

ANN LAURA STOLER, *CAPITALISM AND CONFRONTATION IN
SUMATRA'S PLANTATION BELT, 1870-1979: A REVIEW**

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What is it like to live in one of the Javanese communities that ring the periphery and fill the interstices of East Sumatra's vast plantation economy? Ann Stoler argues that a complete answer requires both a worm's-eye and a bird's-eye view. The worm's-eye view is anthropological, a recounting of life as it is experienced by the villagers; the bird's-eye is historical, an analysis of the actions of plantation administrators and government officials from the early days of the industry until the present, as those actions have shaped village life.

Simpang Lima, a village of about one hundred households in the heart of the plantation region south of Medan, is the site of Stoler's anthropological research. All of the inhabitants are Javanese, and most are descendants of contract laborers imported from Java before the Second World War. The agricultural and residential land which they now occupy was illegally seized from the plantations in the 1940s and 1950s. Only very recently has the government, despite pressures from two plantation companies, begun to issue certificates of title to the squatters and their descendants.

In Stoler's account, one characteristic of social life in Simpang Lima stands out: the disparity between the inhabitants' self-perception that they are farmers and the fact that few of them actually earn the bulk of their incomes from farming. Instead, a small number (much smaller than in pre-depression days) are permanent employees of the plantations, a larger number are "temporary" plantation workers (meaning that they receive no benefits other than a cash wage and the plantation has no long term obligation to them), and many others are employed in the non-plantation economy. Often participation in the non-plantation economy involves short- or long-term migration to other parts of East Sumatra, and sometimes it is illicit or semi-illicit, such as theft from the plantations and prostitution.

The principal effect of these employment patterns is to weaken the bonds of community. A comparison is made with villages in rural Java, where rice land is the major source of wealth and where patronage relations create an intricate network of mutual obligations. In Simpang Lima, signs of discord are everywhere, from the "sneering, divisive, and incessant gossip accompanying the giving of any large-scale feast" (p. 193) to frequent intra-village robberies. Even within families there is little harmony or cooperation. The youth are not interested in working on the family plot or contributing in other ways to the family's income, but seek cash wages which they can spend on themselves. To the extent that Simpang Lima remains a community at all, it is because its inhabitants share a common ethnic (Javanese) and class (rural proletariat)

* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985. xii + 244 pp.

status vis-à-vis the outside world of Batak and Malay plantation managers and other employers.

The account of Simpang Lima takes up only twenty pages of a two hundred page text. The bird's-eye description of patterns of "labor control and confrontation," as Stoler defines her historical topic, covers most of the book's five substantive chapters. In Chapter 2, "The Early Contours of Labor Control: Corporate Capital and Contract Coolies," she traces the development of labor policies from the beginning of the industry through the depression. Multi-national corporate capital, with the support of the colonial state and the connivance of the local Malay aristocracy, acquired large tracts of prime agricultural land, creating a land shortage for the indigenous population of Malays and Bataks and the tens of thousands of Chinese and Javanese plantation workers imported into East Sumatra each year. These imported workers were indentured laborers, held to their contracts by the infamous penal sanction. Quoting Stoler: "laborers who ran away, refused to work, or otherwise transgressed the rigorous rules inscribed in their contracts were subject to imprisonment, fine, and/or forced labor above and beyond the duration of the initial agreement" (p. 28). Other inducements included a steady supply of prostitutes, credit at company stores, and the use of gambling debts to force reenlistment.

Beginning in the 1910s, the costs of these policies--a high repatriation rate, growing violence, and a variety of social ills--led to a new strategy of encouraging the migration of families and providing them with small private garden plots and better health care. There was also considerable debate, cut short by the depression, over the best way of ensuring a large labor reserve available at low cost as plantation needs grew. Between 1930 and 1933 nearly half of the 336,000 contract workers were fired. Many were then rehired as "free laborers" at one-fourth their former wage, creating the core of the reserve of "temporary labor" that still exists in Simpang Lima today.

Chapter 3, "Plantation Workers in Protest: The Politics of Violence," uses administrators' reports and contemporary newspaper accounts to portray the workers' reactions to these policies. "By the 1920s," Stoler writes, "assaults on white personnel had escalated to such a level that Sumatra's East Coast became infamous throughout the Indies . . ." (p. 47). At first believing the violence to be personal and criminal, the planters came increasingly to see it as political and a serious threat to the social order. In the 1930s colonial and nationalist newspapers waged a series of editorial battles over specific incidents, the former seeing external agitators and Communist plots everywhere, the latter insisting that the workers had legitimate grievances which could be resolved by more enlightened labor policies. Stoler's own view is that "most expressions of protest and violence were myopically conceived, centering on estate-based grievances, not fundamental opposition to colonial--much less capitalist--domination as manifest on the plantations or in any other form" (p. 85). But it was the planters' perceptions, not the workers' actual motivations that led to the increased repression of the 1930s.

During the Japanese occupation, plantation workers for the first time illegally settled and farmed concession land on a large scale. But they were not recruited to the nationalist-oriented militia created by the Japanese and did not play an important role in the Revolution that followed. "One could almost say that the work force retained its 'coolie' status, subservient to the economic interests, military priorities, and political concerns of more powerful social groups, be they Dutch, Japanese, or Indonesian" (p. 110).

Finally, the periods from 1950 to 1965 and 1966 to the present have been respectively the zenith and the nadir of labor politicization and radicalism.

Stoler is skeptical of the impact on worker welfare of even the most important plantation union, the Communist Party's Sarbupri (Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia, Union of Indonesian Plantation Workers), during the earlier period. Following Rex Mortimer, she considers the Communists ambivalent radicals, too concerned with their relationship with President Sukarno and with the nationalist struggle against foreign imperialism to pay attention to the more critical task of opposition to capitalism. But Sarbupri at least led the fight against the expansion of the temporary labor force, seeing it as a threat both to workers' incomes and its own political position. After the defeat and massacre of Communists and their supporters in 1965-1966, all of the cards were in the hands of the now-Indonesianized plantation management, backed up by the New Order state and the armed forces. Symptomatic of the new dispensation was that "According to the official government count, from 1973 to 1976, temporary workers increased from 10% to 29% of the total work force on the government estates" (p. 168).

What are we to make of this hundred years' tale of planters' actions and workers' reactions that have led to the sorry condition of Simpang Lima today? It is easy to agree with Stoler that life is hard in the Javanese communities of East Sumatra, perhaps harder than it is for most other ethnic groups in the region. And to agree as well that with the end of party politics--and especially the destruction of Sarbupri in 1966--whatever balance there was between classes has shifted, with state support and participation, to management. But these findings are not new, and did not require extensive archival and field research.

Stoler's purpose, if I am reading correctly what is at times a dense text, is to bring the most sophisticated Marxist and other interpretations of plantation economy to bear on the history and current condition of the East Sumatran Javanese. In my view, and not to put too fine a point on it, what she has produced instead is a long and sentimental lament, unpersuasive on the facts and without a clear theoretical statement.

The most troubling empirical weaknesses are in the section on Simpang Lima, which plays the critical role of providing the present social reality whose history is traced. It is surprising that, after two years of research, so little hard data is presented. Evidence of village and family disharmony is brief and anecdotal. We are given no coherent picture of the village economy, not even basic statistics on income and employment distribution, and no historical data. Some of the internal evidence, particularly that of youths finding more remunerative work outside the village, could be used to support a counter-argument of growing prosperity. And even if her findings are accurate, the case has yet to be made that the causes of Simpang Lima's problems are in its plantation environment. Not only in East Sumatra are complaints heard today that children do not want to farm, that village harmony is breaking down, that boys are becoming thieves and girls prostitutes.

I have two problems with the book's theoretical apparatus. The first is that Stoler's essentially Marxist persuasion means that she is burdened with the need to prove that, no matter how much it seems to be otherwise, the workers have lost and are losing. If protests decline, it is because the most assertive workers have been repatriated to Java. If workers defy the authorities by cultivating private plots on concession land, they are only more deeply subordinated to the plantation structure of exploitation as a whole. If workers are allowed to move out of barracks and into family dwellings and foremen are punished for abusing workers, "these were the very same concessions that allowed the basic structure of labor relations to remain unaltered and exploitation to

intensify in modified form" (p. 206). Surely finding the truth requires a less teleological approach.

My second problem with Stoler's analytical framework is that it has no central organizing principle, no synthesizing concept that illuminates observed behavior in a new way. Instead she offers a parade of unintegrated concepts and themes. One is the feminist perspective, which crops up from time to time throughout the book but is never treated systematically or related to other themes. Another is the controversy among students of plantation society as to whether workers who grow their own food are engaging in acts of resistance or submitting to a planters' stratagem. A third is the idea that labor control involves "cultural hegemony," not just ideological imposition by the ruling class but, quoting Raymond Williams, "its acceptance as 'normal reality' or 'common sense' by those in practice subordinated to it" (p. 9). Yet another is the debate over whether plantations should be characterized as halfway houses between feudal and capitalist production systems. And linked to this is a discussion of "the vital role of the state and organized labor in the enforcement of labor control where workers' struggles were curbed by both unions and the state" (p. 12).

Perhaps Stoler's theoretical problems stem from the fact that she has tried too hard to avoid the pitfalls of vulgar (or is it classical?) Marxism. Discussing in her preface the debate over "structure and human agency" (that is, between economic determinism and political voluntarism) in historical change, she claims "that it is neither the structural imperatives of capitalism nor the willful acts of perfect revolutionaries which alone determine how societies transform, classes define, or social relations change" (p. viii). In her conclusion she quotes approvingly Marx's dictum that people are "both the authors and actors of their own drama" (p. 203). But she is unable to resolve the tension between the two poles in a way that leads to a powerful explanation of her own. Thus the book becomes a lament rather than an analysis.

The most important implication of this theoretical muddiness is that Stoler can offer no solutions--policies or politics--to help her subjects out of their misery. Instead she ends her last substantive chapter with a quote from a field informant to make what has become in Third World Marxist literature an almost obligatory apocalyptic point: "[The age of justice] will come soon. And when it does things will turn upside down. You watch out, because it will touch Jakarta, Europe and even the United States. No, it will not be confined to North Sumatra alone" (p. 201). When Marx said that the task is not to interpret the world but to change it, he could not have meant to give future social scientists such an easy escape hatch from serious political analysis.