A. L. Stoler, Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979
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This new book about the « politics of labor control » on the rubber, tea, tobacco and palm oil plantations on the east coast of Sumatra in Indonesia is a dynamic example of an « ethnography of political economy ». The narrative begins with the entry of United States and European (primarily Dutch) corporate capital into Sumatra in the 1870s. It analyzes the immigration of hundreds of thousands of landless peasants — primarily Javanese but also considerable numbers of Chinese — as indentured laborers through the 1920s. It ends with the ethnographic present (1979) in a Javanese agricultural community on the plantation periphery formed by the descendants of these indentured laborers who have « reconstituted » themselves into « peasants ». Its concern is with the relations of power, struggle and domination between plantation management and its labor force.

In the preface the author promises not to fall into the pitfall of many political economists who are « long on the economic » and « short on the political »; this promise is fulfilled. The author shows a subtle appreciation for the contradictory nature of historical process. There is nothing functionalist in her documentation of management’s domination of labor in East Sumatra. Special attention is paid to the « nature of popular politicization », and to « popular modes of resistance and their consequences ». The actors — the people without history — are not subsumed within the author’s class analysis or global, structuralist perspective. Historical events are understood as the outcome of resistance and struggle rather than as unilinear dominations or as products of economicist logic: « Our starting point then is a relationship of contestation and change, not one of institutional stability and cohesion. »

This sensitivity to contradiction and complexity is well illustrated with the interpretation of the « contemporary contours of labor control ». From the late 1870s through the 1920s, violent repression along with gender and ethnic cleavages maintained a cheap, obedient, and relatively stable plantation labor force. Today, between 25 and 60 percent of the labor force no longer lives on the plantation. Ironically, however, it is precisely their status as « independent peasants » which now guarantees a stable, inexpensive labor force. Economic necessity obliges this impoverished peasantry to sell its labor to the large estates under temporary contracts via intermediaries. Workers — especially women and children — receive considerably less than the legal minimum wage paid to permanent resident laborers, and they get no social benefits (housing, social security, family rice allowances, etc.). They survive on below subsistence wages without starving or emigrating precisely because they have a minimum alternative source of income — whether through extended kin relations, illegal commerce, a tiny rice paddy or prostitution.

The paradox of this historical process of the reconstitution of a Javanese peasant-based plantation labor force in Sumatra lies in its political dimension. The peasants initially settled as illegal squatters after World War II. Their communities were the fruit of a determined struggle by workers to gain independence from the estates in spite of the plantation owners bitter opposition. In the often violent process of defending their newly acquired lands, tens of thousands of Javanese squatters were radicalized politically and mobilized into peasant unions in the 1950s and early 1960s. Management « lost » the battle in the short run only to come out ahead in the long term, because this very flight of laborers from the estates weakened the plantation-based union movement. In subsequent years, the bargaining power of the permanently resident labor force was further diminished as « independent » peasants returned to the estates as non-unionized temporary laborers.
Another strength of Ann Stoler's ethnography is its combination of archival sources with oral accounts collected from elderly persons. The author cites extensive historical material from the Netherlands and from the Dutch colonial archives, and includes fascinating confidential letters written by plantation administrators and owners, which she obtained from the files of the Sumatran Planters' Association. In addition to living with plantation worker-peasants, she also systematically interviewed management — from top level European managers of transnational corporations to local administrators and foremen. She was thus able to collect detailed accounts of graft and abuse from the very persons committing it.

The historical period in question here is violent and bloody — whether it be the Japanese occupation during World War II, the protracted guerrilla wars of the 1950s, or the massacre of almost 100 000 Communists and their « sympathizers » following the 1965 coup d'État. Nevertheless the style is neither polemical nor melodramatic, but rather resorting to understatement. The horror of violent events speak for themselves, often through quotations from primary sources.

The book also helps us understand how ethnicity and especially gender operate in the context of unequal power relations and of the productive process : « Ethnicity and gender provide the charged idioms in which class relations are embedded and expressed. »

Finally, although the author fits within the North American anthropological tradition of political economy and peasant economics that has developed out of the work of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, there is a distinctly « French flavor » to her book ; hence the occasionally convoluted sentence structure, the sometimes complicated vocabulary, the passing references to Foucault and the systematic concern with issues such as sexuality and ideology in general : « ... divergent influences have combined to make me look to the power of discourse, the force of fear, and the threat of violence as critical elements of domination. » There is a good reason for this « Gallic » influence : the book was written in Paris in the early 1980s. Indeed, in the acknowledgements the author recognizes her debt to several French social scientists and institutions for their analytic insights, financial generosity, and friendship.

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Tikopia est un atoll soulevé, au large des Nouvelles-Hébrides et dans le prolongement des Salomon dont il dépend politiquement. Cette île, peuplée de Polynésiens, a été étudiée depuis près de soixante ans par un ethnologue anglais (né en Nouvelle-Zélande), Raymond W. Firth. Le dictionnaire qu'il présente ici, non seulement résume les notes qu'il prit depuis son premier séjour en 1927 jusqu'à la rédaction finale en collaboration avec des Tikopiens à Auckland en 1978, mais peut aussi être considéré comme une encyclopédie.

La première partie explique les conditions du travail de l'auteur, donne un exposé grammatical et phonologique, et cite les emprunts, d'abord mota (langue des premiers missionnaires venus des Nouvelles-Hébrides), puis anglais. La deuxième comprend le dictionnaire encyclopédique et alphabétique plus trois pages de croquis : rivage marin, les