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Ulbe BOSMA, *The Making of a Periphery: How Island Southeast Asia Became a Mass Exporter of Labor*

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REFERENCES

Ulbe BOSMA, *The Making of a Periphery: How Island Southeast Asia Became a Mass Exporter of Labor*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 320 p., ISBN: 978-0-23118-852-4, \$65.

- 1 Moving away from the established conventions of comparing indices and data to understand the 'reversal of fortunes', this book focuses rather on the questions of labour and the processes involved in the turbulent world of commodity production to explain the peripheralization of Island Southeast Asia. The book is interesting in the sense that instead of looking at how the 'West' moved forward, it looks at how Island Southeast Asia got stuck (to put it crudely) and became a major exporter of labour. The process, Bosma argues, did not happen overnight but took centuries—starting in the pre-colonial period with its economy oriented towards export, becoming more entrenched during the colonial period, and continuing until the post-colonial period with some events contributing to the return of the plantation-based economy. But according to Bosma the concentration of plantation oriented towards export alone does not explain the development: he argues that this was complemented by the socio-economic structures such as labour recruitment, with its associated processes such as money lending (at a high interest rate), and by the landlessness of the rapidly growing population which led to the migration of these labour forces to plantations and other areas for better opportunities.
- 2 The book does not immediately engage with the issue at hand, but slowly builds the case up over six chapters, with each succeeding chapter dealing with the various factors that contributed to the process. The first chapter describes the introduction of

vaccination and how this resulted in the rapid growth of population in Java and the outer islands. The international slave trade and the ending of slavery, taken up in the second chapter, only contributed to the increase in the labour force in the urban centres, as many landlords began to end patron-client relations and opted to recruit labourers from the open market. The impact of this increase in labour force is discussed in the following three chapters, where the rapid expansion of plantations in East and West Java and North-western Philippines, and the intrinsic connection between the growth of the plantations and the processes of labour recruitment and control, is explained in detail. Most of these labourers (seasonal included) lived in conditions of debt-bondage, among other reasons because of the abundant supply of labourers (during seasonal scarcity). The roles of the landlords, recruiters and sub-contractors are ever-present in the analysis of this process. But the reason for the long discussions of the history of plantations and their significance becomes clear as the book moves on to consider the role of the smallholders and their continued importance in the production of certain crops, and then to focus on the local handcrafts. These were mostly practised during the smallholder's free time, and continued to flourish, surviving the onslaught of cheap machine-made clothes from Japan, and thus challenging the idea of de-industrialization as the cause of the 'reversal of fortunes' put forward by scholars such as Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson. The role of the colonial state is also not without significance in creating precarity among the rural population: this is particularly the case of the colonial Dutch government's policy of importing cheap rice from Burma and Thailand, which directly disincentivised the rural workforce's engagement in rice production, forcing them to move to urban areas for better opportunities. The continued reliance of the colonial economy on the global crop export market centred around plantation, and the problem for the colonial rulers of controlling the labour force with penal sanctions while yet recognizing its contribution to the prosperity of the plantations, proved detrimental in the long run to improving the conditions of the workers.

- 3 Up to this point, Bosma discusses the socio-economic relations and the trajectories of Island Southeast Asia in the immediate aftermath of the second World War; his final chapter looks at the post-colonial period, when what many today see as the peripheralization of Island Southeast Asia took definitive shape. This is perhaps the section of the book which readers will find wanting in some sense. The brief analysis looks at the many problems the post-colonial state inherited from its colonial state—from the deep-rooted socio-economic structures of over-population and landlessness, to the continued concentration of plantations oriented towards export. This contributed to the continued mass migration of labourers and led to the practice of the sub-contractors advancing money and loans to them (at a high interest rate) encouraging the patron-client dependency, akin to debt-bondage, to re-emerge. The contribution of these factors to the Indonesian case is well presented, while the case for the Philippines is not so detailed, since Bosma himself acknowledges that the colony was placed in a better position by being under American colonial administration. The deterioration of the Philippine rural economy (one of the main factors that contributed to the rural mass migration) between the colonial and the post-colonial period, is given less detailed attention in the book. Landlessness, the incentives of better wages and the desire to improve the workers' conditions are mentioned, but the process of how they became landless (90 percent of the total land by the mid 1980s concentrated in the hands of 10 percent of the population) only gets a brief mention. He simply identifies

the prior networks, the level of education, and the outward-looking attitude of the young Filipinos and Filipinas as the incentive for migration, without explaining in detail why the need for such large-scale migration arose in the first place. The case of Malaysia receives the least attention, with the migration of 1.8 million Malaysians attributed to the lack of suitable jobs in their home country. Most of the causes discussed are internal factors, with external factors getting a brief mention for better contextualization of the local processes. But this corresponds to Bosma's view that the study of the path to peripheralization should not only be based on an overarching value or theory, but also on the local processes involved.

- 4 The book in the end achieves what it set out to do and will be interesting for scholars from the region and helpful in understanding and contextualizing their present conditions; but it will especially be interesting for scholars working on labour history, as labour and its processes are at the heart of the analysis.

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