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# THE DIALECTIC OF COLONIAL INDONESIAN HISTORY

by

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AMSTERDAM

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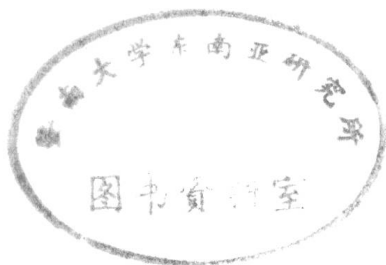
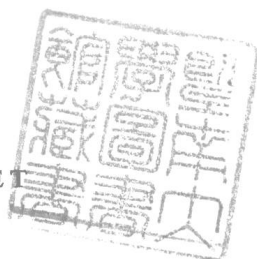
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Throughout the course of colonial Indonesian history there run two antithetical themes which by their alternating dominance and interaction have determined much of the character of the confrontation of the Indonesians by the Dutch and the views which the latter held of the former, as well as the political and economic policies which the Dutch followed in the Indonesian archipelago. One theme, which might be called "universalistic", attempted to project in varying degrees an identity of interests between Dutch and Indonesians and was fortified by a variety of ideological rationales, especially those of historic Liberalism and later by Neo-Liberal, humanitarian and Marxist views. The other, which could be designated as a "particularistic" trend, tended to emphasize socio-economic differentiation and subordination within traditional social structure and economic practice in Indonesia, and sought sanction from religious or secular principles usually designated as Conservative. It would not be correct to identify the two themes merely as "Liberal" and "Conservative" respectively, however, for the manner in which these terms have been used in analyses of Dutch colonial policy has often tended to obscure the not infrequent similarities in their component policies as well as the shifting bases of their rationales. For example, a "particularist" element, as will be seen, may in varying degrees be present both in so-called Conservative and in Liberal policies. The two themes, already discernible in the era of the Dutch East India Company, sometimes converge in support of particular policy objectives, sometimes they are in marked opposition to each other, and then again they appear to alternate in adhering to certain policy aims, one theme taking up, so to speak, where and what the other left off. By considering the two themes in their typical universalistic and particularistic dimensions it is suggested that the major dialectic of the colonial Indonesian epoch as well as its aftermath can perhaps be better understood. The first two parts of the present essay will analyze the interplay of the two themes, along the lines of development of colonial policy itself, part 3 will focus on some representative reformers and academicians who reflect the dialectic in their publications, while the concluding portion will seek to touch on some historiographical implications.



## I

The image projected by the Dutch East India Company is mercantile, Calvinistic and Republican, and during the greater part of the Company's existence this image also stood for a highly particularistic view of the Indonesian world. The component features of the image sometimes appear to be integrated: "God has given mankind the knowledge of seafaring not only for the purpose of carrying from one land what another needs, but also to fulfill the world and to make known and spread His word over the entire earth. In doing this more benefits and profits can be had from the Indies than ever before,"<sup>1</sup> thus wrote Jan Pietersz. Coen, the Company's fourth governor-general (1619-1623, 1627-1629), combining religious convictions with his commercial interests. But Coen's other aims e.g. the systematic Dutch colonization of Indonesia, found few followers, while in general the profit motive was stronger in Company policy than missionary zeal. The Company might from time to time seek to impose a Puritanical rigor on the public morality of its settlement Batavia, it might even promote translations of Biblical texts into Malay, but an active proselytizing or a deliberate effort to create a spiritual bond in Christ among all those under the Company's sway was never contemplated. For there was a strong Calvinist sense of predestinarian supremacy in the thinking of the Company's servants; all of Asia, as a seventeenth century Dutch poet put it, lay "smothered under a cover of error, sunk in ignorance and bestiality,"<sup>2</sup> evidently as a result of God's immutable design. Moreover, commercial interests might well be jeopardized by an active missionary effort.

A proud burgher's revulsion of the aristocratic ostentation and royal arbitrariness evident in Indonesia speaks from many of the earlier records in the Company era. The rule of law was all but non-existent in the Indonesian principalities, to hear some Company officials tell it, and princely absolutism is said to render virtually every native inhabitant into a slave. One sharply observant Company official, Aart Gijssels, who early in the 1630's became Governor of Amboyna, recounts the tale of an Amboynese chieftain who, walking in the presence of a Dutch Company official, one day casually



remarked to him: "I'd like to see if my sword is sufficiently sharp," and as casually drew his sword and with it hacked into a woman walking ahead of him. "These are their rights," concludes Gijssels.<sup>3</sup> In Java, which soon became the Company's principal power centre, the same atmosphere prevailed. Rijckloff van Goens, who was to become one of the Company's ablest governors-general, notes in his report of his mission to the court of Mataram in 1654 that "neither measure nor order" governed the king's justice," "*ende als hem sulcx in de kop schiet sodanige beveelt te doden als't hem behaegt*" ("and if he has a notion to it orders the death of anyone he wishes"), the king employing as executioner the father for the son, the son for the father, or brother for brother.<sup>4</sup> As late as the beginning of the twentieth century a Javanese saying could be heard expressing the sense of virtual rightlessness among the peasant mass: *nek awan doewekke Sang Nata, nek bengi doewekke doersila*, i.e. "during the day it (i.e. the people's property) is the king's, during the night it is the brigand's." <sup>5</sup> The extent to which such accounts are colored by Dutch ethnocentrism is difficult to say; certainly in his own village society the Indonesian enjoyed the protection of *adat* (custom). Still, feudal wilfulness and the common man's resulting insecurity are difficult to deny.

But whatever the initial disdain of Dutch Republicanism for the Indonesian feudal order and its vagaries, the interests of commerce imperatively demanded a rapprochement with that order and from the beginning the Dutch East India Company's economic policy was based on and intertwined with royal and aristocratic privilege. The Company's contracts and deliveries, its preferments and options, all depended on feudal Indonesian rights and powers and the average Indonesian peasant or worker experienced the Company's influence primarily through the intensification of already existing levies of produce and labor, or the occasional introduction of new ones by princely authority but actually at the Company's behest. Thus there emerged what is perhaps the chief economic feature of the "particularistic" theme in colonial Indonesian history, namely a socio-economic system best designated as feudal capitalism, in which a traditional aristocratic social structure was fitted to the interests of a commercial capitalistic corporate venture and the Javanese nobleman in fact became an indispensable functionary of the Dutch

merchant. In the Moluccas Company officials might directly exercise authority over Indonesian cultivators and slaves in the production of spices, but their powers and mode of life, and the constantly enforced hierarchical distance, often came to rival that of Java's grandees. To say that this system wholly prevented a closer Company interest in the lives and manners of the Indonesians is untrue: we do have still valuable accounts by Company officials testifying to such interests, particularly in terms of the Company's legal position in the welter of foreign nationalities that traded with and within the Indonesian world. But it does seem correct to argue that feudal capitalism enforced the existence of two dissimilar political and cultural spheres, which touched each other almost exclusively at the point of economic interchange.

Indicative is the body of extant Indonesian and Malayan literature, in which the European generally, and the Netherlander particularly, in the era of the Company is featured. The Indonesian *hikajat* (histories) and *sjairs* (narrative poetry) not only show little or no attempt to understand the actual character of the Westerners and their motives,—indeed indicate that Europeans are discussed only “when the pressure of events makes this inevitable,”—but show also a tendentious or inaccurate presentation of events so as to minimize or denigrate the role of the European, as well as a deliberate transformation of the European into a Malay or Indonesian type of character familiar to the indigenous literature.<sup>6</sup> Description of Europeans seems confined to the outward features of their customs and behavior, e.g. the shaking of hands, the tipping of the hat, the use of knives and forks at mealtimes, the stamping of the feet when angry, and so on. Only a very few Company officials, e.g. Baron G. W. van Imhoff, Governor General from 1743 to 1750, appear to have made any real impression on the Indonesian chroniclers and then they are still metamorphosed into a typical, Ardjuna style, traditional Indonesian epic heroes. The contention of a recent Indonesian writer that already as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century the Indonesians has acquired a “clearly outlined image” of the Netherlanders seems rather exaggerated;<sup>7</sup> to be sure, such tales as the *Baron Sakèndèr* stories depict the commercial preoccupation of Company personnel, but the Dutch characters are thoroughly mythologized and “Indonesianized.”<sup>8</sup> In time Indonesian

rulers even seek to legitimize Dutch suzerainty by mythologizing Dutch descent from Indonesian ruling dynasties.<sup>9</sup>

It seems well to stress that such “Indonesianizing” of the Dutch as did take place in the Company era took place in an aristocratic context, i.e. enforced the feudalistic, social distances and status differentiations between Indonesians and Netherlanders, and thus also accentuated the “particularistic” theme. The enormously ornate dwellings of the higher Company personnel in the environs of Batavia, the princely ostentation of their style of living, the dictatorial powers of Company officials, rendered society in the widening area of Indonesia under direct or indirect Company control more aristocratic than ever before.<sup>10</sup> The Calvinistic Puritanical vigor of early Company officials might gradually make headway for a more eclectic tolerance in religious beliefs (in which even the Indonesian spiritworld came to play an important role for the more thoroughly acclimated members of the Company), Republican burgher simplicity might long since have vanished—except for the impecunious junior clerk fresh from Holland—having been supplanted by a new aristocratic opulence, but neither of these developments altered the “particularistic” element in early colonial relationships, to the contrary, they confirmed them.

Yet, the eighteenth century—the very century which most fully accomplished the feudal transformation of the Company and its personnel in the Indonesian world—was also the century in which the “universalistic” theme was born and slowly gained in prominence. West European rationalism and particularly the ideas of the French Enlightenment, combined with growing opposition to the inefficient commercial monopolistic and mercantilistic policies of the Company, formed the initial basis of this universalistic theme. The earlier mentioned van Imhoff, “a true example of the eighteenth century reformer who was apt to believe that the character of human society could be changed by decree,”<sup>11</sup> with his vision of a transformation of the Company from a commercial to a territorial power in Asia, is one of the earliest indications of the new spirit. Service with the Company, as van Imhoff put it in 1741 in his wellknown “Considerations” on the state of the Dutch East India Company, “lacks all honor and prestige” and one entered its ranks not to gain respect “but solely for one’s bread.”<sup>12</sup> Van Imhoff proposed to

reform the Company by encouraging an active Dutch colonization, curtailing some of the Company's extensive and cumbersome commercial operations in Asia and shifting Company control away from the complex trading transactions into which the Company's Asian trade compelled it to enter. Like an enlightened despot of the times van Imhoff founded a hospital, schools, including a seminary, a postoffice, a bank, even a newspaper, and exhibited an unequivocal humanitarianism toward the Indonesian. Typical also of this—perhaps first—representative of the Dutch “universalistic” temper in colonial Indonesia was his collision with the Javanese aristocracy, and his tactless conduct toward certain nobility directly contributed to the repeated wars of succession of the once proud Mataram empire in Central Java. As we shall see, for later devotees of the universalistic view the Javanese aristocracy and the system it represented often became embodiments of all that was said to impede the Indonesian's development, and Dutch dependence on the indigenous feudal system for commercial gain and maintenance of internal order came to be regarded as a blot on the national honor.

Van Imhoff's reforms largely came to naught but in the closing decades of the eighteenth century the new universalism gradually seized firmer hold of some Company personnel. As early as 1753 Governor-General Mossel issued an extensive regulation prescribing the degree of “splendor and luxury” (*pracht en praal*) Company officials would be entitled to display according to their rank, including style of clothing, type of carriages, horses, jewelry and so on. The regulation, originally conceived for the protection of Company personnel against the temptation of oriental ostentation, soon became a bitter point of contention. For by attempting to control the “splendor” of Company officials the regulation seemed in fact to attack the entire aristocratic way of life and the spirit of the colonial feudal capitalistic order, and subsequently the more radically Jacobin minded among the Company's officials in Batavia came to look on the regulation as an invitation to demolish the whole tradition of feudal etiquette and to put in its place a system of Republican egalitarianism under which even the Governor-General would be addressed as “citizen”. Conservatives, in turn, had first looked upon the regulation with dismay, but later they

defended it against the Frenchified egalitarians as the bulwark of their privileged position in colonial Indonesian society. The ultimate repeal of the regulation in 1795, in the midst of a bitter struggle between Dutch Jacobins and Conservatives in the higher ranks of the Company personnel in Batavia, in a real sense marked a major breakthrough of the universalistic temper, whatever the indignities leading Conservative officials might yet manage to impose on such Dutch Jacobins as C. H. Wegener, a Company judicial officer, who had warned his fellow councillors in the Council of Justice in Batavia, in 1798, that in "the coming great reorganization" those "who find satisfaction in hateful self aggrandizement" and "joy in the suppression and slavery of free born man" would not escape their just desserts.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes the breakthrough of the universalistic spirit is most fully apparent in the successive generations of a single family of colonial civil servants, and in this respect the van Hogendorps provide a good illustration. Willem van Hogendorp, scion of an old aristocratic Dutch family, had gone to the Indies in Company service in 1773 in order to recoup his fortune, and this he did in part at least by means of a private smuggling trade. Though in many ways he was as "feudal" as his associates and as much inclined to reap personal benefits from the Company's corrupt monopolistic system, Willem was also something of an "enlightened" figure in Batavia, active in propagating vaccination against small pox and the author of a short novel called *Kraspoekol*, strongly anti-slavery in message and imbued with a spirit of Rousseauistic moralizing.<sup>14</sup> Willem's son Dirk was wholly to make common cause with the French revolutionary development (he rose to Lieutenant General and "Comte de L'Empire" under Napoleon), but for Indonesian colonial history his importance lies in being perhaps the first complete manifestation of the new Liberal ideology. Dirk had seen service in English India, and on the basis of his experiences there, as well as those in the Dutch service in Java in the closing years of the East India Company, he had formulated the chief outlines of the "universalistic" theme for colonial Indonesia. "The feudal system is deadly for all activity and industry. It is the system which is most fully in force here,"<sup>15</sup> Dirk wrote in 1794 from Java to his brother Gijsbert Karel, who was to play a major role in the recon-

stitution of the Dutch monarchy after the Napoleonic era and in its new colonial policy as well. "It is this system, far more than the climate, which is the cause of the indolence and apathy of the Javanese," Dirk went on. And later: "Is there a country known in the world where the peasant is happy, free and well situated, without having ownership of land?" As for the members of the Indonesian nobility through whom the Company had amassed its riches, these made the peasantry work "without giving them anything for it, hardly leaving them enough for their subsistence and that of their women and children, indeed sometimes not even that much . . .".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, counseled Dirk, give the Javanese the right of private property on his land along with security of person against feudal arbitrariness; replace the forced deliveries by a land tax (as in parts of English India); abolish the feudalistic forced labor services and the Company's anachronistic system of commercial and production monopoly; and let the universal human impulse in search of gain operate freely and where it thinks best to the benefit of all. There should, therefore, be freedom of trade for all European entrepreneurs; and with certain limits European private capital should be freely permitted to enter. These ideas were also essentially those of Gijsbert Karel. Though, as Professor S. Kalff, in a still valuable article on Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp's role as colonial reformer has pointed out (*Haagsch Maandblad*, August, 1931, pp. 139-158), Dirk's brother was much more a theoretician of colonial constitutional matters than a practical man of affairs, he too was convinced of the potential energy and ability of the Javanese to pursue his own best economic interests. The Javanese was neither lazy, nor apathetic agreed Gijsbert Karel, the very existence of village markets on Java showed not only the Indonesians' inherent industriousness, but also their capacity to grow in this industriousness upon "realizing their selfinterest."

On the basis of his classic Liberal economic theory Dirk also built a vision of the rights of man, which he expressed with Napoleonic fervor in a stage version of his father's novel *Kraspoekol*. The play created a tumult at its first performance,<sup>17</sup> but the typical anti-slavery sentiments of the author were beginning to find ever more sympathy, not only among those for whom Rousseau was primarily a prophet of a new egalitarian humanitarianism, but also

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in those circles where the right and the freedom of man were primarily interpreted in economic terms. Still, though Dirk might fulminate against "the horrors that are committed in order to obtain slaves" who, he said, were "shipped to Batavia like a group of beasts," his revolutionary libertarianism did not go so far as to include the granting of complete political freedom to the Indonesian. "Political liberty," declared Dirk, "to which all people by their very nature possess an undeniable right, would at present, in the imperfect state of civilization in which the Javanese still are, be the most harmful gift that could be given them."<sup>18</sup>

This deft rationalization by which respect for human rights, freedom from restriction in economic enterprise, and continuing Dutch political control over the Indies were all made to mingle, found its culmination perhaps in the lengthy report of Willem van Hogendorp of 1827. This Willem van Hogendorp was the eldest son of the earlier mentioned Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, and was as convinced of the blessings of free enterprise as his uncle Dirk. Willem's report of 1827, written at the behest of the government, and at a time when for various reasons the colonial Indonesian economy seemed to retrogress more and more, was not only a ringing affirmation of the principle of freedom for European capital, but also sought, in effect, to make the subsistence and village centered Javanese subservient to that principle by forcing him, in one way or another, into a direct labor relationship with European capital, especially on the large estates. Lacking capital and entrepreneurial know-how and drive, the Javanese peasant by himself could not initiate a significant economic development, argued Willem. Only an active and extensive colonization effort by Europeans, the granting of land rights to Europeans, and an influx of capital could accomplish significant economic growth and bring a profitable balance in the colonial Indonesian budget for which, constitutionally, King William I was directly responsible. Labor would be necessary also, and by granting to European entrepreneurs sizable land concessions in the neighborhood of densely populated native areas such a labor supply would be assured, particularly as over time the indigenous population would increase. What van Hogendorp clearly expected was the proletarianization of the Javanese peasants, who, lacking reserve land in view of the expanding popul-

ation, would increasingly tend to become wage earners on the European estates. By counting also on the feudally structured spirit of subvience of the Javanese worker in his relation to the European estate owner, and by placing no impediments in the latter's way, capital would thus be attracted, and free Javanese labor, driven by the need for employment in shrinking village land area, would meet it to their mutual advantage.<sup>19</sup>

Before considering the "particularistic" reaction to Willem van Hogendorp's proposals their broader implications may perhaps be briefly traced. The 1827 report is, of course, the full blown credo of economic Liberalism, of freedom of contract between capital and labor in an unimpeded market, applied to colonial Indonesia. It compares in significant respects to those changes in economic outlook and policy in Britain and on the Continent of the same period, so ably described by Polanyi.<sup>20</sup> The 1827 report, in effect, proposed to transform the feudally oriented Javanese into economic man, driven by hunger and gain into wage employment on European estates, the land of which was lost for further subsistence cultivation to a growing village population. The report envisaged direct economic contact and contract between European capital and Indonesian labor, and thus it could still echo the unequivocal humanitarian attack on feudalism and on the indigenous aristocracy as an intermediary in the economic process that was the hallmark of early Liberal criticism of the policy of the East India Company (*vide* Dirk van Hogendorp). But the report, it is well to stress, also seems ambiguous in its estimate of the Javanese from time to time. Van Hogendorp is clear about the blessings which obedience to economic self-interest and a free labor market would bring to the Javanese; but van Hogendorp also gives the impression of regarding the Javanese as rather backward, as having to be awakened to his true selfinterest through the free interplay of economic needs and the means of meeting them. *Eventually*, the free laborer would thus confront the equally free European capitalist estate owner, and the government, recognizing the sanctity of economic law, would leave this confrontation also as free as possible. It is this last implication which makes the 1827 report, despite its touch of particularism, a kind of landmark in the development of the "universalistic" theme in colonial Indonesia, for it introduced perhaps most fully the



image of universal economic man and his drives, to which also the untutored Javanese would respond.

Although Willem van Hogendorp's report constitutes a kind of ideal type of the early universalistic ideology, its principles were already evident in the colonial practice of earlier decades. With the demise of the East India Company in 1800 Liberal and free trade ideas, in combination with the new French revolutionary concepts of man and the state, had—sometimes in strange combinations—begin to make headway. The administration of Marshal Herman Willem Daendels (1800-1811), Napoleon's emissary, is a case in point. There is official concern for the welfare of the Javanese, a systematic attempt to curtail feudal abuses and exploitations of the cultivator, and the assertion of a new concept of national Dutch power with—in the background—a national citizenship for all living under the Dutch flag in the Daendels era. All this inevitably meant collision with indigenous royal and aristocratic privilege. But there is also the same curious application of Liberal economic principles when it comes to the Indonesian cultivator as was evident in Willem van Hogendorp's 1827 report. The concept of economic man, possessed of the same universal economic drives, does not apparently apply to the Javanese in the same degree as it does to the European. This view, it seems well to stress, is the essential distinction between the ideas of Dirk van Hogendorp and his nephew Willem. The latter, as we have noted, stressed the lack of drive, entrepreneurial skill, not to mention of capital, on the part of the Javanese, necessitating the active and unrestricted intervention by European capital. This view Daendels seems to share. Daendels notes that the Javanese have no particular desire to become landowners—indeed he asserts that “landownership has never been known among the Javanese”—and he foreshadows Willem van Hogendorp again by declaring that the “shaping of the Javanese nation” depends on an unimpeded colonization effort by Europeans.<sup>21</sup> In line with this, and because he was driven by lack of money, Daendels accelerated a process of “refeudalization” by encouraging the sale of large private estates to European planters. The land of these estates was in fact sold with the native population on it, which subsequently became *talléable et corvéable à merci* of the European owner.

Thus the European estate owner would acquire his labor. Willem