Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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Epilogue: Servitude as the road to progress

The cultivation system gave a powerful boost to the production of export crops on Java for the world market between 1830 and 1870. The notion that colonial economy and society changed radically in this relatively short period is correct, but is incomplete unless qualified with the understanding that the regime of forced labour that formed the cornerstone of this economy had disrupted the peasant order for much longer, especially in the Priangan Regencies. The suggestion that the system of forced cultivation and delivery of coffee in this region must be considered an early precursor to the cultivation system can be reversed, by stating that what developed in the hinterland of Batavia in the early eighteenth century developed into a pattern of servitude that a hundred years later coerced the population in much of Java into serving the interests of the mother country. Between 1831 and 1866, annual remittances by the government of the East Indies during the era of the cultivation system amounted to some 500 million guilders. This is a conservative estimate of the profits that the mother country enjoyed from the colony. Recent studies, such as those by Van Zanden and Van Riel (2000) and Gordon (2009), mention much higher amounts. Besides paying off its debts, the Dutch state used these public revenues generated overseas to finance large infrastructural works at home, including the building of railways, and exempted the metropolitan bourgeoisie from paying an income tax. On top of this drain from the colony came the profits, savings, revenues from the sales of possessions and cultivation commission that expatriates (planters, merchants and civil servants) sent or brought home with them. Although criticism of the regime of overseas exploitation and repression, which drew its main political support from the growing metropolitan bourgeoisie, gathered momentum after the middle of the nineteenth century, it largely focused on the government’s monopoly on the cultivation and delivery of colonial goods. Despite the ripples caused by Multatuli, sympathy with the lot of the mass of peasants in the colony was

48 The surplus earned through unfree labour in the East Indies was also used to buy the freedom of slaves in the West Indies in 1863. In Surinam, planters were paid 300 guilders per slave to compensate for the loss of their property. The release of some 33,000 slaves cost the state of the Netherlands less than ten million guilders. Apart from their manumission, the slaves themselves did not receive any compensation.
subordinate to the desire to reign in the exclusive control of the colonial bureaucracy and create greater scope for private enterprise. The proponents of economic liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century were unanimously critical of the merits of the cultivation system. A century later, a number of studies had been published that took a slightly more cautious and apologist approach.

This revisionist tendency, in my view related to a school of colonial history with a pronounced statist character, is the main thrust of the work of Van Niel, Fasseur and Elson, published in the final quarter of the twentieth century. It is certainly not the case that these authors, by contrast to earlier accounts that decry the cultivation system, tend to speak only in laudatory terms of what policy-makers intended and practised on Java in the mid-nineteenth century. But their favourable assessments are firmly focused on the management of the colonial enterprise. Van Niel and Fasseur in particular remain far removed from the workfloor and the readers of their studies learn very little of how the system affected the peasants on Java. Fasseur is aware of the one-sidedness of this approach, explaining it in the foreword to his thesis. He is primarily interested in how the policy-makers both in the metropolis and in the colony responded to the forces unleashed by the cultivation system. In his view, this question excludes in advance highlighting the impact from an Indonesian perspective. He adds that such an approach would be possible only on the basis of studies that would do justice to the local context. In this way, he identifies an altogether different dichotomy that has nothing to do with adopting a Dutch or an Indonesian perspective, but with the choice to either focus on the interests of the local population or those of the government. Fasseur clearly gives preference to the latter. He repeats the argument adopted by Van Niel, namely that the great local variation renders it virtually impossible to reach conclusions that can be generalized. Van Niel emphasizes that what was presented as a system actually disintegrated in practice into an ‘interlocking set of local accommodations’. Elson started his study of the cultivation system and its longer-term impact by investigating the cultivation of sugarcane in the

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49 ‘Java under the cultivation system’ (1992) is a compilation of essays published by Van Niel on this subject over a period of more than 20 years. After his thesis Kultuurstelsel en koloniale baten (1975), Fasseur edited a compilation of contributions on the cultivation system by various authors, including himself, entitled Geld en geweten (1980). In ‘Javanese peasants and the colonial sugar industry: Impact and change in an East Java residency, 1830-1940’ (1984), Elson limited himself to developments in one region during and after the introduction of forced cultivation. In ‘Village Java under the Cultivation System, 1830-1870’ (1994), he expanded his analysis to the whole of Java, taking account of an enormous quantity of archival resources.
eastern corner of Java. In doing so, he was responding to the standpoint that a regional approach is necessary to understand how the regime of forced labour operated. This is, however, not the full story as Elson believes that it is certainly possible and even desirable to draw conclusions about the cultivation system that transcend local differences. The observation about the lack of uniformity as emphasized by Van Niel and Fasseur is – in the light of a whole series of contrasts between plains and hilly areas, different population densities and social structures, divergent forms of governance, widely varying agricultural practices, etc. – self-evident rather than striking. Despite the specifics of the many different contexts, however, it is important to address the question of how the peasant order on Java experienced the colonial regime. Elson answers this question in a comprehensive and deeply researched follow-up study, but in which he does not succumb to the tendency to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities. The quotations with which he opens his introduction do stress the diversity that confronted those charged with implementing the cultivation system, a differentiation that only intensified as the chosen course was pursued. It is interesting that he justifies extending his analysis to the whole of Java by stating that all historians aspire to draw general conclusions. This statement places Elson not so far from the conclusions that Van Niel and Fasseur draw from their studies. Important as it is, the couleur locale that they drew explicit attention to earlier disappears at the end when they have to find an answer to the question whether the colonized peasantry benefited or suffered from the cultivation system. All three reach the obvious conclusion that the lion’s share of the profits from the system flowed into the Netherlands’ national coffers, but they also all agree that the increase in production brought more benefits than harm to the peasants on Java.

Their shared parti pris is squarely opposed to my own assessment that the large majority of successive generations of coffee cultivators in the Sunda highlands remained immersed in poverty and suffered severely under the regime of forced labour to which they were exposed in the period covered by my study (1720 to 1870), initially with the introduction of the Priangan system and later under its extension as part of the cultivation system.50

Van Niel is very resolute in his belief that the system benefited the local population, though he does admit that the larger peasant owners benefited

50 The positive reappraisal of the impact of forced cultivation on the situation of the native population has not gone unnoticed in recent Dutch colonial historiography. De Jong, for example, welcomes the breakthrough of the revisionist perspective and is satisfied to conclude that it has finally put paid to earlier critical assessments (De Jong 1998: 203-25).
at the expense of the classes that owned less land or none at all. As before, the land-poor and landless classes remained dependent on the better-off segments in the village system (Van Niel 1990: 87). In his considered view, however, the quality of life improved across the board under the cultivation system, a leap upwards that was even more striking when, after the regime of forced labour was abolished, the situation of the local people became worse rather than better.

Current research into prosperity in Javanese villages tends to support the idea that there was more material wealth in Java during the Cultivation System than in the years following its demise. (Van Niel 1992: 214)

Fasseur appears to agree with Van Niel’s verdict, supported by his calculation that the planters were paid more in wages than was imposed on them in the form of land rent. The increased purchasing power meant that the common people were now able to buy goods that used to be beyond their reach. Fasseur does admit that the planters in the Priangan, where most of the coffee was produced, were paid much less than their counterparts elsewhere on Java, but this was compensated for by the fact that they were exempt from land rent (Fasseur 1980: 124, note 39). Apart from the extremely low wage that the Priangan peasants received for their labour, Fasseur completely ignores the fact that they also had to surrender a fifth share of their paddy yield to the local chiefs, which in itself was higher than the land rent introduced by the government. Another factor that distorts the arguments of both Van Niel and Fasseur is that they focus more on the cultivation of sugarcane than on coffee. Yet Fasseur himself reports figures that show that coffee was by far the more important crop. Besides the fact that coffee generated much more income for the Dutch national coffers than sugar, the impact on the local population was also much greater, with two and a half to three times more households involved in the forced cultivation of the crop between 1840 and 1860 (Fasseur 1975, annex 1). In 1850 56 per cent of the peasants in Java were assigned to the forced cultivation of coffee while in the same year only 21 per cent were engaged in growing sugarcane. This severely unequal burden on labour weighed even more heavily because coffee had already been produced for more than a century – primarily in the Priangan – when the peasants living on the plains of Java were subjected to the forced cultivation of sugarcane.

The criticism of devoting insufficient attention to the huge army of conscripted labour employed in coffee cultivation cannot be aimed at Elson. Although his first study focuses on the importance of sugarcane,
for his analysis of Java as a whole he extended his study to coffee, the crop that generated four-fifths of the colonial profits. Elson does not dismiss lightly the heavy burden imposed on the hundreds of thousands of peasants mobilized to grow this important export crop, nor does he fail to mention many of the abuses that the system gave rise to. Where the coffee regime was far less oppressive and the peasants received a much better price for the beans, as in the eastern regions of Java, there was more scope for improving living conditions and those of the land-poor and landless classes did not deteriorate as they did for their counterparts in the Priangan. Elson ends his argument by drawing up the balance of the cultivation system, noting the strictures and disadvantages, but concluding that its overall effects were positive. He rejects the claim that forced cultivation brought poverty, asserting the opposite, that ‘the Cultivation System promoted a previously unknown level of general prosperity among the peasantry’ (Elson 1994: 305). He appeals to his statistics to show that this applies equally to the cultivation of coffee.

They indicate the presence, through forced coffee cultivation, of enormous amounts of disposable income in the hands of the peasantry, something that could not have occurred on so a large scale in the years before 1830. Forced labour it was, and cheaply paid to boot, but it was income which would not otherwise have been realised. \textit{(ibid.): 314}

I would like to counter this argument by pointing out that, during this period, there was no substantial increase in the circulation of money in the Priangan. The residency reports repeatedly noted the low level of monetization of the peasant economy, which was undoubtedly largely due to the low wage of only a few cents a day. I will return later to the main conclusion from Elson’s argument – the same with which Van Niel and Fasseur close their studies. But first I would like to refer to two side arguments that Elson uses to support his conclusions. The first suggests that the cultivation of coffee did not require the requisition of land owned and used by the peasants. Secondly, he claims that the regime of forced labour may have reduced the opportunities for other sources of employment and income – as any remaining time had to be used to produce sufficient food – but that this disadvantage was considerably outweighed by the peasants’ increased purchasing power. In the previous chapters, I have disputed the validity of both these claims in respect of the Priangan. Colonial officials in this region refused time and again to accept that the peasants were able to satisfy what was their main concern: to produce enough staple food. Year
after year, the residency reports noted the inadequate quantities of rice available to feed the population. There must have been almost no time at all to grow secondary crops like pulses and vegetables, so important for a balanced diet. What had initially been introduced as a subsidiary activity – planting a few coffee shrubs that required little maintenance close to their homes – and which in the eyes of the colonial administrators was easy to combine with the time and energy required to grow food, soon evolved into a heavy burden. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, an instruction was issued to increase the stock of coffee trees to 1,000 per planter. This excessive burden was dictated from above to meet the growing demand on the world market, with no awareness at all of the amount of labour it required. It was now no longer only the male head of the household who was exposed to the regime of forced labour. It was taken for granted that the women and children would help to grow the coffee. Such a massive increase in the burden of labour could not but have a far-reaching impact on the structure of the household and the distribution of labour within it, for example, on the social and economic position of the women. Elson has no problem admitting that women and children were mobilized en masse in the forced cultivation of crops (1994: 205). In his view, however, this added burden had an emancipatory effect as it brought to an end the confinement of the women to the household and thereby represented a breakthrough in the gendered division of labour. This begs the question of whether his convoluted conclusion also applies to the enormous increase in child labour. The highly intensified burden on peasant labour was not a point of discussion in early-colonial reports. It was imposed from higher up in the form of orders and instructions and those in power expressed their displeasure if the quotas were not met, ranted about the excessive laziness of the peasants and the lack of pliability of the local chiefs, without concerning themselves with the causes of their reluctance. Statements of a more critical nature were an exception in official documents. Such as the question posed by Muntinghe in one of his many memoranda of how a farmer back in the Netherlands would respond if told to make do with half, a quarter or even a tenth part of his yield. The more the regime of unfreedom became accepted as normal, the rarer such attempts to challenge its premises became. By then, the notion of the colonized subject as having completely different standards to those that prevailed in the West had become well established. He was seen as the ‘Other’, to whom one’s own norms and values do not apply. Any appeal also to live by them in the colonial domain was neither possible nor desirable. The political and social convictions that had taken root in Europe were in principle not valid beyond the metropolis. There was
no room for Enlightenment ideals in the exploitation of overseas territories, as it had evolved in the Priangan lands from the start of the eighteenth century. This meant that Muntinghe, now in his official guise as president of the Council of Financial Affairs, summarized in an advisory report to the Commissioners-General on 4 September 1817 what the essence of the coffee regime was and should remain.

Working in the coffee gardens gratis and delivering the crop exclusively to the government for the lowest possible price undoubtedly produces immediate and the greatest benefits. (Van Deventer 1891: 190)

I now return to the main revisionist argument, the alleged increase in purchasing power of the peasants as a result of the far-reaching under-utilization of their labour power being brought to a resolute end. This is the well-known *mise-en-valeur* thesis that the intervention of the foreign ruler was necessary to develop the country and its people, to add value where it was absent before. Corroborating what he had written on an earlier occasion (1990: 45), Elson referred in his summing up approvingly to a colonial source stating that:

if [the land at present planted with coffee] were left to the people for the cultivation of other products of native industry ... it can safely be accepted that nine-tenths of these lands would remain uncultivated and the population would enjoy an insignificant gain from them. (1994: 314)

This is a stereotypical charge dating back to the VOC era and frequently repeated to justify the force employed to commit the native population to cultivate and deliver agrarian products. Colonial archivist De Haan, who processed a colossal volume of documentation in his four-volume work at the beginning of the twentieth century, did not fail to mention a single case of abuse by VOC officials in his imposing retrospective on the origins of the Priangan coffee regime. His considered final judgment was nevertheless that the hard hand of authority may have produced much pain and suffering, but that it was unfortunately necessary to instil the inhabitants of the Sunda highlands with the economic discipline that they lacked. The imperative to work was imposed rigorously from above but, given the primitive state of development in which the peasants stagnated, there was no better alternative. Indeed, the means justified the ends, not least because the outcome was in the final instance also beneficial to the coffee planters themselves. The increase in production was achieved by
making efficient use of time that was available in abundance and had previously been spent in idleness. But was there not a disproportionate gap between the benefits enjoyed by the Company and the costs to the population? Creaming off the surplus, De Haan concluded, simply meant combating ostentatious laziness and was therefore an intervention that contributed to the progress of civilization.

If one speaks of the disproportionate relationship between the imposition of rigorous labour and excessive profits made, it should be noted that this discrepancy amounts to a loss of time, and that it is more than doubtful whether the peasants would have spent this leisure time on improving their lot rather than lazing around. Forced cultivation may not have led to advancement, but it can hardly have had a stultifying effect on a population so unproductive, cultivators who preferred clearing gaga to laying out sawahs. (De Haan III, 1912: 578)

De Haan disagreed with Nicolaus Engelhard who, during his time as commissioner for native affairs (1791-98), held the view that ‘the Javanese must be driven and beaten to work as though they were animals’. Yet the archivist did belong with those who tended to see the early-colonial enterprise as essentially a development mission. He readily admitted, however, that it took a long time for the beneficial effects of this noble endeavour to become visible. But that was to be expected. The work of civilization could not be achieved overnight. Did the Netherlands also not owe its success to the hard struggle fought tirelessly by our forefathers?

A nation such as ours which has worked day and night, which has fought endlessly, which has sacrificed its material wealth and its blood without looking back to maintain its position in the march forwards, should truly not find it too hard that this Sundanese folk with no marrow or pith, created as woodchoppers and water-carriers for stronger races, incapable of releasing themselves in an eternity from the grind of a slumbering existence in slavish servitude to Chiefs and Princes [my italics], that this Sundanese folk, we say, should have been forced to work with their hands at the orders of foreign masters and to their benefit to share the blessings of a state of civilization, which was only reached in the West through centuries of bitter struggle. (De Haan I, 1910: 438-9)

In this mindboggling statement, the racist tone that gave a special significance to the encounter between colonizer and colonized can clearly be
heard. And as for the coercion that accompanied this clash, when all was said and done it was not really so bad and, in any case, a hard hand was necessary to turn these obstinate and slothful subsistence peasants into eager, fully fledged producers. This viewpoint, though undoubtedly dominant, was counterbalanced by a radically dissenting perspective already early on in which the coffee gardens of the Priangan were seen as slave plantations (P. de Haan 1829).

The idea that forced labour may have been unpleasant but was unavoidable was an elaboration of the *mise-en-valeur* notion that had many advocates in European metropolises during the late colonial era, even in more progressive political circles. Native populations had to be denied their freedom in order to coach them to progress under strict supervision. Discipline as a condition for achieving civilization was the ideology that Van den Bosch had felt necessary to combat poverty and pauperization in the mother country and to arouse the desire of the Javanese peasants to work. The Encyclopaedia Britannica hailed him:

... as a statesman who expanded the poor-relief system and instituted the paternalistic Dutch East Indies Culture System, by which vast riches in export crops were extracted ... and in which he argued against a liberal colonial system and for a strongly paternalistic one, claiming that people unaccustomed to a work ethic needed strong guidance. (Accessed on 27-6-2013)

At first sight, then, the royal adviser’s activities in the metropolis and the colony were driven by the same motivation: to uplift the people and give them prospects for improvement. These parallels led historian Albert Schrauwers to label the cultivation system, no less than the pauper colonies in the metropolis, as Enlightenment projects in modern state-building. Both were designed by the same policy-maker, Johannes van den Bosch. While paupers were seen as work-shy, Javanese peasants refused to produce a surplus from which they themselves would be the first to benefit. The approach applied in the benevolent colonies set up in the mother country was of the same order as the pressure to which the people of Java were subjected, for their own good – both aimed at advancement to a higher level.

51 See, for example, Albert Sarraut, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*. Paris 1923.  
Schrauwers concluded that the methods developed to instil this productive virtue among the poor in the metropolis were applied on a broader scale on Java. Yet this conclusion also signifies a turning point in his exposé, as the method employed to impose discipline – the exercise of force – does not change the fact that the purpose and impact of the two courses of policy in metropolis and colony were radically different.

The Cultivation System transformed large parts of Java into a para-penal institution, an enclaved economy. Whereas the colonists of the Benevolent Society [in the metropolis] were allowed to progress as just outlined, no such progression was possible in Java under the Cultivation System (ibid.: 321)

Since the colony was seen from the very beginning as primarily a source of profits for the metropolis, any policy claiming to give priority to the welfare of the subaltern population in the colony could do nothing more than pay lip service to this enlightened objective.

The colonial mode of production generated not only coffee, but also the myth of the inefficient, defective native who lacked the incentive and the capacity to set himself to work, and who therefore had to be as it were forced to progress. This viewpoint evolved into a basic principle of colonial ideology, justifying and legitimizing unfree labour as an unavoidable inconvenience that would benefit also the subjected party, if not in the short term then certainly over a longer period. This doctrine of backwardness denied the native population the capability for self-development because it lacked the economic drive, as embodied in the behaviour of Western man. In his thesis (1910) Julius Herman Boeke formulated the basic principles of the economic and general social dualism in which he characterized the deviant behaviour of the Eastern people, whose limited needs should be seen not as a time-bound aberration but a permanent feature, leading them to live in self-imposed exclusion with extremely low living standards. This dogma would resurface after the completion of the decolonization process in the second half of the twentieth century, in studies that sought to interpret the underdevelopment of the poorer parts of the world as due to internal rather than external conditions. Examining the applicability of this proposition in the post-colonial era is far beyond the scope of this study. Of relevance, however, is the discussion Goedhart devotes to the failure of coffee production as a peasant mode of production after the abolition of the Priangan regime in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. He summarizes the situation at the end of his
book with the observation that the conscripted cultivators had become redundant in growing paddy and had not succeeded in evolving into free coffee peasants, but offered their services as wage coolies to large-scale private agribusinesses. In his view, the transition from peasant-owner to wage labourer illustrated the unfortunate incapacity of native producers to work on the basis of their own enlightened self-interest (Goedhart 1948: 232). In this explanation, the victims of unfree labour could only blame their own defects if they regressed rather than progressed socially. Where the state has evolved in interaction with society, a reasonable balance can develop between the two. In the colonial situation, however, the edifice of public power and authority may have exerted considerable pressure on social relations, but it was unable to acquire more than a fragile and inadequate grip on native society, let alone become embedded in it. In the context of an expanding global market, the late-colonial state also remained a ‘foreign body’ and assumed a position of domination that left no space for countervailing power. Nevertheless, this state apparatus was unable to impose its will to govern effectively on the society it appropriated. ‘Seeing like a state’ was eventually also a fiasco in the tropical territories of the Netherlands.

I would like to briefly examine the modality employed by the colonial authorities to achieve what they had ordered: more and more coffee. The prevailing view is that they succeeded in this ambition by making clever use of native institutions, customs and values. Before and after Governor-General Van den Bosch, the directorate of the colonial enterprise created the impression that, in implementing their designs, they preferred accommodation to confrontation, by taking the situation as they encountered it as the starting point for achieving their objectives. And with great success, if we are to believe not only their own resolute testimonies but also those of outsiders. For the production of colonial goods, the authorities relied on the traditional servitude of the peasants to their lords. Not interfering in the affairs of the native population, including in relations between the different social segments or in the long-standing arrangements between the lords and the peasants, was sacrosanct. This argument permitted the heavy burden of labour imposed on the peasants to be seen as continuing

53 For example, the study by James William Bayley Money, published in 1861 under the title ‘Java, or how to manage a colony’, is full of praise. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Clive Day was much more critical. His study, ‘The policy and administration of the Dutch in Java’ (1904), dug more deeply and referred extensively to the available source material. Day took no pains to disguise his low opinion of Money’s work.
a centuries-old practice. It also allowed the myth to arise that a uniform system was impossible because it was necessary to take account of local differences, which could be preserved rather than disappearing under the heavy yoke of uniformity. I found no confirmation for this way of thinking. In as far as the assumption of ‘an interlocking set of local accommodations’ is accurate, in my view this arose from the incomplete reach of the colonial policy-makers. Their inability to change what they encountered, rather than respect for local practices and institutions, is a more plausible explanation of the limited oversight and even more restricted control of the thinly staffed administrative apparatus over the situation at the foot of the colonized society. The notion of a progressive process of social levelling resulting in a de-differentiated peasant order, as suggested by Geertz (1956, 1963), illustrates the extent to which the colonial authorities overestimated the impact of their intervention. Despite attempts to hunt down reluctant peasants trying to evade their obligations to work, the authorities failed to mobilize each and everyone in the Priangan to plant coffee. Conversely, it is also necessary to reject the view that everything remained as it was. In an earlier publication, I referred to the famed village system on Java as an early nineteenth-century invention (Breman 1979) and my opinion has not changed since. What colonial history describes as a traditional institution could often be traced back to regulations and instructions imposed from higher up. The actions of the Priangan chiefs, for example, should not be seen as those of an established elite, respecting existing forms of sovereignty. In examining the significance and role of the native aristocracy, I have placed them in the context of the colonial policies of sedentarization, territorialization and hierarchization that led to far-reaching changes in relations between lords and peasants.

While the introduction of the cultivation system was clearly demarcated, its abolition was laborious and not at all transparent. Like most authors, I have taken 1870 as the watershed year, as that was the year in which the Priangan system of governance was abolished. Despite this, however, the compulsion to grow coffee remained for some time, even though it was now presented as a form of cultivation that gave priority to the interests of the peasant-producers. Various reasons have been given for the somewhat puzzling demise of the cultuurstelsel, most of which Fasseur rejects as unconvincing (1980: 125-9). He himself tends to explain the phasing out of the regime in terms of external circumstances, namely pressure from an increasingly vocal lobby of liberal businessmen and politicians in the metropolis pushing the government to withdraw from the strictly regulated colonial economy. Cees Fasseur disagrees with Wim Wertheim, whose
seminal work on the changing fabric of Indonesian society and economy, published shortly after decolonization (1956), attributes the disappearance of the cultivation system to three causes: the transition from government intervention to the free interplay of market forces, shrinking profits from government-controlled cultivation, and the impact of Multatuli’s book *Max Havelaar*, which had aroused the public conscience. Fasseur rightly points out that Dutch capital initially showed little interest in investing in the colony. As time passed, however, this interest became increasingly strong. Private and large-scale agribusiness had already started to gain momentum before the end of the nineteenth century, and this was to grow into an extensive agro-industrial complex in the early decades of the new century. Thanks to the new Agrarian Law of 1870, which denied the native population access to its own land-base, and helped by a government that leased this ‘waste’ land, now declared state domain, to Western companies for the long term and on very favourable terms, agribusinesses emerged that covered much larger areas than the coffee gardens ever had.

Fasseur is more correct in rejecting the notion that the cultivation system declined because it generated steadily falling profits. On the basis of conservative estimates he calculates that, on the contrary, while remittances from the colony accounted for less than a fifth share of national income in the first 20 years, by the 1850s they had risen to nearly a third. Colonial goods brought in increasingly high profits, to such an extent that this was one reason why it took so long to phase out the system. As elderly statesman Baud had astutely observed, Java was and remained the cork on which the Dutch economy stayed afloat. The desire to drive up colonial profits to the maximum was matched by a compulsion to save as much as possible on the costs of colonial exploitation. No increases in expenditure could be proposed or approved which, according to Baud, ‘were not, in the strongest sense, strictly necessary’ (Van Deventer III, 1866: 22). Lastly, the publication of Multatuli’s critique of the colonial enterprise undoubtedly had a considerable impact. Nevertheless, Fasseur concludes with good reason that his staunch critique of both liberals and conservatives did not meet with a warm reception from the political establishment. The tone of this dissenter was considered too sharp, and there was widespread unease about why it would be necessary to forfeit such an easy and important source of income. This was essentially the same argument Baud had used to reject an increase in the meagre wages with which the coffee planters in the Priangan were palmed off: why pay more for something you could get for so very little? The guilty conscience could be kept in check as long as the profits were considered to make a welcome and indispensable contribution to the
growth of the Dutch economy. Now and in the distant future, a justification that also applied to the continuation of colonial domination itself.

If this interpretation does indeed do justice to the policy pursued both in the metropolis and the East Indies, how should the demise of the cultivation system then be understood? As I have outlined in this study, the causes of the decline and fall lay in the regime of unfree labour itself. Denying that the peasant population on Java had acquiesced in the forced cultivation and delivery of crops for trade runs through my argument like a red thread. I am therefore fundamentally in disagreement with authors who recognize that the burden on peasant labour was unprecedentedly heavy while simultaneously expressing their surprise that the large majority accepted their fate with docility. Not only Fasseur, but also Van Niel and Elson (and, for example, also Blussé 1984: 80), interpret the situation in this way.

Disturbances of the peace that might have shaken the government awake did not occur in this period, with the exception of Banten, which was a traditional hotbed of unrest. Baud expressed his surprise in 1847 at the ‘resignation’ of the people, who lived under the yoke of a system that rode roughshod over their rights and institutions. Official reports referred to only very few instances of active resistance to the cultivation system after 1840 (there were undoubtedly more cases of passive resistance, but these were less easy to identify, unless they took the form of mass desertion). (Fasseur 1975: 47)

One of the more remarkable phenomenon [sic] of the mid-nineteenth century was the acceptance of the Cultivation System by the Javanese; if they did not accept it willingly or gladly they certainly did not protest as much or as vehemently as in the later period. Generally speaking the period of the 1830s to the 1850s saw little protest of a violent sort associated with the System. (Van Niel 1992: 115)

Land flight, sabotage, strikes, public demonstration and other forms of resistance and protest are all incidentally acknowledged in Elson’s study but they do not add up to much and are also absent from the detailed index. ‘By far the most common response among peasants, however, was simply to make the best of their circumstances’ (Elson 1994: 96).

The Indonesian historian Sartono has contradicted the suggestion that disruptions of law and order were peculiar to Banten. He begins his case study of that region – a revolt which broke out in 1888 – by pointing out that agrarian unrest was endemic and erupted in risings of the peasantry
against colonial authority time and again in almost all the residencies of Java (Sartono 1966: 1-2). The statements of the colonial historians quoted above lead me to characterize their assessments as indicative of a statist bias. In the first place because the authors referred to above understate the structural violence used to pressgang the peasants to cultivate the compulsory crops and to ensure they continued to do so. Secondly, because they fail to acknowledge the resistance that did occur; in the Priangan immediately after the introduction of the system and in the period that followed, not occasionally but persistently and on a large scale, from high to low. Creating the impression that the peasants docilely allowed themselves to be set to work for a price that made a mockery of the real value of their labour, does no justice to the rich arsenal of evasion techniques, sometimes extending to sabotage, obstruction or desertion; and if that had no effect, a refusal to work could lead to a confrontation with gang bosses, chiefs or colonial officials. On accepting a chair as professor in the history of Asia, Schulte Nordholt observed that the colonial expansion of the Netherlands created a state of violence that has only been addressed marginally in accounts of the historiography of the metropolis. His conclusion could hardly be more explicit.

It is a misconception to claim that this was only something temporary, a closed-off phase in the development towards a presumed state of ‘peace and order’. Anyone alleging this does not sufficiently recognize that the violence experienced throughout almost the entire archipelago established a regime of fear, and that this violence continued to resonate in the memories of the people until the end of the colonial era. (Schulte Nordholt 2000: 8)

As was to be expected, Fasseur thoroughly disapproved of this judgment. In a response a short time later, he accused his colleague of ideological

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54 In an otherwise positive appraisal of the Dutch edition of my book – ‘Breman’s account is measured, assured and compelling, a splendid piece of sustained analysis’ – Elson takes issue with my criticism of his statist bias (Elson 2011). However, I am not the only one to express this reservation of his otherwise excellent study on the impact of the cultivation system on Java’s peasantry. Knight, another prominent historian of colonial Indonesia who has mainly researched and published on sugarcane production in coastal Java for export, has questioned Elson’s use of state archives with a minimum of critical discussion. ‘Village Java under the Cultivation System makes so relatively little attempt to critically distance itself from the figurative colonial archive. The vast body of opinion and “data” assembled by colonial officials in the mid-nineteenth century is treated as substantially value free.’ (Knight 1996: 122) For another critical appraisal of Elson’s argumentation on similar grounds as mine, see Clarence-Smith 1994: 258-9.
prejudice, because he did not and could not substantiate his argumentation empirically (Fasseur 2000: 10). Yet this lack of empirical proof was precisely the essence of Schulte Nordholt’s criticisms of the source material as recorded in the colonial administration.

Fasseur’s robust allegations are completely compatible with his tendency to deny all colonial injustices that cannot be supported by factual evidence. But can this position itself not also be seen as ideologically biased? This is what Levyssohn Norman argued as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, with his statement about the wide discrepancy between the sometimes malevolent nature of policy practice and the overly favourable way in which it was presented. He illustrated this discrepancy by referring to the good intentions that the British interim administration in the early nineteenth century claimed for itself and the adverse reality concealed in official documents.

They all breathe the same spirit of paternal concern for those subject to the system and of great philanthropic liberality; yet if one lifts the tip of the paper veil, one is surprised at the way in which these mild principles are – or rather, are not – put into practice. (Levyssohn Norman 1857: 182)

Such misrepresentation of reality did not of course change after Dutch rule in the colony was restored. That is clear, for example, from the series of residency reports drawn up in 1840-41 on the punishment of village chiefs for failing to perform their duties. Baud, now national adviser on colonial affairs, had asked the Governor-General in mid-1840 to inform him about the custom of disciplining these local headmen by caning them. He let it be known that this form of arbitrary punishment was forbidden and would henceforth be treated as a serious abuse of authority. An inquiry set up six months later by the attorney-general at the Supreme Court of the Dutch East Indies exposed a wide range of punishments the colonial authorities used to call village heads to order. They varied from reprimands to being detained or condemned to forced labour, sometimes together with dismissal. In five of the seventeen residences reported on – including the Priangan Regencies – caning was one of the common instruments of punishment. One Resident reported that in his area of jurisdiction between 1836 and 1840 around 1,000 village chiefs had been given punishments of widely varying severity and that, in 1840, under his authority, 15 to 20 punishments of caning had been meted out in coffee gardens and cane fields. In his commentary on this revelation, Van Deventer pointed out that this form of punishment should be seen as inherent to the cultivation system. He
alleged that, under this regime, village chiefs were put in the pillory and whipped until they bled, sometimes to death. A footnote shows that he was by no means exaggerating.

We can cite examples where perpetrators have been given twenty lashes, which they did not survive. The evil of lashing in general is exacerbated by the different ways in which it can be applied, depending on the degree of cruelty of the official concerned. (Van Deventer I, 1865: 420)

Fasseur is not interested in paper veils. While others provide evidence that there was a state of violence, this colonial historian persists in his claims that such accusations are inspired by ideological prejudice.

The conclusion of my argument is that the cultivation system declined not as a result of external factors but, despite the frequent and excessive use of violence, because of it being undermined from the inside and from the bottom up. The army of conscripted labour in the Sunda highlands was no longer prepared to do what was mercilessly required of them, to deliver an ever-increasing volume of coffee beans. In my view, the throttle to make the engine turn over faster and faster eventually proved faulty. Attempts to repair it were counterproductive and it became more and more difficult to keep the coffee machine running. Those driving it were forced to change course. Firstly by dismissing the higher chiefs from their management of production and retaining the lower native officials, who were the actual foremen closer to the workfloor, under strict surveillance. And secondly by abandoning the cultivation of coffee in far-off plantations and relocating it to smaller plots closer to the peasant settlements – a lukewarm attempt that ended in failure.

I would like to add a few comments on the excessively heavy burden of labour that the colonial government imposed on the Priangan peasantry. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this burden was increased even more by the introduction of corvee services, on top of the mass mobilization of labour for the cultivation and delivery of coffee. This meant that, in addition to the tasks that the peasants had to perform for their lords, the government ordered them to fulfil a wide range of obligations which, in addition to cultivation services, took up at least one day a week and included guard duties, transport or construction work and tending to the needs of higher and lower colonial officials, including satisfying their desire for ostentatious shows of pomp and circumstance. All these services together accounted for substantially more than half of the peasants’ working year. And how were these obligations met? Firstly, higher and lower chiefs tended
to disguise the true numbers of subordinates under their charge. The apparent low population density in the Priangan Regencies and its erratic slow increase was largely due to the obstinate under-registration of the number of households and how many people they comprised. This was one way in which the local aristocracy could put their own interests above the demands of the government. But the closer colonial inspectors and controleurs came to the workfloor, the more difficult it became to hide the true size of the actual manpower. The gradual growth of the population in the region (from 998,777 in 1871 to 2,187,236 in 1900) was more an indication of the increasing reach of the colonial authorities than the consequence of normal demographic accrescence. An important moment came when the authorities decided to shift the basic unit for mobilizing labour from the composite peasant household to the nuclear family of husband, wife and children. This reform aimed to involve the land-poor and landless underclasses directly in the cultivation of coffee by removing the dependency of the mass of the people on the larger landowners. The persisting problems with the coffee regime after this change show that the authorities had only partially succeeded in this aim. They never managed to mobilize the total peasant workforce. Besides those unfit to work (the elderly, the disabled and very small children) a privileged class was exempted from cultivating coffee for political reasons. This proved insufficient since large landowners continued to buy themselves free of their obligation to work by sending one of their farm servants or sharecroppers or paying for a replacement. It will be clear from my account that the cultivation system relied more on the land-poor and landless classes than on the peasant-owners. With this observation I come to the final conclusion, the impact of the system of forced labour on the position of the more disadvantaged segments in the socioeconomic structure of the Priangan.

The developments that took place in the Priangan in the late-colonial era confirm neither Boeke’s theory of dualism nor Geertz’s theory of involution. The fact that neither of these analytical constructions provides a satisfactory explanation does not affect the fact that they can, in a certain sense, be seen as complete opposites. While Boeke believed that the stagnation of the native population in poverty was a consequence of internal factors, namely their lack of an economic mentality, Geertz sought the cause in the destructive impact of colonial domination. Both interpretations undeniably seem to offer something of an explanation for the developments in the Sunda highlands. An enclave of Western economic activity emerged in the Priangan as early as the end of the nineteenth century which the native population either had nothing to do with, as it was denied access to this
capitalist circuit, or remained firmly at its base as unskilled, unregulated and poorly paid coolie labour. This does not, however, allow the conclusion to be drawn that the gap between the two sectors was in principle one of economic and social dualism based on cultural differences in norms and values.

At first sight, Geertz’s standpoint also seems to be correct, as can be seen from the following statement by a senior regional official in 1892.

One of the few things that can be said to be generally true throughout the Priangan is that the people, everywhere to a greater or lesser extent have time in abundance, but nowhere have money in abundance.55

The image of persistent poverty in which the whole population was immersed as the consequence of a progressive process of social levelling is, however, incorrect. Although the relatively privileged upper social layer in the Priangan had also failed to survive the regime of forced coffee cultivation unharmed and had no opportunity to develop under their own steam, this peasant elite – thanks to its close ties with the aristocracy – could usually avoid having to perform the despised heavy cultivation and corvee services themselves. Having appropriated the largest share of the cultivated land, the households of these well-to-do owners even succeeded in strengthening their prominent position after the abolition of forced labour. By giving their prosperous lifestyle a pious disposition they increased their power and acquired a degree of dignity that made them opponents rather than allies of the colonial government.

How did the much more substantial rural underclasses fare after they were freed from servitude? The colonial policy-makers eventually succeeded in accessing the labour sealed up in composite peasant households and mobilizing it directly to perform the cultivation and corvee services required by the government. The pattern of employment changed, as the conscripted labourer made way for the footloose coolie, as those who had earlier been the victims of forced labour were now able to offer their labour freely. Freedom of movement increased but, before commenting on this, I would like to note that the land-poor and landless classes had been accustomed to moving from place to place since time immemorial. These shifting peasants were therefore suited to the demands of mobility, roaming around in search of work and shelter, for example by clearing forest

lands or sharecropping for a large landowner in an attempt to move up a rung on the agrarian ladder or, conversely, escaping forms of dependency that they experienced as too restrictive. These were the ‘vagrants’ that Van Sevenhoven considered it necessary to warn against, unreliable folk if only because of their footloose lifestyle, who were barely visible in the nebulous landscape and against whom villages had to protect themselves by denying them access. I described the presence of this proto-proletariat in the early nineteenth century in an earlier publication, rejecting the suggestion that it was not embedded in the rural order based on agriculture and the village (Breman 1987a: 47). Towards the end of the nineteenth century this underclass had freed itself of its ties of attachment. This was accompanied by an increase in size, a consequence of the growing land pressure. The inability of more and more people to meet their basic needs was caused not so much by a sharp rise in the population, although it was growing more rapidly now, as by the decision to deny the native population access to as yet ‘uncultivated’ land. The mobility of the proletariat was also encouraged by the abolition of the pass system, that had restricted the free movement of labour under the *cultuurstelsel*. Small landowners experienced a process of semi-proletarianization, because the plots they owned produced insufficient food for even a minimal level of subsistence and they had to do paid work to supplement it. The problem was that there was insufficient regular employment available that might offer this enormous pool of labour that was now available full- or part-time the prospect of a life without poverty and the opportunity to improve their living standards. Did the large-scale public works now set in motion to open up the region – the construction of roads and railways, better transport, the growth of trade and industry – not provide a large quantity of jobs and higher incomes? The people of the Priangan were indeed freed from their sole reliance on agricultural production in which they had been engaged from generation to generation, but only to remain firmly confined at the bottom of the new economic order. The benefits of this process of opening up and the new infrastructure that accompanied it were primarily enjoyed by those who had initiated it, and hardly – if at all – by the large mass who were now free to move around at will. The majority of the Sundanese people occupied the lowest echelons in the hierarchy of the widening and more diversified labour market but qualified for nothing more than low-skilled employment on a casual basis, with a meagre and irregular wage and very little chance of improving their lives. Despite the impressive expansion of economic activity in the region, the purchasing power of this proletariat hardly increased, while the existing inequality, both within native society
and between that society and its expatriate managers, remained intact. The sharp inequality was recorded in a series of detailed reports labelled as 'Diminishing Welfare Investigations' in the early twentieth century. The course taken after the mass of the people in the Sunda highlands had been released from servitude was one of dependent development, in the form of their continuing subordination to interests other than their own. It was a course referred to in late-colonial terminology as progress.