

SOJOURN *Symposium*

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

Review essays by Nancy Lee Peluso and Adrian Vickers, with a response from Jan Breman.

Keywords: colonialism, coffee, forced labour, Priangan and Cultivation Systems, West Java, Indonesia.

Review Essay I: Nancy Lee Peluso

Professor Emeritus Jan Breman, historian of land and labour relations in colonial and contemporary India and Indonesia, has written another important book on Java. This time he has taken on a detailed revelation of the growth and transformations in the notorious but under-studied, two-hundred-year-long coffee production regime known as the Priangan System (*Preangerstelsel*), the first and future model of the various crop production and delivery systems later known as the *Culturstelsel* or “Cultivation System” and implemented across Java in the early years of Dutch colonial control (1830–70). The story stretches over two long periods of colonial rule between the eighteenth century and the second decade of the twentieth century: that under the VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, the United East Indies Company or the “Dutch East Indies Company” [p. 11]) and the first half of the period that Java was ruled as part of the Dutch colonial state known as the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). He also covers the interregnum of Dutch power, when two short-term but important governors — the

French-appointed Herman Willem Daendels and the Briton Thomas Stamford Raffles — served as successive Governor-Generals of Java between 1808 and 1816. The book is an important contribution to our understanding of the agrarian transformations that rendered the volcanic and mountainous Priangan region of West Java a model of extreme colonial exploitation. Breman tracks the nearly two hundred years over which the colonial overseers levied their most violent and deadly exactions on the labour and land of Priangan's peasants, labourers and indigenous rulers.

Professor Breman takes us on a 350-page journey that traverses time rather than the space of the mountains that were once visible from Batavia — today's Jakarta — on Java's north coast. These historical landscape views are hidden today, not only by the thick smog that usually fills the air from the coast to the island's interior, but also by the ways in which Java and the production of the crop often called by that same name tend to be currently imagined. A good portion of this eastern part of West Java's highlands now comprises urban, peri-urban, and rural spaces packed chock-full of people. Much of the land is paved over by a network of highways and byways, while every remaining inch of cultivable land is planted in something consumable; some areas are still home to plantations of tea, coffee and other tree crops once exotic to the island. The region today is a symbol of rural and urban industrial production, and a major exporter of labour into global markets. Yet, while the contemporary Priangan is the homeland of peasant movements fighting for access to land such as the Serikat Petani Pasundan (Pasundan Peasant Union), it was a nearly empty "frontier zone", as Breman (p. 12) calls it, as late as the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Breman exhumes West Java's forgotten frontier landscapes from the archives and critiques other historians' and officials' misremembered and mistaken views of the system as one benefitting the region's most marginalized denizens. Instead, Breman reveals the violence that repeatedly characterized VOC and colonial state rule in the Priangan, as the VOC and the Dutch colonial state successively created a class of middle managers in the persons of the indigenous

rulers in and around the uplands. “The Company” forced the land and people of this region into harsh labour service, sedentarized a highly mobile population, and expropriated control of their land to produce a tropical colonial crop that would change the world and put the Dutch colonial empire at its centre, if only for a relatively brief historical moment. The author clearly meets his objective of defetishizing coffee-as-commodity.

The horrors of coffee production in West Java were first revealed to an unknowing world beyond colonial insiders by Multatuli, the nom de plume of Eduard Douwes Dekker, a former Dutch colonial officer in the so-called coffee districts, who published a tell-all novel entitled *Max Havelaar* in 1860. Douwes Dekker had quit the colonial service in disgust and returned to Holland after watching thousands of Javanese die from starvation in the coffee districts and trying unsuccessfully to change the system from the inside — or at the very least to raise the consciousness of his superiors. Unfortunately for those workers, coffee was far too important to the Dutch colonial enterprise, explained Professor Cornelius Fasseur, Breman’s fellow historian of the nineteenth century, reporting on what the colonial managers claimed. Coffee and sugar — the other superstar crop produced on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Java — were the brightest jewels in the Dutch colonial crown, “the cork on which the Indies floated” for quite some time (Elson 1994; Fasseur 1992, p. 160). For this reason, as Breman shows, generation after generation of colonial decision-makers refused to humanize the oppressive system, whatever liberal or “rights-based” ideology they might claim to bring to Java.

Breman’s account differs from those of other scholars in that he takes his readers back to the earliest days of coffee cultivation on the part of Javanese and Sundanese growers in the Priangan as part of their infamous agroforestry systems in the seventeenth century. He also gives us a view from within the hinterlands themselves. The first coffee trees were planted in grower’s gardens, close to their houses. The desire of the VOC to meet the growing demand for coffee on the world market led it, however, to require that more and more

trees be planted every year — a thousand trees per household at one point — with more land conscripted for this purpose and more people forced to plant and labour in what seem to have become more mono-typic coffee fields, or at least fields characterized by the low coffee trees and shaded by banana or other, taller species.

As a student of more recent transformations in Indonesian land use, resource access and land control, I celebrate Breman's attempt to focus a critical and detail-oriented eye on the interconnected land and labour relations in a region of Java with a past rendered unique by the policies, practices and profit motives of colonial authorities across multiple regimes of colonial rule. While stories of Java's subjugation are familiar, even classic, in the history of colonial Asia, the specifics of why and how the Priangan remained in the ever-tightening grip of these alien rulers are less commonly known. In the first century of the coffee production and delivery system it was not unusual for Company officials to use violence and publicly humiliate indigenous leaders, caning and whipping them or locking them in stocks for months if they did not force their subjects to produce enough coffee. The humiliations only succeeded in encouraging the gentry to submit the peasantry to greater hardships, often denying them even the meagre returns that they were owed for their labour. Forced labour and coerced cultivation continued from the early days of VOC territorial control through the first half of NEI colonial rule. Conditions for the landholders and labourers of the region worsened as time went on, because of policies that, among other actions, doubled the standardized weight of the pikul and quartered the payment per pikul of coffee delivered. The VOC even changed the terms of labour service to require corvee labour of landless labourers (*numpang*, *panukang*, *bojang*) and not just of landholders, as had been the case prior to the VOC's conquest of the region.

Breman discusses the ideas and practices of a succession of colonial leaders and advisors — Van Hogendorp, Nederburgh, Raffles, Muntinghe — who had the opportunity to end the oppressive practices of the Priangan System but did not do so. Breman here

agrees with Fasseur (1992) and Elson (1994) that all these men ultimately accepted that the colony existed to feed the mother country and that the system was working to generate returns. Yet, while these leaders applied their reformist ideas and actions successfully in other coffee production areas of the island, all of them deemed them irrelevant to and forbidden in the Priangan. It is here that the economic explanation for why the oppressions of the Priangan System continued for so long — that they were its high rate of profitability — falls short. In other words, if less oppressive measures were working elsewhere in Java, why continue them in Priangan? In an example of the excessive burdens that authorities placed on this region's inhabitants, Daendels put landless labourers to work on one of his most famous civilizing projects: the construction of a post road across the north coast. Breman reports that hundreds of men died of starvation and exhaustion building this road. They were neither paid wages nor provided meals — a traditional practice that supplemented wages for labourers. The work was unpaid and considered obligatory corvee service.

The Priangan is important to the history of Dutch colonialism on Java because it is one of the exceptions to the temporal division of colonial rule between the period when the VOC was primarily a mercantile trade monopolist, with its strength mainly along the coast, and the territorial rule of the NEI colonial state after the turn of the nineteenth century. The other interior region in which the VOC exercised territorial control was in a portion of the island's vast teak forests in the Residency of Rembang, lying inland from Java's northeast coast (Boomgaard 1988; Peluso 1992).¹ In both sites, labour services were heavy and excessive, and remuneration rarely met basic needs.

The officers of the trading-company-turned-territorial-governing-body in the Priangan had not innocently taken over the tributes once collected by indigenous rulers from their clients. Focusing on this misrepresentation lies at the heart of Breman's critique, and he provides plenty of evidence to demonstrate that it was a fabrication. As a "patron", not only did the VOC fail to protect its new clients

from hardships or depredations, but the worst of these measures were imposed by the VOC, in collaboration with the chiefs. Over time, the prices that the peasants and labourers were paid for coffee deliveries declined radically. More insidiously still, the VOC criminalized many labour and production practices that had previously been part of the normal relations of everyday agrarian life.

This criminalization took place through three processes to which Professor Breman attends throughout his narrative, starting in the VOC era and lasting until the Priangan System ended in 1870. These were territorialization, a transformation in the parameters of rule and patronage; the related process of sedentarization, and with it the extension of labour obligations to “settled” labourers who did not own land as well as the interdiction of multiple forms of mobility. These latter included shifting cultivation, travelling to work outside one’s district of residence, the exclusion of Chinese and other itinerant traders from the region, and rendering illegal any travel out of the district without a travel pass. What is striking about these means of control is that they have appeared in the “managerial” tool kits of contemporary governments in Indonesia and elsewhere. Although the ways in which these technologies of rule are applied changed a bit with the times, state actors and institutions still use territorialization and sedentarization to restrict and control access to land, allegedly to make national space more governable (Elden 2013; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995 and 2006; Watts 2003). The examples given by Professor Breman show that, through the imposition of these restrictions on mobility and on land control, the basic practices and institutions of peasants’ and labourers’ everyday lives were radically altered. This process affected settlement patterns, the extent of cultivated area and the composition of the household. The VOC, after all, desired to produce a new commodity — coffee — in a new place, without commodifying the relations of production by which it was produced. It imposed harsh versions of pre-capitalist relations within the capitalist logics that characterized its broader business practices. The system literally pressed labourers to death, while VOC officers complained about the inherent “laziness” of the Javanese.

In the Priangan, and later in other parts of Java, territorial boundaries between districts in which various chiefs controlled production, tribute and trade meant that the indigenous regents no longer competed with one another for clients. The VOC determined the territories from which rural subjects would pay tribute obligations to these intermediaries and which resources the latter would control. The Company tasked them with monitoring labourers and farmers so they stayed in place and with settling those who were still mobile to make them available to plant and tend coffee trees. This approach and practice were quite different from patterns of authority, rule, and patronage in much of pre-colonial Southeast Asia (Anderson 1991; Peluso 1992; Reid 1993; Thongchai 1994).² On Java, the VOC had no desire to allow labourers involved in the production of commodities like coffee actually to become “free”. Strange as it seems today, labour was the scarce resource in the Java of the VOC era, particularly in the Priangan, and these territorial and mobility controls forced labourers to plant coffee, to live in settled households and to stay within residential districts in which they were registered. If they were not confined to specific districts, their patrons would have to compete for their labour power, and the result would be a higher cost of labour.

Breman’s stories about land and labour in the Priangan make visible many practices of everyday life and livelihood production, as far back as the seventeenth century. This is no small feat: it is tremendously difficult for observers of rural life on Java and, more specifically, of contemporary Sunda to imagine this long settled island as an almost empty “frontier”. To illustrate, the Priangan in the seventeenth century had only ten per cent of its land under production.

Providing this kind of grounded view is difficult, given the huge gaps in the VOC archives. That said, more explicit theorization might have filled in some of these gaps, as other reviewers have suggested (Li et al. 2016; Lund 2016). In contrast to this point, I read this book as an empirically driven story shaped by and told with reference to a theoretical view that challenged several framings of the social, political, and economic relations of these colonial-

era coffee projects — arguments found in the literature treated in Breman's final chapter. Yet, while I appreciated Breman's theoretical deployments of territorialization, sedentarization and criminalization, it was not always clear why he had chosen to use other concepts to describe people and places, and how these might fit in broader analyses of agrarian transformations.

For example, this book refers to the region's mobile labourers and mobile highland cultivators as "nomads", an association that implies group transhumance and arid climactic zones rather than montane rainforests and forest farmers working in one of the wettest places on the planet. Why not "shifting cultivators"? The notion that shifting cultivation was a historical feature of traditional upland cultivation in West Java is strong among contemporary agroforesters, agroecologists, and other scholars of agrarian environments in Indonesia and West Java (see, for example, Soemarwoto 1984). The work of other scholars working on the region, such as Michael Dove (for example, 1985) and Harold Conklin (for example, 1957), might also have informed theoretically Breman's investigation of how these mobile Priangan subjects lived, and how their patterns of work and life fit into the transformation of the Priangan. On a related point, the book makes no reference to the gendering of labour or to household organization, even though the ways that the VOC and the colonial state changed the labouring and landholding status of various household members and the effect of their forced labour policies on household composition were crucial aspects of the region's agrarian transformation. Were the labourers and landholders in all categories only men? Were women forced to labour, and, if so, under what conditions? Finally, Breman uses the term "frontier" without defining it clearly or showing how its meaning actually changed over time with conditions on the ground. The term as a category of theorizing space is not uncontested; yet, recent work on commodity and resource frontiers demonstrates the many political connotations of the "frontier" label.³

Despite these quibbles, it seems petty to begrudge Professor Breman his choice of terms, given the material with which he had to

work and the scope of the book's achievement. As he tells us, even the coffee commissioners who travelled through the region did not know how to "see" the Priangan and its complex land and labour relations. In the context of the limited observations, insufficient documentation and biases of writers of extant reports on conditions there, the book is a valiant effort — a careful, sedimented history (Moore 2005) that demonstrates how the VOC past shaped the future of the Priangan under the colonial state.

In publishing this book, Professor Breman has completed a joint project that he began in the late 1970s with two devoted colleagues, Wim Hendrix and the late Jacques Van Doorn, as he acknowledges in his introductory remarks. His achievement is in documenting in a single volume the details of a commodity production and political regime as it was written on the land and the bodies of Priangan coffee growers and labourers. The book is available in English, Dutch and Indonesian, making it widely accessible. Professor Breman has written an essential component of the agrarian history of Java, showing how, once upon a time, the Priangan was made into an "out-of-the-way place",⁴ even while it bolstered the economic position of an early colonial capitalist power.

Review Essay II: Adrian Vickers

This book made me feel nostalgic for a mode of engagement with Southeast Asian history that has now largely fallen out of academic fashion. Jan Breman is one of the giants of social history, and his passionate and lucid writing on the history of labour has transformed our understandings of colonialism and of the bases of inequality in Indonesia.

The book continues Breman's earlier studies of colonial transformations of labour relations through the regimes of plantations and the mechanisms of land ownership. Breman's works on the rubber and tobacco plantations of Sumatra were written (Breman 1989 and 1992) with the same sense of outrage and injustice that the

present publication demonstrates. He moved from the exploitation of Sumatran coolies to questions of how the colonial state deliberately covered up investigations into the abuses that were part of the coolie labour system (Breman 1988), and then to the ways that colonial government fundamentally changed the nature of land use in Java, and in so doing created mechanisms that dislocated the peasantry and created workforces for colonial capitalism. In this book, Breman provides a long-term perspective on the Priangan highlands of West Java, which, because of their proximity to the VOC base of Batavia, attracted the attention of the Dutch when they were expanding their economic interests into Java's interior. Breman takes the story from pre-colonial times, through the VOC period, to the modernizing Napoleonic regime of 1808–11 and its successor British period of 1811–16, the notorious Cultivation System of 1830–70, and the liberal period that replaced it.

Breman belongs to a school of enquiry that has its roots in the work of W.F. Wertheim (1959), whose attention to labour history provided what was then a dramatic new intervention into the study of Indonesia at a time when orientalist research dominated that study. During the 1970s and 1980s, a range of studies of labour and social history provided depth to Wertheim's original work. Browsing through the bibliography of Breman's book, we see many of the key writers in the field: James C. Scott, G. Roger Knight and Peter Boomgaard — who, sadly, died only recently — being three of the most prominent. Despite a flourishing group of Indonesian social historians at Gadjah Mada University now continuing this research, there are no new Western names on the list of those investigating material aspects of Indonesian history today.

Some parts of the story of the coffee industry in West Java are extremely well documented, others — particularly the discussion of what came before the VOC's intrusions — rely on some guesswork and extrapolation. The Priangan region was extremely well documented by successive colonial regimes, and so Breman has copious data on which to draw in some parts of the book. Some of the data are too copious; the historical narrative is sometimes

overwhelmed by detail in some parts of the book, and in others the wider picture of the coffee industry and related economic data could have been provided. I kept wondering, for example, how the meagre pay of coolies related to the prices of goods on Java and to prices for coffee in the Netherlands, but the book does not mention the latter in anything other than vague statements. Likewise, what proportion of the world's coffee supply did West Java supply? Some of the secondary sources on which Breman draws tell us these things, but it would have been good to have such details spelt out.

One part of the story concerns the transformation of the indigenous ruling elite of the Priangan into middlemen within the colonial apparatus of rule. This story has already been well told for Java, notably in Heather Sutherland's 1979 book — strangely absent from the references in Breman's book. The "regularization" of the indigenous rulers gave them vested interests in the colonial system, and thus increased their role in the exploitation of the peasantry. It is important to stress that what Breman is describing is a system, not simply the result of individual greed but rather a set of structures built up over time, in which "good" and "bad" are sacrificed to forms of managerialism with their own imperatives of profit. At times some of the decisions made do not follow any necessary economic logic, but rather are based on the ideological drives of the system.

In accounting for the system and how it changed, Breman could in fact have paid more attention to ideology. He draws heavily on the famous novel by Multatuli — the pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker — *Max Havelaar, or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (1860), for illustrations of the outrageous kinds of exploitation that took place under the Cultivation. Certainly there is a clear body of evidence that supports Multatuli's argument that the peasantry of Java were being abused terribly. However, Breman also needs to recognize the liberal humanism that underlay Douwes Dekker's worldview, and to go beyond his agreement with that worldview in order critically to examine how complicit it was in furthering the interests of large capital. Douwes Dekker and his allies succeeded in pressuring the Dutch parliament into allowing

big European companies freer access to the East Indies after 1870, with a result that did little to improve the lives of the peasantry that his novel had described.

Given that the fashionable name for this kind of ideologically driven, management-focused, big capitalism is “neoliberalism”, Breman has missed the opportunity to reflect on the implications of his study for our understanding of present-day capitalism. The transition from the Cultivation System to the Liberal Policy was one from state planning to a policy centred on private enterprise. Neither produced good results for the peasantry of Java. Rather than taking on the big issues, however, the last section of Breman’s book is devoted to discrediting the arguments of revisionist historians who have defended the Cultivation System (Elson 1994; Fasseur 1992; van Niel 1992). While Breman proves his case against the revisionists, the book has much wider implications for the understanding of development and the role of capital. I hope that younger researchers will continue to elaborate on these issues of capitalism and inequality, matters too important to be left to the whims of fashion.

Author’s Response: Jan Breman

The prologue to the book sets out its motif. I aimed to write about why, when and how an unfree work regime to produce coffee took shape in colonial Java. The red thread running through my case study is a discussion of the impact that this brutal system of exploitation had on the peasant economy and society of the Priangan highlands. Nancy Peluso and Adrian Vickers have aptly summarized the contents of my treatise, and I thank them for their generous reviews. I shall first respond to some of the issues that they have brought up, and then broach wider questions raised in other appraisals, before ending with an account of what happened when I offered the manuscript for publication.

Peluso is quite rightly interested in noting that forced coffee production affected the division of labour within the peasant

household, and, more pertinently, the question of to what extent the excessive burden was divided up among members. The archival and secondary sources provide no information on gender and age distribution of the coffee workforce. Men must have done most of the cultivation work — opening up the land, planting the saplings, weeding and pruning and taking the harvest to the warehouse. The women were left behind to take care of the food crops, weave clothes and run the household, but they had to join the men at the peak of the cultivation cycle, to pick the berries and process them into black beans. They were rounded up, together with the elderly and even small children, to make their way to the coffee gardens and find makeshift shelter there for months on end. Again, only haphazard information can be found on how this massive mobilization under coercion took place. That prompts me to comment on the available data, collected to keep the colonial machinery informed on success in the realization of the huge targets set from high above: no fewer than a thousand trees per household, an unachievable tally, and yet from 1785 onwards the obligatory yardstick for many decades. What we are anxious to learn cannot be found in the archives, as this information was considered irrelevant to the task at hand: to maximize profit and minimize cost. No doubt, there were a few men within the colonial apparatus who opposed and even dared to voice their dissent publicly (Horton 2016, p. 155). But, when all is said and done, we have to read between the lines and against the grain to satisfy our curiosity. The problem goes deeper than that. The numbers and tables included in the book — which according to Anne Booth (2016) lack proper evaluation — are not meant to back up my analysis with quantitative evidence, but rather to allow me to dispute their validity, to cast doubt on their veracity.

As Peluso has pointed out, shifting cultivation was still the usual mode of agriculture when coffee production was first prescribed as a form of taxation in the Priangan. The term labour nomadism, however, refers to land-poor and landless cultivators who were incorporated in the composite peasant household. I have related its origin to the slowly evolving transition to irrigated agriculture.

Sawah cultivation requires fixed settlement and more labour than is available in the landowning household. The agrarian underclass grew in size, being prevented from access to unclaimed land for cultivation. As actual tillers of the soil, its members either received part of the yield as sharecroppers or were attached as farm servants to propertied households. These dependent segments drifted around and bargained as clients for a better deal with another master. While the *cacah* (corporate peasant household) formation antedated colonial rule, I have argued that the imposition of coerced coffee cultivation compelled landowners to add footloose cultivators to their households in order to render the labour services that the colonial authorities had foisted on them. The coffee regime insisted on sedentary cultivation, and forbade peasants from moving around freely or changing their masters. With the steady expansion of *sawah* holdings, the *cacah* was the core unit of taxation, but, first in 1785 and then again in 1839, the system's burden further increased to include all households, landowning or not, in the labour levy. The Priangan peasantry had become more stratified than that in most other regions of Java — a change made manifest in a swelling army of dispossessed cultivators.

Vickers wonders how the meagre coolie pay compared to the price of coffee in the Netherlands and what proportion of the world's coffee market came from Priangan. In 1726 it amounted to about half to three-quarters of the modest global trade in the new commodity. A century later, Java still produced half of the total quantity shortly before the founding father of the cultivation system argued that Java's coffee had to be cultivated with unfree labour in order to remain competitive in the world market. But I take Vickers' point: my case study does not trace the global commodity chain. John Talbot (2017), who published a major book on the coffee trade that I came across only belatedly, also regrets that I have not discussed in more detail Java's role in the evolution of the global market. I chose intentionally not to do so, because the focus throughout the book is firmly at what happened on the work floor. In the same way, Eduard Douwes Dekker, who subtitled his 1860 *cri de coeur* "the coffee auctions of the Dutch Trading

Company”, stayed away altogether from that scene in Amsterdam in order to tell the tragic tale of Saïdjah and Adinda and the story of how Max Havelaar berated the district heads for their oppression of the peasantry. Should I have paid more attention to ideology? I did so, but by looking in a different direction and elaborating on “the othering of the native”. This othering already early on took the shape of crude racism and ended with the polished variant framed by Julius Boeke: the suggested absence of economic man which made it necessary to discipline the peasant to civilized behaviour. In the colonial mindset, servitude could be explained as the road to progress. But the ideology that Vickers asks me to address is of a different nature and concerns the switch from the state-managed cultivation system to large-scale capitalist agribusiness. I shied away from drawing a crystal-clear parallel with the neoliberal ethos of present-day capitalism, as to do so would have implied going too far beyond the local and temporal foci of my case study. But once more, I could have referred to Douwes Dekker, who in his repudiation of the abusive regime refused to join the opposition, the “free enterprise” lobby eager to welcome him on board. The stance that he took was one of “a plague on both their houses”, since he had learnt on the plantation run by his own brother that production free of state control did not mean free labour. In more words than I can spare, that would also be my opinion.

The data are too copious, Vickers bemoans. I hope that he does not imply that my study stops at “thick description”. Although worthwhile in itself — the original Dutch edition was twenty per cent bulkier, with over two hundred thousand words — my aspiration has been to provide more than that. Of all critical remarks made, the one I find most intriguing is the observation that my study falls short of conceptual abstraction (Lund 2016) and theoretical elucidation (Li et al. 2016). What both reviews seem to have in mind is the absence of a comparative approach. They share this argument with another reviewer who deplors my inability to relate my findings to coffee regimes in colonial Africa and elsewhere in the world (van Mellebeke 2016). I readily accept his claim that a similar

modality for growing coffee was also practised in the Belgian Congo. Colonialism has often resorted to forced labour in the extraction of surplus. But to the best of my knowledge I have not implied that the Priangan System or its later transformation into the Cultivation System was exceptional, as Roger Knight (2017) suggests in his review. My sustained focus on a single case does not mean that I consider it atypical. While I see the merits of broader assessments, that is more than I wanted to do.

Taking stock of the contents of my book, Peluso labels it as an empirically driven story shaped by and told through a theoretical lens. She has eloquently expressed what I attempted to achieve, but this does not answer the charge of negligence of which I stand accused: the need to present and discuss my findings on a wider canvas. When I beg to disagree with this opinion, it is on methodological rather than substantial grounds. Comparison is actually at the forefront of the research that I have all along conducted. On my appointment to a chair in sociology at the University of Amsterdam, I insisted on adding the adjective “comparative” to the title. In their review of the book, Li et al. (2016) draw attention to some of the publications in which I have discussed different forms of unfree labour. It is actually a long list ranging from past to present — on slavery practised in tribal communities, the bonding of agrarian labour in pre-colonial and colonial India, the genocidal collection of wild rubber as ordered in the Congo Free State, the indenture of coolies in enclaves of colonial capitalism throughout the Global South, and, finally, what I have termed neo-bondage in contemporary South Asia. In all these cases I have tried to conceptualize and analyse what I came across, but consistently endeavoured to situate theorization in its concrete setting. It is a point of view explicitly shared by Alec Gordon (2017). The conclusions reached are meant to have a broader relevance, but that abstraction cannot be understood without contextualization.

In the book under review, as in my earlier publications on the theme of unfree labour, theory and analysis are framed in an unfolding narrative covering events from the late seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. But, of course, where and when it

is possible to do so, the prospect of wider applicability is always waiting to be explored — just not necessarily in one and the same case study. I end my rejoinder by pointing out the connections that do occur among distinct instances of unfree labour.

I have explained how the tenacious resistance of the Priangan producers to the coffee regime left the colonial government ultimately no option other than to abolish compulsory cultivation and delivery of the main export commodity. The price paid for a century and a half of relentless labour extraction was unduly high. A large part of the peasantry slid to the bottom of the social hierarchy to work and live as coolies. Its proletarianization found a consequence in the land reform proclaimed when the hated system of coerced production had run out of steam. The Agrarian Law of 1870 declared all land beyond the village borders and not under regular tillage state-owned. The plunder of this so-called wasteland deprived the peasantry of its customary right to have access to the forest surrounding their settlements and to bring it under cultivation as *swidden* or *sawah* fields in the course of time. The appropriated land reserve was leased at low cost and on long-term contracts to owners or lenders of private capital, most of them expatriates, eager to open up large-scale estates to produce cash crops — in the Priangan, mainly tea — for sale on the global market. Plantation agriculture became a booming business, and it would grow to dominate the late-colonial economy. The crucial point that I want to emphasize is that the agrarian reform was not only an act of vast peasant dispossession. The same sleight of hand simultaneously implied the creation of a workforce kept footloose, which remained engaged as sharecroppers or labourers in food crop production but which, in order to find the wherewithal for sheer survival, had to search for additional employment and income as coolies on public works and plantations. From these impoverished underclasses the army of migrants emerged, dispatched to open the jungle in the Outer Provinces for capitalist agribusiness and to produce tobacco, rubber, palm oil and other export commodities in the late colonial era. Their indentured recruitment in Java's countryside, backed up by state-imposed penal sanctions,

was the subject of another case study (Breman 1989). The link made is meant to highlight unfree labour as a recurrent theme in my research and my attempt to understand its shape, setting and outcome in a common perspective. This theme and attempt underlie these successive studies.

On completion of the manuscript, I submitted it for inclusion in the *Verhandelingen* series of the KITLV in Leiden, which had published most of my books and articles on Indonesia's past and present. At the end of a lengthy round of evaluation, the institute's editorial committee declined to publish it. The verdict was an unpleasant surprise, but it did not really come as a shock. My earlier work *Taming the Coolie Beast* (Breman 1989) had provoked unfriendly critical-to-hostile reviews from a few of my colleagues in Leiden. When Amsterdam University Press (AUP) brought out the Dutch edition of my study on the coffee regime in the Priangan (Breman 2010), it was ignored by all Dutch colonial historians, but not by Bob Elson (2011), who wrote a fair review. Still, the stonewalling was such that AUP decided to remainder the Dutch edition of that book even before this English edition came out. Also, no review of the English edition, not even a hostile one, has appeared in a KITLV journal. The disgrace into which I have fallen can be discerned from the way in which the institute's editorial committee succinctly phrased its rejection of my manuscript in 2010 by its editorial committee: in my translation from the original Dutch, "a long-winded discourse with often cumbersome formulations in a quaint use of language without a consistent storyline". It could hardly have been more devastating, but I found an ally in Benedict Anderson, with whom I had started to correspond on my findings. Reading through the chapters which were then still in the Dutch original, Ben took the time to give his comments in an e-mail message while I plodded on.

My admiration for this work of yours is very high. The fundamental argument is to me completely convincing and even majestic. Wonderfully various sources elegantly tapped. I think the slowness on my part is also because the reading makes me so sad and so furious. The cruelty, the greed, the

hypocrisy, the intrigues, the shadiness, the racism. Not a single person one can respect. This text is a huge contribution to the history of colonialism, not merely Dutch, and of course, of Java ... the book stimulated me to think about so many things. My congratulations — a real chef d'oeuvre.

While in the erstwhile home country a *tempo dulu* sentiment on its overseas past still lingers on, Ben's appraisal did fortify me to enlighten a non-Dutch audience about the regime of forced cultivation and its imprint on colonial Java.

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SUGGESTED CITATION STYLE

Peluso, Nancy Lee, Adrian Vickers, and Jan Breman. "SOJOURN Symposium on Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market: Profits from an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java". *SOJOURN* 32, no. 3 (2017): 719–41.

NOTES

1. That comparison awaits another article.
2. These policies of territorialization, of sedentarization and of the criminalization of mobility echo the changing circumstances in rural England during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. E.P. Thompson (1975) and Karl Polanyi (1944) describe similar practices in the same period during the enclosures and other forms of privatization of agrarian and forest property in England.

3. This literature is too vast to cite in detail, but a few recent texts on Southeast Asia include Eilenberg (2012 and 2014), Barney (2009), Peluso and Lund (2011). For the Amazon, see Cleary (1993), and for a critical analysis of the American frontier imaginary, see Klein (1997).
4. See Tsing (1993) for the origins of this construction.

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