

Jan Breman. *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits From an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015. 404 pp.

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Research and debates on colonial labor regimes in Java have focused overwhelmingly on sugar cane, while for long periods coffee production involved more rural households and generated greater profits than did sugar.¹ The regime of forced coffee deliveries in the Priangan (Dutch: Preanger) highlands of West Java, initiated by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the eighteenth century, was a forerunner and model for the Cultivation System later established all over Java by Governor-General van den Bosch.

For West Java at least, the research gap regarding coffee production is amply filled by Jan Breman's *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market*, originally published in both Dutch and Indonesian.² The book is the outcome of a project started forty years ago by the Department of Comparative Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), but interrupted by the department's closing in 1987.³ Jacques van Doorn (1925–2008) began research on the opening up of the Priangan region for coffee cultivation, aided by his friend and former comrade-in-arms Wim Hendrix.⁴ With the withdrawal of van Doorn, the project was taken over by Breman in 1993.

Handsomely produced by Amsterdam University Press with numerous maps and illustrations,⁵ the book reflects the unique and long-standing collaboration of two researchers, quite different in background and character but both completely engaged in their mission. Working behind the scenes, the autodidact Hendrix burrows tirelessly in the colonial archives, adding his own uniquely critical reading (as anyone who has seen his internal working papers and pungent hand-annotations on

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¹ W. G. Clarence-Smith, "The Impact of Forced Coffee Cultivation on Java, 1805–1917," *Indonesia Circle* 64 (1994): 241–64.

² Jan Breman, *Koloniaal profijt van onvrije arbeid; het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen koffieteelt op Java, 1720–1870* (Amsterdam University Press; 2010); and *Keuntungan kolonial dari kerja paksa: Sistem Priangan dari tanam paksa kopi di Jawa, 1720–1870* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014).

³ The university's short-sighted closure of comparative sociology condemned the social sciences at Erasmus to two decades of de-internationalization, a situation corrected only in 2009 with EUR's "acquisition" of the International Institute of Social Studies (The Hague) as a new University Institute.

⁴ Jacques van Doorn and Wim Hendrix, *The Emergence of a Dependent Economy: Consequences of the Opening up of West Priangan to the Process of Modernization*, CASP series no. 9 (Rotterdam: CASP/Erasmus University 1983). Van Doorn and Hendrix served together as conscripts in the Netherlands's decolonization war in Java, and were among the first to expose the many acts of cruelty committed during that conflict (or rather, in the language inexplicably still preferred by Dutch politicians and the media, the "excesses" occurring during the "police actions").

⁵ With the exception of some misspellings of words and place names (e.g., *petingi* for *petinggi*, *Pacacaran* for *Padjadjaran/Pajajaran*, *payung* for *payung*, *pasangrahan* for *pasanggrahan*).

photocopied archive documents will understand), working *avant la lettre*, “along the archival grain.”⁶ Breman, a “defiant sociologist” and “indefatigable scribe of the labouring underclasses,”⁷ is best known for his landmark works on Indian labor. But he has also produced two important historical works on labor and land in the Dutch East Indies, on both of which Hendrix also collaborated: one on Sumatran plantation labor and the “coolie contract” system, and another on “upside down” 1920s’ colonial land reform in West Java, in which the government took land from the poor and gave it to the less poor.⁸

Mobilizing Labour has been the subject of at least two detailed review essays that readers may consult for a chapter-by-chapter discussion of the book.⁹ In brief, the first third of the book (chapters I–III) sets the scene, and takes the reader from the first ventures of the Batavia-based VOC into the hinterlands of western Java up to the arrival of Governor Daendels in 1811. One key argument here is the role of the VOC in sedentarizing the peasantry and limiting their mobility, and thus, in turn, their room for maneuver by switching patrons. That is, while their previous relatively nomadic existence as shifting cultivators allowed the possibility of moving from one patron to another when exaction became too harsh, sedentarization “not only made it easier to cream off the greater agrarian surplus [...] but also to tie them down in servitude” (37). Furthermore, “sealing off the highlands as a sort of reservation and forcing the inhabitants to stay put were the main instruments used by the Company to collect the colonial tribute” (93).

Chapter IV describes the dynamics of the Raffles interregnum and the debates that followed between advocates of forced and free cultivation. Chapters V and VI then describe the triumph of the advocates of “unfree labour” and the coffee regime as it expanded and evolved during the period of the Cultivation System (1830–70), and chapters VII and VIII describe the winding-up of that forced-labor system.

Three important reports, all commissioned by the colonial government and all in varying degrees critical of the Priangan system, are the basic sources for Breman’s book, expanded with additional library and archive sources (particularly for the later chapters). For the period up to 1811, the main source is the monumental, four-volume study of the VOC’s operations in the Priangan regencies, compiled by the Batavia-based government archivist Frederik de Haan (1863–1938).¹⁰ For the subsequent half-century (up to the 1860s), colonial official Salomon van Deventer (1816–91) was invited to use his period of leave in the Netherlands (1862) to explore the ministry archives and wrote a detailed, three-volume account of the system and its

⁶ Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁷ Ashwani Saith, “A Defiant Sociologist and His Craft: Jan Breman, an Appreciation,” *Development and Change* 47, 4 (2016): 879.

⁸ Jan Breman, *Control of Land and Labour in Colonial Java* (Leiden: Brill and KITLV Verhandelingen, Dordrecht, 1983); and *Taming the Coolie Beast* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁹ See: Tania Murray Li, Alexandre Pelletier, and Arianto Sangadji, “Unfree Labour and Extractive Regimes in Colonial Java and Beyond,” *Development and Change* 47, 3 (2016): 598–611; and Anne Booth, review of *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market* for *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 52, 2 (2016): 255–58.

¹⁰ Frederik de Haan, *Priangan: de Preanger-regentschappan onder het `Nederlandsch Bestuur tot 1811*, four vols. (Batavia: Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, 1910–12).

failings.¹¹ Finally, the liberal politician and reformer Otto van Rees (1823–92), member of the Council of the Indies—and future minister of colonies and governor-general—compiled the most critical of the three studies,¹² which, after some official stonewalling, was instrumental in the formal abolition of the Priangan system in 1871.

Breman's thorough study leaves the reader in no doubt that, compared to other parts of Java, the Priangan system resulted in (even) more destitute peasantries on the one hand, and (even) more ostentatiously wealthy local heads and clergy on the other. It was an effective system of colonial extraction based on unfree labor, but not an efficient one: coffee yields in the highlands were far below those found in the regions of "free" cultivation, and by the mid-nineteenth century production was stagnating.

There is still work for future historians to do, as some puzzles remain. In the early pages of the book, Breman makes a courageous attempt to unravel the process of differentiation of the peasantry that accompanied the transition from shifting to settled cultivation, and links this to the origin of the *cacah*, a "composite and stratified household" (40) that included not only the owner of the fields (*bumi* or *sikep*) and his family, but also dependent sharecroppers (*numpang*) and/or farm servants (*bujang*). More detailed knowledge of the inner workings of the *cacah* might throw light on the "cultural dynamics of recruitment to *cacah* households" and the actual working of coercion at the point of production,¹³ and, in turn, the general (though never total) lack of resistance by the landed peasantry.

In a lengthy epilogue, Breman broadens his focus to the Cultivation System as a whole, setting his sights on the revisionist historians (especially van Niel, Fasseur, and Elson) who argue that the Cultivation System benefited local populations by injecting cash into village economies. This polemic is certainly justified in this reader's view—all the more so in light of the recent controversy provoked by Gilley's defense of colonialism and argument for recolonization.¹⁴ It seems, however, to have gotten in the way of any broader engagement with historical comparisons and debates about global commodity frontiers, commodity regimes, and unfree labor.¹⁵ Of course, it could be argued that Breman has spent most of his professional life in the comparative study of unfree labor at different times and places, and broader engagement does not need to be the organizing principle of every separate project.

Finally, a note of caution to readers who may assume that unfree labor is a thing of the past in Indonesia. Government interference in the lives of Indonesian peasants—telling them what to plant and when to plant it—did not end with the departure of the Dutch, or even with the end of Suharto's regime in the late 1990s. To this day, the

¹¹ Salomon van Deventer, *Bijdragen tot de Kennis van het Landelijk Stelsel op Java, op last van zijn excellentie den Minister van Koloniën, J. D. Franssen van de Putte*, three vols. (Zalt-Bommel: Joh. Noman en Zoon, 1865–66).

¹² Rapport O. Van Rees, "Raad van Indië en Regerings-Commissaris voor de Preanger-Regentschappen," National Archive, Ministry for the Colonies, Verbaal 29 June 1870.

¹³ Li et al., "Unfree Labour," 604.

¹⁴ Bruce Gilley, "The Case for Colonialism," *Third World Quarterly*, Taylor & Francis Online, September 8, 2017 (DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037). This "Viewpoint" essay was subsequently withdrawn by Taylor & Francis at the request of the academic journal editor and in agreement with the essay's author.

¹⁵ See, for example, Steven Topik, "Historicizing Commodity Chains: Five Hundred Years of the Global Coffee Commodity Chain," in *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, ed. Jennifer Bair (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 37–62.

reformasi government colludes with domestic and foreign investors to give local people in Kalimantan (and to a lesser extent, Sumatra) an offer that they cannot refuse: join the palm-oil venture as contract farmers, or move out. And in the rice-bowl areas of Java, Bali, and parts of Sumatra and South Sulawesi, local governments and military officials compel peasants to engage in the continuous planting of rice (i.e., planting the new crop within fifteen days of harvest). If the peasants fail to do this, as a recent instructive from the governor of South Sumatra enjoins, “management of their farms will be taken over by the Koramil [local military command].”¹⁶ The comparative study of unfree labor “in its past, present, and emergent configurations” remains a subject of great relevance in Indonesia and beyond.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gubernur Sumatera Barat, Surat Edaran No. 521.1/1984/Distanhorbun/2017 tentang Dukungan Gerakan Percepatan Tanam Padi. Padang, 6 March 2017. Continuous planting of rice—as peasants well know—exposes the crop to chronic infestation with various pests and diseases, which can only be controlled by regular fallowing (or planting with a different crop), or with massive and frequent applications of poisonous and costly pesticides. It is not surprising, then, that currently an estimated 14 percent of Indonesia’s rice crop is facing harvest failure as a result of these infestations; see “Rentang jadi bumerang: hama wereng mengancam tanaman padi,” *Kompas*, July 23, 2017; and “Hama aneka produksi GKG,” *Kompas*, July 24, 2017.

¹⁷ Li et al., “Unfree Labour,” 609.