

Clarifying rupture: An authors' reply

Sango Mahanty 

The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Sarah Milne

The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Keith Barney

The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Wolfram Dressler

The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Philip Hirsch 

The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Phuc Xuan To

The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Dialogues in Human Geography
2023, Vol. 13(2) 216–220
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20438206231177070
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

In our article, 'Rupture: Towards a Critical, Emplaced, and Experiential View of Nature-Society Crisis', we advocated for contextually rich and critical understandings of environmental crises and their catalytic effects. This authors' reply responds to four commentaries whose authors raise helpful questions and insights. We first review the spatial and temporal connections between specific rupture episodes and ongoing processes of extraction and exploitation. We then discuss how the impacts of rupture disproportionately fall to those with the smallest contribution to the crisis. Third, we clarify how our contextually rich view of rupture differs from planetary analytics such as the Anthropocene. In terms of rupture's effects, we agree with comments that rupture does not simply represent a politics of hope but can strengthen authoritarian interests. Finally, we clarify what it means to 'put rupture to work'.

Keywords

rupture, Anthropocene, crisis, inequality, agency

The four commentaries in this forum have engaged helpfully with different aspects of our article on 'Rupture' (Mahanty et al., 2023), which argues for contextually rich and critical understandings of dramatic nature-society transformations and their catalytic effects. Cretney and Nissen (2023) illustrate how rupture spoke to the often-unpredictable outcomes of disasters in New Zealand, especially

the politically ambiguous character of the 'open moment' that followed Christchurch's 2011 earthquake.

Corresponding author:

Sango Mahanty, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.
Email: sango.mahanty@anu.edu.au

Besky (2023) sees rupture as a valuable framing for the interactive and temporally complex processes that are leading to exhausted resources and people in West Bengal, India. Kumar (2023) emphasizes that – if the timelines are calibrated to European colonization rather than the industrial revolution – epochal frames like the Anthropocene can help to support claims for justice by highlighting the role of coloniality in contemporary environmental crises. Wilmsen and Rogers (2023) find resonances with their research on social and ecological disruptions associated with dams in China, while asking a series of important methodological questions on how to ‘put rupture to work’. The interconnected themes in these commentaries prompted valuable discussion and reflection, which we share in this response.

Rupture’s expansiveness in space and time

Our paper defined nature-society rupture as a tangible episode of dramatic change or disruption that ripples across space and through time. As Besky observes, ruptures are often ‘a long time coming’; they can emerge from historical and ongoing processes of extraction and racialized exploitation. In this sense, the concept of rupture adds depth when compared with other approaches to socio-ecological change in the literature that emphasize sudden shifts and urgency such as ‘tipping points’, ‘emergencies’, and ‘disasters’. As the latest IPCC assessment shows, there is a narrow and closing window to address planetary crisis (IPCC, 2023). Problems arise, however, when urgency makes us blind to questions of history and justice (as cautioned by Kumar) or is harnessed to generate the exploitative or unjust ‘emergency politics’ discussed by Cretney and Nissen.

Spatial and temporal processes cannot be disentangled, as we illustrated in the connectivity between local-to-regional changes catalyzed by Mekong hydro-power dams. Hydropower projects intersect with historically layered socio-spatial processes of land use change and dispossession. At the river basin scale, dams collectively re-organize and disrupt ecosystems and produce cumulative impacts on nature and livelihoods. The Mekong River Basin is now a highly engineered and splintered watershed, in which there is no

returning to a ‘pre-dam’ state. Wilmsen and Rogers find similar patterns of transformation, dispossession, and displacement in the Three Gorges Dam case; they also flag global connectivities through the ongoing investments of Chinese companies in hydro-power schemes around the world. We agree with their assessment that ‘a rupture analytic asks us to take a more expansive and non-linear view and . . . asks us to stay in place’. The need for a spatially and temporally expansive understanding of the drivers and effects of specific rupture episodes – such as the construction of hydropower dams – is integral to our conceptualization.

The ‘who’ of rupture

In theorizing the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of rupture in our paper, we considered how actors experienced rupture in differentiated ways. The ‘who’ of rupture warrants further discussion in response to Kumar’s point that some actors and groups have historically contributed more to the environmental crisis, while Besky shows how the impacts disproportionately fall to those with the smallest contribution and the least power.

On contributions to rupture, Kumar proposes that we must ‘stay with the trouble of the Anthropocene’ because an epochal view highlights the role of coloniality in our current crisis and provides a basis to hold historical actors accountable, especially colonial states of the Global North. Here, he echoes ideas from decolonial scholarship that are cited in our paper, where social and environmental justice are paramount requirements in meeting global challenges such as climate change (Sultana, 2022). While Wilmsen and Rogers speak to the more immediate context of dams and mega-infrastructure, they too find it important to ‘point the finger’ at responsible actors as a basis for resistance and accountability.

The interactive and historically informed view of rupture that we propose empirically examines and contextualizes these questions of accountability. To illustrate, our engagements with Mekong hydro-power activists find that these groups were working with an expansive understanding of political spaces where specific campaigns were increasingly linked to broader rights-related questions within authoritarian political contexts. For instance, a Vietnamese

colleague observed that environmental activists were expanding their concerns beyond ‘air, water, chemical pollution’ to a broader spectrum of work that intersected with human rights – a transition that also elicited strong government crackdowns on civil society. Although state actors were a continued and central focus, civil society strategies were necessarily sophisticated, networked, and long-term (The Rupture Project, 2022). Through their experience, we see that – rather than weaken agency – a nuanced view of change processes enabled civil society groups to strategize within their tightly constrained political settings.

In relation to the differentiated effects of rupture, Besky rightly draws attention to rupture as a ‘problem of work’, where resource exhaustion especially adds to the burden of the most marginalized, who also experience the most substantial socio-ecological impacts in rupture settings. As Besky observes in West Bengal, these burdens can be existential and can seriously impact processes of social reproduction. In the Mekong region too, such impacts were evident in dam-affected communities, whose residents had to contend with overlapping changes wrought by large-scale land developments, conservation interventions, and a growing rate of land dispossession from unsustainable debt (Green and Bylander, 2021) connected with the intensification of market-oriented agriculture (also noted by Wilmsen and Rogers in their commentary). These factors combine to drive proletarianization, whereby smallholders turn to other forms of paid labor (Kenney-Lazar, 2012) and out-migration (Barney, 2012; Wilmsen and Rogers, 2023). Besky’s attention to ‘work’ is a welcome addition to our conceptualization because she highlights the impacts on social reproduction as well as physical and emotional ‘exhaustion’ in these disrupted settings.

An analytic for the Anthropocene?

Our paper contrasts the emplaced and contextually rich view of rupture with the planetary and often insufficiently critical lens of the Anthropocene. Kumar counters, however, that it remains important to keep an eye on the ‘epochal’ character of the

Anthropocene. While recognizing the potentially depoliticized and homogenizing qualities of dominant Anthropocene discourses, he also sees value in attending to the epoch for centering questions of justice in the environmental crisis, especially the contributing role of European colonization. Kumar contrasts this with the language of ‘emergency’ which can overlook the balance sheet of historical contributions versus current costs. Since our conceptualization of rupture attends to historical influences, we think it is consistent with Kumar’s call to consider historical injustice. We add though that we understand coloniality to be an ongoing process rather than just an historical or epochal event (after Wolfe, 2006). A processual view of coloniality – and indeed state power – is important if we are to recognize how contemporary processes benefit dominant groups in society at a cost to Indigenous and other minorities – as often occurs in the Mekong and elsewhere.

With this in mind, we explicitly framed rupture to provide a more critical and nuanced pathway into environmental crisis than epochal thinking permits. As Besky observes, the role of ongoing coloniality in driving racialized exploitation, dispossession, and the reorganization of landscapes and lives is important to our framing of rupture. In this sense, rupture mediates between planetary transformations that we associate with the ‘epoch’ of the Anthropocene and emplaced episodes of crisis or disaster. Our concept of rupture also engages with the post-colonial politics of authoritarian extractivism in Global South contexts. Rupture can therefore bring the epoch to life in a place and time and recognize the contributions and experiences of specific actors. Yet rupture differs in focus and scope from the Anthropocene and is not always an artifact of it. In this sense, rupture may indeed address Kumar’s aspiration to critically juggle between discrete ‘events’ and the ‘epoch’.

The ‘open moment’

Central to our theorization of rupture is the notion of the ‘open moment’, whereby disruptive episodes catalyze novel spaces of negotiation and agency. Rupture’s potentially catalytic role drew insightful comments from Cretney and Nissen as well as

Wilmsen and Rogers. As Cretney and Nissen recognize, rupture episodes can expose injustices and create a broader state of flux, where ‘life turns to molten metal’. We show in the paper that these spaces of negotiation play out in highly contingent and ambiguous ways within politically and economically unequal settings – for instance, sparking acts of resistance, as much as reassertions of state authority (see also Mahanty et al., 2023). Exploring these ideas in the cases of post-disaster politics and COVID-19 in New Zealand, Cretney and Nissen find that these political spaces are not only spaces of radical resistance but also can equally create political space for groups that seek to generate oppression and violence. They cite the emergence of far-right voices to counter government lockdowns during COVID-19 as an example. In the Three Gorges Dam case, Wilmsen and Rogers assert that ‘the open moment was not to be’ because the project ultimately extended Chinese state power. Yet they also observed elements of resistance around this project, even as these could not derail the state’s resettlement plans. We agree that the ‘open moment’ of rupture is politically ambiguous; it does not simply represent a politics of hope because toxic and extreme elements as well as authoritarian state power can occupy or control such spaces of negotiation.

Discussions at a round-table dialogue with Mekong civil society groups in Chiang Mai during July 2022 – just after our paper was accepted – further illuminate the character of the ‘open moment’ (see The Rupture Project, 2022). Overwhelmingly, the participating activists expressed concern about shrinking political space in countries of the Mekong. As noted earlier, they saw a growing awareness in government that environmental issues intersected broader rights-related questions, producing new and harsh government crackdowns on organizations as well as individual activists – perhaps akin to those observed by Wilmsen and Rogers in the Three Gorges Dam case. Considering this shifting political space, they placed growing importance on the development of long-term networks rather than ‘wins’ in specific campaigns (see also Fung and Lamb, 2023). As one participant shared, ‘for local civil society

advocates seeking social and environmental justice, it is now hard to think in terms of success or failure because we are engaged in a long-term struggle’. Windows of opportunity emerged but could be narrow and fleeting; and advocates and ordinary citizens increasingly faced physical and emotional exhaustion. These insights confirmed the ambiguous character of the spaces created by rupture, while struggles to gain justice were necessarily long term. Nonetheless, there was a continued determination to advocate for justice, rights, and accountability from the government.

Putting rupture to work

In response to Wilmsen and Rogers’ question about the analytical boundaries of rupture, our approach involves tracing such connections, starting from specific episodes and grounded ‘cases’. As Lund (2016: 1203) suggests, ‘the choice of rupture is epistemological’. A defined episode of rupture represents a framing and a comparative entry point to observe how local processes and multi-scaled forces coalesce, and as a way of accounting for power and injustice, in places over time. A large dam becomes a ‘case’ of rupture because it is conceptualized as such, through the knowledge and analytical skills of the researcher, and using some of the tools and approaches we have set out in the paper. The analytical boundaries thus depend on context and analysis: on how any particular case of rupture is conceived, operationalized, and abstracted. This approach echoes ideas from open, extended case methodologies, reflexive rather than positive science, and our mixed-method political ecology lens (Doolittle, 2015).

Conclusion

The commentaries in this forum usefully remind us that rupture is *not* ‘Everything Everywhere all at Once’. Instead, the concept is intended to provide a grounded entry point and a critical understanding of the sources and effects of nature-society disruption. Our conceptualization of rupture brings politics back into discussions of crisis, together with values that prioritize concerns about nature,

equality, solidarity, and justice. We hope that this forum sparks further exploration of what the theorization of rupture offers toward understanding diverse forms of nature-society disruption, and helps to inform the next crucial step: repair.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Australian Research Council (DP 180101495: Rupture: Nature–Society Transformations in Mainland Southeast Asia). The authors acknowledge the support of Lauren Rickards with this Forum and editorial assistance from Sophie Dowling.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council, (grant number DP180101495)

ORCID iDs

Sango Mahanty  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0382-5879>

Philip Hirsch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3887-6203>

References

- Barney K (2012) Land, livelihoods and remittances: A political ecology of youth outmigration across the Lao–Thai Mekong border. *Critical Asian Studies* 44(1): 57–83.
- Besky S (2023) Agrarian crisis, affect, and accumulation. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 207–210.
- Cretney R and Nissen S (2023) What is generated through rupture? *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 197–201.
- Doolittle A (2015) The best of many worlds: Methodological pluralism in political ecology. In:

- Bryant R (ed) *International Handbook of Political Ecology*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 515–529.
- Fung Z and Lamb V (2023) Dams, diversions and development: Slow resistance and authoritarian rule in the Salween River basin. *Antipode*. Epub ahead of print 14 March 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12939>
- Green WN and Bylander M (2021) The exclusionary power of microfinance: Over-indebtedness and land dispossession in Cambodia. *Sociology of Development* 7(2): 202–229.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023) *Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report*. Geneva: IPCC.
- Kenney-Lazar M (2012) Plantation rubber, land grabbing and social-property transformation in southern Laos. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(3–4): 1017–1037.
- Kumar A (2023) Ruptures of the Anthropocene: A crisis of justice. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 202–206.
- Lund C (2016) Rule and rupture: State formation through the production of property and citizenship. *World Development* 47(6): 1199–1228.
- Mahanty S, Chann S and Suong S (2023) The emotional life of rupture at Cambodia’s Lower Sesan 2 hydro-power dam. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. Epub ahead of print 14 March 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486231162087>
- Mahanty S, Milne S, Barney K, et al. (2023) Rupture: Towards a critical, emplaced, and experiential view of nature-society crisis. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 177–196.
- Sultana F (2022) Critical climate justice. *Geographical Journal* 188(1): 118–124.
- The Rupture Project (2022) Civil society in the Mekong: What can we learn from environmental struggles? *New Mandala*. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/civil-society-in-the-mekong-what-can-we-learn-from-environmental-struggles/> (accessed 22 March 2023).
- Wilmsen B and Rogers S (2023). Putting ‘rupture’ to work at the Three Gorges Dam. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 211–215.
- Wolfé P (2006) Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research* 8(4): 387–409.