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Jan Breman (2024), "Kolonialisme, kapitalisme, dan rasisme; Kronik pascakolonial"

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Book reviews

Jan Breman, *Kolonialisme, kapitalisme, dan rasisme; Kronik pascakolonial*. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2024, 323 pp. [Translated by Susi Moeimam and Nurhayu Santoso from: *Kolonialisme en racisme; een postkoloniale kroniek*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021.] ISBN 978-623-321-279-3. Price: IDR 164,800 (paperback).



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Jan Breman's book *Kolonialisme, kapitalisme, dan rasisme; Kronik pascakolonial* should be compulsory reading in both Dutch and Indonesian high schools and universities. This is true at two levels: empirical and political.

First, the information of the practice of colonialism that are laid out in parts II and III, and also in the overview Chapter 1 either strengthen the understanding of those with some familiarity with colonial practice or introduce this exploitive and brutal practice for those unfamiliar with that history. The detail of the study of the coolies of East Sumatra would be a good introduction to anybody. At this empirical level also, the coverage of Dutch policies after the Indonesian proclamation of Independence, both in relation to the mule-headed insistence of trying to reconquer the colony as well as later policies, including the attempt at reformist analysis by Dutch politician, Jan Pronk, is very useful. Anybody who is new to thinking about colonialism in Indonesia will surely be provoked to study more once they have read this book.

Second, this book lays out a direct challenge to all ways of thinking that are still overdetermined by legacies of the front so that I cannot comment on them all. For me, perhaps one of the sharpest examples of the strength of the colonial mentality is the arrogance of analysis of Robert Elson that Breman refers to quoting from a work by Edward Aspinall (pp. 268-269). Elson (2008) in his book *The idea of Indonesia; A history* railed against all the alleged weaknesses of the early Indonesian nationalists. As Breman points out, neither Elson nor Aspinall discuss any of the limitations and burdens imposed on those leaders by the colonial reality itself. In fact, without a

thorough assessment of the way colonial rule blocked economic, scientific, educational, and cultural development, Elson's actual criticism of the early nationalists is, in my opinion, totally invalidated. The real question is not how the nationalists' ideas measure up to criteria arbitrarily asserted by a Western academic somewhere – this is actually a variant of Orientalism. The more real question is how these leaders were actually responding, from the position they each found themselves in, to the conditions they faced. In my view, one of the weaknesses in the development of political ideas in Indonesia today is that it does not draw enough upon the thinking of these early nationalists. This is not in the sense there needs to be a return to adopting these ideas holus-bolus, but to draw from them critically.

Breman also raises the political challenge of resisting the widening gap between the rich world and the poor. He talks about the “end of feeling shame” regarding this growing gap. He sees it as a manifestation of the same acceptance of the gap in his own society, The Netherlands. I don't want to comment on this question as regards The Netherlands but there is one legacy of colonialism which is not understood in Indonesia, which deeply affects how Indonesians view the question of the “Third World”, or what today is referred to as the Global South. Breman says at one point that “many studies of development don't have any historical depth” (p. 238). This is certainly true of Indonesia. In 1950, when finally the Indonesian government and society was faced with the challenge of beginning their national development they were faced with two (at least) almost insurmountable legacies. First, the country had been drained of massive wealth during colonial rule and, insanely, was immediately faced with a huge foreign debt to The Netherlands. The economic historian, Alec Gordon, has calculated this massive drain in his article published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. Second, as a consequence of what had been drained out, the colonial regime left almost no developmental inheritance of use. In the middle of the twentieth century, 1950, Indonesia had no modern manufacturing sector, no system of higher education, no scientific infrastructure and a population so immiserated, capital accumulation was impossible. Indonesia was a poor country as it is today. Its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita is very low, as is the case with all Global South countries. This is a direct consequence of colonialism and, especially since 1965, the pursuit of policies that are not set within the framework of acknowledging this legacy and the need to find a way out of the situation colonialism has left.

If Breman's book can contribute to refocussing attention on the reality of colonial legacies, then Indonesians may start to understand that the country's state of underdevelopment is a consequence of colonialism. As this is the case for all Global South countries, perhaps Indonesia may start to identify and solidarize with the Global South rather accepting as valid the ambition to enter the habitat of the neo-coloniser, such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). What such a consciousness would lead to is a perspective on national development that would be fused with one of national liberation through cooperation with the Global South – and

with those elements of societies like that of The Netherlands and Australia that want to act in solidarity with the Global South's struggles, what Breman calls "*solidaritas global*". Here I share Breman's scepticism with "projects aimed at stimulating awareness" at the local level (p. 261).

The final chapter of the book discusses the intellectual journey of the Dutch scholar Wim Wertheim. This is an essential component of this book. If it would benefit scholar-activists in Indonesia to re-study Sukarno and Syahrir, scholar-activists of Indonesia from the imperialist countries, such as Holland and Australia, need to re-study Wertheim and his friend Jan Breman. The tradition that Wertheim and Breman represent does, as Breman states, represent a break from Orientalist study of Indonesia, whether in the old, explicit colonial forms or more modern, variants that simply ignore the legacies that are smothering Indonesia.

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