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“A Strange Industrial Order:” Indonesia’s Racialized Plantation Ecologies and Anticolonial Estate Worker Rebellions

Lisa Tilley

Abstract

The plantation continues to expand across contemporary frontiers, remaking social orders and ravaging ecologies in the service of value extraction through commodity production. This article revisits the ‘strange industrial order’ of the plantation in 1950s Indonesia at a time of deep contestation in which estate workers were organizing to reinvigorate the unfulfilled goals of anticolonial struggles. Reading this moment through the anxieties of European planters in the British archive, I argue that these struggles deeply disturbed the localized racial labor order of the plantation, while also working against the extractive tributaries of the international order. Further, the article suggests that keeping alive a historical consciousness around how industrial racial regimes are produced, disturbed, and fractured is vital to countering the harms of our plantation present.

Keywords: Plantations; Ecology; Indonesia; Labor Rebellions; Anticolonial Struggle

The plantation is still with us. As George Beckford (4) said of plantation economies back in the 1970s: “Winds of change were said to have swept through the Third World [but] though the winds may have swept, they have not swept clean.”¹ The plantation is now a thoroughly normalized landscape form which was once considered ‘strange’ in terms of its mode of social and agricultural organization. The plantation’s strangeness owes to its rationalized order, its technologized form, the way it materializes mastery over nature, and, ultimately, the way it destroys ecologies in the name of ‘improvement’. More than this, the plantation has long demanded the remaking of social orders, the forced movement of populations of bonded, enslaved, or otherwise exploited laborers, the making of racial labor hierarchies, white planter subjectivities, and, as a correlate to these, the making of race itself.²

In the early years of decolonization from Dutch colonial rule, European plantation ownership remained extensive in the new Indonesian Republic. In this context, the British sought to maintain their claims over plantation estates and commodity extraction against local demands for meaningful redistribution. In this article I engage with organized Indonesian worker rebellions against these British planters in the 1950s and argue that their struggles deeply upset the localized racial labor order of the plantation, while also working against the extractive tributaries of the international order. This was a moment of deep contestation in which anticolonial struggle interacted with the attempted renewal of forms of European economic imperialism through plantation extraction. Reading this moment through British anxieties over worker struggles is a means of revealing an imperial formation ‘off-center’ at its points of fragility and incoherence.³

I begin with an overview of the strange yet normalized industrial order of the plantation, with a focus on its relation to colonization in the Indonesian context. I then illustrate the plantation, as a racially stratified order, with granular evidence on the ‘planting’ of whiteness⁴ in the top layer of the labor regime. The next section charts the beginning and the tragic ending of the plantation workers’ struggles, before the analysis focuses more closely on what estate laborers achieved, read through the archived anxiety of British agents. A final section covers how the discursive reduction by the British of plantation workers’ struggles to externally authored communist threat functioned as a disavowal of both laborers’ own historical agency and of their astute critique of global structures of extraction and the local racialized labor order of the plantation.

Plantations have been instrumental to colonization, and therefore to the formation of empire, in manifold ways. The very concept of the plantation as a radical form of technologized agriculture

was employed by colonial regimes and societies to justify the subjugation of those racialized as inferior – and thus not suitably competent with technology – in the colonies. Consider for example, Waibel’s (156) published academic account in which he stresses that “a plantation is not only an agricultural undertaking; it is also an industrial enterprise.”⁵ In the Dutch-colonized territories known as the Netherlands East Indies, the Indigenous population were credited with agricultural skills but excluded from any recognition of industrial capacity (Waibel 156):

[T]he natives of the Netherlands East Indies produce only a scant one per cent. of the exported sugar, although they grow sugar cane for their own needs. They use, however, either the fresh sap of the cane or make a brown, syrup-like mass which can not be transported but must be consumed on the spot. The natives are not capable of producing solid brown or white sugar, for to do this they would need, besides the sugar-cane, capital for constructing costly special sugar mills and they would have to have highly scientific and technical knowledge to operate them. The plantation system, therefore, is found only in the tropics because it is there that crops are grown that require not only much unskilled labor but also highly technical knowledge and last investments in processing plants and equipment to prepare the products for shipment to distant markets. The result is that the natives must fit into a strange industrial order.⁶

From this perspective the *strange industrial order* of the plantation is not simply a means of production which coincided with colonization and the formation of empire, but instead a means of organizing land and society which was mobilized to justify domination over what would become plantation economies. The understanding that plantation production needed Western capital, the techno-industrial expertise that non-whites were excluded from, as well as vast reserves of variously enslaved, bonded, or cheap labor, meant that European plantation interests required colonization to secure all of these aspects at once. Empire itself was therefore partly justified in the minds of Europeans by the need for a combination of European experts, non-white and subjugated forms of labor, and land in ‘off-center’ tropical regions in order for plantation forms of accumulation to be realized.

The expansion of plantation frontiers has also been a key motor of colonization in the sense that it required the initial accumulation of land by means of Indigenous expropriation. This frontier expansion partially corresponds to the primitive accumulation delineated by Marx as a dual process of land and labor expropriation.⁷ However, the literature on plantation economies has long documented degrees of subversion on the part of enslaved and subjugated laborers enacted through practices ranging from marronage to covert cultivation on plantation surrounds to estate theft.⁸ These histories remind us that the plantation has been less a site of straightforward proletarianization and more a site of hybridized modes of production, struggles over ways of being, and of deeply contested relations with colonial and postcolonial forms of power. In the Dutch East Indies context, forced removal of communities for the sake of plantation expansion also meant that Indigenous populations were illegalized on their own lands by colonial regimes and subject to arrest as ‘poachers’ or ‘squatters’ – in this sense the expropriation of land for industrial planting often meant the production of destitution and criminalization among native peoples (Li 39).⁹

As an industrial landscape form requiring an abundant labor supply, plantations have also provided reason for colonial planners to move populations regionally or globally and reorganize social structures according to their visions of racialized labor hierarchies. Significant numbers of Dutch, for instance, began to settle as *Perkeniers* or planters from the early 17th century, forging new white settler subjectivities defined by their dominant position at the apex of plantation hierarchies. Lower down on the constructed racial hierarchies of plantations, workers themselves were transferred geographically through various means including enticement, coercion, and simple deceit. In the development of plantation estates on Sumatra, for example, bonded Chinese and Javanese “contract

coolies” were transferred in the hundreds of thousands (Stoler, *Plantation* 126).¹⁰ Furthermore, the reverse side of mass transfers of people is that later processes of estate retrenchment during plantation restructuring left many thousands of discarded and unemployed former laborers around plantation estates, as in the case of Sumatra in the 1920s (Stoler, *Plantation* 134).¹¹

In the present day, we are now deeply aware of what the colonial transformation of land into the technologized agriculture of plantation estates set in motion. In contemporary Indonesia, plantation frontiers continue to expand transforming social organization and ecologies, destroying biotic life and biodiversity, and causing extensive carbon emissions through the burning and clearing of land (cf. Andrianto et al.).¹² Palm oil plantations, for instance, require the initial destruction of forested areas, which is often achieved through burning. By 2014, 51 per cent of global palm oil was being cultivated in Indonesia, which helps to make the country the biggest producer of ‘land use, land-use change, and forestry’ (LULUCF) carbon emissions in the world (cf. Alisjahbana et al.).¹³ In short, Indonesia’s establishment as a plantation economy in the colonial era set the country on a path towards continued extractive dependency in the world economy through plantation production, a condition which is productive of ecological collapse.

Ultimately then, the plantation should be understood as a social, spatial, and economic arrangement which is fraught with contradictions. The plantation was originally declared by colonial planners to bring technological mastery over nature – of the kind that could only be managed by ‘superior’ Europeans – and yet plantation agriculture is contributing greatly to the rapid collapse of nature. Further, colonizers planned plantations around the rationalization of society into carefully ordered racial hierarchies. However, estates turned out to be productive of new spatially underpinned,

hybrid peasant/worker subjectivities, which in turn were prone to resistance and rebellions. The section to follow deepens our understanding of the racial order of the plantation by considering the construction of European superiority in relation to an ideology of ‘improvement’ and through the ‘planting’ of whiteness in estate orders.

Improvement and the planting of whiteness

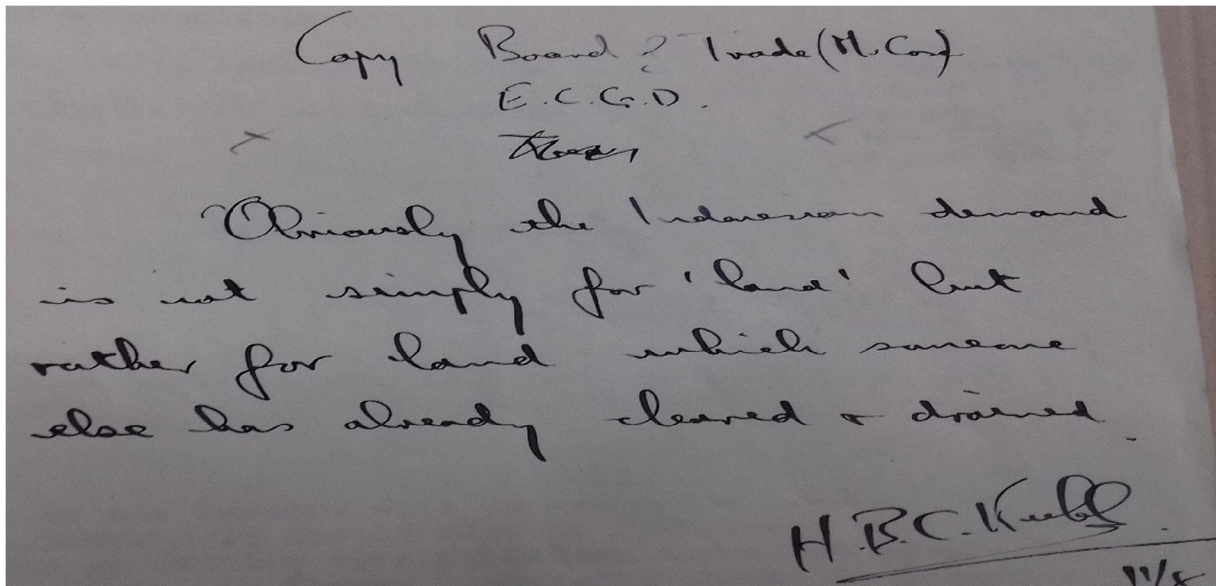


Figure 1. “Obviously the Indonesian demand is not simply for ‘land’ but rather for land which someone else has already cleared and drained” (Foreign Office note, 1950.)

The Japanese occupation of the Indies during the Second World War from 1942-1945 had brought fresh horrors for the local population, including forced labor and famine. At the same time, some of the land which had been expropriated under Dutch colonialism was redistributed to members of the remaining population for crop cultivation, with the Japanese occupiers appropriating part of the

produce. In North Sumatra, for example, over one third of plantation estate land was redistributed to local peasants under the Japanese administration. After the war and the proclamation of the Indonesian Republic came Dutch reoccupation and re-appropriation of estates from 1946 (Stoler, *Plantation* 136; Stoler, *Capitalism* 95).¹⁴ However, in this time of flux and struggle, plantation communities were strongly against conceding land and power to the Dutch once again.

By 1950, the Indonesian news agency Antara reported that around 30 per cent of East Sumatra’s land was leased to European companies for foreign plantations. Yet, only around 5 per cent of the land leased for tobacco plantations and 60 per cent of the land leased for rubber and palm was actively cultivated at any one time. Further, only 9 per cent of the land was reported to be held by Indigenous communities in East Sumatra, leaving them very much marginalized on their own terrain. To gain an idea of the extent of British interests in the area, Antara also reported that close to 38 per cent of the capital invested in East Sumatra rubber, palm, and tobacco plantation estates was British at the start of the 1950s.¹⁵

Considering the intense contestations over the status of agricultural land at that time, British government documents on the state of post-war plantation interests reveal a surprising degree of optimism with regard to the long-term commercial future of those ventures. British agents expected that Indonesian independence would actually bring benefits for their plantation interests by providing a route to overcoming the favored treatment enjoyed by Dutch planters under Dutch colonialism which was perceived to disadvantage British estates.¹⁶ A deeper reading of British statements, as advanced below, reveals that this confidence is largely assured by the racial hierarchy of the plantation economy itself. More specifically, it was assured by the association between whiteness and expertise,

and by the British expectation that the Indonesians had sufficiently internalized the need for European management on plantations to the extent that the natives themselves believed that expulsions of white planters would mean the death of the industry.

In response to Antara’s reports on the injustice of the ongoing concentration of land in European hands in East Sumatra and the continued marginalization and impoverishment of the Indigenous population, J. B. Roberts of the British Consulate in Medan defended this as a matter of the lack of capacity for improvement on the part of the Indonesians themselves. On 24th July 1950 he wrote:

[T]here are still vast tracts of very rich land in the coastal areas, which are completely flooded owing to the silting up of the rivers. Of course, some one must clean those out, but it may be some time before this occurs to the Indonesians [...] Again, when dealing with any decision of land tenure, it should not be forgotten, that the average coolie’s ideas regarding land-conservation are still quite primitive and wasteful in the extreme. On taking over a piece of land, he will produce one crop of rice and maize each year for three years, and then abandon it entirely for new ground.¹⁷

In this and related correspondence by the British, the ‘lazy native’ trope originally identified by Syed Hussein Alatas is reinforced in relation to ideologies of European supremacy.¹⁸ Here it is important to note how narratives centered on the figures of the European ‘expert’ and the ‘primitive and wasteful’ native articulate (and are reinforced through) the notion of ‘improvement’. As Bhandar demonstrates, the ideology of improvement, notably rooted in the work of John Locke and William Petty, has been a central rationale for expropriation through European colonial projects. Land which is judged to be in need of ‘improvement’ through superior modes of cultivation is often inhabited by communities which are themselves judged to require improvement in association. Petty’s thought in particular enacted the “fusing together of the value of land and people” in Bhandar’s (39) terms, such that who could or could not be the meaningful agent of ‘improvement’ remained a racialized

question.¹⁹ Indonesians, in these 1950s British accounts, are understood as too idle and unskilled to drain the land and therefore must wait for Europeans to enact improvement before attempting to re-appropriate land.

Recall too that most of the land leased by Europeans for tobacco cultivation lay idle at any one time, yet Roberts cites Indigenous shifting cultivation as evidence of a lack of advanced agricultural capacity, without attending to how such practices meaningfully differ from the production of idle land by Europeans. Roberts goes on to argue that whether companies should cede parts of their lands or not “is a question which should be resolved on a high government level, and not decided by the arbitrary action of trades union leaders or irresponsible gangs of coolies.” In this case, he questions who the agent of land distribution should be and laments the direct action which is gathering pace by this time on Sumatra plantations in the form of occupations, plantation raids, and wage disputes.²⁰

After occupations by organized labor in Aceh gathered pace, invitations were extended to British planters to apply for replacement lands.²¹ This proposal was met with deep cynicism by European planters in the area according to British Consulate reports:

the consensus of opinion among all owners of estates in Atjeh – including the British, – is that the invitation to re-occupy their properties is nothing but a ruse to obtain ready European technical skill to rehabilitate estates, without any guarantees being given for future tenure. In other words, to rehabilitate not only the estates themselves, but also communications, bridges, etc., for the future benefit of the Achinese and Bataks. Once again, the dichotomy is made here between European technological competence and Indigenous idleness, lack of skill, and thus lack of capacity for immanent progress. British concerns continued to center on the question of how to rehabilitate estates to ensure their productivity for the purposes of value extraction but without facilitating technological transfer which would work in favor of “the

future benefit of the Achinese and Bataks.”²² In November of 1950, a Mr Matthewson of the firm Harrisons & Crosfield wrote of plantation rebellions: “they will kill their goose long before Indonesian skill, standards, and savings could be equal to the task [of running plantation estates].”²³

As time wore on, strikes, estate seizures, illicit rubber tapping, and ongoing plantation raids caused European plantation managers to experience a range of personal reactions, from anxiety to full-blown breakdowns. However, estate managers would only leave their posts as a last resort given the lack of alternative employment available to them at the same level of esteem. In a Memorandum written in May of 1950, a Java visiting agent for the British Foreign Office articulated the predicament facing European planters: “A planter, once he ceases to become a planter, is a man with very little scope as a rule.” The level of prestige and managerial rank attained in the estates of the Indies counted for very little in Europe. “How else can one explain that men have carried on in spite of the vicissitudes of insecurity, discomfort, family separation etc?” They may have been at the apex of localized racial hierarchies within a strictly tiered plantation labor regime, but outside of the colonies they lost all social standing. In the understanding of the British Foreign Office at the time, planters would persist in their posts knowing they had little alternative and despite their expectation that the Indonesian anticolonial struggle could soon bring about the re-appropriation of planted lands under the control of European companies. As the Foreign Office agent noted: “they are convinced that sooner or later either on account of extreme nationalism combined with or followed by communism the European planter will in due course find his position quite untenable.”

Correspondence from July of 1950 also reveals the fault lines along which negotiations were fractured between European rubber planters, organizing through AVROS, the Rubber Planters’

Association, and estate workers. In the British understanding, their interlocutors in the tier of administrative staff were “mostly Batak refugees” who had aligned with union organizers among the labor force but also were understood to have influence upon the Achinese Government of the time.²⁴ The degree to which this tier of mainly Batak “inspectors, mandar, and clerks” would align with different interests was also understood to hinge on the benefits they received under government schemes. For example, the British believed that the ‘native inducement scheme’ which at one point allocated 70 per cent of plantations to Indigenous administrators, but was later cut to 10 and 12 per cent, had previously marked a transition to “a much more amenable frame of mind” with respect to British interests.

Overall then, the upper tier of the plantation order was claimed and guarded by white Europeans, who justified their position through racialized understandings of the need for ‘improvement’ and of who could be the proper agent of such processes. By carefully maintaining their position and guarding against the transfer of technology and resources to non-whites, Europeans reinforced the production (or planting) of whiteness and sharpened their racial distinction from the ‘primitive & wasteful’ natives. The Batak administrators who comprised a lower tier in the racial labor order were understood to shift their alliance according to the benefits offered by Europeans. The British thought they could be made ‘amenable’ through inducement schemes, but at the start of the 1950s they were more closely aligned with organized laborers whose movement was consolidating across the archipelago. The remaining sections provide an overview of the beginning and the tragic end of this movement of organized labor in the 1950s and 1960s, before more closely illustrating the

details of what estate workers achieved by means of their confrontation of both the plantation’s local order and its position in global structures of extraction.

The beginning and the end of SARBUPRI

Following the wartime Japanese occupation of the former Dutch East Indies and Indonesia’s struggle for independence against Dutch re-occupation which filled the remainder of the 1940s, the political arena under Sukarno, the first President of the independent Republic, rapidly became characterized by vibrant and participatory forms of political life. The Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, or PKI) had various aligned or affiliated organizations including GERWANI (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia* or the Indonesian Women's Movement) and SARBUPRI (*Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia* or the Estate Workers’ Union of the Republic of Indonesia).²⁵ The PKI’s affiliated organizations constituted a combined membership of about 27 million Indonesians; and, of these, the plantation workers organized through SARBUPRI numbered 700,000 (White 3; see also Mortimer).²⁶ As with other PKI affiliates, SARBUPRI largely adhered to the legal rules of the new Republic’s democracy, yet at the same time remained committed to “campaigning for the realization of the unfulfilled promises of the Indonesian revolution, in particular for economic and social justice on both the global and the national scale” (White 3).²⁷

SARBUPRI’s ultimate ending is fairly well documented in scholarship, if still deeply distorted in many narratives within Indonesia itself. In February of 1965, organized plantation workers attempted one of their (by then well-rehearsed) collective occupations of US Rubber Company-owned plantations in North Sumatra. In tandem, Sukarno had informed US firms of his plans to temporarily

take control of rubber plantation estates and other foreign-owned enterprises. Such moves by the Sukarno administration, along with the plantation estate workers’ occupation and strike tactics, exacerbated the negative sentiment among foreign companies with Indonesian interests and the governments they worked closely with, including the US administration. Following a botched coup attempt by a faction of the Army which would come to be known as the 30 September Movement, a devastating counter-revolution against the PKI and its affiliates, including the unionized plantation workers, began to gather pace. By mid-October of 1965, General Suharto had taken control of the Indonesian Army and the elite paratrooper regiment was ordered to begin an assault against the 30 September Movement, which by that point had become associated in popular narratives with the PKI itself and referred to as ‘G30S-PKI’ (White 6).²⁸

Members of SARBUPRI became the prime targets of anti-communist killings perpetrated intensively over five months following Suharto’s initial order. On the estates of Sumatra, plantation companies themselves provided vehicles to transport SARBUPRI members to execution sites, thus facilitating many of the mass-killings (Fauzi cited in White 7).²⁹ Further, reports on the massacres of plantation workers and others deemed to be leftists were filed to Western embassies, however, no action was taken to hinder them. European, Australian and US commercial interests saw in Suharto a chance to bring in a new era of corporate transnationalism in Indonesia which would overturn the anticolonial economic reforms of the previous decade.

In July of 2016 an international tribunal at The Hague ruled that Britain, the US, and Australia had all been complicit in the mass killings in Indonesia which have been referred to in terms of “politicide” (Gittings & Jarvis 75).³⁰ With respect to the UK and Australia in particular, the report

criticized their pro-Suharto propaganda efforts and concluded that they “continued with this policy even after it had become abundantly clear that killings were taking place on a mass and indiscriminate basis. On balance, this appears to justify the charge of complicity” (Gittings & Jarvis 71)³¹ This period of orchestrated anti-communist violence resulted in up to one million killings, although a full and reliable count of the victims has never been carried out.³² As with other PKI-affiliated movements which had been targeted during the mass killings, any surviving plantation union members were subjected to various forms of discipline, humiliation, and abuse, ranging from forced labor to expulsion (cf. White 12; Stoler, *Capitalism* 164; Larasati).³³

Engaging further with British government archives, the rest of this article complements existing accounts of SARBUPRI’s rise and brutal extermination by filling in closely illustrated detail on British planters’ engagements with unionized estate laborers at the height of their organizing activities. The section to follow considers how SARBUPRI cultivated mass-based and widespread rebellions across the plantation estates of the archipelago. Further, it sheds light on how deeply these actions disturbed British planters in Indonesia and also shook the foundations of the plantation economy’s racial order.

Cultivating rebellion against racialized plantation regimes

If SARBUPRI’s brutal and tragic extermination in 1965-1966 is most often the subject of attention, it is worth sparing some analysis here on what the plantation workers managed to achieve in the few years of decolonization following the proclamation of Indonesian Independence in 1945. Viewing this historical moment through the British archive reveals the sheer extent of the workers’

campaign across the archipelago’s estates – a campaign which involved organized plantation raids, coordinated removal of crops, produce, and equipment, as well as related tactics of commercial sabotage. This ‘off-center’ method of reading SARBUPRI’s campaign through the British archive also reveals the extent of anxiety this caused from 1950 onwards when conditions were clearly becoming increasingly unbearable for British and other European planters in Indonesia. For example, at this stage, Rubber Estate Agency planters in West and Central Java were considering cutting their losses and abandoning their estates altogether or “selling them for what we can get.”³⁴ Around the same time, Francis Peek & Co. planters were complaining that the “intimidation being practised by the SARBUPRI is quite fantastic.”³⁵

Further correspondence from Peek & Co. over August and September of 1950 elaborated on the psychological state of planters on the Medini plantation estate in Central Java:

I have long felt that lack of progress was due to Mr. Marang’s breakdown; as already indicated in past reports he was unable to give proper effect to instructions. Nervous tension was one of the principle causes. I had hoped that under Mr. Scherrer there would have been a marked improvement, but the situation on Medini is too much for him. [...] Labour appears to be so difficult here that it would not take much more for Mr. Scherrer to ask to be relieved of his post. As known, Mr. Bruce found Medini so disheartening that he refused to return to the estate.³⁶

This candid account illustrates just how far organized struggles were disturbing the structural logic of the plantation by way of their impact on the psychological state of the managerial class. Plantations were becoming both ungovernable and unprofitable because strikes and other tactics were driving planters to take leave due to ‘nervous tension’, despite their comparable lack of career prospects outside of the plantation hierarchy.

By November of 1950, organized workers were engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with the security forces acting to protect British estate interests. For example, in West Java, security was being

rotated around 31 estates belonging to the firm P&T Lands, however, when an “unguarded estate was attacked, troops were moved to it from another estate, which in turn became unguarded and attacked.”

Further, a letter from a Mr Matthewson of Harrisons & Crosfield explained the extent of European anxieties:

unless the almost unbearable pressure on European staff can be relieved and they can see some light on the horizon, it would appear that the recent steady loss of irreplaceable experienced men may sooner rather than later develop into a dangerous exodus, making normal working impossible [...] Study of the various strikes engineered in turn in Sumatra and in Java gives the impression not of haphazard pattern, but of cunning, carefully planned design.³⁷

The plantation economy in Indonesia maintained broader material injustice in the sense that estate land controlled by Europeans left little land for the Indigenous population, thereby rendering them marginalized, destitute, and largely dependent on the low-wage plantation work producing for export markets. SARBUPRI’s tactics directly targeted the exploitative low-wage element of this regime and applied pressure for concessions from European planters in part with respect to exploitative wages. The union’s efficacy here is apparent across British correspondence, including that of a representative of Francis Peck & Co late in August of 1950: “As you know the strike has now become a fact, and we fear that the Union’s demands as regards a daily wage will have to be substantially met.” This indicates that the British were cognizant that plantation workers were pushing back at this point against the broader material injustice of the plantation economy.

British planters were also aware that SARBUPRI members were effectively mounting an incisive and well-founded critique of ongoing forms of value extraction which drained the profits of the plantation system and delivered them to Europe. As a report to the Foreign Office on the state of Java plantation estates lamented: “The Sarbupri Secretary (a man with murder on his conscience)³⁸

told the Acting Manager that they had nothing against the staff personally, but *they could not agree to the transfer of all the profits to England!*” [emphasis added]. Similarly, a planter from the firm Harrison & Crosfield wrote in November of 1950 that the aim of organized plantation workers was “to instigate a succession of strikes and unrest in order to produce chaos and *drive Western entrepreneurs out of the country*” [emphasis added]. He went on to complain: “As the result of skillful subversive propaganda amongst ignorant workers, allied with intimidation, labour gets more and more intractable and productivity declines.”

The above quotes betray a degree of awareness among British planters that SARBUPRI’s struggle was, at heart, an anticolonial one which ultimately sought to overthrow a racial labor regime headed by Europeans. They were also clearly aware that the actions sought to work against global structures which extracted value and channeled it to Europe. However, at the same time, reference to ‘ignorant workers’ indicates a disavowal of organized laborers’ status as agents of history in their own right. Such a portrayal of SARBUPRI members as ignorant natives, manipulated by propaganda from outside forces, fed into wider British narratives which dismissed plantation rebellions as the product of external communist agitation in a Cold War context. The following section explores further how the plantation workers’ struggle ultimately became broadly framed in a reductive and inaccurate way in terms of an advancing ‘red peril’.

Anti-communism as counter-revolution against anticolonial action

The analysis above reveals the apparent awareness among the British that plantation rebellions were enacting critiques of both a global structural problem – value extraction to Europe – and the

associated localized problem of racialized labor regimes in which European planters held power over estates and Indonesians themselves were reduced to landless, underpaid laborers. However, in their objections to, and organizing against, plantation workers’ strikes, the British began to reduce rebellions to externally driven, communist-inspired chaos in their narratives. For example, a government report documenting “Labour Troubles” in June of 1950 noted the extent to which British plantation owners felt they were on the back foot as labor actions reached “terrifying proportions” and began to float communist influence as the underlying cause:

There has recently been a series of strikes mainly on the estates in East Sumatra, as a consequence of which production has been somewhat dislocated, and in order to get things going again, firms have been compelled to grant very considerable pay increases to their native laborers [...] It is not known to what extent the strikes were Communist inspired.³⁹

An increasing emphasis on the expansion of communist organizing ran through British accounts of SARBUPRI activities: “That the AVROS [Rubber Planters Association] representatives have misgivings about the SARBUPRI organization in Atjeh is not surprising, when it was noted that *the Langsa Branch employed the “hammer and sickle” emblem as their official seal in a communication*” [emphasis added].⁴⁰ British reference here to clues and suggestions of communist influence over plantation worker organization is curious considering SARBUPRI, along with other mass-based organizations of the time, were explicitly affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party.

A letter drafted by British planters in August 1950 to a J. Dalton Murray in the Southeast Asian section of the Foreign Office to inform shareholders in plantation estates in Indonesia placed particular emphasis on the ‘evils’ of communist organization:

Communitic agents, seeking as usual to dominate, appear to find this a particularly promising new field for their disruptive activities, including the fomenting of repeated strikes aimed at paralyzing production and producing economic chaos. In pursuance of

these nefarious ends these would-be creators of chaos have quite evidently nothing to learn in methods of intimidation and in attempts to arouse the cupidity of the estate worker by adjuring him not to worry if the estate should be forced to abandon production, as in that event he would enjoy unlimited freedom to tap the estate trees for his own benefit. [...] There is indeed growing evidence how profoundly demoralizing, far-reaching and potentially dangerous this evil is proving to be.⁴¹

In such interpretations, it is notable how separations and reductions of the plantation workers’ struggle have particular political implications. Chiefly, there is a separation of the overarching anticolonial struggle from its integrated communist vehicle – organized plantation workers become simply ‘dangerous’ and ‘evil’ ‘commies’ oriented towards ‘chaos’ for its own sake. This disarticulation distilled the plantation workers’ struggle into a specifically racialized version of ‘red peril’ – a globally orchestrated and locally enacted disruption of the perceived proper order. In turn, this move reduced the plantation workers themselves to seemingly unthinking drones, represented as being manipulated by a higher force which worked to “arouse the cupidity of the estate worker.”

Plantation workers, racialized as inferior and naturally external to trajectories of ‘improvement,’ were not understood as full agents of their own histories in such accounts. British discourses here therefore enact a profound disavowal of organized laborers’ status as political agents staging their own sharp critique of the plantation economy within global colonial capitalism. Clearly, there is a further contraction here between the apparently genuine fear of the workers themselves, as documented in previous sections, and their dismissal as mere pawns under the direction of external communist forces. Such narratives around racialized red peril also did the preparatory work which allowed the British to tacitly support deadly actions instigated in 1965 which ultimately resulted in the brutal extermination of SARBUPRI through anti-communist massacres. In short, Indonesia’s organized plantation workers were killed in the name of anti-communism for their attempts to fulfill

the original goals of the anticolonial revolution by enacting meaningful structural change in the plantation economy; an economy which continued to produce extraction to Europe at the expense of Indigenous expropriation and immiseration.

Conclusion

Plantation workers have a special place in the historiography of anticolonial struggles as agents contributing to radical changes in the global political economy through the formal liberation of colonized areas. And yet, as Beckford (4) phrased it: “although plantations were one of the main sources of conditions that generated the winds of change, they have managed to withstand the tempest.”⁴² In other words, the ‘strange’ order of the plantation remains with us, generating old and new economic and ecological exploitations in the present. With this in mind, I have revisited Indonesia’s SARBUPRI plantation worker struggles here, in part, as unfinished business.

Reading labor actions in an ‘off-center’ way here through the anxieties of the British archive reveals how far these actions disturbed both a localized racial labor order and the established international tributaries of extraction. The analysis returned to a historical moment in 1950s Indonesia in which profound gains were made against a racial order of extraction, even if some of those gains were briefly held. The racially tiered and deeply exploitative social order of the plantation not only existed administratively and ideologically, it was also deeply embedded both spatially and psychologically. The non-white Indigenous population had been excluded, by definition, from being agents of ‘improvement’ by means of technologized agriculture, just as they were excluded materially from their own lands by the plantation regime. ‘Whiteness’ – as a construction inseparable from supremacy – was partly produced and reinforced in plantation orders through its association with

improvement and authority as well as through its distinction from the ‘primitive and wasteful’ character ascribed to natives.

It took the concerted action of tens of thousands of plantation workers to reveal the deep contradictions in the estate order. This was an order overseen by ‘superior’ European planters who guarded their positions at the top of the localized racial hierarchy, yet who had no notable status back in the metropolises of Europe. SARBUPRI’s coordinated and mass-based tactics drove this somewhat stranded European planter class to anxiety and personal breakdowns. Ultimately, the strikes of 1950 and 1953 won workers wage increases of up to 30 per cent as well as driving through a labor code committing estates to a seven-hour working day, protections for women and limits on child labor (Stoler, *Capitalism* 127).⁴³ SARBUPRI actions also brought deep costs for European corporations who had believed their monopoly on technologized agriculture and estate management would allow them to maintain the same old colonial-style order on plantations beyond Indonesia’s formal independence. If the plantation continues to advance as a seemingly abiding social and spatial order, what lessons from the struggle and sacrifice of anticolonial labor movements can we draw on in our current context? The prospect of social, economic, and ecological justice in the plantation present may well hinge on a renewal of past struggles for the contemporary age.

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Notes

1 Beckford, George L. *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*. (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 1999), 4.

2 There is a global history of the plantation to be told which brings together estate economies from the Americas to Asia. Within this broader history there are many forms of plantation which diverge by scale, labor or enslavement regime, degree of industrialisation, and by the specific relations of oppression and resistance. This article deals solely with the Indonesia context just as formal empire was being undone by anticolonial struggles. Situating Indonesia’s estates in this moment within a broader global history of ‘the plantation’ is not intended to disavow the distinct histories of plantation forms across time and geographical space. See, for example McKittrick, Katherine. "Plantation futures." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (42) (2013): 1-15; Beckford, “Persistent Poverty” 1999; Stoler, Ann Laura. *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; Bosma, Ulbe. *The Sugar Plantation in India and Indonesia: Industrial Production, 1770-2010*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

3 Aside from secondary sources, this article engages with documents in the British National Archives, specifically those within the following files: FO 371 83749; FO 371 83752; FO 371 83753; FO 371 83796; FO 371 92517; LAB 13 417; LAB 13 418.

4 Here I echo Sylvia Wynter’s observation that the islands of the Caribbean “were ‘planted’ with people, not in order to form societies, but to carry on plantations whose aim was to produce single crops for the market” (p.95). In the analysis I stretch this to a reflection on the ‘planting’ of whiteness itself. Wynter, Sylvia. "Novel and history, plot and plantation." *Savacou* 5, no. 1 (1971): 95-102.

5 Waibel, Leo “The Tropical Plantation System,” *The Scientific Monthly*, 52, no.2 (1941): 156.

6 Waibel, “The Tropical Plantation,” 156.

7 See, for example, Glenn Coulthard for an overview and critique, Coulthard, Glen. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2014).

8 See, for example, Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage*. University of Chicago Press, 2015; Rodney, Walter. "Plantation society in Guyana." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 4, no. 4 (1981): 643-666; Stoler, Ann Laura. "Plantation Politics and Protest on Sumatra's East Coast." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986): 124-143.

9 Li, Tania Murray. *The Will to Improve*. Duke University Press, 2007, 39.

10 Stoler, Ann Laura. "Plantation Politics and Protest on Sumatra's East Coast." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986): 124-143. 126.

11 Stoler, “Plantation Politics”, 134.

12 See, for example, Andrianto, Agus, Heru Komarudin, and Pablo Pacheco. "Expansion of Oil Palm Plantations in Indonesia’s Frontier: Problems of Externalities and the Future of Local and Indigenous Communities." *Land* 8, no. 4 (2019).

13 See, for example, Alisjahbana, Armida S., and Jonah M. Busch. "Forestry, forest fires, and climate change in Indonesia." *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 111-136, Climate Transparency. "Brown to Green: Assessing the G20 transition to a low-carbon economy." (2018). <https://www.climate-transparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018-BROWN-TO-GREEN-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>

14 See, Stoler, "Plantation Politics" 136; Stoler, "Capitalism and Confrontation" 95.

15 FO 37183749

16 FO 37183752

17 FO 371 83749

18 Alatas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. London: Frank Cass (1977).

19 Bhandar, Brenna. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Duke University Press, 2018. 39.

20 FO 371 83749

21 Aceh appears in archive documents as the Dutch version Atjeh, then in common use.

22 FO 371 83752

23 FO 371 83753

24 FO 371 83752

25 For a compelling and original analysis of GERWANI, read Larasati, Rachmi Diyah. *The dance that makes you vanish: Cultural reconstruction in post-genocide Indonesia*. U of Minnesota Press, 2013.

26 See, White, Ben. "Remembering the Indonesian peasants' front and plantation workers' union (1945–1966)." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1-16, p.3 and Mortimer, Rex. *Indonesian communism under Sukarno: Ideology and politics, 1959-1965*. Equinox Publishing, 2006.

27 White, "Remembering", 3.

28 White, "Remembering," 6

29 Fauzi, M., ed. 2012. *Pulangkan Mereka! Merangkai Ingatan Penghilangan Paksa di Indonesia*. Jakarta: ELSAM. Cited in White, "Remembering," 7.

30 Gittings, J., and H. Jarvis. "Final Report of the IPT 1965." Bandung: Ultimus (2017), 75

31 Gittings & Jarvis, "Final Report", 71

32 Gittings & Jarvis, "Final Report", 38

33 See, White, "Remembering," 12; Stoler, "Capitalism", 164; and for analysis of the life-long and intergenerational stigmatisation and exclusion of those associated with Gerwani and the PKI, see Larasati, "The Dance".

34 FO 371 83753

35 FO 371 83753

36 FO 371 83753

37 FO 371 83753

38 This accusation is neither explained nor substantiated in the archive documents available.

39 FO 371 83752

40 FO 371 83752

41 FO 371 83752

42 Beckford, "Persistent Poverty" 4.

43 Stoler, "Capitalism" 127.