
The author of this book, Jan Breman, is a prominent Dutch sociologist and historian who has published a number of important and widely read works about colonial history, labor migration, poverty, and related socioeconomic issues in the Global South. The present book is an in-depth historical explanation of the connection between today’s problems of inequality and racism with Western (European) colonialism and imperialism in the past, with an emphasis on the Dutch expansion overseas.

In this book, Breman strongly criticizes Western imperialism, colonialism, and their various “postcolonial forms” that he views as exploitative, violent, and racist. Instead of contributing to the welfare and “civilizing” the local populations, as any colonial government used to claim, colonialism drained the existing resources of colonized lands—both the natural and the human resources—and denigrated the indigenous communities as inferior peoples. How could such a stance be adopted by Western countries supposedly enlightened by the ideas of democracy? Breman explains that the underlying problem lies in the capitalist ideology of free market forces, which has become the breeding ground of social exclusion and social Darwinist ideologies. Racism on which the colonial relationship was based was strongly reminiscent of the discriminatory attitudes that the elite in the motherland had adopted against their own working class (p. 185).

To elaborate his arguments, Breman highlights the ideas and practices of labor exploitation and racism in a “postcolonial chronicle,” written through fourteen essays covering the period between the 1800s and the 2000s. He traces the origins of his perspective about inequality and social injustice to his upbringing as part of the Dutch working class. He highlights a correlation between social science disciplines and their practitioners’ backgrounds, spe-
cifically in terms of “origin” and “class,” through which many of their points of view have been shaped. “The professional knowledge in which they are trained,” according to Breman, “is an addition to a view of the social system and its dynamics that they had previously acquired” (p. 29). He then explores the political thoughts of Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the prominent European thinkers about democracy. In Breman’s analysis, Tocqueville’s ideas of social exclusion, social Darwinism, and capitalism created a lasting impact on Western society. One main problem of Tocqueville’s notion of a common identity in a nation-state is “the exclusion of people other than their own blood and soil,” which has given rise to a “global identity politics of racialized segregation” (p. 68). In the colonial period, such ideas were translated into the policy of exploiting the “inferior” people’s resources and a legacy of white supremacy among different races.

Breman then analyzes the colonial regimes of terror in colonial Indonesia and Congo in the twentieth century. According to Breman, the civilizing mission (la mission civilisatrice) of Western colonial expansion—under the name of “ethical policy” and the like—was little more than failed political rationale. For the indigenous populations during the colonial period, the course of modernity and enlightenment was also “disputable” (p. 340). According to Breman, the colonial government sided with private businesses to exploit the laborers and natural resources of the colony. He opposes the view which regards misdeeds in the colonial territory as mere “excesses”. Rather, he invites the reader to contextualize the wider setting of the colonial regime. Doing so leads to a better understanding of “racism in the labor system” and the “colonial spirit” in the twentieth century, which opposes any criticism of colonial rule (p. 33).

Breman also convincingly explains how the colonial government and society—including the colonial press agencies—silenced criticism from both the indigenous people and the Europeans who dared to speak the truth in public. Such names as J. van der Brand for the Deli scandal and Roger Casement for the Congo scandal were dismissed as advocates for the wrong things (advocaat van kwade zaken). In the perception of colonial society at that time, they tainted the glory of colonialism. Ironically, in the case of Dutch society, the glorification of the colonial past has only been significantly challenged recently, with the increasing number of new research projects on this topic.

In the wake of the Pacific War, Breman views the Dutch attempt to reoccupy its former colony as detrimental to the newly founded Indonesian Republic, which was already substantially damaged by Dutch colonialism and the Japanese Occupation. He calls attention to the Dutch government’s attempt to use divide and rule (verdeel en heers) tactics to weaken the country under a federal system, known as the Republik Indonesia Serikat (Republic of the United States
of Indonesia), which further increased Indonesian separatism during the 1950s (p. 382). Under a period of economic progress immediately following the Pacific War—known as the Glorious Thirties (Trente Glorieuses)—France, the Netherlands, and other developed countries had the chance to help their former colonies in Asia and Africa. Conversely, Western elites used the development aid scheme to subjugate the rest of the world, then on the path to dependency. Breman warns us that this is precisely the image of a failed postcolonial world: a continuation of the capitalistic-colonial past, fueled by exploitation and racism, taking place everywhere, including within developed countries.

Yet despite its astuteness in defining the problems of the postcolonial world, the book’s prescriptions to resolve them are less well-defined. Breman notes that the crisis of capitalism is due to the unwillingness of the economic elites to expand the market, specifically by increasing both the production and purchasing power of poor people in the global economy (p. 369). He makes an appeal for the world’s rich to help its poor by no longer excluding them, as doing so is a condition of inequality (p. 371). Breman shows that these socioeconomic problems are made by humans through a conscious policy (p. 261). Therefore, humans can also change this policy into a path to equality and social justice.

Along similar lines, the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer states in his novel: if suffering is man-made, and not some natural disaster, then it can surely be resisted by men (Toer 1991: 183).

Breman raises several critical issues in this book, such as discussions on objectivity and moral judgment to understand the past. He invites the readers of this book to follow his past academic debates on colonial history with distinguished scholars, while making clear that his own stance is anti-colonial. In general, Breman’s explanations in this book are compelling. However, his overarching proposition on the nature of colonial government and the plantation regime invites further questions. Were some variants of the plantation regime more humane to laborers, and if so, to what extent? Nicole Lamb’s publication in this journal describes labor conditions that might contradict Breman’s generic view of colonial labor. Using recollections from former plantation workers in the Kayu Aro Plantation, west-central Sumatra, the author argues that security and stability are remembered as the “most important features of plantation life” in the early twentieth century (Lamb 2014: 554).

Overall, this book has fulfilled its promise to deliver a better understanding of the present socioeconomic conditions of global inequality and racism and their close connections with the colonial past. The book’s broad geographical scope commendably unveils the imaginary border between the colony and the motherland—the rich and the poor countries—and leaves us with the impression that humanity and oppression coexist in every part of the world. Besides
providing verbal explanations, the book also uses various relevant illustrations. To reach a wider audience, an English translation of this important book would undoubtedly be welcome.

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References