Map 1. Thailand, the Thai-Myanmar border, and the Mae Sot industrial zone.
Through to the back of the cremation grounds where the fields of sugar-cane begin, Ko Soe and I coast our bicycles to a stop. It is mid-December, and the sugarcane stocks are tall now, taller than us. Somewhere amid these fields Myanmar migrant workers from the nearby Apex garment factory are hiding. We know this because Ko Soe had only minutes ago been talking with one of them by phone, but then the connection had died; presumably this worker’s phone had run out of power. So now we dismount and look around for an entrance into the fields. The sugarcane is far too dense to walk through, even if we were to leave our bicycles behind. Uncertain how to proceed, we soon spot a man standing, looking at us from the edge of the fields where some car tracks come to an end. Ko Soe calls out and, as we approach, explains to the man that he, too, had worked at Apex, having quit only a few months prior. “We’ve come to see the workers’ situation,” he adds.

The man, whom we now see to be in his early twenties, leads us down a narrow path walled by stocks of sugarcane. When the trail reaches a small stream, we lift our bicycles and carry them along the watercourse until, as
directed by our guide, we lay them aside and jump across the brook to an isolated patch of banana trees. It is here that we begin seeing the migrants, bunched together with their baskets of food and clothing, standing, idling, chatting with each other, and reclining on woven mats laid out on the ground. Some of the men are smoking. Others chew quids of betel. A few young children are milling about, and I even spot a couple of babies being held. To my left a young woman lies on her back reading a Burmese romance novel. An older woman, speaking by phone to a migrant friend elsewhere, laughs as she explains her predicament. Someone else brings out a tin of biscuits and passes it around to share. The migrants waiting here smile and greet us, thanking us for coming.

There are, perhaps, about fifty migrants here—mostly women—crowding out small patches of open ground among the banana trees. Although Apex had, I was told, employed upwards of three hundred workers only a few years earlier, the workforce seriously declined when large groups quit in a series of disputes over unpaid wages; others left following the recent closure of the factory’s weaving department. Hence, the migrants hiding here are all that are left, among whom are a handful I know from my previous visits to the factory.

In response to our enquiries about their situation, the migrants tell us that they fled into the sugarcane field this morning while it was still dark, taking with them supplies of rice, boiled eggs, pickled tea, and packaged snacks they had prepared the night before. Initially, they say, the Apex factory owner, who is based in Bangkok, had given instructions that the workers were not to stop production despite news of impending raids. At the last minute, however, the personnel manager got cold feet and told the workers they should temporarily hide out in the nearby sugarcane fields because neither he nor the owner could guarantee their security. The migrants we are speaking with ask us, in turn, what we know of the raids elsewhere, and they name a factory nearby where they have heard the police who came up yesterday from Bangkok have already arrested the workers.

Today is December 15, 2012, one day after the deadline for undocumented migrants in Thailand to register for temporary passports and work permits, thereby escaping their status of illegality. Like the vast majority of the more than 200,000 Myanmar migrants in Mae Sot, in northwest Thailand’s Tak Province, those hiding here amid the sugarcane lack documentation for legal residence and work in Thailand. And like most everyone
else in Mae Sot’s migrant community, they knew the registration deadline was approaching; billboards had been put up, and loudspeaker-toting pickup trucks had toured the town, announcing in both Burmese and Thai that those not registered by December 14 would face up to five years in prison, with fines up to 50,000 baht (just over $US1,600). Government officials in Bangkok had further announced that over one million undocumented migrants would be deported.¹ At other factories in Mae Sot, workers had fled across the nearby border to Buddhist monasteries in the Myanmar town of Myawaddy to wait until the Bangkok police departed. Everyone seemed to know it would only last a few days; this was not the first registration deadline to pass, nor was it the first time raids had been conducted in Mae Sot.

Although most Mae Sot migrants knew in advance of the registration deadline, only a small minority had actually applied for passports and work permits. For the majority, the cost of obtaining these documents through any of the area’s many private passport companies was prohibitive—more
than they could save in a year. While it was possible for employers to advance the money to cover the cost, this was not a common practice in Mae Sot. Most factories, such as Apex, simply avoided immigration hassles and potential raids by paying off the local police with monthly fees deducted from the wages of the undocumented migrants they employed. This was, presumably, why the Bangkok (and not Mae Sot) police had been entrusted with the task of enforcing the current registration deadline.

In the end, however, very few raids actually occurred in Mae Sot when the registration deadline passed. Out of some four to five hundred factories in the area, I heard mention of only two where such raids apparently took place. And shortly thereafter, the Thai Ministry of Labor announced a three-month extension to the registration period.²

Had the threats of raids, arrests, and deportations all been for show? Or had the Thai government heeded humanitarian appeals for an extension to the registration period, such as that voiced by the head of the International Labor Organization³? Perhaps policymakers in Bangkok had recognized that mass deportations would have severely undermined Thai industry. In any case, the migrants I met in the sugarcane field went back to work a few days later. They did not, to my knowledge, ever register for passports or work permits while employed at the Apex garment factory, despite the extension granted.

**Whence the Precarious Worker?**

The migrants hiding in the sugarcane field that day epitomize the precarious worker, that increasingly conspicuous figure whose proliferation is the hallmark of capitalist globalization. Born of the neoliberal shift that marked the turn of the 1980s, the contemporary precarious worker achieved her prominence as governments seeking to attract and maintain globally mobile capital while containing national debt deregulated labor markets, rolled back protective labor legislation, and cut social welfare spending. Within this sparser regulatory environment, and under the increasing uncertainty and competitive pressures of a more open global market, production firms have sought to reduce costs and offload the risks of market fluctuations onto the workers in their employ.

To these ends, such firms have shifted to more “flexible” employment practices and production strategies. David Harvey locates the expansion and
intensification of employment flexibility in a period of flexible accumulation that began during the mid-1970s and marked a shift away from the prior Fordist organization of production. Under the Fordist production model, prominent (largely male) segments of the working class were provided stable, secure, and often unionized employment with relatively high wages as a means of securing their consent to a regimented and intensified industrial labor process. The flexibilization of labor, by contrast, withdraws this stability of employment and this relative affluence of wages.

The Fordist production model has been most commonly associated with the industrialized North Atlantic economies of the post–World War II era. Within Thailand and other East Asian countries, however, employment arrangements in light manufacturing have similarly undergone a shift toward flexible employment and production since the 1980s. As Frederic Deyo frames it, this shift has entailed a move from (using Michael Burawoy’s terms) “hegemonic regimes” to “market despotism.” Under the former, employers depended heavily on worker consent and cooperation to ensure production, whereas under the latter employers have increasingly relied on coercion and “the economic whip of the market.”

Deyo suggests that this flexibility in employment and production entails “the ability to introduce changes in product and process quickly, efficiently, and continuously.” In Asia’s export-oriented manufacturing sectors, flexibility has, he points out, primarily involved a focus on “short-term adaptability and cost-cutting,” the result of which has been “an insecure, floating workforce.” It is this “insecure, floating workforce” that has earned the now-familiar epithet of precarious.

In conceptualizing precarious work, I follow Leah Vosko’s definition of the term as “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements.” In Thailand, such precarious work has expanded under an increased use of subcontracting, casualization, and contract and migrant labor, particularly following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. As labor market deregulation and flexibilization have fostered increased precarity among workers, this precarity has, in turn, pressured the individuals so affected to accept lower-paid, more flexible employment arrangements.

Such broad politico-economic analysis usefully situates contemporary forms of precarious work within a context of globalized production and trade, neoliberal reforms, and the discursive hegemony of marketization.
Within this analytic milieu, arguments connecting state policies to the growing insecurity of workers have served as a consistent basis of political critique. In a recent iteration of this argument, Ching Kwan Lee and Yelizavetta Kofman draw on the case of Mae Sot to argue that precarious labor has been “an integral part of the state’s strategy of development.”

Conceptual linkages such as those articulated by Lee and Kofman, which draw a straight causal line from neoliberal reforms to flexible management strategies to precarious work, usefully call attention to the significant role of state policies in enabling and exacerbating the insecurity of contemporary employment arrangements. Such analysis can also aid in sharpening a strategic focus for broad-based political action. Yet what are the finer empirical grains that slip between the cracks of such generalizing narratives? How, for example, are we to reconcile a variegated landscape of labor regimes with the shared policy environment of an individual country? The particularly sordid labor situation in Mae Sot, for instance, once earned this district an ignominious reference as “the cesspool of labor rights in Thailand.”

This concept of a “labor regime” is one that I will return to throughout this book. It therefore demands some elaboration. With minor differences in emphasis, critical scholars of labor have variously employed the terms “factory regime,” “labor control regime,” “labor regime,” and “dormitory labor regime” to index the ways that regulatory arrangements organize and control workers at particular sites. Along such lines, Henry Bernstein has defined a labor regime as the “interrelations of (segmented) labor markets and recruitment, conditions of employment and labor processes, and forms of enterprise authority and control, when they coalesce in sociologically well-defined clusters with their own discernible ‘logic’ and effects.”

Rather than singular and coherent projects of rule, however, labor regimes can be usefully understood as regulatory assemblages. This is due to the fact that such regimes inevitably comprise overlapping and often contradictory practices and relations that are never wholly delimited within the terms of official law and policy.

In order to grasp the spatial and temporal specificity of a given labor regime, I take as a point of departure what Harvey has referred to as “labor control.” By this he means a certain “mix of repression, habituation, co-optation and co-operation” that is organized both in the workplace and throughout society at large” and serves to discipline workers for the purpose of capital accumulation. The particular configuration of labor control
in a given time and place, argues Harvey, is shaped by the regime of accumulation, such as Fordism-Keynesianism or post-Fordist flexible accumulation, within which this labor control plays out. This conceptual linking of a particular form of labor control to a regime of accumulation enables broad typological analysis. There is, however, little scope left within this framework to analyze the diversity and dynamics in labor control configurations that play out within a given regime of accumulation. I thus adopt the notion of a labor regime for the purpose of analyzing regulatory arrangements that differ geographically (such as between Bangkok and Mae Sot) and temporally (such as between Mae Sot in the mid-1990s and in 2011–2013, when I conducted fieldwork for this project), even if these different contexts are all seen to operate under a similar regime of accumulation. To speak of labor regimes as regulatory arrangements plays, furthermore, on the dual meaning of the term *arrangement*, both as a particular configuration of things and as a tentative, negotiated outcome between multiple (if unequal) parties. To the extent that labor regimes under contemporary neoliberal orders exhibit geographic discrepancies within a single country, this difference demands explanation.

Analysis that situates such geographic variance at the receiving end of “zoning technologies” through which states seek to “achieve strategic goals of regulating groups in relation to market forces” can account for certain policy-related regional differences. Arguing along these lines, Pitch Pongsawat writes that a legal regime of “border partial citizenship” structuring migrant labor in the Mae Sot export processing zone “was intentionally created by the state as an effective means of entitlement, control and exploitation.” It is due to such spatialized regulatory practices that Mae Sot can be effectively understood as an innovative site of border capitalism.

With the term *border capitalism* I am not solely referring to the fact that the Mae Sot industrial zone is located on the geopolitical border dividing Thailand and Myanmar. Rather, and more significantly, I employ the term to highlight the ways by which various state authorities and private employers have creatively employed borders as technologies of rule to regulate a spatially delimited population of migrant workers. These borders as technologies of rule include, first of all, the geopolitical border separating Thailand and Myanmar, where authorities strip (typically undocumented) migrants of various rights that are legally due to Thai citizen workers. Second, there is the internal border around Mae Sot at which police restrict
migrants’ passage onward to central Thailand and in this way spatially anchor a pool of low-wage labor to the country’s geopolitical frontier. Third, there are practices of social bordering by which state authorities discursively and legally construe migrant workers as a racialized other to the normative Thai citizen—an other unworthy of the concern, solidarity, and rights due to fellow Thai nationals and workers.¹⁹ In these multiple ways, Mae Sot exemplifies the contemporary “proliferation of borders”—borders that in their multiplicity leave segmented and heterogeneous the landscape of labor regulation in any one country.²⁰

Much of this bordering as technology of rule is, to be sure, bound up with state policy. Yet notions of geographically targeted state planning, however much they are attentive to the variegated landscape of labor policy, are unable to make much sense of regionally particular labor regimes that fail to achieve, move beyond, or even conflict with official state policy. How, for example, despite the government’s stated aim of “regularizing” undocumented migrants in Thailand and the widespread desire among migrants for the freedom of residence and work that legal documentation promises, has the acquisition of such documentation remained the exception rather than the rule among Mae Sot’s migrants? In addition, trying to grasp the vagaries of actually existing labor regimes in terms of well-laid-out state policy risks ascribing to states a singularity of agency and level of control which they simply do not have.

A Politics of Precarity

In order to move the study of precarious labor beyond a taken-for-granted congruence between formal state policy and the ways labor regimes—as regionally particular regulatory arrangements—play out on the ground, I adopt here two analytic shifts.

The first of these entails shifting our analytic lens from precarious work to the precarity of workers.²¹ In situations of heightened insecurity, the precarity of flexible labor is bound up with other forms of vulnerability outside the workplace, which impact on—but cannot be reduced to—remunerative work per se. In Mae Sot, for instance, low-wage, uncertain employment has undermined migrants’ capacities to save the money needed to acquire legal documentation. This lack of documentation has, in turn, constrained their
capacities to claim their legal rights while putting them at constant wariness of the ever present threat of arrest, detention, and deportation. Hence, it has been relatively easy for employers to leverage migrants’ “illegal” status in order to keep wages well below the legal minimum; to put workers off work temporarily without pay when there is a drop or delay in production orders; or to fire workers without giving them the legally required severance pay.22

The second shift requires expanding our analytic lens to encompass a range of parties—both within and beyond the state—that are involved in shaping the regulation of labor, and thus the conditions of workers’ employment. In Mae Sot this includes employers, the police, different government departments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private passport companies and independent brokers, and migrants themselves—all of whom engage in quotidian disputes, negotiations, and compromises that reproduce or transform the local labor regime, albeit in highly unequal ways.

The spatial regulation of laboring populations can thus not be understood solely as an expression of coherent state policy. To better comprehend how regionally particular configurations of power shape and make possible certain forms of workers’ precarity, what is needed is an analytic that situates this precarity within a web of social, economic, and political relations extending into and beyond the workplace, as variously situated actors contest, negotiate, and compromise, and thereby undermine, transform, or reinscribe the existing labor regime.

Most useful in this regard is Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of “social space.” As Lefebvre employed it, the term refers to the ways that spatial arrangements shape social relations while also being produced by those relations. Rather than being a neutral container of human activity, space is politically saturated. It serves as “a means of production [and] a means of control” that regulates and reproduces existing relations of production.23 While state planners and capitalist interests may be hegemonic in its construction, social space, as a social product, is coproduced by multiple “classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes.” For this reason, social space is persistently disrupted by its internal contradictions—that is, by its internal class conflicts. It is for this reason, argued Lefebvre, that “class struggle is inscribed in space.”24

Understanding spatial formations of precarious labor in terms of (Lefebvrian) social space allows for an investigation into the situated practices and processes reproducing, reshaping or eroding the ways through which workers’
precarity becomes manifest in a given setting. In addition, by calling attention to the everyday conflicts and struggles of variously situated agents—in a word, *politics*—this analytic focus provides a starting point for addressing questions of what constitutes a politics of precarity in Asia.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, precarity emerged as a conceptual point of convergence for political action in Europe among broad swaths of occupationally insecure groups. In part, the salience of precarity as a political platform within Europe at this time was contingent on the enduring legacy of the continent’s post–World War II Fordist-Keynesian welfare states, which served as a backdrop against which to contrast the increasingly insecure position of European workers. In Asia, however, precarity has not emerged so prominently as an explicit platform for political action. Thus, despite the expansion of flexible labor regimes and precarious work arrangements within Asia, Dennis Arnold and Joseph Bongiovi note that “identifying ‘precarious politics’ in developing Asia, assuming it exists, and theorizing around it is a largely unanswered challenge.”

The present study offers a response to this unanswered challenge. In doing so, I call attention to a *politics of precarity* as it has developed in one particular Asian context. I employ this concept of a politics of precarity in order to flag two related social processes: the first entails the everyday ways through which different actors engage with each other and, in so doing, serve to undermine, transform, or reinscribe particular precarious labor regimes; the second entails a specifically working-class politics—that is, the ways in which a particular web of social, economic, and political relations within and beyond the workplace shapes and makes possible certain forms of struggles, critiques, and moral claims among precarious workers themselves.

An analytic focus on this quotidian political life brings into view for investigation those forms of contestation taking place outside formal unionization, electioneering, and legislated policy reform. Such a focus is all the more important given that, as recent evidence has made clear, labor market restructuring around the world has increasingly excluded, or weakened the influence of, registered trade unions from formal political processes, thus raising—if only relatively—the importance of alternative strategies of working-class struggle.

In one of the more prominent recent analyses of precarious labor as a global phenomenon, Guy Standing writes of the “class fragmentation” and
weakening of trade unions that resulted from the late twentieth-century restructuring of labor market governance. Following the global trend of union decline, neoliberal reform and flexibilization in Southeast Asia have similarly impacted the regional organization of industrial employment. This has led in Thailand to a significant drop in union density since the start of the 1990s, with a further weakening of the representative capacities of unions following the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

On one level, such analyses correctly point to an empirical reduction in union density and the loss or weakening of an institutionalized space in which unions can engage with formal state structures. However, analyses lamenting the decline of formal union density do little to explore what alternative forms of working-class organization and struggle might be growing in relevance under contemporary transformations in labor-capital relations. Such alternative forms of organization and struggle are part of what I explore in this book. My suggestion is that as previously existing working-class institutions are undermined, space opens for alternative—though not necessarily more effective—forms of organization and struggle.

The Social Production of Border Capitalism

The central contention of this book is that the Mae Sot industrial zone, as a spatialized regulatory arrangement, has shaped and made possibly certain forms of class struggle—the effects of which have disrupted and transformed the site’s border capitalism. This argument contrasts with analyses that would see the regulatory arrangement of such zones as being fixed in advance by state policies—developmentalist, neoliberal, or otherwise. I therefore analyze Mae Sot as a dynamic social space—a politically charged space—whose movement is born of the site’s internal contradictions. This is, moreover, a movement that persistently threatens to disrupt the site’s existing social relations, whose conditions of possibility were, in part, born of antecedent class struggles.

The on-the-ground regulation of migrant labor in Mae Sot can thus not be read off of official state policies. Rather, the everyday regulation of migrants in Mae Sot remains contested at the local level, persistently reshaped, and often ambiguously understood by the migrants to whom it applies. As a designated Special Border Economic Zone, Mae Sot’s spatially bounded
regulatory arrangement, proximity to the Myanmar border, and distance from central Thailand have enabled a particularly acute situation of despotism organized around the optimization of low-wage, flexible labor for the purposes of capital accumulation and border industrialization. Yet the ways in which migrants have responded to the forms of regulation they confront have forced regulatory actors—such as employers and local government officials—to adjust their regulatory practices accordingly. It is in this way that border capitalism, as both situated relations of production and a spatialized regulatory arrangement, is socially produced.

The argument I advance here is clearly inspired by the work of Lefebvre. But I draw more specifically from the operaista(workerist, often glossed as autonomist Marxist) tradition that grew out of Italian factory workers’ struggles in the 1960s. Writing in an early issue of the workerist journal Classe Operaia, Mario Tronti laid out a critical approach to understanding capitalist development—whether it be technological change, capital relocation, regulatory reform, or the reorganization of the labor process. The particularities of capitalist development, argued Tronti, were best understood not as neutral technical innovations but as reactions to the threats to capital accumulation and managerial prerogative being posed by concrete working-class struggles. As Tronti maintained,

“We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working-class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital’s own reproduction must be tuned.”

Building on Tronti’s innovations about the primacy of workers’ struggles in catalyzing capitalist development, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have extended the argument to account for multiple cycles of restructuring: “Workers’ struggles force capital to restructure; capitalist restructuring destroys the old conditions for worker organization and poses new ones; new worker revolts force capital to restructure again; and so forth.” It is along such workerist lines that I analyze in this book the transformations that have occurred in Mae Sot’s regulatory and industrial landscape.

Taking stock, however, of workerism’s achievements and shortcomings, Steve Wright has pointed out that workerist analysis (at least in its earliest
years) was limited by an often narrow focus on collective struggles at the point of production, thereby neglecting “the world beyond the factory wall.”

How, we therefore need to ask, are the struggles of subordinate classes outside the workplace related to the reproduction and transformation of capitalist relations at the point of production? And further, how do such struggles affect the broader regulation of proletarian populations? To address these questions I bring into the analysis of capitalist restructuring, along with factory strikes and workforce socialization, struggles over migrants’ mobility outside the workplace, and migrants’ everyday evasion of—and engagement with—the police. The book’s overarching narrative presents these various struggles as constitutive moments in the transformation of Mae Sot’s regulatory geography, at the scale of the workplace and at the scale of the industrial zone.

It needs to be stressed at this point that labor struggles on the border have never been wholly spontaneous outbursts—automatically generated, as it were, by Mae Sot’s regulatory arrangement. Rather, they have emerged out of gradual processes of migrant subjectification and class formation—what I refer to in chapter 5 as everyday recomposition—that are grounded in the relations and experiences of migrants along the border. Particular workplace struggles in Mae Sot have also typically entailed extensive deliberation and planning “behind the scenes” among the workers involved, as in the case I examine in chapter 6. For these reasons, within the circuit of regulation → struggle → new regulation, there are countless agentive moments in which individuals have intervened and influenced the process of Mae Sot’s regulatory transformation.

Situating Mae Sot within the Global South

The inquiry at hand follows recent anthropological initiatives in “rethinking capitalism.” By this is meant, in part, the project of employing ethnography, as research method and written form, to interrogate received narratives of capitalist development—narratives that have so often taken the North Atlantic experience as definitive. Surveying, for example, the scholarly use of the terms precarity, precarious labor, and flexibilization, Arnold and Bongiovi point out that the analytical deployment of these concepts has been most prevalent within studies of advanced industrialized
countries—that is, countries of the Global North. The consequent analytic privileging of such cases within discussions of flexible and precarious labor risks leading, in turn, to certain broad generalizations about contemporary socioeconomic change—generalizations that are not wholly transferable to much of the Global South. Among such generalizations, flexibilization and precarious work have been analytically connected to deindustrialization, working-class fragmentation, and a temporally specific movement away from a postwar Fordist-Keynesian labor-capital arrangement. We thus have Harvey, for instance, dating the emergence of flexible labor regimes to the period following the Fordist-Keynesian postwar boom of 1945 to 1973. Significantly, the North Atlantic Fordist-Keynesian regulatory configuration involved a considerable expansion of industrial production and a relatively strong institutionalized position for trade unions.

Applied to Thailand and other countries of the Global South, the temporality of Harvey’s account of postwar Fordist-Keynesian history makes an ill fit. Although industrial manufacturing for export has been promoted in Thailand since the 1960s, it was only in the 1980s that a clear shift in government policy moved the country away from economic dependency on agricultural production to export-oriented industrialization. In addition, aside from a brief moment in 1956–57, the establishment of trade unions has only been legal in Thailand since 1975. And the country’s most notable boom years occurred in 1987–96, not 1945–73.

Harvey’s model of capitalist transformation need not be read as problematic, however, so long as it is taken as global rather than universal in its claims. Insofar as Harvey’s dating of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism is understood as referring primarily to the North Atlantic experience, the different temporality of labor regime transformation in countries of the Global South can be read as a function of their different historic and geographic (initially peripheral) integration into global supply chains. It was, after all, in the mid-1980s—as Euro-American firms looked abroad for low-cost, flexible workforces—that industrial production in Thailand underwent a massive expansion, with considerable foreign capital investment into the country’s labor-intensive export-oriented industries—garment manufacturing being initially the most significant. This was, of course, the moment of the new international division of labor, when North Atlantic corporations—at once enticed and compelled by globalization—relocated their manufacturing operations to, or began sourcing from, newly emerging
industrial zones throughout the Global South. Deploying a discourse of docile bodies and nimble fingers, industrial manufacturers at these then emerging sites of industrial production almost exclusively employed women for apparel, footwear, and electronics assembly, producing in this way feminized industrial workforces and new gendered divisions of labor. In Thailand this dynamic played out in the large-scale internal migration of young women from the country’s poorer northeast region to Bangkok and other central Thai provinces, where they took on factory work in various light industries—a process I consider more fully in chapter 2.

That the narrative of economic transformation in the Global North cannot serve as a ready-made framework for understanding changing capital-labor relations in the Global South is certain. Yet this does not necessitate the rejection of concepts like flexibilization and precarious labor for analyzing employment conditions in countries such as Thailand that did not pass through a classic Fordist-Keynesian era. The question is how we might make productive analytical use of terms like flexibilization and precarious labor to flag general tendencies in labor-capital transformations without losing sight of the geographic and historical specificity of countries in the Global South.

The concepts of flexibilization and precarious labor have indeed been widely deployed in studies of the Global South, including those focused specifically on Thailand. Yet whereas scholars such as Standing see these concepts as bound up with deindustrialization, and whereas Harvey dates (North Atlantic) flexibilization to a post-1973 period, flexibilization in Thailand emerged more recently within a period of intensified industrialization. Deyo, for instance, dates the start of Thailand’s labor market deregulation, and the resulting flexibilization of employment arrangements, to the mid-1980s—the very moment, that is, when the country shifted its development focus to export-oriented industrialization. Alternatively, suggesting a later date, Kevin Hewison and Woradul Tularak see the 1997 Asian financial crisis as the most significant turning point in the transition to flexible labor regimes in Thailand. Whether the start date is set at the mid-1980s or at 1997, the process of employment flexibilization in Thailand has developed concurrent with a significant expansion in manufacturing industries and in the country’s total number of factory workers. And while union membership in the United States peaked in the late 1950s, in Thailand this number peaked in the early 1990s. Thus, contra Standing’s suggestion that precarious labor globally is bound up with deindustrialization, it is
important to note that Thailand’s industrial proletariat (noncitizens included) is today much larger than it has ever been before.

As one such locus of manufacturing growth over the past two and a half decades, the border district of Mae Sot, along with its neighboring districts of Mae Ramat, Phop Phra, Tha Song Yang, and Umphang, offers a particularly instructive site for investigating contemporary forms of workers’ precariousness in the Global South. Situated on the border at the westernmost point of Thailand, the district has served as the entry point of highest traffic for migrants from Myanmar—along with war refugees and political asylum seekers—since the late 1980s. The period of large-scale migration into Mae Sot thus roughly corresponds with Thailand’s contemporary era of marketization. Industrialization in Mae Sot, which picked up following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, was thus from the start dependent on migrant workers, market-based labor (de)regulation, and flexible strategies of employment and production.

As an explicit development strategy, the Thai government began promoting Mae Sot as a migrant labor–based export processing zone in the late 1990s, encouraging capital investment by offering tax holidays as part of an industrial decentralization strategy. The Thai government has also sought to develop the site as the primary trade route across the Thai-Myanmar border, and as a key regional trade hub advantageously positioned on the transcontinental Asian Highway. Various state development agencies have, in addition, pushed to have the area reclassified from a Special Border Economic Zone to a Special Economic Zone. The plan, which the Thai cabinet finally approved in January 2013, and which I discuss further in this book’s postscript, grants the district certain regulatory exemptions and facilitates the import of migrant labor.

Despite the clear stamp of official state regulation, Mae Sot remains a border area at the margins of Thailand, where police, military and paramilitary forces, and local government authorities have had considerable—though often de facto—powers of autonomy from Bangkok. These actors have sought in their own ways to manage the traffic and presence of migrants, as well as border trade to and from Myanmar. Additionally, following the large-scale exodus of refugees from Myanmar into Thailand beginning in the late 1980s, a sizable contingent of international NGOs established an enduring presence in Mae Sot and other sites along the border. Over time, some of these organizations expanded their mandates from humanitarian
aid for refugees to also cover various migrant issues. In addition to—and in many cases funded by—the international NGOs operating in Mae Sot, Myanmar migrants and political exiles established their own community-based organizations (CBOs) to address various concerns they identified within the local migrant population. The particular geography and history of Mae Sot has thus brought together an array of parties seeking to engage with (and benefit from) the site’s migrant population.

It is thus in Mae Sot that I situate this book’s analysis, drawing to do so on some twenty months of ethnographic research I conducted there between 2011 and 2013, with shorter follow-up visits made in July 2015 and June–July 2016. I was for the duration of this fieldwork based mostly out of the office and shelter of the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, and it was through my involvement with this association that I met and conversed with hundreds of migrants who approached the group for assistance, many of whom took up temporary residence in the organization’s shelter. Such was the case, for example, with recent arrivals from Myanmar who, with little
money and no place to stay, had shown up in Mae Sot seeking employment; a pregnant woman who had been fired and then evicted from her factory dormitory when her employer had discovered her pregnancy; groups of migrants who had quit or been fired in collective disputes with their employers; and individual migrants who found themselves stuck, waiting out protracted—and at times seemingly derelict—workers’ compensation claims.

It was likewise due to my involvement with Yaung Chi Oo that I was able to accompany to the Mae Sot Labor Protection Office migrants engaged in collective bargaining and labor rights cases, such as that of the Supafine Fashion factory, which I recount in chapter 6. And it was through my affiliation with Yaung Chi Oo that I attended meetings with local Myanmar CBOs, international NGOs, and various Thai government and police officials, as well as employers and their representatives. Outside my work with Yaung Chi Oo, I regularly visited and conversed with migrant friends and informants in factory dormitories, external worker housing, Burmese-run tea shops, and several local Buddhist monasteries that housed monks from Myanmar. Alongside the innumerable informal conversations that I had with migrants during this time, I also conducted sixty formal (semistructured) interviews, of which I recorded all but five. While the Myanmar population in Mae Sot is multiethnic and multilingual, I conducted these interviews only in Burmese. It was likewise in Burmese that the statements by migrants included in the ethnographic accounts in this book were originally spoken. The names, of course, of all migrants (as well as most factories) included herein are pseudonyms unless the individuals in question requested otherwise. Finally, in the first half of 2013, I carried out (with the help of several migrant friends) a basic demographic survey of over a thousand migrant workers employed at fifteen factories in Mae Sot, the results of which I outline in chapter 1.

Mae Sot is also, I should add, a town in which I previously lived and worked for over four years, first in 2004 and then again from 2006 to 2010. Fieldwork for this project was thus very much a return home, and among those who make ethnographic appearances in this book are old friends and acquaintances from the border, including my wife Ingyin Khaing (May), herself a longtime Myanmar migrant resident of Mae Sot and a constant source of insight into the local situation.
Outline

The chapters of this book, aside from the first, are organized around particular forms of struggle through which Myanmar migrants have contested, disrupted, and transformed Mae Sot’s border capitalism. Chapter 1 traces the historical production of the Thai-Myanmar border, with an emphasis on events in Myanmar. Included there are also demographic details of Mae Sot’s migrant population. Chapter 2 pursues the historical development of migrant labor regulation in Mae Sot through an analytic of capitalist recuperation—by which I mean the ways through which state officials, NGOs, and capitalist employers have appropriated what were initially subversive workers’ struggles, channeling them instead into collaborative institutions bolstering industrial peace and the border’s status quo. Chapter 3 focuses on struggles over migrant mobility, investigating the ways in which borders that restrict migrants’ movement have been variously deployed and contested. Chapter 4 explores practices of coercive policing in Mae Sot and the ways in which such policing, and migrants’ responses to it, has shaped migrants’ precarity both inside and outside the workplace. Chapter 5 examines the ways by which labor market flexibilization in Thailand has, somewhat counterintuitively, facilitated socialization and class recomposition among Mae Sot’s migrant factory workers. Chapter 6 presents an extended case study of a workers’ struggle at one Mae Sot garment factory in order to illustrate the ways in which flexibilization, while closing down possibilities for more conventional unionized struggle, has simultaneously enabled alternative forms of workers’ self-organization. Subsequently, in the book’s conclusion, I return to my core argument in order to reflect on the implications of the foregoing analysis for our understanding of contemporary capitalist transformation, whether in Mae Sot or more globally. The book then closes with a brief postscript summarizing recent developments in migrant regulation in Thailand stemming from the country’s 2014 military coup.