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Dynamic farmers, dead plantations, and the myth of the lazy native

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ABSTRACT
This essay draws on insights from ethnographic and historical research in Indonesia to challenge a stubborn dualism that presents farmers as subsistence-oriented and risk-averse, in contrast to plantation corporations which are assumed to maximize productivity and profit. Drawing on this dualism, and setting aside centuries of enthusiastic farmer engagement in growing global market crops, oil palm plantation corporations and their government supporters maintain that farmers are not interested in growing oil palm, or cannot do so efficiently, while corporations can be trusted to get the job done. The essay troubles this dualism on theoretical, empirical, and political grounds.

KEYWORDS
Indonesia; plantations; oil palm; colonial policy; cacao; coffee; agribusiness corporations; rural development

Openness to the iterative back and forth between theory and empirical research is a key feature that has enabled *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (JPS) to develop the field of agrarian studies in original and compelling ways. In this essay I draw on insights from ethnographic and historical research in Indonesia to challenge a stubborn dualism that presents farmers as subsistence-oriented and risk-averse, in contrast to plantation corporations which are assumed to maximize productivity and profit.[1] This dualism plays an important role in Indonesia where corporations and their government supporters maintain that farmers are not interested in producing global market crops and/or cannot produce them efficiently, while corporations can be trusted to get the job done. In the colonial period the notion of farmer incapacity was entrenched in the 'myth of the lazy native,' a profoundly racialized ideological formation brilliantly analyzed by Malaysian historian Syed Hussein Alatas (1977). The myth is belied by three centuries of enthusiastic farmer engagement in producing global market crops. Currently, the myth enables the suppression of farmers who are eager to grow oil palm, a lucrative crop, and supports the granting of concessions to Indonesian and foreign-owned oil palm plantation corporations that already control over 30% of Indonesia's farmland.[2] My essay troubles this stubborn dualism on theoretical, empirical, and political grounds.

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[1] I define farmers as owner-operators with farms below 25 hectares, with or without hired fieldworkers. I adopt Indonesia's official definition of plantations as units exceeding 25 hectares since enterprises beyond that size typically require a plantation-like bureaucratic and supervisory regime. Indonesia's plantations need formal licences; they come in many sizes up to a maximum of 100,000 hectares, with management units averaging 5,000-10,000 hectares.

[2] https://chainreactionresearch.com/report/28-percent-of-indonesias-palm-oil-landbank-is-stranded/; Indonesia's total farmland is 62 million hectares https://data.worldbank.org. On the ownership of Indonesia's private and publicly listed plantation corporations see TuK Indonesia (2018) and Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth (2016)

Dualism in theory and practice

In the 1920s Dutch scholar Julius Herman Boeke propounded a general theory of dual societies, intended to account for the failure of native populations of 'the East' to develop. In contrast to the West, he proposed, societies in 'the East' are characterized by limited social needs and the deployment of effort only to fulfill such needs. Hence their economies are static. He concluded that efforts to promote native development were both harmful and futile. Colonial policy should focus on restoring the harmonious village life of 'an intrinsically Eastern community,' an idea he adopted from Gandhi.[3] Dutch critics of the time challenged Boeke's theorization for overlooking the colonial exploitation that constrained native economic activity. Nevertheless, Boeke's dualist model became embedded in the fields of peasant studies and development policy, where it has taken on new forms.

Boeke's theory that rural society can be divided into a static half and a dynamic half was favorably cited in the three-part essay by Teodor Shanin that inaugurated JPS and carved out the field of peasant studies (1973, 1974). Shanin notes that 'Peasant economies have indeed shown a remarkable degree of structural persistence under different external impacts, their essential characteristics outliving, as it were, most of the social and economic systems in which they appeared. Boeke's notion of dual economy and society seems to document, in a somewhat overstressed form, such a case (Boeke 1953)' (Shanin 1974, 186–7).

As the field of peasant studies developed, the concept of a static peasantry governed by a distinct 'moral economy' (Scott 1976) oriented towards subsistence was subject to significant critique. The work of Sydney Mintz (1973), for example, focused on the Caribbean where formerly enslaved and indentured workers had carved out livelihoods on the fringes of the plantation economy: his peasants were not exemplars of a fixed type but people who had responded to new circumstances in dynamic ways. Eric Wolf (1982) wrote against static portrayals of people 'without history'. William Roseberry (1989) exposed problematic renderings of 'natural economy,' and Michael Kearney (1996) explicitly rejected dualistic framings. Theories of articulation examined how the two apparently distinct spheres were linked, with the 'peasant' sphere tolerated so long as it produced cheap workers and cheap wage goods to subsidize capitalist enterprise (Wolpe 1980; Bernstein 2010, 89–95). A crucial critique concerned the homogeneity attributed to 'peasants,' as scholars pointed out that farmers vary significantly in their degrees of market engagement and may be subject to class differentiation (Bernstein 2010).

Despite such critiques, dualism persists among scholars who argue that intensive market involvement is not farmers' natural condition but a path they are forced into or enter by mistake. Theorist of contemporary peasant lifeways Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2014), for example, draws a contrast between what he calls peasant agriculture and entrepreneurial agriculture. He characterizes peasant agriculture in terms of farmer autonomy, love of the land, limited debt, and production for direct use or for local markets; entrepreneurial agriculture is the opposite in every way. He argues that farmers who take the entrepreneurial path are misguided as they will end up with ruined farms

[3]See Boeke (1953). Wertheim (1961) reviews Boeke's ideas and influence.

encumbered by debt, a position also espoused by activists associated with the La Via Campesina (Desmarais 2002).[4]

Dualist schemes are embedded in the attention scholars pay to the role of force in breaking down farmer autonomy. Whether force takes the form of enclosure, rent, taxation, debt or direct coercion, the implication is that without such force, farmers would protect their commons, limit market engagement and opt for risk-minimizing, more ecologically attuned ways of life (De Angelis 2001; Glassman 2006; Federici 2004). [5] Focusing on the global south, theories foregrounding dependency and peripheralization suggest that production of commodities for global markets is a source of impoverishment, hence farmers avoid it when they can.

As many scholars have shown, theories foregrounding coercion fit poorly in island Southeast Asia where force has not been used to push reluctant farmers into global markets; rather, since colonial times, farmers have been eager to produce for these markets whenever they can obtain good prices and evade monopsony and coercive control (Elson 1997; Bosma 2019; Hall 2012, 2011).[6] While some farmers are wedded to their ancestral land, others move off to land frontiers when opportunity beckons; and they refuse to be confined to food production much to the chagrin of trustees, colonial and contemporary, who argue that the village and the rice field are their natural habitat (Kratoska 1985). Like the cacao farmers of Ghana described in the classic work of Polly Hill (1963), Southeast Asian farmers have repeatedly launched into global commodity production on their own initiative, using their own funds and locally sourced credit (Cramb et al. 2017; Fox and Castella 2013). They have also proven to be competitive in market terms. Despite the narrative that associates plantations with modern, industrial, technically efficient methods, scholars studying the rise and fall of plantation agriculture note that farmers routinely outcompete plantations and many crops that were once grown on plantations are now farmer based (Byerlee 2014; Bosma 2019, 14; Bissonnette and De Koninck 2015).

Overlooking counterevidence, dualist arguments that present farmers as incapable of producing global market crops have taken on new life in the era of pro-corporate development policy. If farmers are not serious about producing the food and commodities needed to supply a growing global population, so the argument goes, policies should favor agribusiness corporations. An iteration of this argument is found in the 2011 World Bank report on global farmland investment which concluded that half of the world's potentially arable land is un- or underutilized, and calculated the dollar value it could produce under efficient management (Deininger et al. 2011). Read critically, the report conjures a dualistic world in which static, unproductive farmers (and pastoralists) occupy far too much land, and productive agri-business corporations occupy too little (Li 2014c). Countering this argument, a 600-page report commissioned by the FAO confirmed that farmers with plot sizes of less than two hectares are responsible for most of the agricultural production in Asia and Africa, and could produce much more on a sustainable, agro-ecological basis if given support in the form of infrastructure, finance and appropriate research (IAASTD

[4]For a critical review of this literature see Bernstein (2014).

[5]Historicizing the enclosure narrative Perelman (2000) shows that classical political economists privately recognized the efficiency and productivity of farmers, but conjured images of static and slothful peasants to justify enclosure and forced displacement into factory work.

[6]For an expansive review of Southeast Asia's commodity frontiers see Nevins and Peluso (2008).

2009). Yet the IAASTD report failed to shift the policy narrative; farmers continue to be drastically under supported; and the 2021 UN Food System Summit promoted a corporate agribusiness agenda (Herren and Haerlin 2020).

Spurred by concerns over climate change and human rights, agri-business corporations are seizing the moment, promising to solve global problems by deploying advanced tracking technologies. Consumer-driven demands that palm oil meet environmental and human rights standards are a case in point. Tracking supply chains is much simpler when production is centralized. In an interview I conducted with my co-researcher Pujo Semedi, an official at the ILO responsible for monitoring labor standards in the oil palm sector explained that the ILO could not track worker safety on thousands of small farms, hence it focused on plantations. EU demands for proof that oil palm is not grown on deforested lands require every plot to be registered and its no-deforestation status confirmed, presenting farmers with a massive technical and bureaucratic challenge.[7] Corporate demand for carbon offsets is more readily met by expanding corporate 'forest' plantations than by tracking carbon in complex landscapes (Borras et al. 2022; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). The outcome of these tracking initiatives is to render farmers and their practices invisible or cast them as unruly and unsafe, while casting corporations as reliable and transparent.

Climate rationales lurk in the World Bank's effort to identify 'un- and under-utilized' land, as experts argue that maximum efficiency should be achieved on existing farmland to reduce forest encroachment (Deininger et al. 2011), the so-called 'land-sparing' approach. Schemes that would set aside half the earth's surface for efficient (corporate, high tech) agriculture and remove unproductive farmers from the other half to let nature return to its Edenic state are contemporary dualism's leading edge. In multiple ways, green agendas and climate change furnish agri-business corporations with new arguments to confirm their superior capacity (Borras et al. 2022). They consign farmers enthusiastically producing global commodities to a no man's land: neither nature nor corporate agriculture, they do not fit in dualist schemes.

The myth of the lazy native

In Indonesia, the focus of my historical and ethnographic research, farmers producing global market crops have been routinely overlooked. Production is concentrated in the uplands, hinterlands, and islands where the terrain is not suited for irrigated rice. Farmers grow some crops for sale in local markets and in upland Java in the 1970s improved roads encouraged farmers to produce temperate vegetables (onions, cabbages, potatoes) for a growing urban middle class (Hefner 1990). Yet in many hinterland areas, especially outside Java, poor transportation makes it impractical to produce perishable crops like fruit and vegetables and local food markets are quickly saturated. Hence farmers prefer to produce export crops such as tobacco, rubber, coffee, clove, cacao, coconut, and oil palm. These crops offer good returns to labor, which is the scarce factor of production in these areas. It is harder for farmers to crash a global market and although price collapses are painful, farmers are accustomed to cycles of boom and bust.

[7]https://chainreactionresearch.com/report/eu-deforestation-regulation-implications-for-the-palm-oil-industry-and-its-financers

Coffee was an early boom crop. In 1791 when revolution in Saint-Domingue decimated global coffee supply, farmers in the Indonesian island of Sumatra rapidly filled the gap. In the 1840s 12,000 porters were reported to carry harvested coffee beans to load into US ships waiting in the port of Padang (Bosma 2019, 106). As Bosma notes, some farmers probably supplemented family labor with enslaved or indebted labor, a practice common in the archipelago before 1900 in areas where 'free' labor was scarce. Nevertheless, thousands of highlanders were involved in producing coffee on their own farns and they reaped significant rewards, especially when they were able to maintain their food production and avoid the yoke of local chiefs (2019, 44–70, 98-107).

Rather than welcome independent, farmer-based export-crop production, colonial authorities elected to overlook it. Beginning in the seventeenth century, as Syed Hussein Alatas shows, colonial authorities conjured a racialized 'myth of the lazy native' proposing that native farmers did not produce more than they needed for their own subsistence. To propound this myth, authorities had to overlook native farmers' ample production of rice, pepper, onions, garlic, sheep, deer, beef, pepper, cloth, daggers and spears, goods transported around the archipelago and across the Indian Ocean in junks weighing up to 200 tons (Alatas 1977, 185–90); and they had to set aside the sophistication of the Southeast Asian merchants who traded in these products using complex financial instruments comparable to those in Europe (Braudel 1979, 33–5). Incompetent traders were fit to be displaced by colonial trading monopolies; lazy farmers needed to be coerced.

The myth of the lazy native was deployed early in the eighteenth century to justify the coercion of coffee farmers in Java. Ironically, no coercion was needed to persuade farmers to start producing coffee. Farmers eagerly adopted the crop when it arrived in the Priangan region in 1707 and maintained their enthusiasm so long as they could sell their coffee freely at the global market price. In 1723 the Netherlands Indies Trading Company asserted control over coffee, suppressed free trade, and replaced the market price with a miniscule 'delivery allowance.' Company officials interpreted farmer reluctance to produce coffee for a near-zero return as confirmation of their laziness, and imposed delivery quotas that were harshly enforced.[8] As Jan Breman explains, the 'Priangan system' of forced coffee production was especially brutal. Company officials argued that native farmers had ample reserves of land and labor they were too lazy to use and pressed for ever-higher delivery quotas. Farmers were forced to plant coffee on land that was unsuitable or too far from their homes, jeopardizing their food production and causing famine in some areas (Breman 2015; Li, Pelletier, and Sangadji 2016).

Around 1800, as Company rule morphed into rule by the Dutch Crown, the critic Dirk van Hogendorp argued that land should be distributed to native farmers and the forced delivery of agricultural products abolished. Restating the lazy native rationale, the newly appointed Governor General of the Netherland Indies responded as follows: the Javanese are reluctant to acquire more than they need for subsistence; force is required to compel them to produce more; if they make a profit they stop work until the profit is exhausted; since natives do not make proper use of the land, any land distributed to them would fall into the hands of Chinese or Europeans; and the Dutch had no means to compel Javanese rulers to accept such reforms (Alatas 1977, 65).

[8]The replacement of market logics by administrative logics is examined by Schrauwers (2011).

Backed by lazy native arguments, the Indies government deepened and extended its use of coercion over the following century. In 1823 farmers coerced to meet coffee quotas provided 77% of Netherlands Indies export revenue (Kano 2008, 35). Coercion was central to the infamous Cultivation System for coffee and sugar that extended over much of Java from 1830-1870. In the 1840s over 60% of rural households in the affected areas were forced to do virtually unpaid work on these crops or related infrastructure for a minimum of 66 days per year (Bosma 2019, 75, 211n19). In the hard-pressed Priangan region, unpaid labor obligations extended to 225 days, squeezing out other productive and wage-earning activities (Breman 2015, 223). Yet coercion did not increase production. Throughout the period of coerced coffee production which lasted until 1910 in some areas, farmers who were permitted to sell their coffee freely at the global market price planted it enthusiastically and obtained much higher yields (Breman 2015, 271; Li, Pelletier, and Sangadji 2016, 607). Reviewing the history of coerced cultivation in Java, historian William Clarence-Smith (1994) concluded that the whole coercive system was unnecessary, wasteful, and inefficient from the perspective of both the producers and the colonial purse. Yet force was sustained, and independent farmer production was suppressed for two centuries, backed by the lazy native rationale.

In Sumatra, suppression of independent coffee production was instituted in 1837 by controlling the rivers, and from 1847–1908 coffee production quotas were imposed. Absurdly low production 'allowances' meant that farmers produced only enough coffee to fill their quotas and turned to other export crops that were less tightly controlled to meet their cash needs (Oki 1984). Colonial efforts to suppress independent production and/or suppress prices ensured that almost all the surplus was removed from the local economy in this period, leaving only a bare minimum for 'subsistence' in place. Addressing the presumed subsistence orientation of peasants directly, Akira Oki argues that it was the suppression of farmer production that created the illusion of a 'naturally' static, subsistence economy; periods of recession in which markets and access to wage work collapsed produced the same illusion.[9] Rather than a linear transition from subsistence to commerce, Oki argues, farmers' emphasis on commerce waxed and waned in relation to economic opportunities and politically induced constraints (1984, 271–3). Based on these observations, Oki proposes a reframing of theory away from the question 'what are the characteristics of a subsistence economy' to ask instead 'why certain societies are subsistence economies,' rejecting understandings of risk aversion and a subsistence ethic as characteristics of a peasant type in favor of historically grounded analysis (1984, 288).

The apparent stasis of the Sumatra's smallholding population evaporated when compulsory coffee cultivation was abolished in 1908. Concerned to increase the supply of Indonesia's principal food crop, rice, colonial authorities built new roads into highland areas where they hoped farmers would be willing to tap their abundant rice reserves. Instead, highlanders opted to *reduce* their rice production in favor of coffee, which was much more lucrative. Farmers whose land was not suited to coffee planted other commercial crops such as coconuts and rubber. Officials tried to pressure farmers to maintain rice production without success (Schrieke 1955, 98–101). In one case officials ordered rubber trees to be cut down because they had squeezed out rice production, an untenable

[9]White (2015) explores the effects of inflationary and deflationary crises on Indonesia's commodity frontiers.

situation in their eyes though not untenable, presumably, in the eyes of the farmers who planted the rubber (Geertz 1963, 123, fn76).

Traveling in the Sumatra interior in the 1920s Dutch sociologist Bertram Schrieke saw palpable signs of new wealth: 'Houses, Medan or Singapore style, are rising up like mushrooms, for the population invests all the money not required for expanding cultivation in such building' (1955, 101). Schrieke noted new practices: farmers were hiring wage workers to help with both food and cash crops; there was a new demand for the extension of roads and a new willingness among farmers to help pay for them; and farmers requested that a farmers' journal include market quotations from Batavia and Singapore. Former residents who had migrated away from these previously isolated areas returned to participate in the new economy (1955, 104–5). Farmers in other parts of the archipelago prospered as well; in Kalimantan and Sumatra they purchased thousands of bicycles, hundreds of sewing machines, and dozens of motorcars during the 1920s, and in Sulawesi farmers producing copra invested in children's education (Bosma 2019, 99–100).

Corporate plantations emerged in the Netherlands Indies after 1870, facilitated by a Land Law that claimed all land for the Dutch crown except for tiny areas recognized as individual private property.[10] Concessions were promptly granted to plantation corporations with a focus on sugar and tea in Java (Bosma 2019), and tobacco followed by rubber and oil palm on Sumatra's east coast (Stoler 1995). Despite sustained government support for plantation corporations, in 1930 farmers still produced 53% of the colony's agricultural export revenue (Geertz 1963, 105). In Java sugar farmers threatened to outcompete plantations because their production costs were 25% lower; corporations responded by persuading the government to ban farmers from growing sugar (Bosma 2019, 105). Rubber began in 1906 as a plantation crop but farmers soon took over, producing 60% of rubber exports by 1938 and 80% circa 2000. Government efforts to protect rubber plantations from farmer competition failed, and many plantation corporations went bankrupt.[11]

Plantation corporations were especially concerned about competition for labor supply. As Tom Brass and Henry Bernstein pointed out in their introduction to a special JPS issue on colonial plantations in Asia (1992), plantation corporations in Sumatra used the lazy native argument to justify importing migrant workers. They then imposed indenture contracts on the migrants to prevent them from absconding from the plantations to work for neighboring farmers, who paid better wages. Rather like Java's coffee farmers who were coerced to fill quotas without a fair return, migrant plantation workers in Sumatra were not reluctant to work; they were reluctant to work for pay that was lower than the market rate. Managers who employed both indentured and free workers on their plantations noted that the former were 30% more productive, a feat achieved by implementing fierce discipline and a ten-hour workday (Bosma 2019, 127; Breman 1989).

[10]Key clauses of the 1870 colonial Land Law were repeated in the post-independence Agrarian Law of 1960, and the land rights of most of Indonesia's farmers continue to be insecure. They have de facto possession but may be displaced whenever a government agency or corporation bearing a concession license lays claim to their land. On colonial land law and contemporary land struggles see McCarthy and Robinson (2016) and Lund (2020).

[11]Colonial observers' frustrations at being outcompeted by farmers are discussed in Dove (2019). Dove maintains that Dayak farmers opted to balance rice and rubber production to protect themselves from market risk. However farmers squeezed for land or labor may abandon food production in favor of the more lucrative crop. See Feintrenie (2010) and Li (2014a).

Dynamic farmers

By dynamic farmers I mean farmers who create and respond to new livelihood opportunities, transform their social, ecological, and economic relations, and take risks. Several conditions are necessary for them to launch enthusiastically into the production of global market crops, of which I will briefly explore three: desire, opportunity and security. To illustrate I draw on my ethnographic research in the Indonesian island of Sulawesi which was the epicenter of a cacao boom that took Indonesia from zero production in 1980 to become the world's third largest producer by 2000, all of it planted on the initiative of farmers with 'spectacular efficiency' and little or no government support (Ruf, Yoddang, and Ardhy 1995).

As I showed in *Land's End* (2014b), desires have histories, geographies, and specific social coordinates. Sulawesi highland farmers who launched into cacao in 1990 had their reasons. They experienced severe subsistence crises related to the El Niño droughts that afflict the region every 4–7 years, devastating their fields of rice and corn and forcing them to rely on famine foods that were increasingly scarce. They were chronically short of cash, as incomes form their previous market crops, tobacco and shallots, had collapsed. And they were ready for a change. Cacao, they reasoned, was easy to grow. Women were especially enthusiastic about a future in which they could reach out to pluck a cacao pod from a tree and turn it into money instead of spending their days on hands and knees weeding fields of corn, rice, or tobacco. With cash they could buy rice and still have funds to improve their houses and buy clothes. They could also send their children to school, overcoming the shame they experienced due to their illiteracy and inability to speak Indonesian. Unlike the highlanders in mainland Southeast Asia described by James Scott (2009), they did not see themselves as culturally distinct people, proudly sustaining their autonomy. They thought of themselves as ordinary villagers but poor and woefully isolated because the government failed to provide them with roads and schools. They did not seek autonomy from markets but fair prices and a level of prosperity that had eluded them thus far.

The opportunity to prosper from cacao was furnished by highlanders' access to land, which was broadly distributed at the beginning of the boom: all highlanders who wanted to plant cacao were able to do so. They simply planted cacao seedlings on their current swidden fields, turning their shared commons into private property, plot by plot. No one opposed this bottom-up process of enclosure since everyone wanted to plant cacao. Opportunity was also furnished by breaking the monopsony of coastal merchants who bought highland products. Records show that highlanders produced tobacco for export as early as 1820 but the dynamism potentially introduced by their tobacco production was suppressed. Merchants extracted all the surplus, leaving highlanders with no funds to invest in farm productivity or ventures like trade or money lending. My highland interlocutors understood this very well: they said the merchants on the coast grew rich from their tobacco while their situation remained the same from one generation to the next. There was no 'increase' as they put it – no improvement in any aspect of their lives. With cacao, in contrast, multiple merchants competed for business and successful cacao farmers were able to realize a profit which they used to invest in their farms and buy more land.

Security was a more complex condition, and some farmers ended up radically insecure following their decision to plant cacao. Initially, security was achieved by maintaining food production but as the shared swidden land was enclosed and filled with cacao, food production was squeezed out. Ironically, attempting to maintain food production made farmers less secure: the highland soils are too poor to farm intensively without fallow, and highlanders who insisted on growing food on residual small, worn-out plots failed miserably; they also failed to generate enough funds to buy the agricultural chemicals without which cacao production falls to zero by year seven. They soon discovered that the best way to hold onto their land was to plant more of the higher value crop, cacao, and hope to make enough money to buy food; some, however, were unable to repay the loans they took to buy sacks of rice and were forced to sell their land. Classes emerged as successful farmers bought up the land of struggling neighbors, some of whom became landless.

The problem of landlessness is relatively new in highland Southeast Asia. In much of the region until around 1980 farmers could expand into forests when population increased or new opportunities beckoned (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). The security furnished by an open land frontier enabled dynamic farming: during Sumatra's coffee booms of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, farmers could respond to failed farming ventures by opening new land and trying again; and they could respond to periods of price collapse by reverting to food production (Oki 1984). By the 1990s Sulawesi cacao farmers did not have these options as oil palm plantations and resettlement schemes took up more and more space, forest boundaries were enforced, and farmers competed among themselves to enclose land for cacao. Hence the agrarian classes that formed became definitive: landless people had no way to acquire land for food, cacao, or other new crops that came along.

Highlanders who succeeded in establishing viable cocoa farms became more secure, with savings to cover emergencies and buy food when necessary. For newly landless highlanders, survival was ever more difficult. Cacao needs little labor; the regional economy offered very little employment; and their inability to speak Indonesian made it difficult to migrate further afield. For farmers and the newly formed class of wage-seekers alike, social isolation and government neglect added to the challenges. Farmers in many parts of the world are protected by subsidies in the form of state transfers (pensions, subsidized sacks of rice, basic income supplements, cheap farm inputs), remittances from family members working elsewhere, or the subsidy from nature represented by an open land frontier and fertile forest soils. Ready access to off-farm work also helps keep marginally productive farmers afloat (Bernstein 2010, 110–2). Sulawesi highlanders had no access to subsidies or protections; they had only their farms to rely on. The lesson I draw from this is not that farmers should focus on food production and avoid market risk; rather, supports should be in place to make their ventures more profitable and less risky, a point to which I will return.

Whether growing coffee in colonial times or cacao today, the farmers I have described do not fit the model embedded in dualist schemes which consign them to a subsistence niche. Close attention to their desires and practices reveals a differentiated picture in which they have eagerly engaged in markets when opportunities beckon but their capacity to stabilize their farm enterprises, accumulate wealth and achieve their consumption goals depends on their access to land, fair prices, and crucial safety nets. My deeper concern with dualist models is not that they fit poorly with farmer experiences; it is the way they are deployed to legitimate the privileges granted to plantation corporations, the topic to which I now turn.

Dead plantations

Dualist schemes that present farmers as unwilling or incompetent producers of global market crops conjure a mirror image: modern agri-business plantations, purportedly capable of bringing jobs, development, and productivity to remote regions. Exploring dualism as a policy narrative in the Malaysian state of Sarawak at the start of the oil palm boom, Rob Cramb cites Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud who envisaged 'modern agricultural development along the major trunk road with rows of plantations and villages well organized in centrally managed estates' (Cramb 2012, 278). Referring to his fellow citizens as 'natives,' a racialized term of colonial origin, Taib argued that only government and corporate intervention could bring lazy, irrational people into the economic mainstream. To sustain this narrative officials kept counterevidence at bay and abandoned Sarawak's long tradition of offering support to farmers growing global market crops such as pepper. Cramb (2012, 287) describes how a program providing inputs to farmers who wanted to plant oil palm on their own land was promptly withdrawn: it received 8970 applications in one year, evidence of farmer enthusiasm that interfered with the myth of the lazy native and threatened the interests of plantation corporations seeking land concessions.

Lazy native rationales abound in Indonesia's plantation zone, where Pujo Semedi and I conducted ethnographic research from 2010-2015. In *Plantation Life* (2021), we quote managers who offered a heroic version of their role in taming the wildness of the Kalimantan interior: 'The Dayaks had not built anything here, they didn't even wear clothes,' one manager remarked. He portrayed the Dayak and Malay communities whose land the plantation occupied as static, primitive, and unproductive. He ignored the transformations of the preceding centuries during which eight different Dayak groups speaking distinct languages had migrated into the area to grow rice and harvest forest products destined for world markets. He also overlooked their history of adaptation: they had lived for seven decades as neighbors of a colonial rubber plantation; they had adopted rubber as their own principal cash crop and forged relations with Chinese rubber traders; and they had absorbed two generations of Javanese ex-plantation workers who married into the local population.

The manager's failure to note that the local population was productive, multilingual, and dynamic was no accident. According to the dualist scheme, it is plantation corporations that transform static places by bringing jobs and development. Managers we met stressed their technical competence and complained bitterly when they were obliged to work with farmers contracted to supply oil palm fruit to the plantation mill. The Indonesian government promoted contract farming schemes during the 1980s, a period in which the World Bank and other development agencies regarded farmers as capable of contributing to national development. Oil palm contracting schemes required corporations to place 80% of their concession in the hands of farming households, each allocated a two-hectare plot; 20% was managed directly by plantation staff. As our ethnographic study showed, some farmers prospered through these schemes although they faulted corporations for unfair treatment. Plantation managers saw the situation quite differently. They described farmers as lazy and unruly, 'the source of problems,' willfully interrupting plantation order, productivity, and profit.

Around 2000 Indonesia's plantation policy shifted away from farmer support towards increased privileges for corporations. New rules permitted plantation corporations to manage their entire concessions and reduced their obligation to engage with farmers. In the new contract schemes, when they materialize, plantation managers directly control all the land nominally assigned to contracted farmers, and these 'farmers' do not grow palms; they simply receive a small monthly payment into their bank accounts.[12] Although the rhetoric of the Indonesian Oil Palm Growers association (GAPKI) stresses corporate support for farmers, in practice GAPKI marginalizes both contracted and independent oil palm farmers. The reason is not hard to identify. Corporate recognition that farmers can grow oil palms efficiently and achieve prosperity through their own efforts would eliminate the rationale for installing plantations.

Several dimensions of Indonesia's plantations lead me to classify this mode of organizing production as moribund, if not dead. One is the corporate license to cause harm. The government grants massive land concessions to corporations on the promise that they have beneficial effects, namely bringing jobs and development to remote areas. Yet, to install and run plantations, corporations inevitably inflict harms. Corporate land acquisition in Indonesia often involves the presence of the military and police and may result in death, injury and arrest; yet even when land acquisition is peaceful, plantation corporations displace farmers from the land they use, reducing farmer autonomy and rendering previous livelihoods impossible. Reduction of biodiversity is not an accidental harm – it is the very purpose of plantations which are designed to convert mixed landscapes into vast homogenous fields producing just one crop. Jobs are a promised benefit, yet corporations are legally entitled to use and dispose of workers at will, notably contract and casual workers who are not protected under Indonesia's 2003 Labor Law.

Plantation corporations also expect continuous support and protection from politicians and government officials at all levels since corporations are classified as partners that advance the cause of national development. The harm that stems from the tight relationship between the government and corporations is to undermine the rights of citizens who live in plantation zones. Although there is no formal change in their legal status, in practice workers, contract farmers and villagers in areas surrounding plantations cannot ask their village heads or other officials for protection from corporate harms since these officials are expected to collaborate with the corporations on a formal basis, as part of their job descriptions. Corporations pay the officials a monthly honorarium and additional payments for services rendered. Baed on our research, Pujo Semedi and I came to characterize everyday life in a plantation zone as life under corporate occupation. Huge swaths of countryside are occupied by corporations that dominate social, political and economic relations but have no legal responsibility for the condition of

[12]For excellent analysis of the contemporary oil palm sector in Indonesia and Malaysia and different contract formats see Cramb and McCarthy (2016). The unfairness of current contract farming schemes is exposed in https://thegeckoproject.org/articles/promised-prosperity-drowning-in-debt/

the occupied population. The results are profoundly undemocratic and for some villagers and workers, they are lethal.

A second feature of plantations that qualifies them as moribund is their chronic dependence on state subsidies for life support: These subsidies stand in stark contrast to the harsh market discipline imposed on Indonesia's farmers and workers. Plantation land is subsidized: corporations are granted concessions to use state-claimed land for a period of 35 years, renewable. They do not pay for the use of this land at the market price; low license fees make it virtually free of charge. Plantation corporations also access subsidized credit, since they are permitted to use their plantation concession licenses as collateral for bank loans (Obidzinski et al. 2012, 25). They often access subsidized labor, furnished by the Transmigration program that uses government funds to settle would-be farming families in the vicinity of plantations and fails to provide them with sufficient land to sustain themselves (Li 2016; Potter 2012). A further subsidy comes in the form of laws that favor corporations, and lax enforcement of laws that impose costly obligations (Pichler 2015). The taxes owed by plantation corporations are very low, and payments are not effectively enforced (Li and Semedi 2021, 166).

Taken together, the subsidies granted to corporations cast doubt on the dualist narrative that conflates the large scale of plantations with efficiency and productivity. Many of Indonesia's plantation corporations are inefficient, producing low yields and running their huge mills far below capacity, and they are chronically prone to corruption (Li and Semedi 2021, 176–83). Nevertheless, inefficient plantations survive and their access to subsidies removes any pressure to innovate. Indeed, they are technologically stagnant. Managers deploy a century-old method for harvesting oil palm fruit, namely a skilled man wielding a sharp knife attached to a very long stick; workers are not supplied with wheelbarrows to cart the heavy palm fruit to the roadside, obliging them to carry the loads on their backs. As in colonial times, profits are not increased through innovation or productive efficiency but by squeezing more labor from workers while reducing their cost (Li 2017). It is a deadening regime, not a dynamic one.

Finally, the zones surrounding oil palm plantations can be classified as dead in the sense Caribbean scholar George Beckford (1972) noted decades ago: there is no diversity or investment in the local economy.[13] Corporations process raw fruit into crude palm oil in their on site mills, but send the oil elsewhere to be refined and transformed into food products, cosmetics and so on. Corporate profits flow far away and migrant workers remit their wages to families in other provinces. Hence very little money circulates in the surrounding villages and multipliers at the provincial level are feeble as well (Obidzinski, Dermanwan, and Hadianto 2014).

In contrast to dead plantations, or farmers tied to corporations on unfair contracts, independent oil palm farmers generate a lively local economy. Many lack access to high quality seedlings and sufficient fertilizer, hence they achieve lower yields per hectare than well run plantations. Yet agronomists confirm that there are no technical economies of scale in growing oil palm and the inverse relation applies: farmers can achieve yields equal to those on plantations, and they do so at much lower cost per

[13]Ulbe Bosma (2019) argues that state-supported sugar conglomerates took control of Java in the colonial period with a similarly deadening effect. Notably, the conglomerates lobbied the government to permit imports of cheap rice, ruining rice farmers and driving them to work in sugar fields and factories for low wages.

ton since they do not need to pay for overseers, administrators and guards (Cramb and McCarthy 2016, 32; Carter 1984; Deininger and Byerless 2011). The technical challenge concerns milling the fresh palm fruit, which must be completed within 48 hours of harvesting, a challenge that could be met by government support for small dispersed mills and good roads. Oil palm farmers calculate that they need a minimum of 6 hectares to prosper: 2 hectares to cover monthly expenses, 2 hectares to cover farm inputs, and 2 hectares to cover savings for emergencies and investment in education or land purchase for the next generation. With 8 hectares they can send several children to university. If they have sufficient land, they retain diverse crops but where they are squeezed for land or labor they usually opt for mono-cropped palm to maximize their income (Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang 2010).

Class differentiation among oil palm farmers can be fierce: as with cacao in highland Sulawesi, not everyone succeeds with this crop. Farmers who lack access to capital are squeezed and may lose their land (McCarthy 2008; Habibi 2022). Yet our ethnographic research confirms that everyday life among oil palm farmers is much less bleak than that of villagers in zones dominated by by plantation corporations. Prosperous farmers in our research site hired workers and paid them double plantation wages. Since skilled labor was scarce, farmers provided workers with housing, transportation, food, bonuses and other benefits to attract and retain them. Where farmers prosper and workers are well paid, they spend money locally improving their houses, buying motorbikes, installing generators, and acquiring goods and services so neighbors who have been squeezed out of farming can make a living in other spheres. They are also more flexible than plantations, adapting to market and climate contingencies by switching crops and shifting livelihood activities as needed, a process we observed during the period 2010–2015 when the price of rubber collapsed and villagers rebalanced their on and off-farm portfolios.

Tragically, Indonesia's dynamic farmers and the broadly based rural development they enable receive very little official support while corporate plantations continue to expand. The problem is graphically represented on Figure 1 where the shading indicates land allocated to oil palm plantation corporations. No one knows if these massive areas of monocrop production could be repurposed in the event of ecological or market collapse, and Indonesian law has no provision to return expired land concessions to villagers. Ecological, economic, and political relations are locked in, a dead zone indeed.

Political strategy beyond dualism

My review of Indonesia's history of export crop production challenges a stubborn dualism that has shaped theory and practice for several centuries. Whether framed negatively as lazy natives, or positively as peasant producers who are subsistence oriented and risk averse, the peasant side of the dualism fits poorly with upland locales where farmers have embraced global market crops and often jumped in with both feet. They have done so with good reason: the argument that engagement in global commodity production is a sure pathway to impoverishment does not reflect the historical experience of Southeast Asia where many farmers have prospered, even as some lose out.

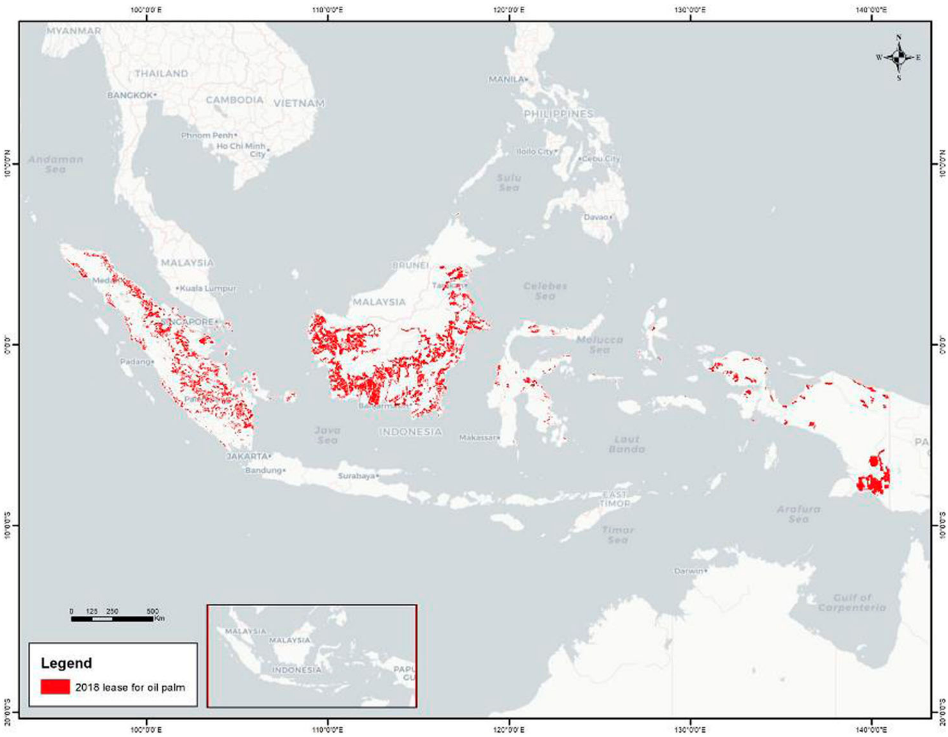

Figure 1. Land given out as oil palm concessions in Indonesia (2018). Source: https://chainreactionresearch.com/report/28-percent-of-indonesias-palm-oil-landbank-is-stranded/.

Turning to the corporate side of the dualist divide, my review casts doubt on the superior efficiency, productivity and technical dynamism of plantation corporations. Corporations are extensions of state sovereignty, privileged in numerous ways (Barkan 2013). Fernand Braudel (1979) captured this point long ago. The idea that plantation corporations are subject to the competitive pressures of a 'self-regulating market' is a myth since markets are routinely fixed or distorted by *defacto* or legal monopolies. Although plantation corporations promise dynamism, development, and a bright future, the worlds they create are static and deadening, a crucial finding that scholars have captured in the concept of the plantationocene (Wolford 2021; Murphy and Schroering 2020).

Reversing this disastrous trajectory is a political project urgently in need of traction. To intervene effectively in history, a political strategy must resonate with the common sense of the people who have most at stake in changing its course (Thomas 2010; Li 2019). The global peasant movement the Via Campesina opposes corporate dominance over agriculture and global food chains, a platform with which Indonesian farmers would wholeheartedly concur. For several centuries corporations of different kinds have suppressed their activities, reduced their incomes and in the case of plantations, dispossessed them entirely. Yet the second element of the 'peasant path,' the one promoting the production of food for local consumption has little traction in Indonesia's highlands and hinterlands where farmers have a long history of producing global market crops. They retain food production when it fits in their farm repertoire but do not give it pride of place.[14]

On Java, where most farm plots are tiny, the owners, renters and sharecroppers who manage these plots seek to maximize the returns to their labor which they deploy both on and off farm (White 2018, 1122). In the highland areas I have studied the same labor-saving calculus applies. It was the drudgery and uncertain returns from swidden rice production that encouraged women in highland Sulawesi to try their hand with cacao, and even those who ended up losing their land did not express nostalgia for their lost food production. Their lament was that land access had come to an end and they had no way to achieve the prosperity that cacao had brought to their neighbors. For farmers who are squeezed for land or labor the adoption of agro-ecological methods, like chemical methods, has to generate paybacks that cover the opportunity costs. They simply cannot afford to farm in ways that do not pay.

Indonesian farmers who grow export crops have often prospered. As I noted, processes of class differentiation may emerge among them, especially where land access comes to an end. Some farmers will be excluded, a problem that could be mitigated in several ways: farmers would be less squeezed for land if there were fewer corporate plantations; government provision of infrastructure, subsidies and cash supports could help more farmers, if not all of them, achieve stability; government investment in roads, education, and communications could improve access to off farm work and remittances to help prevent downward spirals of debt and land loss.

Providing farmer support and rural infrastructure is a development strategy that has been followed successfully in many parts of Asia, albeit under different political rationales.[15] In Thailand, the world's third largest palm oil producer, farmers dominate oil palm production and there are no corporate plantations (Colchester and Chao 2011). It is significant that Thailand was not directly colonized, and no colonial-era land law or lazy native myth stand in the way. Thai farmers also have the capacity to make effective demands for state services (Walker 2012), a capacity Indonesia's farmers lost when the Farmers Union was annihilated in the brutal massacres of 1965–66 and have not recovered (White, Graham, and Savitri 2022; White 2016). Indonesia's rice farmers have occasionally received some support, notably during the period of the Green Revolution which successfully raised yields on even the tiniest farms (White 2018) and in 1980s when plantation corporations were obliged to provide farmers with contract schemes. The main trend for several centuries, however, has been to neglect farmers while supporting and subsidizing corporations.

Theories of peasant economy and pro-corporate development policy have a radically different political bite, but they share in the dualist the assumption that producing food for local consumption is farmers' natural priority. Whether this focus is regarded as lazy or wise, it overlooks the role that dynamic farmers who produce global market crops have played and can still play in national development, together with the initiatives they

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[14]Gaps between movement ideals and the role of export crops in farmer livelihoods are well recognized by scholars and activists attempting to craft a peasant movement that resonates across different contexts (Burnett and Murphy 2014; Robbins 2015).

[15]On state investments in rural China see van der Ploeg (2014). The effects of distributive land reform in bringing development and prosperity to rural and urban Japan, Korea and Taiwan in the post war period are discussed in Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010).

take to innovate, diversify, and achieve prosperity on their own terms. More recognition and support for such farmers could help to stop the advance of corporations that increasingly dominate rural spaces in Indonesia and beyond.

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