

Book Review

Breman, Jan (2015) *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits From and Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java.*

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The outrageous absurdity of colonialism is difficult to fathom. Colonised societies were recreated in the most profound way through the systematic dispossession of people's land, labour and dignity by the instruments of force, economic interests, racism, and administrative and political reorganisation and subordination. Colonialism is both an extraordinarily audacious and ambitious undertaking, and a banal – albeit ruthless – governance of labour, property and identity in the everyday. *Mobilizing Labour* provides a detailed chronological analysis of the mechanisms of dispossession and colonial control in Java, and it shows the step-by-step adjustment and tightening of the exploitative regime from 1720 to 1870. The externally imposed political, legal and social rules, and the ways in which they locked in with the institutional opportunities of local political and economic orders, continue to this day to shape the political, economic and mental landscapes of the post-colonial world. There is, therefore, good reason to welcome Jan Breman's systematic and meticulous analysis of how unfree labour was mobilised for the global coffee market in Java from the first years of colonial contact in the seventeenth century.

A private company colonised Java. The Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC*) was originally established as a chartered company in 1602 with a monopoly on the Dutch oriental spice trade. The Company – possibly the world's first global enterprise – operated with the impunity and force previously accorded only to the state. It had been granted the powers to wage war and establish colonies. It could negotiate treaties, mint its own coins, and imprison and execute convicts according to laws of its own making. Although it was a private company, it operated like a sovereign ruler. At the beginning, the Company had little or no territorial ambition as long as trade was secured, but as coffee became an ever more important commodity, control over land and territory in the Javanese uplands became important to the Company.

Priangan, what is now West Java, was the central area for coffee production. The political structure was not territorial, but was based on servitude to rulers with the possibility of defection. Initially, the Company distributed plants to local rulers to have their populations grow this exotic new crop. This relied on the ability of local rulers to secure increasing production. However, as the Company's appetite grew both in terms of quantity and profit margin, the crop lost its appeal for farmers, and the Company began to engineer more coercive measures to secure production. Breman describes in detail how the Company changed the local political system from one of personal fealty to one of territorial control. It outlawed movement and migration, and people who "deserted" were

apprehended and returned to their masters. Moreover, the system of local rulers was streamlined to serve one single purpose – indirect rule. Variation, diversity and other paraphernalia of the local polity were eliminated, and recalcitrant chiefs were disciplined and replaced.

Coffee was paid for by weight, using a local measure – the *pikul*. Rather than negotiating the price per *pikul*, the colonial administration changed the weight value of the *pikul* from 125 pounds to 250 pounds, but kept the price per *pikul* fixed. The sovereign capacity to decide who lived where, what they farmed and how much was paid for it was in the hands of the VOC. Obviously, the operation was far from smooth and there was resistance, but Breman is careful not to distort the big picture of ruthless exploitation by marshalling a series of episodes of resistance. Resistance did not undo the new political economy of indirect territorial rule, compulsory cultivation of specified crops and draconian punishment for disobedience. The Company went bankrupt in 1799, and the Dutch state inherited its colonial possessions.

The Dutch takeover of the colony provided an opportunity to rework some of the basic principles of colonial rule. For example, it was discussed whether to recognise the local population's property rights in land. However, such ideas were quickly dismissed, and the colonial territory also became colonial property. The system of forced cultivation and *corvée* labour for road building and other infrastructure development remained intact. In fact, it increased the pressure on the local population. The forced cultivation of coffee is estimated to have taken up to six months per year of a farming family's time. Forced cultivation was extended to other parts of Java from the nineteenth century. The colonial administration "discovered" or invented social structures suitable for indirect rule, such as village councils and local headmen who would serve as points of contact between the producers and the administration.

The second half of the nineteenth century brought a shift in how to control agricultural production. The need for investments in agriculture increased, and there was a gradual move toward free enterprise capitalism. Private investments in plantations and agri-business were encouraged, and gradually forced labour ceased to be the central instrument of agrarian production. The Agrarian Law of 1870 consummated the shift by declaring all land to be the property of the state. This way, government's ability to control production and agrarian development was now exercised through control over space, territory and property rather than through the direct control over people's bodies and labour. This model has largely remained in place in Indonesia ever since.

Breman's style is clear and uncontrived, and his book is based on a wealth of archival sources from Indonesia and the Netherlands. The history of unfree labour in Java is systematically related to events and dynamics of Dutch history. War, political crises and the "golden age" in the Netherlands are drawn in to explain policy changes and opportunities in a convincing way. The author does not push any particular theoretical point. Obviously, the focus is on labour control and what accumulation this allows for the powerful classes, but a sharper argument, a broader comparative commentary, or possibly some conceptual abstraction would have brought out the book's contribution more clearly. Nevertheless, *Mobilizing Labour* reserves the last chapter for direct engagement with current historiography.

In recent years, a scholarship (especially in Asian studies) has emerged with a revisionist – or sometimes apologetic – view of European colonialism. Such scholars argue that, while harsh and unfair, the forced cultivation system and colonialism as such had benign effects, and, on balance, the population was better off because of these colonial policies. It echoes Mr. Wilcox in *Howards End*, who says,

A word of advice. Don't take up that sentimental attitude over the poor.... The poor are poor, and one's sorry for them, but there it is. As civilisation moves forward, the shoe is bound to pinch in places, and it's absurd to pretend that any one is responsible personally. Neither you, nor I, nor my informant, nor the man who informed him ... are to blame.... It's just the shoe pinching – no one can help it; and it might easily have been worse (Forster, 2000 [1910]: 192).

This book can be seen as a full frontal attack on this particular reading of history. Breman takes the perspective of the victims of colonial policies. They were not better off conscripted for hard and dangerous labour, forced to farm particular crops with no freedom to sell in a competitive market, and they were not better off categorised as less than full human beings, without equivalent rights and entitlements. No doubt production grew, wealth was produced and society underwent many developments, but the unequal power to decide whose labour was supposed to produce whose wealth under what conditions makes it impossible for Breman to espouse a revisionist view. The big picture is made up of many small ones, and Breman never loses focus on the plight of the powerless.

Mobilizing Labour is well written and seamlessly translated. There is a useful glossary and the illustrations are informative and interesting. Yet, some editorial effort should have been spent in structuring the book and its chapters. The richness and length of the text requires a concise explicit argument and a conclusion for each chapter. Such editorial finesse (and a good index) would have aided reading and understanding and would, no doubt, have secured it a larger readership among students and scholars interested in agrarian development elsewhere.

REFERENCE

Forster, E.M. (2000 [1910]) *Howards End*. London: Penguin.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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