on the relationship between different drug crops and illicit peasantries. How much do crop and context matter? Do coca, opium and marijuana produce different kinds of peasantries? Drug crops' individual properties, climatic and topographical requirements, the social, financial and political relations and agrarian rhythms in which they are embedded has not been systematically studied and compared.

As noted, 'illicit peasants' can be defined simply as growers and workers within illicit crops. However, the boundary between 'licit' and 'illicit' peasantries is rarely clear and fixed, and the delineation and policing of this boundary of course reflects underlying power relations. In many contexts drug cultivators do not self-identify as an illicit peasantry and nor do they see their engagement in drug cultivation as 'illicit' or criminal, though, as explored below these perceptions can vary across space and time. As with licit 'stimulant' crops like sugar or coffee, there is tremendous variation across time, space and scale in terms of who grows drugs, how they are grown and who they are grown for.[6] Compare for example, Afghan peasant farmers growing poppy in the desert frontiers of Farah, with illegal cannabis growers in inner city London, industrial scale marijuana farms in California run by corporations, with peasant settlers in Colombia growing cocaine in the frontiers of Putumayo bound for consumers in Miami, or Bolivian coca farmers cultivating coca leaves legally for domestic labourers or urban consumers, to large scale mechanised farming of licit opium in prime arable land in Lincolnshire, UK under contract with pharmaceutical companies.

Therefore, drugs are grown for licit and illicit markets, in frontier and non-frontier spaces, in the developed and developing worlds, by peasant households as well as in large scale industrial level plantations. Not all drug cultivation is associated with illicit peasantries and not all drug production (legal or illegal) takes place in frontier settings.

[6]See for example Schneider and Bosma (2021) for their excellent volume on 'stimulant frontiers'.

In many respects, illicit peasantries are a relatively recent feature of the second half of the twentieth century, spawned by the global war on drugs, along with a decades-long crisis in smallholder agriculture (Gootenberg and Davalos 2018; Thomson, Meehan, and Goodhand 2023; Torres 2018). Illicit peasantries, then, as we argue below are not an archaic throwback; they are shaped by modern and fast changing forces, many of which emanate from well beyond the agrarian frontier.

Their emergence and continued resilience, in part, reflects the powerful international and domestic interests that accumulate around maintaining a liminal, illicit peasantry. For example, in the context of the Cold War, the US directly or indirectly supported anti-communist groups – the mujahideen in Afghanistan, ethno-nationalist armies in Myanmar, and paramilitaries in Colombia – that were funded through drug money (McCoy 1972; Gootenberg 2008). Non-state, or anti-state groups, such as FARC or the Taliban, became increasingly involved in regulating and taxing the illicit peasantry, as well as positioning themselves as their protectors against counter-narcotics efforts. Wars on drugs and wars against terror converged and diverged at different points, but both played a role in consolidating the identity of drug farmers as a criminalised, 'special case', targeted through eradication or alternative development programmes, or pacification efforts.

At the same time, illicit drug farmers hung onto their land in frontier spaces, constructing precarious livelihoods that interweave productive, distributive and reproductive work. They are classic petty commodity producers, in which non-capitalist roles are combined in uneven but enduring ways with capitalist ones (Bernstein 2010). Small-scale farmers absorb the costs and risks of production and reproduction that capitalist farmers are unwilling to bear. For example, family labour, including women and children, frequently plays a crucial role in the cultivation and harvesting of illicit crops (Afsahi 2011; Bloomer 2009; Parada-Hernández and Marín-Jaramillo 2021; Thomson, Meehan, and Goodhand 2023). Household farmers are locked into commodity production by the dull compulsion of economic forces – the so-called 'commodification of subsistence'. But downward pressures – the reproduction squeeze – on smallholder farmers are particularly acute in marginal, conflict-affected frontier regions, with tenuous links to markets and limited state support. The illicit peasantry is therefore largely composed of farmers who were unable to reproduce themselves as petty commodity producers within the licit agrarian economy; drugs cultivation provided them with a lifeline in the form of guaranteed high prices due to the crop's illegality, and this enabled them to maintain a foothold on the land (Thomson, Meehan, and Goodhand 2023).

However, illicit peasantries are shaped not only by the compulsions of the market, and research on illicit economies shows how they are associated with distinct, socially embedded moral economies, involving networks of exchange, self-help and mutual support, expressions of care and commitment (Arias and Grisaffi 2021; Britto 2020; Ghiabi 2022; Grisaffi 2021). They are underpinned by a combination of market and non-market relations and institutions, and this is one of the reasons why market-based crop substitution programmes are notoriously unsuccessful, as they fail to replicate the socially embedded dimensions of illicit economies (Dest 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021b).

Illicit peasantries are neither homogenous, nor harmonious and nor do they 'stand still'. Gutiérrez-Sanín (2021b), for example shows how moral economies change across successive generations of *cocaleros*, with the most recent generation investing in education,

health care and local infrastructure such as feeder roads, saying they have learnt from the experience of their predecessors who spent the proceeds from coca on conspicuous consumption – much like the coca peasants in Bolivia during the boom years, who would start off in dirty clothes wearing rubber sandals and 'soon turned into a gringo' – wearing leather boots, sporting gold watches – they were transformed into 'peasants with perfume' (Grisaffi 2021, 1280).

Technological change also impacts on the moral economy of illicit peasantries, including the rapid growth of synthetic drugs, whether produced within narco-frontiers, as for example in Shan state, or southwestern Afghanistan, or outside of frontier regions, as with the fentanyl boom in the US. In each case, these developments have a devasting effect on illicit peasantries reliant on drug crop cultivation. As Morris (2020) shows, the indigenous peasant communities of southwest Mexico, dependent on poppy cultivation, have been hollowed out as their guaranteed market across the border dried up.

Illicit peasantries can be transformed almost overnight with shifts in the regulatory environment or draconian counter narcotics measures.[7] At the same time, decriminalisation or legalisation, with the exception of Bolivia, has rarely benefited the illicit peasantry. For example, cannabis legalisation within parts of southern Africa has tended to disadvantage smallholder farmers who cannot afford the licence fees – the barriers to entry of the legal market are too great (Rusenga et al. 2023). And if, as advocated by drugs reformers, legalisation was implemented globally, this would immiserate illicit peasantries in the global south, unless accompanied by reforms that tackle the current conjuncture of little-d-Big-D development and the adverse incorporation it generates.

4.2. Spatialising illicit peasantries

Despite these common antecedents and dynamics, illicit peasantries, vary across time and space, and this variation may, in part – returning to our typology – be linked to the narco-frontiers dynamics described above.

4.2.1. Settlement frontiers; a consolidated illicit peasantry

In Colombia, Gutierrez-Sanin provides one of the few systematic characterisations of an illicit peasantry, based on extensive fieldwork in several frontier settings within the country. He argues that an illicit peasantry has been forged out of a set of structural forces – protracted conflict, state repression, extreme inequalities in the distribution of land and successive waves of counter insurgency and counter narcotics policies. 'Institutionalized calamity' is both experienced by, and constitutive of an illicit peasantry – manifest as an enduring instability and precarity (Gutierrez-Sanin 2021a).

Gutierrez-Sanin contrasts the coca economy with the licit agrarian economy, arguing that the former is more egalitarian than the latter in relation to questions of land concentration, differentiation within the peasantry, the proceeds generated by drugs – for labourers and cultivators – and the gendered division of labour. At the same time, coca farmers recognised the 'tough trade-offs' involved, most noticeably the high levels of

[7]Britto (2020) for example argues that the marijuana boom in northwest Colombia was originally a deeply embedded moral economy with almost no violence. This changed with state efforts to counter the drug economy, leading to violence, criminalization and social disembedding.

risk and violence associated with growing coca.[8] This is not to say that licit economies are necessarily any more peaceable – cattle ranching and oil extraction, for example, are also linked to pervasive physical and structural violence (Drugs & (dis)order 2020 & 2022).

These features of the coca economy have produced a politically conscious, class-based illicit peasantry, who according to Gutierrez-Sanin, differ from a classic 'identikit' peasantry, in terms of their hyper mobility, the risk prone nature of their daily existence and an orientation which is less localistic and less deferential.

Another important factor in the consolidated identity of the *cocalero*, compared to other illicit drug producers, may be the physical properties of coca itself; as a perennial that can produce harvests every two to three months – unlike for example poppy, which usually only has one or two harvests per year, and so is grown alongside other food and cash crops. This means that coca, particularly in 'settlement frontiers' becomes a far more central part of the household and local economy, as well as the frontier culture, than is usually the case with poppy (Acero and Thomson 2021; Dest 2021; Gutiérrez and Antonio 2021).

This picture of a 'cocalero habitus' is given further historical depth in Torres's account of the Ariari frontier of Meta, Colombia, in which

> local rural actors situated at the base of the global commodity chain, created and reflected evolving meanings of their livelihoods. The (licit) agro export boom not only produced marketable goods, but also collective identities. Destitute and displaced frontier settlers created a *mestizo* and *colono* coca culture (Torres 2018, 135).

Whilst illicit peasantries across the world lack the formal legal mechanisms to make claims on the state and to process disputes, in Colombia, the politicisation and collective mobilisation of the illicit peasantry as a class – in response to fumigation or drug substitution programmes for example – is a striking feature of the agrarian frontier. As Torres notes, 'For the past four decades, coca smallholders have routinely engaged with the national state to demand better services and integration as working citizens. They have done all this, despite their "illicit" status' (Torres 2018, 152).

However, within settlement frontiers, indigenous communities may have a very different relationship with coca, as Torres (2023) writes about in relation to the revival of coca in northern Cauca within the Nasa population. She points to the ambiguities around the transition of 'ancestral coca', a medicinal plant and cultural resource, into a cash crop that on the one hand provided a material basis for local livelihoods and the indigenous struggle for autonomy and land in response to agricultural modernisation and settler encroachment. And on the other hand, how it was a disruptive force that increased internal divisions, competition and violence within the indigenous community.

Notwithstanding the physical differences between coca and poppy and their associated farming systems/labour regimes, poppy farmers in Afghanistan's southwestern desert frontier, perhaps bear the closest resemblance to Colombia's *cocaleros*. In Helmand, Cold War development efforts which aimed to sedentarise a moving and restive pastoralist population and turn them into loyal citizens/cash crop farmers, failed in achieving these objectives, but did radically shake up feudal social structures, creating a churning and insecure

[8]See also Tamariz (2022) whose research in Oaxaca, Mexico shows how the concentration of cannabis and poppy production increased peasant households' exposure to violence, linked to state-backed counter-narcotics policies. Conversely, diversification of their agricultural systems, by growing a combination of licit as well as illicit cash crops, reduced exposure to violent shocks.

population of settlers (Bradford 2019; Cullather 2002). Post-2001 development efforts including AD focused on the landed peasantry and displaced the landless into the desert frontiers of western Helmand and Farah, where poppy gave them a foothold on the land (Mansfield 2019) – much like the *colonos* in the frontiers of Meta or Putumayo. Such drug-induced frontier settlement tends to be spontaneous, self-organising and self-funded – and this movement may in turn generate a gravitational pull on state and non state actors – as captured in the following quote from a coca farmer in Bolivia's frontier: 'we cut our own roads, built our own schools made our own laws there was no help from anyone outside, it was us … .we made the state present' (cited in Grisaffi 2021, 11).

4.2.2. Extractive frontiers; a diffuse illicit peasantry

This picture of illegal crop farmers who self-identify as a particular class with a distinct worldview, set of experiences and interests, and in some cases a coherent political agenda, resonates less with experiences in Afghanistan and Myanmar, where, with the exception of southwest Afghanistan, there is no open land frontier (Jelsma, Kramer, and Vervest 2005; Meehan 2022; Pain 2023). Here the social landscapes and experiences of state formation, development, agrarian change, class dynamics and identity politics are quite different. And, as already noted, perhaps also because of differences in the crops' inherent properties, poppy peasantries are not the same as coca peasantries.

Whereas *cocaleros* tend to be uprooted populations – people who have moved into 'empty' frontier lands – in Myanmar and Afghanistan, most (though not all) poppy farmers are from the frontier and have shifted (often repeatedly) between 'licit' and 'illicit' crops in response to protracted wars, extractive development, shifts in regional markets and control regimes. Whereas class identity is the basis for (repeated) *cocalero* mobilisation, in Myanmar and Afghanistan, ethnic and tribal identities have been more salient – for instance, the collective resistance of poppy farmers and local leaders to drug bans in Afghanistan, often drew upon tribal networks, part of a long-standing repertoire of resistance to unwanted state interventions.

Across Afghanistan there is also great subnational variation in the character of the illicit peasantry (Goodhand 2005; Goodhand and Pain 2022; Mansfield 2016). In parts of the east and southeast, there is greater land concentration and more internal differentiation within the illicit peasantry. Landed elites have been able to accumulate and often combine poppy cultivation and trading with other businesses and investments, whereas for the land poor, poppy cultivation is a means of survival, part of the coping economy. The landless have become a proletarianised labour force, and an itinerant army of harvesters and labourers follow the harvest around from one climatic zone to another during the poppy harvesting season. In Badakhshan on the other hand where land holdings are small, a more egalitarian illicit peasantry emerged, which according to Pain (2023) was less driven by the dull compulsion of the market, in an economy where non-market relations continue to be important.

In frontiers where poppy cultivation constitutes only one part of a wider (il)licit economy, the identity of the illicit peasantry may be more diluted and diffuse. For example, the life history of Jangul, a small-scale drug trader and farmer from Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan, is illustrative of the changing livelihoods and adaptive strategies employed to deal with risk and precarity. At various times he cultivated poppy, ran a small shop in his home village, smuggled heroin on two occasions to Moscow and at another

time he traded drugs within eastern and southern Afghanistan. Family members contributed to the household economy by getting jobs with the army or police force or, at certain times labouring in Pakistan. By 2020 he was no longer involved with the illicit economy (Drugs and (dis)order 2022). As this example shows, the notion in Afghanistan of a self-identified illicit peasantry is inaccurate. Most farmers grow poppy alongside other food and cash crops, as part of a risk spreading strategy. Often these strategies have strong transnational dimensions, in which livelihoods are constructed though multiple strategies and locations, including self-employment, labour migration, formal employment, drug cultivation, food crops, as well as cash crops.

In extractive frontiers, particularly where drug use has become increasingly embedded in frontier society, the idea of an illicit peasantry embedded in a moral economy marked by reciprocity and mutual support, is less easy to sustain. The diffusion of drugs amongst a rural and peri-urban precariat, and the 'slow violence' associated with wide-spread drug use in places like Kachin State and Shan State, has transformed local understandings of illicit drugs – it is less the 'resistance crop' that cocaleros talk about, than a crop to be actively resisted, something that presents an existential threat to frontier society (Dan et al. 2021; Oosterom, Htoi Pan Maran, and Wilson 2019).

4.2.3. Trafficking frontiers; licit peasantries under pressure

In 'pure' trafficking frontiers like Tajikistan, Honduras or Guinea-Bissau, illicit peasantries are absent; they live across the border – or several borders away – and have no direct influence on the frontier environment. At the same time 'licit' frontier peasantries living in 'drug intensified' border regions are subject to the extractivist pressures recounted above, leading to dispossession and the creation of surplus populations – but unlike illicit peasantries, they don't have the fall-back strategy of growing drug crops, leading, in many cases, to immiseration and outmigration. These trafficking frontiers, because the stakes are so high, can be more violent and militarised than many other frontier regions, though this varies across time and space, depending on how political settlements evolve for managing cross border flows, and the nature of interdiction efforts (Adler 2019; Blume 2022).

In frontiers where the dynamics of extractivism and trafficking are deeply entwined, then illicit peasantries can become a significant political and economic constituency, shaping frontier dynamics – for example border closures on the Afghan-Pakistan eastern frontier sparked rounds of protest from drug farmers, traders and shop keepers who all depended on the flow of licit and illicit goods and commodities across the border. Extractivism and counter-narcotics policies such as drug bans may also push dispossessed populations across borders to live in trafficking frontiers, cut off from their means of subsistence. For example, successive drug bans in Nangarhar, led to the distressed sale of land and assets amongst the peasantry, many of who were forced to move across the border into Pakistan's frontier regions in search of labouring jobs in the informal economy (Mansfield 2016).

5. The politics of illicit peasantries

5.1. Illegality, politics and the arts of resistance

What forms of political agency emerge, and are asserted, in narco-frontiers? To what extent do illicit peasantries collectively challenge the conditions that generate their

precarity and liminality? In addressing these questions, complex tensions and contradictions inherent to narco-frontiers and illicit peasantries, need to be kept in mind.

First, there is the tension between political agency and the over-determined nature of frontier spaces; narco-frontiers, are often portrayed as residual, 'left behind' spaces, and drug farmers as passive victims, at the bottom of a transnational commodity chain in which power and profits are concentrated elsewhere. Many of the key drivers of change emanate from outside the frontier, and these play a role in undermining the agency of illicit peasantries. At the same, we have seen that narco-frontiers are frequently agentic spaces at the forefront of processes of rapid political and social change. Illicit peasantries assert their agency in a myriad of ways and drugs themselves are actants, assembling and (re)shaping social relations, imbuing them with new meanings and subjectivities (Goodhand and Pain 2022).

Second, there is the dual nature of resistance; on the one hand drugs are a 'resistance crop' that act as a bulwark, providing the financial and social resources for peasantries to resist the forces of de-peasantisation (Thomson, Meehan, and Goodhand 2023). On the other hand, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities actively resist coca-growing *colonos* in Colombia's settlement frontiers. Similarly, in Shan State and Kachin State, Myanmar, the prevalence of drug use catalysed a bottom-up political and social mobilisation in the form of Pat Jasan (Dan et al. 2021). This anti-drug movement is articulated within a strong ethno-nationalist and moral discourse that promotes the integrity and autonomy of the frontier population, particularly youth, vis-a-vis external repressive and 'polluting' forces.

Third, there is the tension between the illegality of drugs and the opportunities this creates, and at the same time the drawbacks associated will liminality and illegality. Liminal populations, that are unrecognised and unseen, except through the prism of criminality and deviance, can assert their agency either by evading, or making claims on those who govern. Both strategies are fraught with risk; the former involves continued liminality and exposure to violence, and the latter means becoming legible and risking state opprobrium, and/or losing out in the licit economy.

Where the cultivation of illicit drug crops has been decriminalised, as in Bolivia, this has enabled forms of political agency not open to illicit drug peasantries. Coca leaf has been explicitly tied by the unions to a discourse of indigeneity, and has become a leitmotiv of decolonisation. But contradictions remain – though the unions argue that 'coca is not cocaine' and they push to decriminalise coca leaf, given the role that illicit cocaine plays in the regional economy, legalisation would have a devastating effect on coca prices and local livelihoods (Grisaffi 2021).

5.2. Exit, loyalty, voice

These tensions play out differently across different narco-frontier settings, linked to the differing roles of drugs as already outlined. Inspired by Hirschman (1970), we begin to explore and unpack the political agency of illicit peasantries through the prism of 'exit, loyalty and voice', whilst recognising that further comparative research is required in this area.

5.2.1. Exit

In many respects narco-frontiers are places of (repeated) exit or withdrawal. For example, the constant circulation of populations within or between frontier regions, or across international borders to escape conflict, evade counter-narcotics interventions or flawed development efforts. Illicit peasantries, in expanding or closing frontiers, tend to be repeatedly pushed to more marginal outlying areas within the frontier. These peasantries who live on the margins of capitalism and the state, are 'outside', but not detached – adverse incorporation involves expelling and warehousing a suspended, liminal population – the product of the kinds of spatial and political fixes outlined earlier.

5.2.2. Loyalty

Illicit drug cultivation provides a 'subsistence guarantee' (Scott 1977), a way of managing the reproduction squeeze. By acting as a shock absorber and safety net, drug economies may also play a role in blunting rebellious impulses. Research on informal and illicit traders shows that, though their livelihoods depend on outwitting the state, they tend not to be anti-state in their political orientation (Goodhand, Koehler, and Bhatia 2021; Tagglicozza 2009). Similarly illicit drug farmers depend upon the illegality of their crops to earn a living, and usually, narco-frontiers are characterised by forms of collaboration and collusion between state actors – or their non-state equivalents – and the illicit peasantry. In Afghanistan, for example, poppy farmers tend to keep quiet, operate below the radar and leverage powerful patrons, often drawing on tribally based patronage networks, to evade counter-narcotics efforts (Koehler and Bhatia 2022; Mansfield 2016).

Furthermore, in many narco-frontiers, resistance – or the exercise of 'voice' – is dispersed, fragmented, cowed by violence. Forms of resistance that move beyond the local level or transcend national borders are relatively rare and episodic.

As Mamdani reminds us, the translation of 'social facts' into 'political facts' is always contingent and unpredictable, because of the many ways in which power fragments the circumstances and experiences of the oppressed (cited in Bernstein 2010, 116). This is particularly the case in relation to illicit peasantries, who lack access to legal or formal mechanisms to make claims, collectively bargain and process conflicts. At the same time, narco-frontiers present challenges for political organisers and civic leaders – they are violent and churning spaces, where both leaders and followers often live transient, 'below the radar' lives and sticking one's head about the parapet can be a dangerous business.

Another factor that may increasingly ward against the emergence of strong political identities in narco-frontiers is the growing production of synthetic drugs. This shift from a crop-based resource that is diffuse, generates widespread benefits and provides communities with some bargaining power, to one that is footloose, concentrated and elite-controlled is likely to further undermine the agency and livelihoods of illicit peasantries.

Finally, in narco-frontiers where drug consumption has become deeply embedded, this may ward against political mobilisation, and in fact, using drugs as a currency to pay labourers can be a conscious strategy amongst the powerful to create a pliant and atomised workforce.

5.2.3. Voice

Eric Wolf argued that freeholders, settled on peripheral agrarian frontiers, possessed a level of autonomy and 'tactical' mobility that provided them with the necessary space (outside of landlord control) to participate in radical movements (cited in Taylor 2017, 119). Furthermore, the expansion of capitalism (little d development) – with its extractivist face in frontier regions – as well as big D development interventions (including counter-narcotics policies) have increasingly stripped away subsistence guarantees, catalysing resistance, which sometimes takes the form of public action, or the exercise of voice.

Counter narcotics policies have been a key factor in shaping the political subjectivities of illicit peasantries. This cross-generational experience of being on the receiving end of drug policies and practices, has surely been important in building their shared identity as an illicit peasantry. Counter movements, in response to repeated repression, vary across different contexts, from class based, *cocaleros* road blockades in response to fumigation in Colombia, to armed tribal resistance to drugs bans in Afghanistan.

This calls into question the popular narrative and policy discourse that drugs and criminality are inherently apolitical or depoliticising; the idea that illicit peasantries and traffickers are too busy making a living, or a generating a profit, to bother with politics, does not stand up to scrutiny.

Engagement with drug economies, rather than being antithetical to politics, may representant a different pathway into 'being political' and expressing voice. Across the varied narco-frontiers mapped out in this article we see radical differences in the spaces of, and potentialities for, political agency. In Colombia's democratic political system, coalitions between lawyers, *cocaleros* and civic leaders have played a role in influencing drug policies related to fumigation and substitution (though often at great cost to the latter, many of whom have been assassinated since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement). This has involved broad based movements with clear actions and goals, including blockades, targeted advocacy, alliances with civil society, in the context of institutionalised, democratic, but also very violent, politics.

A clear narrative and set of grievances around 'state abandonment' has emerged, according to Gutierrez-Sanin (2021a), linked to the need for new state-society 'recognition contracts' (Lund 2016). It is less about resisting or evading capitalism and the state, than placing constraints on capitalism and making new claims on the state – or in other words it is about challenging, and changing, the terms of adverse incorporation.

However, in Afghanistan and Myanmar, armed politics and authoritarian rule have to a large extent closed down the spaces for such coalitions to emerge and collectively organise in the public sphere. Mobilisation takes place in response to particular issues or events, rather than as part of a wider policy or ideological platform – for example in Afghanistan, community mobilisation has emerged sporadically in response to threats to livelihoods including border closures, drug bans or taxation. The poppy peasantry have deployed a mixture of exit, loyalty and voice over time, but in the case of the latter it has largely occurred through informal networks, in pursuit of localist agendas.

In spite of radical differences between how voice is exercised across our cases, what unites many examples of mobilisation, is a concern with the politics of access, inclusion and intermediation. As Ye et al (2019), writing about extractivism note, social struggles tend to be focused around addressing circulation. Control of markets, choke points, key

infrastructure and enclaves are at the core of extractivist dynamics – as well as providing the key to unsettling and challenging how states and markets function in frontier regions.

This concern with circulation, and its distributive effects, is what links *cocalero* road blockades in Putumayo in response to fumigation efforts, with Pashtun demonstrations in Nangarhar about border closures with Pakistan. Both involve liminal populations deploying direct action in response to efforts to deny them access to livelihoods that are reliant on illicit flows. These are struggles to construct what the system no longer provides – income, employment, livelihoods, autonomy, hope – which in turn challenges, or at least unsettles, the spatial and political fixes imposed on frontier populations.

Rather than interpreting this exercise of voice as an attempt to create an autonomous sphere, that keeps the state at bay, a la Scott (2009), in many ways it's the opposite of what Scott argues – state elites, on the one hand, gain advantage from keeping the frontiers in a steady-state of liminality, so they can accumulate more rapidly and with fewer constraints than they can do elsewhere, whilst frontier populations, on the other hand, want *more* state, and more legibility, but on different terms.

Cocaleros are well aware of the costs and trade-offs associated with 'staying out of the archives' – liminality and illegality, bring some benefits, including a precarious livelihood, when all other options have been closed off. But they almost inevitably invite high levels of violence and arbitrary forms of governance. Becoming legible is a condition for being able to make claims on the state – or on other state-like forms. In many respects, efforts by illegal peasantries to organise can be understood as an attempt to make themselves more visible and legible – it is a search for recognition and inclusion, something that contemporary development efforts fail so miserably to deliver.

6. Conclusions

In focusing on the dynamics of illicit economies and illicit peasantries in 'disturbed' frontier landscapes we have attempted to show that the 'edges' are neither residual, nor anomalous – drawing on Nancy Fraser they are no 'fluke or empirical contingency but a feature of capitalism's DNA' (2014, 57). The licit and illicit, centres and margins, development (big D and little d) and violent dispossession are entangled and fused together in relationships of 'functional imbrication' (Fraser 2014, 59).

In advancing a tentative typology of narco-frontiers (settlement, extractive and trafficking) associated with different roles played by drugs (driver, follower, financier), we have attempted to explore and better understand the complex spatialities and temporalities of drug economies, and how these *places* may be linked to differing kinds of *people* (illicit peasantries) and peasant *politics*. This is offered as a heuristic device rather than a rigid typology, which we hope may be a useful framework that can be worked with, and amended, in future comparative research on illicit drug economies and drug peasantries. We also hope that such a comparative agenda can provide a starting point for policy makers in the drugs, development and peacebuilding fields to engage in a more differentiated and grounded way with narco-frontiers and the illicit peasantries who inhabit them.

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