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# Indonesia's Plantationocene

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In this short article I explore what a race-centered concept of the Plantationocene, developed mainly by scholars working in the Americas, yields analytically when it travels to another context. Race is not a concept in common use in contemporary Indonesia. Yet Cedric Robinson's expanded concept of racialism as the practice of forging differences among people for the purpose of extraction, while treating such differences as innate, is profoundly resonant. To make this argument I first outline Indonesia's colonial plantation regime and its racialized legacies. Then I draw on ethnographic research I conducted with Pujo Semedi to show how contemporary oil palm plantation corporations produce a racialized form of difference as a core element of their social, spatial, and political organization. In Indonesia's plantation zone, I suggest, racialism is embedded in routine practices and arrangements, and so thoroughly normalized it passes without note. *Key Words: colonial land law, Indonesia, oil palm, plantation, Plantationocene, race.*

An early iteration of the Plantationocene concept stressed the production of simplified landscapes on a vast scale as land, labor, and capital were assembled under corporate management to furnish global market crops (Haraway et al. 2016). This concept readily captures Indonesia's contemporary landscape transformation as monocrop plantations have vastly extended to produce palm oil, a commodity in global demand. Corporate land concessions for oil palm plantations now cover around 20 million ha, a third of Indonesia's farmland. Satellite images reveal total transformation as back-to-back concessions saturate entire districts.<sup>1</sup> Bulldozers remove forests and mixed farms, leaving former landholders in tiny hamlets wedged between plantations, shorn of customary territories and livelihood resources.

Further iterations of the Plantationocene concept by geographers and other scholars working mainly in the Americas stress the intrinsic racialism of plantations and the enduring effects of this racialism over multiple centuries in sites well beyond plantation boundaries (McKittrick 2013; Davis et al. 2019; Wolford 2021). Here I explore what a race-centered concept of the Plantationocene yields analytically when it travels from the Americas to Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

Indonesia's colonial-era plantations were undoubtedly racial formations, as Dutch officials and Dutch and other European concession holders forged a land and labor regime in which racialized natives and migrant workers were mere fodder for extraction (Stoler 1995). It is more complex to account for how

racialism is embedded in the contemporary plantation order and resonates in society at large. The concept of race is not commonly used in Indonesia. In the plantation sector, nearly all the protagonists are Indonesian citizens, and nominally equal before the law. Most plantation corporations are owned by Indonesians;<sup>3</sup> customary landholders, villagers, workers, plantation managers, corporate concession holders, and government officials are often ethnically differentiated but might not be phenotypically distinct.<sup>4</sup> Yet Robinson's ([1983] 2000) expanded concept of racialism as the practice of forging differences among people for the purpose of extraction, although treating such differences as innate, offers a crucial insight. In Indonesia, I argue, plantations do not simply work with existing differences; they produce a racialized form of difference as a core element of their social, spatial, and political organization. To develop this argument, I outline the colonial plantation regime and its racialized legacies; then I draw on ethnographic research I conducted with Pujo Semedi in Indonesia's contemporary oil palm plantations to explore how plantations produce racialism through practices that are so thoroughly normalized they pass almost without note.

## Racialized Legacies of Colonial Rule

The prerequisite for the plantation format in colonial times and still today is the classification of uncultivated or mixed-use landscapes and small farms as

inefficient and without value; and the classification of the people who work these lands as without value as well. This racialized argument was memorably caricatured by Southeast Asia historian Alatas (1977) as the “myth of the lazy native.” Native inefficiency is the alibi for corporations to install plantations.

The practice of evaluating people and their productivity around a racial axis that was entrenched in the colonial legal order still endures. Bhandar (2018) argued that racialized divisions are constitutive of colonial and contemporary land regimes in which the association between a kind of person, a kind of land use, and the inferiority of customary property rights is circular. In contemporary Indonesia the chain of reasoning goes like this: The national land agency grants concessions to plantation corporations on the grounds that they can use the land efficiently; implicitly, customary landholders cannot use land efficiently; hence their customary land rights do not qualify as full property rights; their low productivity and incomplete property rights confirm that they are people of low value; as people of low value they cannot be expected to use land efficiently and they can legitimately be displaced by corporations.

A racial logic underpinned the 1870 Land Law of the Dutch East Indies, which claimed all land for the Dutch crown except for tiny areas recognized as individual private property. The purpose of the 1870 law was to “free” land from its customary claimants so it could be allocated to plantation and mining corporations. The 1870 colonial land law is still basically in place. Its core clauses were retained in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic that gives the state the right to control land and in the 1960 land law, which permits the government to grant large land concessions. To this day, most rural Indonesians do not have formal land titles but hold their land on a customary basis. Whether or not they claim membership in particular customary communities, their legal rights are fragile and their land may be seized by a state agency or corporation bearing a formal land-use license (Li 2021). Hence racialized dispossession occurs not only in the immediate vicinity of plantations but throughout Indonesia wherever customary landholders are confronted by parties wielding paper titles and government support.

For a contemporary iteration of native incapacity in the service of plantation advance, consider the words of a district official at a ceremony opening a

new oil palm plantation in 2017: “The government can build some infrastructure but to develop peoples’ economy, we need investment and the private sector; we can’t hire everyone as government officials, military or police; that is why the district has opened its doors as wide as possible to the private sector.”<sup>5</sup> In the official’s narrative, developing the “peoples’ economy” is the task of corporations that are licensed to destroy the peoples’ economy. In this case, “development” meant bulldozing 8,000 hectares of village rubber groves and rice fields, productive assets the corporation’s planning documents and the district official failed to mention. The official equated development with the provision of salaried jobs, discounting the value of smallholder livelihoods and the social value of the farming families who pursue such livelihoods, even when they make good money. Through routine comments such as this, government officials and their corporate allies position themselves as both different from and superior to ordinary Indonesians—most of the population—who lack access to the formal, salaried “proper jobs” that mark the holder as modern (Ferguson and Li 2018). Defined by lack, these are people whose lives and livelihoods count for very little, making them fit to be cleared out of the way.

Villagers mobilized for more than a decade to try to prevent the arrival of this particular plantation but they could not stop it. Indonesian villagers’ weak rights in law are compounded by a regime of impunity that was inherited from the colonial power and further entrenched in 1965–1966 when the army orchestrated the massacre of half a million people. In the words of Anderson (1999), the result was a rupture in the (briefly) imagined community of the nation as one group of Indonesians turned on another, treating them as “animals or devils,” “‘objects,’ ‘possessions,’ ‘servants,’ and ‘obstacles’ for the Ogre” (12–13), the greedy cabal of Suharto and cronies who control resources, extract profits, and designate disposable populations.

Before the massacres, Indonesia’s farmers and plantation workers’ unions were at the forefront of a movement to transform the colonial racial order and assert equal rights as citizens to land and fair pay. Tragically but unsurprisingly, union members were heavily targeted in 1965–1966 and eliminated as an effective counterforce (White 2016). The military-bureaucratic crony regime took control over existing plantations and assigned itself the right to issue

further concessions in return for lucrative streams of income from licenses, fees, and kickbacks.<sup>6</sup> Lightly disguised with idioms of development and promises of reform, the predatory regime that was installed in 1966 is still intact and the counterforce has not recovered. Citizens have rights on paper, but in practice they have no means to hold powerful individuals, corporations, or politicians to account. Plantations have been both the prize and the vehicle for producing a form of racialism that divides the population into powerful people (*orang berkuasa*) and “small people” (*orang kecil*) who can be exploited or injured with impunity.

### Producing Racialized Others in the Contemporary Plantation Zone

As Robinson observed, racial boundaries are mutable, constructed, and repositioned as conditions change. In the plantation zone of West Kalimantan I studied with Pujo Semedi (Li and Semedi 2021), Malay and Dayak villagers informed us that a colonial-era rubber plantation on the same spot had been a good neighbor. The White managers permitted them to sell food and provide entertainment to workers on paydays, and they continued to farm as before because the corporation only developed a fraction of the total concession area. Plantation workers imported from Java socialized freely with the local population and many stayed on when their work contracts expired, marrying into local families.

An entirely different set of relations emerged in 1980 when a state plantation took over the old concession and set about dividing the population in new ways. The orderly layout of the plantation, its industrial scale, its belching mill, and the neat rows of worker houses announced productive efficiency and constructed both workers and managers as modern. Reciprocally, the plantation both required and produced backward, lazy, and unruly natives as its mirror image. Plantation managers we interviewed described their heroic arrival in this remote area and described the local Malay and Dayak people as half-naked and very primitive. They deployed the colonial myth of the lazy native unrevised, declaring the local population unproductive while failing to mention the abundance of their rice harvests and the family-owned rubber groves that sent tons of rubber downriver every month. Ordinary plantation workers we came to know, most of them hailing from Java,

shared the perception that the local population, especially the Dayaks, were unproductive and possibly dangerous, hence they never visited their hamlets and avoided contact with them. Although technically surrounding villagers were fellow citizens, plantation managers and workers viewed them as people of a radically different and distinctly inferior kind.

Extraction in the contemporary plantation zone is enabled by racialism in two ways. One I have already discussed: Villagers are robbed of their land on the grounds that they have weak rights to it while plantation corporations promise to use it productively. The other is abandonment. A striking finding from our Kalimantan research concerned the contrast between living conditions within and outside the state plantation boundaries. Inside, migrant workers were subject to paternalistic direction and care, and provided with all the facilities they needed to lead healthy, modern lives (clean water, electricity, housing, schooling, pensions, health care, sports facilities, churches, and mosques). In contrast, villagers consigned to tiny enclaves tucked in and around the plantations—customary landholders who had been rendered landless—were afforded no such care or facilities. They lived in ramshackle housing, relied on filthy river water, and struggled to send children to school. Yet all these people—inside the plantation and without—are entitled to the same bundle of rights (food, work, housing, schooling) promised in the constitution.

To make sense of this profoundly unjust situation we drew on the work of geographers and others to theorize plantation corporations as an occupying force that divides populations on a spatial basis and distributes life and death differentially (Makdisi 2010; Watts 2012). Like other corporations skillfully analyzed by geographer Barkan (2013), plantation corporations are present at the invitation of the government and expected to bring prosperity and development to rural areas, yet they are not held accountable for meeting these goals. Legally, villagers who live in the residual pockets of land outside concession borders are classified as “ordinary citizens” (*rakyat biasa*). They are de facto an occupied population, but plantation corporations have no official responsibility for or jurisdiction over them. Managers seldom hire villagers, preferring to hire migrants who they see as more diligent and less troublesome; and they have no programs to extend the

benefits of modernity to surrounding areas. The law on corporate social responsibility is not enforced and even if it was, corporate donations would not compensate for the devastating losses imposed (Rosser and Edwin 2010).

From the perspective of corporations and their government allies, so long as some people in the plantation zone prosper, others can be injured and abandoned with impunity. This is the racialism that counts in Indonesia's plantation milieu: Dividing the population enables the harms that are inflicted on designated populations to be normalized. Like other racialisms, it is self-reinforcing. Managers and workers with whom we discussed these matters did not recognize their own role in producing destitution in the abandoned hamlets; rather, they took landless villagers' lack of farms, jobs, and education as confirmation of their innate inferiority. For their part, villagers regard the situation as acutely unfair but they have no means to change it. Government officials, politicians, and their own village leaders are paid by the corporations and collaborate with them, leaving villagers without allies or recourse. The lack of a counterforce capable of asserting the rights of citizens to fair and equal treatment is palpable in the plantation zone where extraction, injury, and abandonment proceed with impunity.

## Conclusion

Scholars working mainly in the Americas have developed a concept of the Plantationocene that centers race in the making of the modern world. They have examined how plantations transformed landscapes and entrenched racialized social, material, and legal divisions in the population that continue to resonate. I took this concept to Indonesia to see what fresh insights it could yield. Since colonial times, plantation corporations and their government allies have sedimented racialized laws and social divides. Customary land rights are discounted because the value of rural people and their productivity is discounted. Ordinary people have legal rights but in practice they are treated as social inferiors: at best as dependent wards subject to paternalistic care, at worst as racialized others, "small people" who can be kicked around or abandoned with impunity. This is Indonesia's Plantationocene, one overdue for a reckoning.

## Notes

1. See <https://olhadanylo.users.earthengine.app/view/oilpalmseasia> and <https://nusantara-atlas.org/>.
2. Some passages in this article are drawn directly from Li and Semedi (2021). I acknowledge Pujo Semedi's contributions to the analysis presented here and to my thinking on this topic.
3. State-owned plantations cover around 20 percent of the oil palm concession area, private corporations 40 percent, and multinationals in which Indonesian tycoons own major shares 40 percent (TuK Indonesia 2018).
4. A crucial exception is Papua, where phenotypic difference compounds the harms (Chao 2022).
5. For the source, context, and further analysis see Li and Semedi (2021).
6. For a stunning report from NBC in 1967 that directly connects the 1965 killings to the resumption of transnational investment and plantation-based profits, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI42TICZcik>.

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