Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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paying the peasants the lowest possible price for the use of their land and labour was it possible to make a profit for the mother country. It was this understanding that persuaded Johannes van den Bosch to reject the model of private estate-based production using free labour that had been suggested to him. His mission to the West Indies on behalf of the King to reorganize the way these colonies were managed strengthened his conviction that it was only possible to achieve a minimum production price by saving as much as possible on the costs of native labour. This reasoning lay at the basis of the cultivation system that Van den Bosch devised and put into practice. So who was Van den Bosch, how did his plans take shape and what were his modes of operation?

Spreading benevolence at home and on Java

Johannes van den Bosch started his promising career in 1799 as an officer in the Engineering Corps in the East Indies. During his first ten-year stay in the colony, he bought a large estate close to Batavia, which he ran efficiently and profitably. He was forced to leave Java in 1810 after a disagreement with Governor-General Daendels. On his return to the metropolis, he reflected on the knowledge and experience he had gained in colonial practice in the East Indies. This resulted in a two-part treatise, dedicated to the King, which was published in 1817-18, Nederlandsche bezittingen in Azia, Amerika en Afrika, in derzelver toestand en aangelegenheid voor dit Rijk, wisgeerig, staathuishoudkundig en geographisch beschouwd, met bijvoeging der noodige tabellen en eenen atlas nieuwe kaarten [Dutch possessions in Asia, America and Africa, considered in their state and relevance for this Kingdom, from a philosophical, political and geographical perspective, with the required tables and an atlas with new maps]. He most likely also made his way to the upper echelons of the freemason movement in The Hague and that connection to the haute bourgeoisie helped him to become a confidant of the royal family. His interest in political economy led Van den Bosch to an in-depth study of metropolitan poverty, which had become even more pressing as a result of the economic crisis that still held the country in its grasp. Despite his steady rise to higher ranks in the military, he left active service to devote himself to solving the misery in which the lower classes were confined. In 1818 he established the Benevolent Society with the support of a select group of influential figures, including Frederik, the King’s second son. The economic distress, deteriorating into pauperism, in which the urban poor in particular lived, was alleviated by relief provided by the
church or the municipality. This charity was an acceptable remedy for those unfit to work, such as the chronically ill, the disabled or the elderly, but did not offer much relief for those who were unable to meet their basic needs because there was no work. The Benevolent Society aimed to rehabilitate them by facilitating their re-engagement in the labour process. The designer of the plan arranged for the unemployed to be moved to the east of the country, where they could make themselves useful opening up waste land for self-cultivation. The initiative led to the establishment of three agricultural colonies, named after the King's children, where the deserving poor were housed. To facilitate the transition from hopeless urban pauperism to tilling unproductive land, these victims of poverty required not only some instruction in the basics of agricultural work but also strict supervision to teach them how to live properly through gainful employment. Exposed to this drilling in good behaviour gave the experiment a strong disciplinary character, despite the recruitment being on a voluntary basis. This was not the case for another class of destitutes, including vagrants, beggars, alcoholics and other misfits, who were considered too lazy to work. The local authorities in the west of the Netherlands were given the opportunity to rid themselves of these undesirables by having them locked up in two institutions, which were also opened in the east of the country. Teaching moral and civic behaviour to this class of undeserving poor of course called for a much stronger dose of re-education. Being committed to the institutions itself was already a form of punishment, but for these wayward people, the ultimate aim was to change their mentality so that the imposed discipline would be replaced by self-discipline and self-provision. Delinquents were eligible for discharge when they had sufficiently demonstrated that they had regained their virtuosity. Rehabilitation was the condition for their return to mainstream society, but if they relapsed into their old habits, they would be confined again. The passage below shows how strict the regime was to which these involuntary inmates were subordinated.

The new institutions were large (100 to 145 meters long), square buildings with a central courtyard. At Veenhuizen, a central wall ran the length of each wing, dividing the inner courtyard for undisciplined ‘beggars’ from the 125 individual apartments for ‘colonist families’, which ringed the outer facade. The inner courtyard was accessible by only two gates, one for men and one for women, who were kept separate by a fence that divided the courtyard in half. The living arrangements in the inner courtyard consisted of fourteen single-sex dormitories, each sleeping eighty people. Undisciplined, criminalized pauper families were split up and placed
in these dormitories at their induction. Supervisors’ apartments were placed between the dormitories, so that the overseers could observe residents’ behavior without themselves being seen. Couples who could demonstrate that they were married and who were wellbehaved were allowed to settle in the family apartments in the outer ring of the building. To ensure that those in the outer ring did not take advantage of their relative independence to drink or leave the premises, as had the ‘free’ colonists at Frederiksoord, a moat, guarded by sentries, was dug around the building (Schrauwers 2001: 311).

Van den Bosch was assured of royal protection in implementing his plan for combating poverty in the metropolis by agrarian colonization and the King now began to make use of his services for overseas purposes as well. Almost ten years after their first meeting, Willem I felt that this confidant was the man he needed as his consultant for colonial affairs. Van den Bosch went on a mission to the West Indies to come up with proposals to improve the unsatisfactory financial and administrative state of affairs in those colonies. Satisfied with the report that Van den Bosch submitted in 1828, the King appointed him Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies later that same year. He was given the task of making the colony profitable for the mother country. The intention was clear, but how was Van den Bosch to achieve his pledge to generate a colonial surplus to stimulate growth and prosperity in the metropolis? This was a question on which many advisers continued to hold conflicting opinions. Van den Bosch was given the benefit of the doubt to put his ideas into practice.23

The cultivation system that the new Governor-General started to introduce immediately on his arrival in 1830 was not a blueprint, a ready-made design with detailed instructions on how to act. What later merited the name ‘system’ only emerged piecemeal. Its main characteristics are clear from its basic principles. The point of departure was the cultivation and delivery of agrarian products by the peasant population for sale on the world market at a competitive price. To generate the profit required to stimulate the metropolitan economy, these commodities had to be acquired at the lowest possible cost. That was the only way to compete with suppliers

23 In addition to his own writings, I made use of published biographies for information on the way in which Van den Bosch devoted himself to eradicating poverty in the metropolis and to the introduction of the cultivation system in the colony. See J.J. Westendorp Boerma, Johannes van den Bosch als sociaal hervormer; de Maatschappij van Weldadigheid. Groningen 1927 and, by the same author, Een geestdriftig Nederlander: Johannes van den Bosch. Amsterdam 1950.
from elsewhere in the world, such as the slave-based plantation-industry in the Caribbean. Cheap labour had always been the cornerstone of the old colonial regime and this continued under the new policy. Apart from paying the peasant-producers as little as possible, it was also important to keep administrative overhead – especially the costs of ensuring that the peasants complied with the obligations imposed on them – to a minimum. This could be achieved by preserving the mode of operation applied during the VOC era, which, according to Van den Bosch, was simply a continuation of what came before. In the Priangan, this was the trust that the peasants placed in their local chiefs, while elsewhere on Java it was the village system that was alleged to be founded on ‘traditional’ institutions. These two principles – the heavy burden imposed on the peasantry and low expenditure on surveillance – were intended to change the colony into a source of income for the metropolis. Force was an undeniable component of this new policy. It was said to be necessary because the colonized population had simple needs and therefore lacked any zeal to work. Was the coercion inherent in the cultivation system not a problem for its founding father? Van den Bosch put forward a variety of arguments to counteract this opinion. First of all, forced labour was the continuation of customs from the pre-colonial past. Secondly, the forced cultivation and delivery of crops only took up a modest proportion of the time and assets that the producers needed to fulfil their own basic needs. Lastly, Van den Bosch claimed that the obligations imposed on the peasants would lead to a real increase in their incomes. Indeed, their standard of living would rise even more than they could expect if they were allowed to freely dispose of their labour as they wished. Of course, left to themselves they did not want to exert themselves and seek redemption from indolence. From this perspective, the compulsion had a beneficial effect because it put an end to the underutilized labour of the peasantry, an outcome which would first and foremost benefit the people themselves. It was basically the same argument with which Van den Bosch had justified the detainment of urban poor in the Netherlands as the best way to achieve their rehabilitation to citizenship.

The next chapter elaborates on the way in which the cultivation system was implemented. Before that, however, this final section will examine what happened to Van den Bosch himself during and after the introduction of the system of which he was the architect. The new policy made a somewhat hesitant and unsteady start in its early years. These initially disappointing results did not, however, persuade Willem I to abandon his trust in his favourite. On the contrary, Van den Bosch was given more and more authority, until he eventually had carte blanche to act as he saw fit.
The Governor-General succeeded in demoting the Council for the Indies, whose members had shared in governance of the colony, to the status of a purely advisory body. On being appointed, Van den Bosch had agreed to take on the position only on condition that he would not hold it for more than three years. It was ultimately a little longer – though not much – and before departing in 1834 he took the trouble of giving his nominated successor, Jean Chrétien Baud, thorough instruction in the ins and outs of the job. Back in the metropolis, the King immediately appointed Van den Bosch Minister for the Colonies and, in that position, he continued to monitor the enforcement and expansion of his policy, which had now taken on all the characteristics of a full-scale system. The success that the founding father had in mind had now been fully achieved. The best evidence of this was the steady increase in the colonial surplus, which the metropolis not only gratefully accepted, but more or less took for granted. The role of the colony as a source of profit was not up for discussion. Van den Bosch himself had returned home a rich man. His wealth had not been gained from his governmental services but from the income from his enormous estate, Pondok Gedeh. This area, known as the gateway to the Priangan, covered an area of 22,000 hectares and included 80 villages, whose inhabitants grew and delivered crops as prescribed by the cultivation system. He had bought the estate from Nicolaus Engelhard in 1832 and the advantageous deal that the Governor-General agreed with this old hand showed that the kongsi at the top of the colonial administration had remained intact after the changing of the colonial guard. The King would not have begrudged his protégé this fortune, as he himself had reaped much greater profits from the services Van Den Bosch had performed on his monarch’s behalf. For his part, Van den Bosch remained loyal to his patron, including in later years when parliament increasingly criticized the King for being headstrong, and especially for refusing to reveal the financial accounts of the colony. The dispute reached breaking point in 1840 when Willem stubbornly refused to render account for the colonial loans he said that he needed as his privy. To see it debated in parliament was, in his perception, an inadmissible infringement of the rights of the Crown. Van den Bosch sided with his royal patron, allegedly against his better judgment, and resigned when the King’s wish was overruled by a parliamentary majority. As a reward for his counsellor’s unswerving loyalty, the King immediately appointed him Minister of State and elevated him to a higher rank in the nobility, with the title of Count. With hindsight, too, Van den Bosch continued to defend the principles and effects of the cultivation system with undiminished fervour.
Before examining the enormous rise in production on Java for sale on the world market more closely, I would first like to make a few additional comments on the main lines of what would go down in history as the policy of surplus. The discussion that surrounded its launch demonstrated a fundamental conflict between ideas and interests. The ideas that Van den Bosch propagated were grand, dogmatic and fashionable, while the underlying interests were crude, pragmatic and driven by pure self-interest. In an ideological sense there was a deep belief in the potential for development that lay dormant in every human being and could be given free rein by an enlightened government, but politically, the main concern was the need to discipline a peasant population, subject to a system of coercion that they despised and hated, to increase the cultivation of crops for export. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration began to be associated, for the first time but indelibly, with a rather suspect objective. Illustrative of the fundamental inequality between the colonizing rulers and those they colonized was the assertiveness with which Willem van Hogendorp, as the closest colleague of Du Bus de Gisignies, spoke of the inferiority of the Javanese race. He outlined his views in a letter to his family in the Netherlands. White supremacy, he claimed, was based not only on the possession of weapons but also on superiority of character and reason, which the people of Java accepted subordinately and with docility (Hogendorp 1913: 78).

The principles on which this foreign domination was based ran completely against the tide of new political and social opinions that had emerged in Europe in the wake of the French revolution and which were gradually gaining ground there. In the colony the received wisdom took on the characteristics of an ideology, systematically justifying and legitimizing oppression. In the decades that followed, this ideology increasingly acquired the character of a fundamental contradiction between white and black. Illustrative of this school of thought was a memorandum from 1850 with which Jean Chrétien Baud ended his career as Minister for the Colonies. He not only described this contradiction in an absolute sense, as purity that could not tolerate any form of contamination, but also gave the impression that the dominated race endorsed white superiority and had become convinced of its own inferiority.

History teaches us that any contact between the white race and the dark-skinned peoples has resulted in the subjugation of the latter by the former. This experience has convinced the black races that the white race is a higher form of being, and that it is the destiny of both that the one
should dominate over the other. That right of domination is however, in
the strictest sense, considered to be solely a characteristic of the pure
white race, so that, while a black man will bow submissively to a white
man, he is reluctant to obey a man of mixed blood.24

With this statement, the man who for many years held the highest colonial
office expressed the undiluted racist prejudice that underlay policy in
the colony. Could indeed the steady rise in coffee production be seen as
a yardstick for the degree to which the subordination which the colonial
authorities invoked to justify the exploitation of the Javanese peasants had
become internalized?

24 The reference to Baud’s memorandum is included in the Algemeen Overzigt van de staat-
kundige gesteldheid van Nederlandsch Indië over 1852 (pp. 314–5) in which G.G.A.J. Duymaer van
Twist reported in 1855 on the governance and policy pursued. NA, Ministry of the Colonies.
1850-1900, inv.no. 5870, Exh. 9 June 1855, no. 303 secret.