it to the large mountain plantations made it much easier to supervise the work regularly and to keep the workforce under tight control.

The welfare of the people

There was considerable disagreement about the impact of coffee cultivation on the local population that persisted for the entire period during which the Priangan regime was in force. The introduction of the coercive system was justified by the low standard of living of the peasantry, supposedly caused by their non-economic mentality. From this perspective, discipline had to be imposed to ensure progress for both the country and its people. It was an early expression of the late-colonial doctrine that foreign rule should be seen as a means to realize the economic potential that could not be achieved from within. By contrast with the opinion widely held earlier that colonies were there to serve the interests of the metropolis, this *mise-en-valeur* argument gave priority to the ultimate benefits for the local population. The former view had lost little of its cogency in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as can be seen from statements by Governors-General like Daendels and Van den Bosch. It was not until the middle of the century that the idea that the impact on the local population should be the yardstick for assessing the outcome of colonial domination began to gain ground in the public debate on what direction that policy should take.

The discussion on the operation of the cultivation system focused partly on its consequences for the welfare of the population. Early answers to this were unanimously favourable: the unfreedom in which the inhabitants had been accustomed to living from generation to generation remained in place for the time being, but was no great burden to them as they were simple people who were attached to custom. The colonial rulers, however, made every effort to improve their livelihoods and kept a watchful eye on the extortionate practices of the native chiefs. The simple and regular nature of coffee planting opened for the peasants the path to a less troublesome way of life. Anyone travelling through the Priangan could only conclude that the inhabitants were content with their lot. Of course, the peasants had to learn to work diligently, but they were treated with leniency and were paid accordingly. Land flight no longer occurred, a sign that the situation of the inhabitants of the region had substantially improved. In short, coffee cultivation had a beneficial impact and appeared to offer the prospects of final redemption from their state of servitude. A little over a decade later, however, Van Hoëvell, as the most vocal critic and a campaigner for
a change of regime, came to a completely different conclusion after his tour through the Sundanese highlands. Compared with the situation in the other residencies on Java, he had been struck by the deep misery and immense lethargy of the people in this region. This clergyman, who was later to lead the liberal faction in Dutch parliament, identified the Priangan system as the root cause of these problems, as it allowed the native chiefs to take advantage of their subordinates.

The opinions of successive Residents in the region varied widely. I restrict myself to those who held office later and who expressed their views on whether the Priangan system should be continued. Within the colonial apparatus, doubts about this undeniably increased over the course of time. After the involvement and leadership of the regents had been considered indispensable in getting the people to do what they were ordered to do for more than a century – to grow and supply increasing quantities of coffee – the balance of costs and benefits now seemed to have swung in the opposite direction. This reversal began to manifest itself from the end of the 1830s. There had certainly been critical voices before, but they had always been tempered by the counter-observation that the authority of the chiefs was necessary to overcome the aversion of the peasants to the claims on their labour. Symptomatic was the strongly critical tone of the memorandum drawn up by Inspector of Cultivation Ament reporting on his inspection of coffee production in the Priangan at the end of 1839. He observed that the gentry had taken control of most of the wet-rice land and forced their subordinates to tend to the fields without remuneration. The peasants suffered even heavier burdens and, besides the forced cultivation of coffee, had to perform more public and private corvee services than their counterparts elsewhere on Java, while they received hardly a third of the amount paid to coffee planters in other residencies. J.F. Hora Siccama, who was Resident between 1839 and 1841, agreed with these conclusions and stated that the situation of the people of the Priangan was by no means as favourable as many claimed. He added that the influence of the chiefs must be great and the docility of the peasants unlimited for this system to survive, but no one could seriously deny that it was extremely unfair and repressive. His successor, Cleerens (1841-46), did not hesitate in rejecting this criticism out of hand. He denied that the people of the Priangan were in a pitiful state and advised against any reform of the existing system. P.J. Overhand, who came after him (1846-50), had been the Resident of Banyumas and had expected to find the inhabitants of his new jurisdiction in a state of greater need. He was relieved to discover that this was not the case and that the level of poverty was not so severe at all. He expressed his opinion
shortly and sharply: ‘The misery, in which the lower class of the people live, according to critics with no first-hand knowledge of the situation, does not exist’ (De Waal 1866: 369). Minister for the Colonies Pahud did not share this viewpoint. In a memorandum in early 1851, he noted that the widespread poverty and misery in which the people of the Priangan Regencies lived inevitably meant that the Dutch rulers could not make themselves popular in the region. At the end of the same year, Governor-General Rochussen explicitly contradicted him. On his resignation, Rochussen showed himself to be an outspoken supporter of the status quo. Van der Wijck, Resident from 1855-58, also proved in his 1857 memorandum to be a fervent defender of the work regime that had existed in the Sundanese highlands for so many generations. He admitted that the peasants led a meagre existence, but refused to listen to tales of distress and improvidence. On the contrary, he concluded that, on the basis of his experience, the peasants on Java were nowhere as prosperous as in this region.

Supporters and opponents of a change of regime created the impression, however, that their contrasting standpoints were based on how they valued the income that the cultivation system generated for the treasury. In positive assessments of the system, colonial interests – in other words, those of the metropolis – took precedence, while its impact on the native population was and remained a subordinate question. This was also why the members of parliament in the Netherlands, having at length discussed the critical coffee report of 1868, concluded at the end of their deliberations that major changes were indeed required but revisions should not have a negative impact on the profit made from this cultivation. Abandoning the welcome flow money into the Dutch treasury – still estimated at around 50 million guilders annually – was considered too high a price to forfeit. Reforms were due, no doubt, but not in haste and no drastic ones, was the political message to the policy-makers (Goedhart 1948: 64-5). I leave my own judgment on the social impact of the Priangan system until the final chapter, which is both a review of the past and a preview of the consequences of the regime in the longer term for people’s welfare. In advance of this weighing up of the policy pursued in the Priangan lands, I would like to draw attention in this part of my argument to the differentiated impact of the colonial tribute over a period of around a century and a half. Examining the effect of forced coffee cultivation on the native population between 1720 and 1870 shows that its consequences varied for different classes within it. This was largely due to the unequal distribution of the burdens imposed on the people, and especially on taxing the labour power of peasant-producers. In accordance with traditional practice, the tribute was imposed on the propertied class,
the landowners who laid claim to the largest share of the means of existence. Because they had greater carrying capacity, it was reasonable to tax them more harshly than the class that possessed little or no agrarian property. In an attempt to increasingly raise the level of the tribute as a result of the growing demand for colonial goods on the world market, the VOC and later the government switched to a more widely distributed means of collecting it, which was intended to have a levelling effect. In practice, the system of coffee cultivation meant that the main landowners designated land-poor and landless households to do the work that had been imposed on everyone under the rules of public servitude. The social structure was already based on a division between lords and peasants; the colonial regime, with the tribute as its main component, simply reinforced these divisions and the complexity of the hierarchical order. One indication of this was that, in 1860, of the 108,816 households that practised agriculture in the Sunda highlands, more than a third possessed no paddy fields, a significantly higher percentage than elsewhere on Java (Enklaar 1871: 134). Another source set the landless class even higher, at more than half, pointing out that the area of land used to grow food was growing more slowly than the population (Aardrijkskundig en statistisch woordenboek van Nederlandsch Indië, 1869: 832-3). The Priangan system had helped advance a process of proletarianization in that small landowners in particular found themselves having to sell their sawahs and even having to give the buyer money to relieve themselves of the oppressive burden of labour (Scheltema 1927-28: 292). Abandoned paddy fields were not rare and local chiefs would add them to the land they already had appropriated. The colonial sources devote little attention to how this agrarian underclass emerged in the Priangan Regencies. I will examine the social and economic polarization that developed over time more closely at the end of the following chapter. The small paddy growers of the Priangan had been turned into coffee coolies. Besides growing paddy and coffee there was hardly any other economic activity in the region. The report for 1846 noted the lack of regular market places and sheds to store goods in the residency. Warung stalls offered a variety of food and goods for daily consumption in the headquarters of each regency, but this was on a very small scale (Report on the Priangan Regencies 1848: 90).

Good governance

The cause of the crisis that developed in extracting the tribute was not primarily sought in the heavy burden under which the population laboured