

RESPONSE TO LIDDLE'S REVIEW OF
CAPITALISM AND CONFRONTATION

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I appreciate the thorough reading Mr. Liddle has given my book and the attention he has paid to some of its key themes. His review, nonetheless, represents a basic misunderstanding of my project and consequently misconstrues what by my intent is most central to the work and, according to other reviewers, is the book's strength.¹ Specifically, Liddle objects that I offer no "solutions--policies or politics--to help [my] subjects out of their misery," complaining that I am "unable to resolve the tension between the two poles" of the structural limitations imposed by capitalism, on the one hand, and the acts of human agency by which people challenge and shape its course, on the other.

The absence of this sort of resolve, he argues, reflects a "theoretical muddiness" on my part. Yet my analysis is explicitly directed not at attempting to resolve these tensions--an endeavor which I contend would violate the most interesting quality of the data--but at identifying their specific dynamics. In *Capitalism and Confrontation* and elsewhere,² I have argued precisely that such a perspective more accurately conveys the changing relations of labor and capital in North Sumatra. If Mr. Liddle's objections were to bear consequence, he would have to demonstrate, as I feel he has not done, that I have not only avoided the resolution he favors but have misconveyed these relations between labor and capital.

Mr. Liddle, for example, is troubled by what is for him the paradoxical conclusion that acts of labor resistance may ultimately lead to more effective strategies of labor control. Indeed I have argued in the book that workers' efforts to set up clandestine, illicit, and autonomous subsistence centers on the estates or outside their borders, in fact established conditions which were more in the interests of capital than not. He consequently chides me for wanting to have it both ways, for teleologically locating sources of protest

1. See, for example, Paul Alexander, "Review of *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*," *American Ethnologist* 13, 4 (May 1986): 388-89; Terance Bigalke, "Review of *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45, 4 (1986): 918-20; Philippe Bourgeois, "Review of *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*," *L'Homme* (1986); Peter Carey, "Brutalities of a World Apart," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 28, 1986, p. 223; Irene Tinker, "Review of *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*," *The Annals of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 485 (May 1986): 180-81.

2. See Ann Stoler, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist* 12, 4 (1985): 642-58; and "Plantation Politics and Protest on Sumatra's East Coast," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, 2 (1986): 124-43.

in sources of control [pp. 123-24]. While appeals to authority have limited virtue, nonetheless I feel that, if Mr. Liddle is uncomfortable with such ambiguities, then he should cast his critical net further. To cite but one example from his own discipline, James Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet devote a recently edited volume of *Journal of Peasant Studies* precisely to the "unintended consequences" of this and other similar everyday forms of resistance.³

Mr. Liddle understands such "paradoxes" to be little more than a Marxist contrivance according to which no matter what the conditions the workers always lose. This is hardly a contrivance, but a fact. Evidence from the Third World overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that workers "lose" and that their impoverishment is both chronic and structurally based. To understand why this situation exists and how it might be overcome, we need to appreciate why the estate industry has usually benefited from its own "defeats" vis-à-vis workers. We are thus obliged to define what it means to say that capitalists are structurally powerful. Workers may "win" some concessions when an indenture system is replaced by "free" wage labor, as it was in East Sumatra in the 1930s, but what is more striking is how much better off the industry was than might have been predicted; in other words, what made colonial capitalists structurally powerful was their ability to recoup losses and to take advantage both of defeats and of the opportunities created by them.

Our understanding of the nature of colonial and contemporary capitalism in various contexts has been enriched by interpretations focusing on the radically different and contradictory ways in which certain economic behaviors and modes of belief can be deployed by antagonistic classes. Perhaps the most successful of these interpretations is by Eugene Genovese, in *Roll Jordan Roll*, where he contends that paternalism "may have reinforced racism as well as class exploitation" at the same time that it offered slaves "their most powerful defense" against it.⁴ Steve Stern has shown that the very means by which Indian communities contested their repression in Peru's colonial society ensured their subordination within it.⁵ By adopting a similar perspective--one which incorporates, comprehends, and conveys historical ambiguities rather than dissolves them--we can gain an appreciation of how traditions are reinvented by colonized and colonizers with conflicting intentions.

Equally unsettling in Mr. Liddle's criticism is his narrow view of what anthropology should be and of what anthropologists should do. According to him, since anthropologists study villages that is what this study should be about. He divides the book between what he calls the "bird's eye" and "worm's eye" views, complaining that the latter takes up a mere 20 pages of the book. I too would like to publish more of the detailed data I collected on household income, consumption, and time-allocation patterns for more than 100 households; but that will be in the context of another book, precisely because a better description of how Simpang Lima looks today does not necessarily provide a better rendering of *why* it looks that way. Mr. Liddle's preferences aside, it was the latter question I addressed in *Capitalism and Confrontation* not the former.

3. James C. Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in Southeast Asia* (London: Cass, 1986).

4. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 7.

5. Steve Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

In pursuing history "from the bottom up" I have been particularly concerned with the perceptions and categories of those in power. When we look at how the Dutch perceived protest and defined disorder, we are not only reading upper-class sources upside down, we are gathering legitimate evidence for how one social class experiences domination. It is such knowledge which enlightens us about how Simpang Lima came to have the peculiar yet familiar constellation of features it does. Thus, the story I have recounted of Simpang Lima, contrary to Liddle's calculation, does take up a good part of the book's 200 pages. Why Simpang Lima looks the way it does today, why people perceive their world as they do, is not answered by the traditional methods of participant-observation in that village alone. My book is the history of a set of relationships, not of a comfortably demarcated and discretely defined physical and social space. I have suggested that we can gain a better understanding of the relationship between the plantation industry and the Javanese communities which have grown up on its borders, the expansion of capitalist agriculture and labor's resistance to it, by looking at the politics of labor control and the politics of protest, and by understanding the spheres within which labor control was exercised over a one hundred year history.

This intention aside, Liddle argues that the "findings are not new, and did not require [the] extensive archival and field research" which I carried out. If Mr. Liddle intends by his remarks that the general story is not new, I would agree. As I frequently observed in the book, who did what to whom in colonial North Sumatra is not surprising; nevertheless, both its consequence for the structure of contemporary North Sumatran society and its import to the comparative study of colonial power and peripheral capitalism have never been fully addressed. Thus in response to Mr. Liddle, I feel compelled to ask to what Dutch, English, or Indonesian literature he refers? Although a number of scholars have included the Javanese plantation population in studies of wider geographic and topical scope, none have focused specifically on their experience or even vaguely fleshed out their perspective.

This observation is as true for the literature on colonial Sumatra as it is for that on either the nationalist revolution or the post-independence period. I believe that there is a good deal more work that needs to be done on the relations of power and production in North Sumatra. Mr. Liddle's failure to acknowledge a conceptual framework because he objects to both its aims and conclusions deprives the reader of a fair assessment of my work.

