Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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the correspondence of the founders and managers of the cultivation system. While persisting in public that the main motivation was to improve the lives of the native population, Baud laid out in a private letter to Van den Bosch at the start of 1831 why it was necessary to maintain a large class of landless peasants.

The unequal distribution of worldly possessions is the only means of coercion that will ensure that the large working class will be willing to work for the richer classes at a low wage; a general process of levelling would mean the disappearance of this class, each individual would plant his own crops and all large-scale enterprises would fail of its own accord. (Westendorp Boerma II, 1956: 50-1)46

Denying the villagers of the Priangan access to uncultivated land villages thus meant not only that they no longer had a reserve to help ensure they could grow sufficient food to meet their basic needs but also that, in the long term, a pool of labour became available that private enterprises could make use of on vary favourable terms – low wages and without regular employment contracts.

**The agrarian underclasses**

As documented in earlier chapters, the predicament of the agrarian underclasses remained underexposed in the late-colonial literature partly because the government’s attention was focused one-sidedly on the owners of land as the main target for collecting taxes. The preoccupation of policymakers with the better-off peasantry is reflected in the data gathered over time on the native population and how they lived. Reports on the impact of the administrative and agrarian reforms of 1870 on the land-poor and landless classes in the Priangan are equally scarce. It is important to note that these segments had been present in the rural economy before the colonial era and their existence cannot therefore be attributed to colonial rule as such. Native society was traditionally based on unequal access to land as a way of allowing the privileged classes to lay claim to the labour of deprived groups. The more that colonial authorities learned about the peasant landscape in which they were operating, the more visible this

underside became. Commissioner-General Van den Bosch thus wrote in his well-known ‘Memoir’:

Among the Javanese there is a large class of proletarians. Disinclined to engage in an enduring employment relationship, they roam the land, working when they have the opportunity, otherwise stealing and robbing, such that they pose a genuine danger to the public order. Veth included this observation in his work on Java, adding: ‘It is these vagabonds, who only become orang menumpang when they find regular work in the des-sas, that are responsible for the rough gaga cultivation in the mountains, which leads to such reckless destruction of the forests’. (Quoted in Veth I, 1875: 660)

It has already been noted that especially land-poor peasants and landless labourers were set to work in the coffee gardens. According to a report from the Resident of the Priangan Regencies in 1861, in every village in his district there was a class of batur or bujang who acknowledged their employer as their lord and master and did everything he ordered them to do. Their bosses made use of these servants to perform the corvee services they were obliged to provide as landowners.

Did the colonial tax system bring about any change in the social composition of the peasant order? This is a difficult to answer question, due to a lack of empirical evidence, but it is reasonable to assume that the increasing pressure to produce greater and greater quantities of coffee exacerbated existing inequalities rather than relieved them. Class differentiation among the peasantry was accompanied by large-scale and persistent mobility. Van den Bosch, who had combated pauperism in the metropolis early in his career by deporting the undeserving poor, vagabonds and paupers to penal institutions, encountered a social underclass in the colony equally unwilling to submit to the authority of the government. The Governor-General settled for the same remedy, ordering the confinement of:

... all persons who, by their footloose behaviour, idleness and bad conduct, have proved themselves to be harmful to society, without having com-mitted a specific crime, for a maximum of ten years in a penal labour institution (Westendorp Boerma 1950: 113-4).47

The approach was clearly inspired by Van Sevenhoven’s plans to form a pool of unpaid labour which the colonial government could make use of as it wished. In his 1856 village monograph, Kinder de Camarecq noted that the native population was strikingly unattached to the places where they lived. Almost half of the inhabitants of Sembir, the location of his survey, came from elsewhere (1861: 269). This shows that mobility was also widespread before the administrative reorganization. It is very doubtful whether the pass system introduced in 1816 hampered the roaming around of the class of landless peasants. But the power to grant or deny permission to leave the settlement – even for a short time, let alone move permanently – certainly increased the authority of the native chiefs. The abolition of the obligation to report on all movements in 1863 occurred at the suggestion of former Resident of the Priangan Regencies Van der Wijck. Appointed to the Council of the Indies, he had advocated that the owners of agribusinesses be allowed to recruit the labour they needed from wherever they could find them. Defenders of the cultivation system called in vain for the pass system to be maintained to prevent people from moving elsewhere, temporarily or permanently, to evade their obligations to provide labour services. Yet supporters of free enterprise also expressed their concerns about the transition to a labour regime based not on settled peasants, but on a class of footloose, unreliable and undisciplined land-poor and landless labourers.

Free labourers are mainly taken from this class of people, who are on a very low rung of morality. They like to play games, dice, are addicted to opium and seek the company of dancing girls. In order to satisfy these passions they have to go in search of employment or steal. The coolie establishments for transporting goods usually employ such footloose folk. Factories and enterprises also have to use them to do work that settled peasants are not obliged to perform. ... [These people] are of a much lower calibre than the settled peasants who perform compulsory labour, and may God preserve us from too many of these free labourers. (Hasselman 1862: 32)

This deep mistrust of unattached labour, nomadic at the foot of the agrarian economy, would return later in the century in denunciations of the brazen intractability of the coolies contracted for work in the plantation belt which emerged on the east coast of Sumatra. The only way to confine this ‘riffraff and scum’, recruited from the rural regions of Java, in the straitjacket of the plantation and impose discipline on them was to threaten them with penal sanctions (Breman 1987b). It did not go this far in the Priangan, but the
residency authorities did receive a request from the agro-industrial lobby in 1876 to allow measures to punish deserting coolies more severely. The new policy of deregulating ordinances restricting or, vice versa, compelling labour mobility followed on from an earlier decision by the colonial government to no longer extend official support to private entrepreneurs in their efforts to recruit seasonal labour. This had long been standing practice, as shown by the instruction to the Resident of Cirebon to send bujang to the lands around Batavia to work in the sugar mills. Nicolaus Engelhard had already opposed the annual requisition of labour in 1794 because of the coercion that accompanied it (De Haan IV, 1912: 79-80). This intercession by the government came to an end in 1834 when it became clear that forced recruitment in the regions where the mobilized labourers lived had repeatedly caused unrest. Settled peasants obliged to take part in this migratory form of labour could exempt themselves by paying a sum of money and designating a substitute. The costs however increased until the pay-off amounted to thirty guilders, a buffalo team, a quantity of paddy and a sack of cotton. Moreover, many of these migratory labourers, an army of 4,000 men who were under contract for a year, often deserted en route. The owners of the agribusinesses were informed that, in the future, they would have to find their own labour force, just as the Chinese owners of the sugar mills were accustomed to doing.

The above shows that the reorganization of governance and coffee cultivation in the Priangan was part of a wider package of reforms that marked the transition to a system of colonial exploitation based on the free market. Bonded labour, which had been the basis of the cultivation system, made way for encouraging the voluntary supply of labour, while the previous policy of immobilization was replaced by a focus on promoting mobility both geographically and between sectors. Under this liberalized economy, the existing gap between the higher and lower classes widened. The growing inequality within the peasant economy was partly a consequence of the commercialization of food production, which led to the concentration of farmland in the hands of large-scale landowners, at the expense of less prosperous households. It was a trend further strengthened by preventing the native population from using uncultivated land. This was a restriction that especially affected land-poor peasants for whom tilling dry fields was one of the only ways they could preserve their independence from large landowners and to move up on the social ladder. One clear indication of the steadily increasing pressure on agrarian resources was the worsening of conditions for sharecropping during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, to which Scheltema had drawn attention (1927-28: 332-3; see also
Economie van de desa, residentie Preanger Regentschappen IXa, OMW, 1907: 9). The unfavourable circumstances in which petty landowners now found themselves were exacerbated by the fact that they had to perform more corvee services than would have been the case if the work imposed on the desa as a collectivity had been distributed more evenly. Surrendering all their possessions was the most radical solution, when the burden of landownership outweighed the benefits. This consideration explained why:

... the owners of small plots of farmland, especially if it was lower quality dry soil, often preferred to dispose of their land and become panumpang or bujang at a European agri-enterprise than to continue to have to provide corvee services. (Velders 1909: 87-8)

What means of subsistence were available to the growing rural proletariat in the new economy that was now emerging? As before, they continued to be dependent on the better-off peasant class, for whom they continued to work as day-labourers, farm servants or sharecroppers. They supplemented this by performing corvee services for the colonial government, imposed as a tribute in the form of labour in addition to the land tax. They were obliged to perform these activities either at the orders of their patrons or as paid substitutes for others. Outside the village and native agriculture they formed a floating pool of labour for the infrastructural projects now being undertaken on a large scale, especially building roads, bridges and railways. These were labour-intensive public works which reflected the progressive opening up of the region. Although they stimulated the growth of trade, transport and services, the land-poor and landless classes in the Priangan also benefited, even though their access to these new forms of economic activity never extended further than to their employment as a casual and unskilled workforce. Lastly, from among their ranks emerged the great mass of coolie labourers who were employed by large-scale private agribusinesses, of which Holle’s tea plantation was an early example. As this summary clearly shows, the large majority of land-poor and landless inhabitants of the Priangan, with their roots in the lowest echelons of the agrarian hierarchy, continued to be confined at the bottom of the more diversified rural economy both within and beyond the village, and were paid an extremely meagre wage. Released from a sedentary existence based on subordination and bondage, this underclass was condemned to circulate permanently between irregular, unskilled forms of employment based on hard capitalist principles. This made them behave with indifference
and unpredictability that seemed to justify the negative opinion of them expressed by the expatriate managers of the agricultural estates.

In the Priangan Regencies you will often hear not a single complaint about anything, not even a murmur, and then the permanent employees of an enterprise will suddenly up and leave, and not a few at a time; in other words, all of the day-labourers will simply not turn up for work. If you then instigate an inquiry, they will say that something came up and they found this the easiest way to free themselves of their obligations; in the environs of Batavia there is – or was until recently – in some areas such a floating population, mostly in the higher parts of the country, and preferably in the forested mountains. Because of their constant roaming around, they are known as *burung*, or *orang bunjaga* or names with a similar meaning. They are averse to all outside interference, except by their leaders or seniors, and it is very difficult to get them to perform any kind of regular work. The greatest caution is required or they fly away, like the *burung* or birds that they are. (Riesz I, 1883: 100)

This is the classic flight behaviour of a proletarianized class. The management of the large-scale agribusinesses responded to this tendency to run away to avoid having to comply with the onerous and badly paid work regime by demanding heavy punishments for desertion (Ministry for the Colonies, mail reports 1876, no. 616). The complaint was that coolies who refused to provide the agreed labour services in exchange for earnest money or an advance were in breach of their contract.

The price of labour, which continued to be kept at a low level in the period before and shortly after the turn of the century (20 to 25 cents a day for men, 15 cents for women and 7 cents for children) contrasted sharply with the high returns that capital enjoyed from the development of the region (Economie van de desa, residentie Preanger Regentschappen IXa, OMW, 1907: 69–71). The same source reported that coolie wages had stagnated at the same low level for at least the preceding twenty years. The administrative and agrarian reforms of 1870 paved the way for the release of labour from corvee services in the decades that followed but the progress made in this respect did little to improve the lot of many inhabitants of the region in any significant way. The system based on coercion may have been exchanged for one based on free labour, but in both cases the mobilization of a large part of the native population remained limited to subsidiary work, in a manner causing the lowest damage possible to what was and remained their prior concern, the provisioning of sufficient food for their own needs.
Where spatial mobility had previously focused on uninhabited areas and the cultivation of wilderness as a means of escaping the pressure exercised by overly harsh masters, migrants now went in search of wage labour in the large-scale agribusinesses. The Onderzoek Mindere Welvaart (Diminishing Welfare Investigations) instigated at the start of the twentieth century showed that footloose labour was the order of the day in the Priangan.

... a class of drifting nomads among the native population and known to them as jelema tihang hejo, that is, people who never took the trouble to settle down in a somewhat sustainable dwelling, migrants in the broadest sense of the word. (Economie van de desa, residentie Preanger Regentschappen IXa, OMW, 1907: 7)

This mobility was not vertical but horizontal, as it was as good as impossible to move upward from the lowest rung of the social ladder. In the tea gardens the footloose peasants were only eligible for work that required no or very few skills, such as picking and sorting the leaves, as practised but unskilled labour in the gardens, factories and transport, drivers, carpenters and bricklayers for the maintenance of roads, or as smiths to make and repair agricultural tools, tea-chest makers, basket weavers, cart-drivers, for delivering wood for burning and for carpentry, etc. Almost the only one who rose above this was the mandur or foreman, praised as the 'right-hand of the manager', but who was not entrusted with any form of financial management for fear that he lacked the integrity for such a responsibility. In addition, they also worked as warung holders and pasar traders, but only on a small scale. They were cart-drivers but not transport entrepreneurs, simple craftsmen with few tools and no match for the much better equipped Chinese artisans. Compared with half a century earlier, the purchasing power of the population had hardly increased and the ongoing contraction of the native economy had not been reversed.

One of the questions in the Onderzoek Mindere Welvaart (OMW) held in the early twentieth century was: 'What articles produced by the Native population are in no respect at all inferior to the same articles produced elsewhere?' The answers were very telling: according to experts on the Priangan economy, the limited range of native craft products were either too expensive or of inferior quality (OMW, Overzicht Inlandsche Handel en Nijverheid, VIb 1909). The circulation of money may have been given a new impetus but it is very arguable whether it had led to any real progress. Since cottage or home-based industry had disappeared during the era of forced cultivation, the native population had no other choice than to buy cheap
imported clothing, pottery and other consumer goods from Chinese retailers. It would therefore be premature to see the presence of such goods even in the households of the lowest classes as an indication that their economic situation had improved. The abridged extracts from the Colonial Reports between 1849 and 1908, included in the overview in annex 7 of the MWO, show clearly that native trade in the Priangan Regencies had stagnated at a very low level. The reports were equally damning about local artisanal production. It was therefore not surprising that a subsidiary report (IX) was added to the results of the MWO in which native respondents themselves identified laxity as the main reason why the population remained in a state of deprivation.

The economic and social system that had evolved in the Priangan Regencies was met with approval by those at its top, since the duality that had become visible confirmed the prevailing stereotypical perspective why the superior segment should gain and how the losses of the inferior segment were caused by their own defects. It was the essence of a speech which Dr J. Bosscha delivered to the members of the Sukabumi Agricultural Association in April 1909. He gave a concise summary of what had become the tenet of modern-colonial ideology. After explaining why the natives simply lacked the capacities required to become estate owners themselves – because of their insufficient intelligence, absence of efficiency, perseverance and so on – and that it would be better for them to remain in the slot that had been allotted to them, he went on to proclaim that:

A land will only achieve the highest level of prosperity when there is a harmonious relationship between capital, intellect and labour. It is a completely erroneous policy to wish to transform the latter, which is needed in the greatest quantity, into the other two. It would be equal to an army in which the largest proportion is made up of generals. The prosperity that is undeniably to be found in areas where there is much industry, and the tea industry in particular, would be substantially diminished if the happy relationship between the three classes were to be destroyed. Everywhere on Java, where this exists, the people are prosperous and there is no hunger; the three classes work together and protect each other. The worker provides labour, the intelligent class organizes the work, and the capital bears the risk. All enjoy the fruits of this endeavour.

(Velders 1909: 22-3)

Bosscha sketched a process of dependent development that captured the character of the transformation that had taken place in the Sunda
highlands. This late-colonial pattern had its own dynamics, exemplified by a political economy in which those who made up the bottom segments remained stuck in subordination. For those who were in control, it was a profitable enterprise, but they allowed the labouring classes nothing more than a coolie existence. It was a development the foundations for which had been laid in the early-colonial era.