Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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the revenues of the production ordered by the government were given to the NHM in consignation. The NHM became the commercial complement of the forced cultivation and delivery to the government of colonial goods. It was subsequently given sole rights to ship and sell the goods on arrival in Europe. This decision created one long monopoly chain that started with forced cultivation in the Sunda highlands and ended with the buyers at the coffee auctions in Amsterdam. The archipelago, which had always been an exploitation colony, became more than ever the overseas pool for Dutch economic interests. The close relationship that had been established between production and distribution called for uniform management – by the government.

Political turmoil at home

A separate study would be required to do justice to the restructuring of the relationship between the colony and the metropolis from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Such an endeavour is beyond my current study, which essentially remains limited to a treatise on the Priangan system in successive stages of colonial exploitation. The insolvency and subsequent collapse of the Dutch East Indies Company at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with radical shifts in the political constellation at home. This upheaval, again, had major repercussions on how to govern the colonial domain. In order to comprehend the new state regime that came about I shall outline in a brief summary what happened in the metropolis and the consequences of this change in the political setting for the promotion and outcome of the policies pursued in what was and would remain the Netherlands’ major colonial domain.

The Republic of the United Netherlands, formed by seven provinces in the sixteenth century, had by the eighteenth century fallen into a state of stagnation and regression. The trade and industry that had generated so much profitable activity was in decline as the focus of the international economy shifted to new routes and commodities. As a consequence of increasing protectionism, the textile industry in particular saw its markets dissipate and the ensuing loss of employment caused severe economic distress in many towns that had grown prosperous around it. Dutch society retained its strong agrarian-cum-artisanal character. Where there was a gradual transition to machine-based production in other parts of Europe, the development of industrial capitalism in the Netherlands did not progress past the manufacturing stage. The country’s extensive maritime industry
– fishing, shipbuilding, sail- and rope-making – fell into decay. A large proportion of the population – which had grown only to a little under two million at the end of the eighteenth century – led a miserable, often impoverished existence. A telling comment was made by a foreign visitor to this parochial landscape.

In such circumstances this trading nation must be in a bad way. Most of their principal towns are sadly decayed, and instead of finding every mortal employed you meet with multitudes of poor creatures who are starving in idleness. Utrecht is remarkably ruined. There are whole lanes of wretches who have no other subsistence than potatoes, gin, and stuff which they call tea and coffee... (Pottle 1952: 287)

This picture that James Boswell painted of Utrecht in the early 1760s was typical of many urban locations. The situation was no less critical in the countryside, though it was less visible in the public eye. The prevailing misery was of course not equally desperate for everyone or across the board. The slave trade, for instance, remained a very profitable business as shipping black humans from Africa to America was a lucrative source of income for the merchants and conveyors of this valuable commodity. In some sectors and provinces, it is also possible that the decline largely took place in the first half of the eighteenth century followed by a slight recovery in later years. A lack of exact figures and more detailed information makes it difficult to draw up the balance of economic progress and regression. The outcome was in any case a widespread deterioration in standards of living and a growing divide between rich and poor.

The skewed distribution between society’s top and bottom also became politically manifest. The divisions between the supporters of the Orangist party and the Patriots, who were more in favour of a republican system, were not new but, partly under pressure from the political turbulence in continental Europe, became more sharply defined. The rank and file on both sides were now embroiled in armed clashes. The political coup d’état by stadholder Willem V, prince of the house of Orange-Nassau, in 1787 brought an end to the swelling tide of the republican cause (Schama 1977). Defeated in their contest for state power, many of the leading Patriots went into exile in France from where they propagated the ideals of the revolution that came soon afterwards. When French troops invaded the Netherlands, Willem left the country and in 1795 the Batavian Republic was declared, named after a Germainic tribe that had challenged the might of the Roman empire in the remote past. A revised constitution enacted in 1801 expanded
political representation and conceded civil rights withheld earlier. But the emancipatory ideals of the revolution remained inoperative outside the metropolis. A study of the impact of Patriotic politics on the handling of colonial affairs concluded that the principles of the Enlightenment were considered not to apply to people of other races. Pamphlets condemning slavery were distributed and discussed as a crime against humanity but the sentiments expressed by radical reformers were not widely shared and certainly not by the main policy-makers. Treating whites and non-whites equally would have endangered the profits made overseas.

The explanation may be found partly in the inconsistencies present in that way of thinking, partly in the inability of the ‘Patriots’ to pursue a clearly defined policy of their own under unfavourable circumstances, and above all in their clinging to the possession of colonies for the benefit of Dutch prosperity (Schutte 1970: 223).

The new state formation remained firmly under French tutelage although the allegiance became less rigorous with the installation of Napoleon’s brother as King of Holland in 1806. But this regime change was also a short interval, ending with the annexation of the provinces as departments into the French empire in 1810. Again, this was short-lived, as the breakdown of the Napoleonic project led to yet another restructuring of the territorial boundaries of the lowlands.

The radical uprisings throughout Europe had failed and what followed was an anti-democratic restoration of political power also embodied in the return of monarchical governance. At the Vienna Congress in 1815, the allied nations which had joined forces to resist the expansion of France in Europe agreed to the formation of the new Kingdom of the United (i.e. North and South) Netherlands. The monarch foisted on the amalgamated population of Belgium and the erstwhile Netherlands by international diplomacy was the son of the late stadtholder of Oranje-Nassau who proclaimed himself sovereign King Willem I. The geopolitical shift engineered by Great Britain and Prussia in tandem aimed to hold France, now cut down in size territorially, in containment by creating a buffer state on its northern borders. Being upgraded to a higher political stature in continental Europe came at a price for the Netherlands – the loss of most of the maritime colonies it had acquired in Africa and Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the time of the French occupation the British had taken over a number of important enclaves conquered and retained by the VOC. After Napoleon’s downfall, Britain refused to hand back most of the appropriated
Dutch colonies, seeing its ambition to become a global power realized with the help of mostly coastal settlements it had acquired outside Europe. The only prize the Dutch regained in Asia was Java, not much larger than the territory of the new kingdom in the metropolis. Admittedly, that overseas possession would subsequently grow into a much larger domain, the Netherlands East Indies, but that did not occur until later in the nineteenth century and only because the British understood that the spread of Dutch imperialism in the archipelago was less of a risk than allowing the French or, possibly also the Germans, to penetrate into this resource-rich region in Southeast Asia. It was the protection as a client state which enabled the parochial metropolis – by grabbing what came to be called ‘the Outer Islands’ and incorporating them into the colonial state – to slowly build up the framework of the giant Indonesia as we know it today.

The United Kingdom of the Netherlands did not start with an upswing in the economy. The malaise of the preceding decades had lingered on and was further aggravated in the wake of the changes to the continental system introduced by Napoleon. When the British imposed a naval blockade on the coasts of France in 1806, he retaliated by proclaiming an embargo on all British commodities in the many parts on the continent under his control. Both Belgian and Dutch trade and industry bore the brunt of being cut off from import and export traffic overseas. The economy of Amsterdam, the main harbour, was badly affected by the maritime blockade. Shipyards which had employed some 2000 carpenters and other craftsmen in 1800, closed up shop. In 1765 less than 10 per cent of the urban population depended on poor relief but from 1807-09 not less than 40 per cent lived on charity. There was a strong rise in the number of beggars and, according to police reports, each and every day ten babies were left abandoned in the streets. From 240,000 in 1730 Amsterdam’s population dwindled to little more than 180,000 in 1805 (Joor 2015: 266). The economic and social havoc caused by the ceaseless wars which Napoleon had waged throughout the continent continued in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Political turmoil contributed again to the protracted economic stagnation. Belgium ventured to split off in 1830 because Willem I, who proved to be an autocratic ruler, refused to meet demands for reform. A burden to the remaining state budget, the dispute lasted until 1839 and ended with partition of the united territory along the old demarcation lines between the northern and southern Netherlands. It was a humiliating blow to the King’s grand design to be acknowledged as a top-ranking state-builder and power contender in the new Europe. A no less severe setback was the war fought against Dutch rule in Central Java from 1825 to 1830 at heavy military cost. Willem I took it upon himself to reduce
the deficit and the colony was of crucial importance in the sustained effort to boost the metropolitan economy with higher growth rates. Achieving this major objective, the production of a rapidly rising colonial surplus, became the state’s core business.

A small coterie of counsellors unswervingly loyal to the King advised him on how to solve that prime question, rather than the national assembly, which had hardly any say in determining the framework and course of foreign policy. Willem tolerated no outside – let alone public – interference in his handling of colonial affairs and treated the tenaciously held possession in the East Indies as crown property. He chose from among his circle of Royal favourites who to send to Java with the mission to organize the ‘surplus’ and extract it for repatriation. The successful candidates were elevated to the rank of a nouveau nobility, an innovation which tended to be regarded with disdain by those holding titles of older and more feudal vintage. In the next chapter we shall return to the Priangan coffee lands to examine what these Royal emissaries did to comply with the instructions of their overlord. Willem I dictated his policies with brazenness and promulgated them in Royal decrees without bothering, even in a show of semblance, to involve parliament as a main stakeholder. His cunning temperament and obnoxious stubbornness not to compromise on the powers he had usurped was a major reason for his downfall. In 1840 he stepped back, having grudgingly been obliged to settle the dispute with Belgium, but more tellingly because of his absolutist intransigence to be held accountable for his financial misdemeanours in colonial affairs. What was called ‘the Indies deficit’ deferred to a style of bookkeeping which implied that the colony had to provide most of the cash required for running the metropolitan economy in a way that defeated monitoring by political guardians who were sitting in parliament and insisted on a clear divide between the Royal purse and the national treasury. His intractability in providing information on income and expenditure stood the King in good stead as a private man of fortune. When he crowned himself in 1815, Willem I’s fortune was valued at 20 million guilders and the wealth he amassed once in kingly power was said in 1840 to have amounted to 200 million guilders. Colonial exploitation had been profitable, if not for the Dutch population at large than certainly for their ruler, who went down in history as the Merchant King.