Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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to the government, as before. The forced cultivation of this perennial crop also meant that the authority of the regents in the Sundanese highlands remained unaffected. The difference between this and the regulations that Raffles had introduced in the other parts of Java, a difference that had already started to emerge in the time of Daendels, exposed the separate place that the Priangan region occupied in the system of colonial exploitation.

The continuation of what was in effect the coffee regime of the VOC did not generate the great profits that Raffles needed. He himself attributed the disappointing results to the costs of production, including transport to the market, which were twice as high as the selling price had been in recent years. He added to this that the planters received an unreasonably low price for their labour (Raffles 1814: 67). It is a telling comment on the gigantic rise in price that took place from the moment of delivery to the government’s warehouses inland to the arrival of the coffee on the coast. This increase, we can conclude, disappeared almost exclusively into the pockets of a series of indigenous and European intermediaries. The fall in the selling price was a consequence of the British blockade of continental Europe for overseas products during the Napoleonic wars. The stagnating sales not only kept the prices down but also resulted in overfull warehouses. At first supply continued to rise as a consequence of the large-scale planting of trees in new production area on Daendels’ orders. The response to the overproduction was exactly the same as in the earliest history of coffee cultivation on Java: mass extirpation of trees which, in some areas, led to the complete destruction of the crop. Peasants who had to deliver their harvest without receiving any payment at all did this on their own initiative. Rather than taking action to combat this dereliction of duty, the government even offered its silent collaboration (Van der Kemp 1916: 129). After production had fallen from 116,648 pikul in 1810 to 21,348 pikul in 1811 as a result of the stagnation in sales, this was compensated for a year later with a doubling of the much reduced volume. In the next two years, the recovery remained at this level, while in 1815, it rose to 60,186 pikul. That this improvement was considered likely to continue in the years after that can be concluded from Raffles’ decision in 1813 to plant more than two to three million new trees in Priangan. Still, it would take great efforts to restore the number of trees lost to their former level.

Land sale

There was another way of raising money for running expenses, namely auctioning off estates together with the peasants who lived and worked
on them. Before Raffles, Daendels had taken refuge in the same solution and had in this way made himself master of a large domain around Bogor (De Haan I, 1910: 475-6). Anyone examining these affairs more closely will quickly realize that, as well as the colony’s budgetary crisis, this speculative deal was also motivated by the self-interest of the Governor-General and a small circle of top-ranking officials. Assisted by his personal physician, Andries de Wilde, Daendels had become the owner of extensive estates in the Priangan foothills. In Bogor, he had a palace built, which he used as his official residence. The part of his possessions that he did not need to demonstrate his seigneurial status, Daendels sold back to the government for a much higher amount than he had paid for it. These fraudulent transactions made him a wealthy man. Raffles followed the example of his predecessor and entered into business relationships with De Wilde, who had served as a coffee inspector in Bandung under Macquoid, the Resident in the Priangan together with Macquoid himself and with former Commissioner Nicolaus Engelhard. These gentlemen became shareholders in the purchase of land in the Sukabumi region of West Priangan, which had hardly been opened up. Their plan was to set up large-scale agribusinesses to grow coffee and other commercial crops. This led to the opening up of an enormous privatized enclave in the Sunda highlands. Accused of abusing his office, Raffles hastily sold his share, mostly to De Wilde. But, unlike Daendels, he was punished for the malpractice of using his official position for his own enrichment. Raffles was suspended as Lieutenant-Governor and, shortly before the restoration of Dutch rule, was called back to the headquarters of the East India Company in Calcutta.

The solution that Raffles thought he had found to the country’s financial problems was therefore the same as that devised by Daendels, namely to sell off land to private men of business. The purchase price included use of the labour power of the peasants who lived on the land under the same terms that applied to government-controlled land. The urgent need for revenues to keep the colonial apparatus running was the direct reason for taking this step. An important contributing factor in the background, however, was an instruction that Lord Minto, Governor-General of the East India Company in South Asia, left behind for his subordinate after a short visit to Java immediately after the transfer of power. The instruction ordered Raffles to dismantle the feudal system and to replace it with a form of governance that was less oppressive and left more scope for private interest. Minto’s suggestion to radically change the basis of the political economy on Java was largely aimed at agrarian production for trade, and export in particular. The order from higher up was to exercise moderation at first in
introducing the new policy and not to be too hasty. Landed estates should not be sold off on a grand scale but leased, and then only for a limited period. Acute need of money most probably prompted Raffles not to pay too much heed to this prudent advice. As mentioned earlier, private estates were not unknown on Java, having arisen during the Company era. Most of them were on the coast, not too far from Batavia. In the course of time, however, they had spread to other parts of the island, although most of the newer estates were also to be found in the coastal plain. Raffles’ orders were also focused on these areas already well-acquainted with agribusiness under non-indigenous management. Under his governance, however, more concessions were also granted in the higher parts inland.

When he issued his instruction to give more scope to private initiatives in the promotion of agribusiness, Minto noted that a lack of capital and capitalists would probably pose an obstacle to this policy (Bastin 1954: 16-7). One social category, however, had shown its ability to engage in the required capitalist behaviour: the Chinese minority that, as traders and moneylenders, had a long-standing record of interaction with the peasant population. The most successful of them had worked their way up to be tax farmers for the king and the landed gentry, but not without acquiring a reputation for exploiting the common people. Among the Chinese were also those who had established themselves as the owners or managers of private estates. It was therefore not surprising that there was great interest from the Chinese in Raffles’ plans to increase production and expand the agrarian tax base by issuing land to private parties. After all, Minto himself had expressed his hope of internal capital accumulation. Yet Raffles was reticent about alienating land temporarily or permanently to the Chinese, largely due to what his Dutch advisers had told him about their pernicious practices. In his final memorandum of 1814, the Lieutenant-General compared the simplicity of the Javanese peasant to the chicanery of the Chinese tax farmers or toll collectors. The unrest in Cirebon, which flared up at regular intervals, would most certainly have contributed to the unfavourable opinion of these non-native landowners. The people of the region had become so antagonistic to the presence of the Chinese that the latter were no longer permitted to lease land there, a ban that was imposed in other parts of the island for the same reasons. This meant that only Europeans were eligible for concessions to set up large-scale agribusinesses. It was Raffles’ Dutch officials who urged him to promote the formation of a class of white settlers by issuing land on a large scale. In this context, it is important to note that the option of encouraging the emergence of an indigenous class of entrepreneurs was hardly considered, if at all. The Javanese elite had a
reputation for leading a parasitical existence and for showing no interest at all in actively practising agriculture, while the large mass of peasants were believed to possess neither the means nor the energy. The following passage from the report that Rothenbühler, as a member of the committee of inquiry, submitted to Raffles in 1812 illustrates the lack of confidence the majority of colonial policy-makers had in the economic disposition of the common cultivator.

I am convinced that if once the Javanese has land in his possession & is left to himself without any restriction, he will not work any more than is absolutely necessary for him & his family, whose wants are besides of very little consequence – a poor bamboo house covered with ... leaves, a handkerchief & some few cloths for him & his wife, & a small quantity of rice or Turkey-corn boiled in water, with some vegetables, & sometimes a small quantity of fish, this is all...he wants. Lazy by nature, & effeminate by education, the Javanese seems only to exist to live in indolence, occupying himself... by sleeping or sitting alongside a river, contemplating the current of the water, or if he is inclined, taking some fish for his dinner without ever feeling the desire to ameliorate his fate by work. (Bastin 1954: 65)

Notwithstanding the sale of land that Raffles was forced to resort to by pressure of circumstances, he pursued a statist policy that ran contrary to the transfer of either responsibilities or authority from the government to private entrepreneurs. He persisted in his refusal to change Java into an agrarian society in which the local population would be left at the mercy of white landowners to be used as a mere labour commodity. The colonization by Europeans continued under his rule, but went much less far than his advisers, who included many old hands of the former Dutch civil service, would have wished.

Raffles' policy in favour of the peasantry did not change the fact that he belonged to a batch of colonial administrators who never lost sight of their own interests and even allowed their decisions to be determined by them. They were part of a power clique of high-ranking officials who, since the VOC era, had been renowned for the shamelessness with which they in the first place filled their own pockets. They were called to order by the highest authority only if they exceeded the very porous margins of what was considered acceptable degrees of fraud and corruption. This fate befell Pieter Engelhard, for example, who was relieved of his post as Commissioner of Indigenous Affairs in the early nineteenth century. Earlier accusations of extortion played a role in his ultimate dismissal. But these well-founded
suspicions were no obstacle at all to him continuing his career in the service of the colonial state. His case is a random example of the protection and preferential treatment that were customarily enjoyed by those who held lucrative positions. Old friendships and family connections were also invaluable. The colonial power complex could be divided into a number of factions: old guard and newcomers, ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’, reformers and anti-reformers. Sometimes, though by no means always, these dividing lines coincided. But their mutual differences of opinion did not prevent them from forming a united front when it came to the quest for personal profit. In that respect, they were more competitors than opponents. While writing his work on a new fundament for colonial rule, Dirk van Hogendorp was preoccupied with accumulating a personal fortune to enable him to continue to lead the opulent life to which he had become accustomed as the highest ranking official on Java’s East Coast (Fassseur 1985: 214). Daendels was not only a forbidding governor but also an astute businessman who allotted himself state property for a bargain only to sell it back for ten times the original price. Lastly, Raffles made a good show of himself. As mentioned before, De Wilde was happy to take over Raffles’ share when his involvement in the shady land deal became public knowledge and he hastily withdrew from the partnership. As the main owner, De Wilde would eventually develop Sukabumi. Other members of Raffles’ entourage also acquired estates at a bargain. Lawick, Knops, Rothenbühler, Von Winckelmann, Van Motman and Muntinghe – the man who declared that colonial revenues should first and foremost benefit the mother country – were among those who owned splendid domains in Krawang. The plantations on sale were so extensive that only ‘capitalists’ could take part in the auction. This scarce category proved to be strikingly well-represented among those holding the highest public positions (Bastin 1954: 76-88). The white kongsi on Java displayed all the typical behavioural traits of the British nabobs in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the state of opulence in which they lived, their unbridled but vulgar greed for money, their conspicuous leisure and ostentation, a social strategy in which ties of kinship and patronage played an important role, etc. (see for example Moorhouse 1983: 40-2, 56; Woodruff 1963). The removal of regents and other indigenous chiefs from their positions of power in the early nineteenth century in most parts of Java was accompanied by criticism of the feudal lifestyle of this aristocracy, who were branded as a plague on the country and its people. The directors and lower-ranking expatriate staff of the civil service behaved no less parasitically, but the self-enrichment of this caste of white officials was rarely a matter of discussion.
The colonial hierarchy tolerated little criticism from within, while the tendency to present a united front towards outsiders also did little to encourage a free and frank exchange of opinion. Yet the transition from trading company to state enterprise did seem to have contributed to a very gradual change in the code of conduct. Compared to the servants of the VOC, who sought to maximize their own profit with little ado or embarrassment, their successors as state officials at least tried to deny or conceal the fact that they were acting in any way other than in the public interest, no matter how it was defined. Once they had been found guilty of misconduct, it was more difficult for the new generation of administrators to restore their earlier reputation for honour and integrity. Raffles lost his job prematurely partly as a result of his abuses in the sale of land, while Daendels, after being accused of financial misconduct, was not permitted to return to Java as Governor-General in 1816. The higher requirements that were progressively imposed on those in positions of authority did not of course mean that these new public morals were introduced without problems but, compared with the previous regime, violations were tolerated less easily and punished more severely. This was a change that helped mark the advent of the colonial state. Behind the dividing lines that separated the old and new administration of the colony around the turn of the nineteenth century, however, lay a continuity that can also be seen in the career profiles of the administrators. Many of the old guard simply transferred their loyalties to the new masters, no matter whether they were Patriots or Orangists (monarchists), or were – in succession – Dutch, French or English. These old retainers not only followed all the swerves and curves of policy, but claimed that they had always been fierce supporters of the new course. Muntinghe was perhaps the ultimate personification of this flexibility, according to the derisive judgment of his contemporary and rival Willem van Hogendorp, who described him as ‘at all times the obedient servant and cowardly follower of whoever holds the reins of power’ (Van der Kemp 1916: 34-5). After having worn out Nederburgh and Daendels, Muntinghe became a great favourite of Raffles, who praised him as his right-hand man. After the departure of the English high command, he patiently awaited the restoration of Dutch authority in the firm belief that it would once again make use of his standing as a man of all colonial seasons.

**In search of a new policy**

The fall of the Napoleonic empire ended in a major realignment of the multinational state structure on the European continent. At the Vienna