Race, class, and gender
Debates over the character of social hierarchies in the Netherlands Indies, circa 1600–1942


Few contemporary scholars who write on aspects of Indonesian history between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries can avoid at some point engaging with the issues of race, class, and gender distinctions in pre-Independence society. This entails navigating an increasingly contested field of empirical
and historiographical studies that debate the predominance of one category over another – in particular, race versus class – in determining the character of social hierarchies in the Netherlands Indies (colonial Indonesia). This essay reviews three important works written by leading scholars that have set the parameters of that debate, as well as two recently published interventions on the topic. Its aim is to clarify points of consensus and areas of continuing disagreement, and to suggest avenues for further research that might break new paths through the field of Netherlands Indies/Indonesian studies.

The significance of the race/class debate lies not only in its pertinence to a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary scholarship on the Indies that encompasses the VOC/early-modern era (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the colonial/modern period (nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The debate also informs post-colonial discussions over the legacies of Dutch colonialism, in the Netherlands as well as in contemporary Indonesia, and thus shapes the political context in which current scholars of the Indies/Indonesia research, write and teach. It inflects discussions on the contours of post-colonial migration between the Netherlands and Indonesia; on the politics, in both countries, of remembering and forgetting colonial wars, conflicts, and atrocities; and on debates over whether the Netherlands was, in the pantheon of European colonisers, exceptional in its ‘liberalism’ or whether the Dutch were, in fact, as much influenced by conservative, racialist attitudes as the British and the French. Clarifying the parameters of the race/class debate does not of itself resolve these disputes, but it is a necessary first step in order for scholars to make consistent use of an increasingly complex and contested historiography in our research.

Race, class, and gender: Triangulating a recent debate

A suitable place to begin this review is with Jean Gelman Taylor’s *Social world of Batavia*, which has become a foundational work on the social and cultural history of the Netherlands Indies since it first appeared in 1983. A second edition has recently been published. The 2009 edition referred to here preserves Taylor’s original structure, arguments, terms, and sources in their entirety for a new generation of scholars. It is thus a testament to the endurance of Taylor’s original work, which will continue to serve as an important reference point for future studies of VOC- and colonial-era Indies society and its legacies.

The thesis advanced in Taylor’s book is that women significantly shaped the character of social hierarchies in Batavia. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elite society in the Indies capital was not dominated by the European mores of the male VOC agents who governed the colony. Rather, it was the Asian and Eurasian women whom these men partnered and had children with who shaped a hybrid, distinctively mestizo culture.
that endured until the late eighteenth century. In Taylor’s chronology, the British interregnum (1811-1816) signalled an ‘assault’ on this social order (p. 78), one that was sustained by the Dutch once they had resumed power. From the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, European norms increasingly set the tenor of elite society. A historically unprecedented influx of female migrants from the Netherlands during that period encouraged this cultural shift. It was only in the late-colonial era, then, that entry to the upper echelons of society became determined chiefly by one’s ethnicity or race.

The second edition of Social World contains two major differences from the earlier version. One is the more appropriately narrow subtitle, Europeans and Eurasians in Colonial Indonesia (rather than ‘Dutch Asia’). The other is a new chapter added to the end of the book, titled ‘New explorations of European-Asian encounters’ and comprising what is effectively an annotated bibliography of works that have appeared since Social World was first published. This chapter offers a valuable reference list that scholars and students alike should be grateful to Taylor for compiling. However, it avoids critical engagement with the historiographical shifts that other scholars have prompted in the field of ‘European-Asian encounters’. For example, Taylor mentions Stoler, as well as Bosma and Raben (pp. 188, 196), but does not reflect on how their work has refined, challenged, or confirmed her arguments in Social World. Throughout the entire chapter, Taylor makes only one explicit concession to a revision of her ideas about the mestizo nature of VOC society, namely, that she now sees evidence of VOC wives actively attempting to ‘remain Dutch and claim Dutch status’ through their dress, lifestyle and self-representations. This observation complicates Taylor’s original chronology by suggesting that, well before the late eighteenth century, foreign, European mores were salient among the customs that shaped elite Batavian society.

To date, only one work has overtly challenged some of the major tenets of Taylor’s monograph: Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben’s Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies. Taylor cites this book in her bibliographic chapter in the new edition of Social World (p. 196), but her participation in a recent ‘panel discussion’ published in Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs (RIMA) provides a clearer insight into her response to Bosma and Raben’s study. As Taylor herself observes in this review, Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies is, to some extent, ‘an

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1 Taylor takes ‘Eurasian’ to mean the descendants of mixed European and Asian unions, usually a European father and an Asian mother. In more recent studies, particularly in post-colonial discussions of this population in the Netherlands today, ‘Indo’ or ‘Indo-European’ is commonly used.
2 This shift in conception was partly inspired by Taylor’s own, more recent, research using visual sources: Taylor 2009:178.
3 This essay refers to the 2008, English-language edition of the work originally published in Dutch (Bosma and Raben 2003).
4 The panel, convened by Julian Millie at Monash University, comprised Jean Gelman Taylor, Joost Coté, Adam Clulow and Nick Herriman.
amplification and major advance’ upon as well as a ‘running commentary’ on Social World (Taylor 2009: 234). Bosma and Raben concur with Taylor, for example, that colonial society was hybrid in its composition, and their argument that class determined one’s place in the transnational colonial social order that encompassed the Netherlands and the Indies implicitly supports her view that racial segregation was not (at least, not in the VOC period) a feature of elite Indies society.

Where Taylor’s Social World concentrates on the upper classes, Bosma and Raben extend their survey to the lower strata of the Indies community and focus more attention on men at all levels of society, with significant results. The authors argue that claiming membership of the Indies elite meant cultivating a ‘Dutch’ identity, not a Eurasian one. This in turn entailed developing the financial, educational, familial and cultural resources to enter the worldly circle that moved between the Indies and the Netherlands. The authors thus dispute Taylor’s key contention that Asian and Eurasian women were the social glue that united the Indies elite. Not only did a significant number of European men not marry local women; many actively fostered ties with Europe through travel, family connections, and education, thus providing a more Eurocentric standard for social cohesion among the ruling classes than Taylor allows for (pp. 57, 60, 62, 69). Significantly, Bosma and Raben contend that this was true for the entire period in question: there was no drastic break with the past precipitated by the British occupation (p. 92). The authors therefore query the purported power of Indies women as arbiters of social distinctions based on their reproductive functions (in both the social and the biological sense). They also suggest that there was greater cultural continuity between the VOC period and the colonial era than Taylor has described.

In the RIMA review, Taylor posits that by focusing on ‘Eurasians’ in Social World she was able to examine ‘joint ancestry, not social class’, and that her genealogical research de-Europeanized the historiography of Indies society by illuminating Asian and part-Asian women’s cultural influence (Taylor 2009:234-5). In focusing on men, and on ‘creoles’ (affluent, Eurocentric, Indies-born people), Bosma and Raben adopt a viewpoint that obscures the role of women from diverse ethnic backgrounds in shaping Indies social hierarchies (Taylor 2009: 236; see also Coté 2009:243). What does it mean, then, for Bosma and Raben’s stated mission to examine Indies society ‘from the inside’ if the lives and lineages of Asian and lower-class Eurasian women cannot be reconstructed once they established families with European men, because there are no sources to give them a voice (Taylor 2009:236-7)?

Such methodological questions have been taken up, with encouraging results, by Durba Ghosh in her nuanced study of interracial unions in British India (Ghosh 2006). Ghosh’s approach might profitably inform future investigations of women in the Netherlands Indies. Scholars also need to pay
more attention to the status of men and the performance of masculinities in the Indies. Most extant studies that claim to examine how gender historically mediated class and racial identities in the Indies have focused on women (Gouda 1995; Clancy-Smith and Gouda 1998; Locher-Scholten 2000; Stoler 1995, 2002). Bosma and Raben’s work provides a timely reminder that fathers, brothers, and husbands significantly contributed to determining social ranks and identities for themselves and their families. Taylor’s conclusion that Bosma and Raben cannot, in the end, claim to have reconstructed an inside view of Indies society (Taylor 2009:237) is thus only partly true. In fact, their findings on the roles of men in shaping (elite) Indies culture offer new insights into the complex modes in which loyalties, identities and hierarchies were articulated. Further studies of how male role models may have complemented or contradicted the example of female Asian/Eurasian family members will only serve to enrich our understanding of the nexus between race, class, and gender hierarchies in the colonial as well as the post-colonial periods (Protschky 2009: 375–9).

Despite its important contributions to the field, then, Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies has not by any means settled scholarly disputes over the relative importance of race and class in colonial social hierarchies. As the RIMA reviewers of the book have pointed out, Bosma and Raben interpreted an abundance of empirical material in a near theoretical and historiographical vacuum (with the mention of Taylor’s work representing an explicit exception). The authors’ silence on the impact of Ann Laura Stoler’s work on the Indies, which has been extremely influential in international scholarship on colonial studies, is particularly notable (Coté 2009:243-5; Clulow 2009:251). Stoler’s research focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and generally concurs with Bosma and Raben on the point that class was indeed crucial for determining status in the Indies during this period. ‘European’ identities, for instance, were contingent on cultivating middle-class credentials (Stoler 1995:105-6). Indeed, what it meant to be ‘European’ in the Indies has been a key question that unites Stoler’s work (2002:12) with that of Bosma and Raben. However, Stoler’s aim of constructing a historical ethnography of the ruling European classes proceeds from the premise that tracing changes in the composition of racial identities remains the most productive focus for scholars (Stoler 1995:105-6, 113, 179-80, 182-3, 191; Stoler 2002:12, 17-8, 84).

Stoler’s most recent monograph, *Along the archival grain* (2009), provides new impetus for this contention. The central thesis of the book overturns the usual postcolonial approach of reading colonial archives against their grain in order to reconstruct discourses of power. Instead, Stoler (2002:206) develops a methodology that was presaged in some of her earlier work to argue that colonial archives ought not be approached as monuments to rationalising colonial governmentality, but as repositories of sentiment coagulating
around troubling issues: ‘discursive density’ occurs precisely at those sites where controversy reigned (p. 58). Since *Along the archival grain* has already been the subject of a recent debate between eminent scholars in this journal, I will discuss the book here only in order to triangulate the interpretive lines that it advances on race, class, and gender dynamics in Indies society with the arguments developed by Taylor and Bosma and Raben.

Both Stoler and Taylor have written extensively on the role of women in colonial society, often with complementary results but from notably different perspectives. In *Social world*, Taylor is concerned with the public status and private influence of women married to elite Dutchmen. In *Along the archival grain*, Stoler continues her project of placing the home and private life – spheres that were inhabited by Indies women (and children) – at the centre of public colonial debates on sexuality, race and morality (pp. 44-5). Taylor’s charting of the sinking status of Eurasian women throughout the nineteenth century in *The social world of Batavia* broadly coheres with Stoler’s argument that European social mores governed the tenor of elite society during this period, and that a historically unprecedented influx of European women was instrumental to this cultural shift. Important differences arise, however, with respect to the two scholars’ approach to women as subjects of historical investigation. Taylor’s method, especially in her work on the VOC period, has been to examine women as social agents. Stoler, by contrast, approaches women chiefly as sentinels of morality who attracted the scrutiny of colonial authorities when their socially and biologically reproductive powers became salient to public discussion. These divergent approaches are expressed and partly determined by the primary sources that the two scholars have used: genealogical records, commemorative and representational sources for Taylor, government archives and prescriptive literature for Stoler. Divergent narratives result: one in which women have some agency in determining their own status as individuals, as well as in shaping broader social hierarchies (Taylor), and another in which women are acted upon (by male colonial policy-makers, and by other women) as subjects who are shaped to conform to gendered/racialized expectations (Stoler).

Differing sources and conceptual approaches are equally at the heart of disputes between Stoler and her opponents on the race/class question, as the recent *BKI* debate over *Along the archival grain* demonstrated. The reviews, and Stoler’s rejoinder, succinctly outline the divisions between Dutch and

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6 Neither scholar has engaged in a direct critique of the other’s work. In *Along the archival grain*, for example, Stoler accepts Taylor’s basic contention that pre- and early-colonial Indies society was ethnically diverse (p. 172, note 64) and leaves it at that. Taylor’s brief discussion of Stoler in the revised edition of *Social world* has already been discussed.
Anglo-American scholars on the uses of postcolonial and postmodern methods in historical studies. The Netherlands-based BKI reviewers, for example, all suggested that *Along the archival grain* would have been strengthened had Stoler constrained her polemicism in favour of using more numerous and diverse primary sources, and had she read more widely outside the English-language literature on colonialism. Remco Raben defends the position that he and Ulbe Bosma developed in their work – that class can in fact be separated from race in social histories of the Indies – by arguing that Stoler routinely and inappropriately conflates class with race in her analysis. He contends that, in her reliance on official archives and neglect of egodocumentary sources, Stoler often overlooks the fact that Eurasians were present at all levels of society, not just among ‘paupers’, and that middle- and upper-class Eurasians would not have considered themselves (nor would they have been treated) equal to lower-class Eurasians simply on the basis of a shared experience of mixed ancestry (Raben 2009:558). Similarly, Henk Schulte Nordholt posits that Stoler’s archival bias toward government records in Dutch custodial institutions determines a narrative with ‘an unexpected colonial flavour’ that gives voice to narrow, official concerns at the expense of airing diverse, alternative perspectives (Schulte Nordholt 2009:562).

In her rejoinder, Stoler reiterates her key positions on the primacy of race in organizing Indies social hierarchies. She intentionally takes ‘race’ to signify a flexible, ambiguous, social (rather than biological) construct that was inflected by, and can rarely be separated from, other social categories such as class or gender. Public and private tensions over the policing of racial categories emerged at key moments throughout the colonial period precisely because race was an inherently unstable category in Indies culture. Race was thus the over-arching framework through which colonial authorities viewed social tensions and hierarchies (Stoler 2009:565-6). In *Along the archival grain*, these arguments are most clearly developed in Chapters 4 and 5, where Stoler examines the musings of colonial authorities on suitable career paths for Indies-born Europeans and investigates official inquiries into Indo-European pauperism on Java.

Significantly, Bosma and Raben’s own treatment of ‘the (European) underclass’ in Chapter 7 of *Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies* produces observations that are often in harmony with Stoler’s views. In the nineteenth century, the authors write, ‘[f]eelings arising out of racial prejudice would often be expressed in moral terms, cloaked in arguments of public decency and educational

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7 Gouda 2009:553, 555; Raben 2009:559; Schulte Nordholt 2009:561-2. Stoler did little to deflect the criticisms of the BKI reviewers that she had not paid sufficient regard to Dutch-language studies on the Indies when she claimed (in her only direct response to this charge) that Bosma and Raben’s *Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies* was not available when she submitted the manuscript for *Along the archival grain* in 2007 (Stoler 2009:563). In fact, the Dutch-language edition had been available since 2003.
Review essays

standards’ (p. 222). On government concerns about Indo-European orphans, Bosma and Raben conclude that ‘these children incited in the colonial government deep feelings of responsibility for the fate of the Dutch race’ (p. 240). For the governing classes looking down upon poor Indo-Europeans, it seems, race was a compelling framework for explaining social differences.

The convergence between Bosma and Raben and Stoler on this point suggests that doctrinaire insistence on the steady prominence of race over class, or class over race, may be futile, perhaps even ahistorical, when discussing long periods (like ‘the nineteenth century’), or dissimilar issues (elite debates on what to do about Indo-European pauperism, versus marriage and migration customs within the governing classes). The nuances of the race/class debate clearly turn on the primary sources that historians consult, the analytical perspectives that these materials enable (and disable), and the meanings attributed to terms of reference (‘Eurasian’, ‘Indisch’, ‘creole’, ‘mestizo/mestiza’, ‘Indo-European’, and ‘European’). These distinctions are not just academic. The works of Taylor, Bosma and Raben, and Stoler collectively demonstrate that such terms glossed (and often obscured) a range of contested categories and identity positions whose component parts became salient only in certain social and historical contexts. The relative explanatory power of race and class as social constructs and categories in the Indies thus should be expected to shift according to context and perspective, rather than being uniformly sought, or absent-mindedly applied, by scholars seeking to situate empirical studies within historiographical debates.

Two recent interventions: Jones (2010) and Bosma (2010)

Eric Jones’s *Wives, slaves, and concubines* (2010) examines the female under-class of the ethnically heterogeneous society that developed in Batavia during the eighteenth century. Jones builds upon existing studies, including Taylor’s *Social world of Batavia*, to demonstrate that women’s lives provide fruitful insights into Indies social hierarchies during this period. Since the VOC operated on the geographic, social, economic, and political fringes of Asia, inter-marriage between its Dutch servants and local, Asian women was necessary in order to sustain the company’s activities (pp. 12-3). Further, because the VOC’s aim was to protect Dutch interests against other European rivals trading in the region, especially the British, its laws distinguished between company and non-company people rather than between Europeans and Asians. The Asian wives of VOC employees were thus dealt with under company law.

Before the arrival of Dutch traders in the late sixteenth century, Jones argues, Asian women in the Indies had moved in and out of slavery, concubinage, and marriage according to their circumstances and opportunities.
During the eighteenth century, however, formerly unequal yet fluid relations between women became progressively fixed through expanding Dutch interventions in local society. Using documents from the local Court of Aldermen (Schepenbank), Jones reveals how different classes of Batavian women – those with citizen (burger) status, tenuously-positioned concubines, and their household slaves – conflicted in a venue that arbitrated disputes over charges of physical abuse and abscondence. Jones’s book thus provides fresh insights into early-modern Indies society by looking beyond the (Indo-)European elite to consider the poor and unfree Asian women who have thus far received limited scholarly attention.

A more detailed review examining the case studies presented in Jones’s book is in press (Protschky 2012). For the present purpose, Wives, slaves, and concubines provides a good example of how a partisan approach to the race/class debate in Indies historiography can compromise the persuasiveness of a historical study. Jones signals his sympathy for historical materialism early on in his book (p. 15), and argues that it was chiefly class distinctions that determined social differences in the eighteenth century. ‘[E]conomic pragmatism’, he contends, ‘often took precedence over matters of race in the mixed ethnic societies of the early modern world’ (p. 5). Jones explicitly seeks to challenge the work of scholars like Stoler, whom he argues have represented Dutch colonialism primarily as a ‘cultural enterprise’ without acknowledging ‘the profound impact of certain structural factors on cultural forms’ (p. 14). To this end, Jones cites Stoler’s later and more widely known studies (Stoler 1995, 2002), which utilize Foucauldian and postcolonial explanatory frameworks, rather than her early work (Stoler 1985), which was in fact quite attentive to materialist paradigms. In any case, his critique of Stoler is somewhat misdirected, since her work focuses on the colonial period, and she makes no claims about the nature of VOC society. Nor does Wives, slaves, and concubines include empirical case studies from Stoler’s specialty area, the colonial period. It is odd, therefore, that Jones implicitly relies on Stoler’s work to assert that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Batavian society was segregated primarily along racial lines (p. 14). By contrast, Jones contends, prior to the late eighteenth century, ‘early modern Dutch Asia looked very much like the place the post-World War II Netherlands imagined itself to be: a cosmopolitan island of racially tolerant prosperity’ (p. 77). At the end of the VOC era, ‘we smell the demise of a colonial order with a law code that treated Europeans and Asians alike, a society that embraced racial mixing’ (p. 8).

Some of the political tenor of the race/class debate becomes evident in observations such as these, which judge the moral bases of Dutch colonialism as much as they describe the structural transformations that punctuate its historical trajectory. In claiming VOC society to have been more classist (and, rather confusingly, equitable) than its colonial successors, Jones employs
irreconcilable strategies. On the one hand, he emphasizes the singularity of the VOC period (and his own contribution to elucidating that uniqueness) in order to critique Stoler’s depiction of Indies society (leaving aside the fact that she has little to say on the VOC era). On the other hand, he implicitly relies on Stoler’s characterizations of the colonial era to highlight the contrast between the VOC period and subsequent centuries. At the same time, he entirely overlooks key works, such as Bosma and Raben’s *Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies*, that are more sensitive to continuities across the VOC and colonial eras, particularly when it comes to tracing salient class divisions in Indies society.

Jones has undoubtedly produced a worthwhile empirical study of Asian women’s experiences of social (im)mobility in the eighteenth century. The historiographical analysis in *Wives, slaves, and concubines* is weakened, however, by Jones’s selective engagement with key strains in the race/class debate among leading Indies scholars. In particular, the radical break with past socio-legal practices that Jones proposes to have occurred in the late eighteenth century becomes less plausible once we question his assumption that VOC society was in fact as blind to racial distinctions as he suggests (and, conversely, colonial society was relatively insensitive to class divisions).

Ulbe Bosma’s *Indiëgangers* (2010) provides renewed impetus for the argument that, certainly among the colonial elite, racial differences remained subordinate to class solidarity for much of the period that Europeans governed the Indies. Bosma’s emphasis, as the subtitle of his book explains, is on ‘stories about Netherlanders who went to the Indies’ (or ‘Indies-goers’). Bosma argues that it was not until the 1920s that racial distinctions became the defining feature of Indies social hierarchies (pp. 214-5, 233). *Indiëgangers* thus extends the thesis that Bosma developed in partnership with Raben in *Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies*, namely, that Indies society was not racist in its apportionment of status and opportunity; rather, wealth, education, profession, and social connections (class) determined one’s position in the social hierarchy (pp. 13, 107). Arguably, of course, many of these ‘class’ indicators could also be inflected by racial status. In the Indies one was deemed an ‘Indo’ rather than a ‘European’, Bosma claims, because of one’s low social status, not because of one’s race (p. 13). But does it equally hold that one was of low social status simply because one was deemed ‘Indo’? The circularity of Bosma’s contention seriously limits its persuasiveness, certainly in the absence of a more sustained, theoretical discussion of what ‘class’ indexed in the Indies – something that Stoler has done much more thoroughly for complex terms like ‘race’ in her work.

Bosma’s interpretation of large data sets is one of the strengths of *Indiëgangers*. His comparisons between Dutch migration to the Indies and the United States throughout the nineteenth century are especially illuminating. Class background and aspirations largely determined the choices that emigrants made. The United States mostly attracted rural families (pp. 260,
By contrast, Indies-goers were primarily city men from middle-class backgrounds who, for much of the nineteenth century, tended to work in the army or navy (pp. 30–34). Not until the early twentieth century did the Indies attract significant numbers of civilians and families (pp. 15-6, 208). The overwhelmingly male, military origins of European colonial society in the Indies is an important contribution of Bosma’s study, one that suggests that ‘the east’ was perceived by nineteenth-century urban Dutchmen as a venue for pursuing social mobility and career opportunities that were not available to them in the Netherlands (pp. 259, 262). Bosma’s demographic portrait of colonial Indies society once again reinforces the need for further research on men and masculinities, alongside women’s studies, to enrich our understanding of how gender interacted with other social categories to create, maintain, and challenge the Indies social order.

In other regards, Bosma’s book refines the arguments made in Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies on the importance of class differences in colonial society. He posits that, in the nineteenth century, as travel between Europe and the Indies became ‘democratized’ through technological advances, distinctions between white and brown among (Indo-)Europeans were superseded by differences between trekker (travellers) and blijver (stayers) (p. 188). In the early twentieth century, growing numbers of educated, globe-trotting Indonesians complicated this hierarchy. Indonesian elites took advantage of the same ‘colonial migration circuit’ as their European counterparts at precisely the time when racism and nationalism were strengthening in the Indies. For this group, then, joining the circles of the colonial elite heightened their experiences of social difference (p. 194). Bosma’s notion of ‘democratized’ travel is thus problematic: it conflates faster, cheaper voyagers (economic and technological advances) with egalitarian experiences (social levelling), when in fact Indonesians and European ‘stayers’ alike encountered new limits to their social mobility as a result of increased migration in the late-colonial era. It seems appropriate at this juncture to echo Joost Coté’s observation in the RIMA review of Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies, that the Indies elite may well have been ethnically heterogeneous for much of the VOC and colonial periods, and class allegiances among members of that elite may have inhibited racist treatment of one another. It does not follow, however, that there was no racism in colonial policy and attitudes towards Indonesians (Coté 2009:245) in colonial society.

The social effects of the intensifying colonial migration circuit between Europe and the Indies that Bosma describes also complicates his argument that class, rather than race, determined one’s status in the colony. He points out that migration facilitated the formation of an Indies elite with a transnational identity, and a community of people who were reluctant to give up their Dutch passports precisely because of the advantages that accrued to such a license (p. 264). But if a Eurocentric orientation was part of a middle-
or upper-class worldview, then surely racial distinctions are inseparable from class identities after all?

Race is also the proverbial elephant in the room in Bosma’s investigation of a much-neglected question in Indies social history, namely, why European migration to the Indies never resulted in the establishment of a settler colony. Bosma argues that the twin aims of the Indies government throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – to consolidate their military control of the Indies, and to uphold European prestige in the colony – favoured the maintenance of an ‘exploitation’ colony. Had Europeans become a class of manual labourers, as they did in rural southern Africa, the character of Indies colonization would have been entirely different, for in settler colonies, Bosma argues, upholding whiteness entailed ‘controlling propagation’ (p. 108). Instead, it was the segregated labour market, maintained by the colonial migration circuit, that supported white prestige in the Indies. Unskilled jobs were performed by non-white and often unfree workers, while a continuous injection of European migrants and their descendants serviced the skilled professions (pp. 149, 170). Social hierarchies in the Indies, Bosma concludes, confirmed Darwinist theories about Asia’s suitability for exploitation colonies (p. 149).

Bosma’s discussion arguably results in a description of what eventuated in the Indies rather than an explanation of why it was so. Nevertheless, he raises some intriguing points for future researchers to probe more systematically – not the least of which is the salience of race and racial thinking that implicitly (and explicitly, in his reference to Darwinist thought) permeates his analysis, and that stands somewhat apart from his broader conclusions about the significance of class in determining Indies social hierarchies.

And so, it seems, we finish where we began. From reading Taylor, Stoler, Bosma and Raben’s work together it appears that – certainly for the colonial period – race and class were frequently co-dependent (sometimes even interchangeable) markers of social difference in the Indies, even if the authors cannot overtly agree on this point. Gender clearly inflected both categories in distinct ways that are yet to be more deeply investigated for men, and that will no doubt prompt revisions of the historiography on women’s roles in Indies society. More work also needs to be done to resolve the question of whether modes of social mobility in the VOC and colonial periods were in fact substantially different, as Taylor and Jones have suggested, or whether there were significant continuities across these two periods, as Bosma and Raben have argued. Some progress toward this end might be made by nuanced social and cultural histories of early-modern notions of ‘race’ as well ‘class’ in the Indies so that we can begin to make more informed comparisons to the modern era, in which these terms developed rather different connotations, as Stoler’s work confirms. The long view that the works of Taylor and Bosma and Raben have furnished needs to be augmented by studies that
delve strategically into shorter interludes within the Dutch period. Such studies could examine when, under what circumstances, why and for whom gender, class, and/or race became salient markers of social distinction, perhaps using a greater range of egodocumentary sources to give voice to those groups who have thus far received limited attention. Tracing changes over time and context, as well as contests within and between Indies social groups over collective and individual identities, will complicate but also enrich our understanding of Indies histories.

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