Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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records. The high tribute meant that both higher and lower chiefs had an interest in recording lower population numbers, and the headcounts they were required to carry out were very unreliable. The authorities had good reason to suspect that the discrepancy between real and submitted numbers continued to be substantial. It was clear that the accelerated population growth at the end of the 1820s was due more to improved record-keeping than any sudden increase in actual numbers of inhabitants. This meant that more hands became available to grow coffee, but it was still not enough.

**Indispensability of the chiefs, for the time being**

The critical attitude towards regents and the Priangan gentry at large that was prevalent especially in Daendels’ time, was now reversed. The more favourable light in which they were seen by the restored Dutch administration was however limited to the insight that continued reliance on this intermediate layer between rulers and ruled was essential to the effective exercise of power. In 1818, the Chief Inspector for Coffee Cultivation strongly recommended granting the chiefs the dignity they demanded. Only a few years later, this tactical advice proved not to go far enough for Commissioner-General Van der Capellen. In 1822, fulminating against private estate owners and other members of the old guard, he posed the problem in much more principled terms. The author of the 1822 colonization report summed up this revised opinion succinctly. The argument now was that, in the past, the native chiefs had been treated with too little respect. This recognition of their political role, however, brought no change in the belief that the feudal lords conducted themselves as parasites in their dealings with the peasantry.

I have ascribed the oscillations in colonial policy in the early decades of the nineteenth century to the strongly fluctuating opinions of the state-makers regarding the economic course to be followed. The continuing inadequate understanding how indigenous society was structured played an important role in this respect. The old guard would exaggerate their knowledge of the country and its people to the newcomers. But this experience, gained from daily practice, did not go very deep. They had hardly made a start on a more systematic management of economy and society. Both Daendels and Raffles ordered that a register be set up and maintained listing numerous details of every peasant locality on Java. The instructions of both governors came little further than good intentions, largely because there was insufficient attention and capacity in the meagre administrative apparatus to perform
this task. It proved not only difficult to gather all the information required but also to process it and translate it into clear-cut instructions. That this gradually improved is illustrated by the setting up of separate offices, for example for financial administration and for land registration (the Land-Rent Inspectorate in 1817). Affiliated to this agency was an Inspectorate for Coffee Cultivation on Java, headed by an official appointed by Daendels in 1808. From 1820, Residents had to submit annual reports and, when they left office, had to leave a memorandum of transfer for their successor. Lastly, in addition to the regular administration, special enquiries were initiated which were considered necessary to build up a comprehensive statistical database (Kommers 1979; Stevens 1982: 85-94). Although progress was made in counting, measuring and weighing, registering and classifying, it should not be forgotten that the figures and other data presented were not infrequently to a large degree the product of the imagination of those who gathered them, who had to rely on what the local chiefs told them. The chiefs’ desire to above all please their superiors, as well as to keep them in the dark, meant that large areas of the colonized landscape remained opaque to the small group of colonial administrators who were presented with a strongly distorted portrayal of the situation. Elout blamed the incomplete and incorrect reporting on the inferior quality of those who had come from the metropolis for a career in the colonial civil service.

‘... what do we do with people who are on the drink, who combine conceitedness with shamelessness, while they lack any merit to speak of?’
Thus complained the Commissioner-General in a letter to the Director of the Colonies. (Van Deventer 1891: 186)

‘The era of doubt’, was how Stokvis (1922: 27) described the years following the restoration of Dutch rule. But behind the capricious fluctuations in the standpoints of the colonial state-makers, a policy line gradually emerged which would leave its mark on the mode of economic exploitation for another half a century. The debate on what to do with the Asian colony, how to drain a sizable surplus from the overseas possessions, which had been extracted since the beginning of the century, was in fact the Dutch variant of the discussion going on around the same time between English utilitarians on the shape and direction of British policy in India (Stokes 1959). A modality of colonial management that was soon rejected for Java was to rely on the economic rationality of the peasant population. Despite a number of prominent advocates of this school of thought – Dirk van Hogendorp, Raffles and Van der Capellen, with Muntinghe as the link between
the last two – the prevailing view was that the native peasant lacked the incentive of enlightened self-interest and the urge for accumulation that was required to raise production and improve their living standards. In his colonization report, dated 1827, Willem van Hogendorp\textsuperscript{22} stated once again ‘that the population is incapable of exerting any kind of industrious effort, no matter for what purpose. (in Steijn Parvé 1851: 22).

In the debate on what kind of policy should be pursued, the applicability of the economic rationale in a colonial setting was repeatedly questioned. Perhaps not only the Javanese peasants but also the colonists imported from Europe failed to act as expected of \textit{homo economicus}. The owners of the private estates seemed to prefer trade and speculation to agro-industry and adopted a lifestyle that was more feudal than capitalist. They were only prepared to act as entrepreneurs if, along with the land, they were also allowed to make use of the labour power of the peasants at a price far below the real market value of both of these factors of production. This made the question of whether they were pro or anti liberal much more ambiguous. The parties in the discussion on the best course to adopt had little difficulty agreeing that free labour could not form the basis of capitalist enterprise. Viscount Du Bus de Gisignies may have based his plans on the assumption that the Javanese would report for work on the newly cultivated lands in great numbers and of their own free will, but his argument did not stand the test of experience. Without the use of force, both the old and the new generation of landowners believed that they would not be able to find the labour they needed in sufficient numbers. The principle of free labour was hardly a point of discussion. A much more important issue was the choice between market or state, with the advocates of private initiative on one side and an economy regulated by government on the other. The latter won the day, above all because of the much higher profits that the metropolis expected from this regime. This prognosis was by no means purely hypothetical. The Priangan system was based on a long-established monopoly from which it could be concluded that the low costs of the system of forced cultivation and delivery – for the state at least – resulted in very high profits. But did these benefits outweigh the costs? There were a few critics at the time who protested at the state of unfreedom in which the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{22} The Van Hogendorps belonged to a family of politicians well connected first to the Dutch republic at the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and then to the restored monarchy. Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp was one of a small clique which paved the way for Willem I to the throne in 1815. His younger brother Dirk made his career in the colony and it was following his track that Willem, son of Gijsbert Karel, went to Java as secretary to Commissioner-General Du Bus de Gisignies.
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people were forced to live. Pieter de Haan used the term ‘political slavery’ to condemn the colonial regime on Java and this applied especially to the system of forced coffee cultivation in the Priangan Regencies. The shifting cultivation that the peasants had practised in the region was, in his view, not a form of primitive farming but a mode of production that enabled them to escape the hated and feared forced cultivation of coffee. He described how many died of need, while others fled to uninhabited regions and survived by growing mountain rice or by eating only roots (P. de Haan 1829: 182).

Colonial archivist Frederik de Haan stated plainly that it had never been the intention of the VOC to use the system of coffee cultivation to guide the people of the Priangan on the road to progress (De Haan I, 1910: 144). But in the nineteenth century a justification was needed to continue the system of forced cultivation and that pretext was found in the alleged non-economic mentality of the peasantry. The need to turn the colony into an enterprise that was highly profitable for the metropolis continued to be the main concern and one which, since the state coffers were exhausted, was given the highest priority. To fulfil this mission, someone was required who was decisive and self-assured, a strong character driven by the right ideas and the capacity to put them into practice. The man who fitted the bill was Johannes van den Bosch, who had previously been on Java and had completed several important state missions for the King, including a reorganization of the West Indian possessions. When, in 1829, he was presented with the plans devised by Du Bus de Gisignies, Van den Bosch reacted very sceptically. His critical comments were driven by both pragmatic and more principled considerations. He noted that using Javanese wage labour to open up new land was going to be a time-consuming business and required large investments that would only generate financial returns after many years. A more substantial argument was that the course proposed by Du Bus de Gisignies was incompatible with the current backward state of native society. In a study published ten years earlier on how the Netherlands should manage its overseas territories, Van den Bosch had emphasized the importance of a manner of colonial rule that was as compatible as possible with the institutions of the country and its people. His advice on how to proceed in the East Indies fulfilled these criteria and promised the so desperately desired profits to pay off the runaway Dutch national debt in a much shorter time. King Willem I was convinced, undoubtedly for this last reason, and decided to send his counsellor to the colony as Governor-General.

The cultivation system introduced by Van den Bosch in 1830 forced the peasant population in large parts of Java to grow various crops and supply them to the colonial government for export. The new agrarian regime
represented on the one hand a return to the system of forced cultivation and delivery imposed primarily on the inhabitants of the Priangan by the VOC from the early eighteenth century onwards, but it also reflected an acceleration in the process of globalization. That process crystallized into a restructuring of the international division of labour between ‘West’ and ‘East’. In the specific case of the East Indies, Van den Bosch set himself the goal of promoting economic growth on Java and making it competitive with the slave-labour-based production of tropical crops in the West Indies as a supplier of agrarian products to the industrializing and urbanizing world in the northern hemisphere. After the VOC was disbanded, a few high-profile colonial reformers had in the early decades of the nineteenth century taken a principled stand against continuing the forced cultivation of coffee in the Priangan and everything associated with it, including extremely low payments to the producers, preserving the authority of the native chiefs, and the government monopoly on buying the products. In the new revisionist view, this mode of production had become outdated. The top of the colonial apparatus could only justify the temporary continuation of the system in the highlands of West Java with the argument that these revenues remained as yet indispensable. Not only to cover a wide range of expenses – the high cost of the Java War (1825-30) in particular – but also and especially to demonstrate to King Willem I and his advisers in the metropolis the profitability of the overseas possessions. Preserving an aberration of what was intended to become the general modality of collecting taxes seems to have embarrassed the policy-makers. In their final report to the Minister, the Commissioners-General returned to the question of whether it was advisable to continue the regime in the Priangan Regencies on the old footing or whether it would perhaps be more efficient to introduce the land rent system here, too. Their conclusion, however, was a resounding ‘No’ to the latter option. They turned the lack of uniformity in the system now into a recommendation for pluriformity (Report of 16 March, 1818, Van Deventer I, 1865: 393). In later arguments, the apology for the failure to standardize the revenue policy throughout Java would be deftly transformed into a plea to, above all, take account of ‘historically developed relations’, thus justifying diversity on the basis of an imagined tradition.

The Priangan variant as a ‘colonial constant’

The Priangan coffee regime, which had survived into the early decades of the nineteenth century as a backward remnant of early-colonial exploitation,