

# Plantation Life

Corporate Occupation  
in Indonesia's  
Oil Palm Zone

TANIA MURRAY LI  
and PUJO SEMEDI



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Cover art: Dead palms, “Natco” fields, Indonesia, 2010.

Photo by Pujo Semedi.

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# Preface

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PUJO: A plantation is a giant, an inefficient and lazy giant, but still a giant. It takes up a huge amount of space. It is greedy and careless, destroying everything around. It is alien, strange, and unpredictable. It is human, but you cannot form a normal human relationship with it. It can trample you, eat you, or drain your strength then spit you out. It guards its treasure. You cannot tame it or make it go away. You have to live with it. But it is a bit stupid, so if you are clever you can steal from it.

TANIA: A plantation is a machine that assembles land, labor, and capital in huge quantities to produce monocrops for a world market. It is intrinsically colonial, based on the assumption that the people on the spot are incapable of efficient production. It takes life under control: space, time, flora, fauna, water, chemicals, people. It is owned by a corporation and run by managers along bureaucratic lines.

At some point in our collaboration when we asked each other, “What is a plantation?” we came up with these two different answers. Like most of our exchanges, when we talked through the two definitions, we concluded that both were useful for our analysis as they pushed us to reflect. Why the giant? Why the machine? Can it be both? Our definitions were different because they were the products of situated knowledge: our prior experiences, the books we read, the paths we traveled, and the affective hold “plantation life” had on us. Tania spent her teenage years in Singapore. Her family used



to drive to Malaysia on weekends, taking the old road that passed through rubber smallholdings interspersed with villages. It was a peopled landscape in which productive activities and village life were entwined. Around 1990 the new highway passed through monocrop oil palm plantations: mile after mile of monotonous palm, with no villages or people in sight. Every time she drove along it Tania experienced this landscape as machinic, threatening, and desolate. It also made her curious. How did these plantations come to be there? What happened to the villages that were there before? Someone must be doing the work, but where were the workers and how did they live? Tania also conducted undergraduate research upriver in Sarawak where Dayak farmers were concerned that the arrival of oil palm plantations occupying their land would turn them into wage workers, subject to someone else's command. How to read and navigate plantation landscapes became a theme of our Kalimantan research (figure P.1).

**FIGURE P.1** Dayak Village on the Tangkos River



For our first trip together up the Tangkos River, a tributary of Kalimantan's mighty Kapuas, Pujo organized a boat. The huge trees and small hamlets along the riverbank reminded Tania of the interior of Sarawak circa 1980, but the gentle view from the boat was deceptive. Fifty meters (55 yards) back from the river, just out of sight, were thousands of hectares of monocrop palm. Had we taken the plantation-built road instead of the river, we would have seen no forest and no hamlets, just oil palm all the way. Malay and Dayak hamlets like this one are tiny enclaves excised from the plantation concession where the original landholders continue to live in their riverside homes but have no access to farmland and no guarantee of plantation jobs. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

Pujo's definition was inspired by the giant metaphors used by Indonesian intellectuals Rendra and Mangunwijaya to characterize the rapacious crony capitalism of General Suharto's New Order rule.<sup>1</sup> It also came from his knowledge of how plantation corporations appear to villagers and low-level workers (as persons writ large, with intention and force), and his intimate knowledge of how plantations work.<sup>2</sup> He grew up on a tea plantation in Java where his father was the head of transport, and his mother taught at the plantation primary school. For him the vast fields of monocrops that Tania found alienating were both normal and good. He noticed that the children of tea pickers came to school in torn clothes, without shoes, and were malnourished; the children of managers lived in better houses and wore better clothes than he did. He felt pity for the one, and a desire to emulate the other.

When Pujo returned to the tea plantation to conduct post-doctoral research, he discovered another order behind the one he had experienced as a child. This was the order of the giant and the thieves. Plantation archives showed the locations of villages that had been displaced when the plantation occupied their land, and he talked to former workers who had retired without pensions, thrown out like old rags. He found out that the plantation had seldom made a profit during a century of operation. This made him curious. What kind of business can routinely lose money yet still survive? A buried clay pipe (figure P.2), together with a hint from a retired foreman—"the plantation was robbed night and day for decades"—set Pujo's inquiry on a new path.<sup>3</sup>

This history from Java opened up for us the question of how a plantation corporation could be an occupying force (like a giant) and enroll differently situated actors (villages, workers, managers) who both support and steal from it. It was a pattern that emerged strongly when we began our joint research in Kalimantan. Pujo recognized it from our first day, when we witnessed plantation workers sitting in the popular riverside coffee stalls from 9:00 AM in the morning: "these people are all stealing." What surprised Pujo was not that workers stole time but their brazenness: the workers were wearing their official uniforms, publicly performing their disregard for plantation discipline.

In the Javanese plantation Pujo studied, theft was routine but somewhat disguised; it was also euphemized and embedded in moral evaluations. Dutch managers paid themselves a lavish salary and bonuses, blaming losses on coffee leaf rust disease. Native foremen marked up the price of low-quality manure, a practice that continued after the plantation was nationalized in 1958. Foreman manipulated labor by sending company workers to their

FIGURE P.2 The Pipe



On a visit to the tea plantation with Tania, Pujo stopped his ancient jeep on a steep plantation road and pointed out a broken clay pipe in a ditch. The pipe was laid in 1882 to flush coffee berries from the top fields down to a processing mill 8 kilometers (5 miles) below. The reason was theft: plantation workers, cart haulers, and surrounding villagers colluded to steal the plantation's coffee berries. Sealed in a clay pipe, the berries would be safe during the entire journey from the top of the plantation to the bottom. Theft continued, however, because thieves broke the clay pipe, and an even more expensive steel pipe did not stop them. The problem of theft was partially solved when the owners converted the plantation from coffee to tea, for which there was no local market. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

own fields, by adding ghost workers to their work gang (*nggundul*, Javanese for bald heads), or by inflating the number of working days in their section (*ngerol*, acting). They cheated workers by falsifying the weight of the baskets used by tea pickers; pickers also cheated, putting freshly plucked leaves under the rain to increase their weight. Stealing from the corporation was backed by a general sense that the corporation was both rich and wasteful. Workers did not call this practice stealing (*nyolong*) but *ngutil*—Javanese for paring a wart, i.e., removing something that is of no use to its owner but potentially useful to someone else. Managers called theft by workers theft and attempted to police it, but workers only laughed: “Thieves always outsmart police.”

Theft from subordinates was understood by both parties as a natural consequence of hierarchy: a foreman had a right to some extra food, called *pangan mandor*. A foreman's cut caused resentment when it exceeded the “normal”

amount. When workers talked about stealing by managers, they said *angkut-angkut*, Indonesian for “carrying something away.” They called a very corrupt manager *wong rosa*, Javanese for a strong person, someone capable of carrying a heavy load. Among themselves managers did not say corruption but “gathering vitamins and nutritious supplements,” suggesting that their rank entitled them to a diet of high quality. When a colleague was called by the plantation’s internal audit office, they said he had a problem (in Indonesian, *kena masalah*). This meant he had taken too much, causing intense gossip that made the internal auditors look stupid if they did nothing. Most of the time the outcome was light disciplinary action such as a temporary transfer to a nonjob or “dry position” without a flow of cash, or early retirement. Among day laborers with only outright stealing as a way to earn personal benefit, the rule was simply not to get caught red-handed.

Pujo’s ethnographic and historical research on the tea plantation left him feeling very sad, rather embarrassed, and slightly amused. The amusement

**FIGURE P.3** Arrivals



Arrival narratives figured prominently in the students’ field notes, enabling us to see the plantation zone through their eyes. Most of them imagined Kalimantan as a land of exotic tribes and rich tropical forests, but they were disappointed. The eighteen-hour trip on a slow boat up the busy Kapuas River led them into an industrial zone with bauxite mines left and right, cut timber floating downriver in huge log rafts, bustling trading towns, and endless plantations. When the students arrived at our research site, Javanese plantation workers warned them that the native Dayaks could be dangerous, a racialized caricature they had to navigate alongside the unfamiliar terrain. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

came from the richly ironic language people used to describe their world. The embarrassment came from seeing his friends and informants do improper things. The sadness came from a sense of wasted opportunity: his research forced him to recognize that for more than a century Indonesia's natural wealth had been looted not only by foreigners but also by its own people, a pattern he saw repeated in Kalimantan. But Pujo combined sadness with anger: anger directed toward the giants that occupy people's land, destroy livelihoods, and accumulate wealth while turning everyone who interacts with them into thieves.

Our book explores the forms of life produced by corporate occupation of Indonesia's oil palm plantation zone. We conducted the research in the period 2010–15, together with more than a hundred students from our two universities who each spent one to twelve months in the research site (figure p.3). We describe our collaborative fieldwork methods in the appendix. For now, we invite readers to travel with us into the plantation zone as we attempt to make sense of the forms of life that emerge there

# Introduction

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A plantation is a machine for assembling land, labor, and capital under centralized management for the purpose of making a profit; it is also a political technology that orders territories and populations, produces new subjects, and makes new worlds. The enslavement of Africans to work on plantations in the Americas produced novel social formations throughout the Black Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Slave plantations organized production and processing on an industrial scale and pioneered the “high modern” management of space, time, and task long before northern manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> Sugar, coffee, and tea produced in tropical “factories in the fields” furnished cheap pleasures to working classes in Europe, energizing the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Plantations were also the cornerstone of European colonial expansion in Asia and Africa in the period 1870–1940 as monopoly capital went global in search of mega profits.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary plantation expansion is no less world-making and its scale is unprecedented. Since 2000 plantation-based production of sugar has expanded massively in Brazil; and in Indonesia and Malaysia millions of hectares of forest and mixed farmlands have been cleared by plantation corporations to grow oil palm. Crude palm oil, the commodity these plantations produce, is a key ingredient in mass-produced junk food, detergents, cosmetics, and cooking oil as well as biofuels.<sup>5</sup> Half of the products in Euro-American supermarkets contain palm oil, and it makes these products cheaper.<sup>6</sup> Indonesia, the focus of our research, produces 50 percent of the world’s supply of palm oil, and much of it—around 60 percent—is exported to India, where it is popular as an affordable cooking oil.<sup>7</sup> Palm oil produces extraordinary profits



for plantation corporations and involves around fifteen million people in the “plantation life” that our book explores.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed from afar, plantations serve as icons of modernity and orderly development, sometimes tinged with patriotic pride. Their neatly aligned rows of crops and deployment of land and labor on a vast scale are claims to productive efficiency and technical mastery. In Indonesia, managers who attend the College of Plantation Training (LPP) read works by Max Weber on the virtues of modern bureaucracy and rational planning. As it turns out, the evidence on plantation efficiency is mixed: in much of the world crops that were once grown on plantations are now grown on small farms that are often highly efficient in relation to both land and labor, and much easier to manage.<sup>9</sup> Yet arguments for the superior efficiency of large farms and plantations are endlessly repeated and periodically renewed both nationally and on a global scale. In 2011, for example, a World Bank report argued that half the world’s potentially arable land was unused and much of the rest was underutilized. It backed up this claim with maps and graphs that characterized parts of the world in terms of their “yield gap,” framed as the difference between the dollar value per hectare of the crops small-scale farmers currently produce and the potential dollar value under efficient monocropping. The report argued that inefficient land use was not just wasteful; it was environmentally suspect: concentrating production on efficient farms would create jobs, help feed a burgeoning global population, and protect forest and grassland to mitigate climate change.<sup>10</sup>

Supporters of Indonesia’s oil palm corporations defend their expansion in terms of the globally circulating efficiency narrative: palm oil feeds the world and should be produced on massive, modern plantations.<sup>11</sup> Based on such claims, plantation corporations have been permitted to occupy around 40 percent of Indonesia’s farmland and squeeze out small mixed farms.<sup>12</sup> Yet, we argue, it is not agronomy or productive efficiency that dictate plantation dominance, it is politics: political economy, political technology, and the order of impunity that characterizes Indonesia’s political milieu.

Starting from political economy, critical research on the so-called land-grab sparked by the food and financial crisis of 2007–9 brought attention to the renewed interest of transnational corporations in extracting profits from rural spaces. Studies showed that national corporations are also involved, and both foreign and national corporations receive ample state support.<sup>13</sup> These studies paid particular attention to the losses that corporations impose on rural spaces: loss of customary lands, flexible rural livelihoods, diverse ecosystems, and healthy forests to mitigate climate change. Complementing

inquiries focused on profits extracted and losses imposed, *Plantation Life* offers a grounded ethnographic account of the social, economic, and political relations that plantation corporations set in place when they transform vast rural spaces into plantation zones, and of the forms of life they generate.

Our field-based research conducted from 2010 to 2015 focused on two plantations in Tanjung, an oil palm-saturated subdistrict of Sanggau, West Kalimantan.<sup>14</sup> One was Natco, a 5,000-hectare unit of the state-owned plantation corporation PTPN. It operated as a semi-enclosed world in which managers exercised tight control over resident workers. To the tasks of production and the generation of profit, Natco added an expansive social mandate of a utopic kind rather like twentieth-century company towns in the United States, Fordlandia in Brazil, and mines of the Zambian copper belt where workers and their families were provided with facilities to lead exemplary modern lives.<sup>15</sup> Space, time, and mentality were taken under a paternalistic form of corporate guidance.<sup>16</sup> The second plantation was Priva, owned by a private Indonesian corporation with a concession of 39,000 hectares. It had more porous boundaries and fewer social goals. Some workers lived in Priva housing while others were recruited from surrounding villages and commuted daily to work. Much of the production was undertaken by local and migrant out-growers who were bound to Priva until they paid off the debt they assumed for preparation of their 2 hectare (5 acre) oil palm plots. Wedged within and between these two plantations were the hamlets of former landholders who eked out a living from tiny residual patches of land and casual plantation work, people whose struggles were central to the plantation zone as we came to understand it.

The site we studied was specific and we embrace its specificity for the insights it offers on the situated workings of corporate capitalism today. While the elements that comprise plantations are generic (land, labor, capital, seeds, chemicals, technology, markets, management, legal standing), their configuration at particular conjunctures is always unique. Globally circulating capital might seem to be the most generic element, but money only becomes capital when it is brought into relation with land and labor in their concrete forms. As Mezzadra and Neilson argue, every expression of contemporary capitalism is specific, making ethnographic approaches well suited to explore the “spatial, social, legal and political formations with which capital must grapple as it becomes enmeshed in dense constellations of flesh and earth.”<sup>17</sup> The dense constellations that both enable corporate profits and generate novel forms of life—plantation life—are the focus of our account.

Our inquiry weaves together two threads of analysis that are often kept apart. One thread drawn from Marx is political economy where the guiding



questions concern the modes in which capital, land, and labor are assembled to generate profit for some and impoverishment for others.<sup>18</sup> We build on the work of scholars who examine the global circulation of capital, land appropriation, agrarian class formation, and labor regimes.<sup>19</sup> The second thread drawn from Foucault is political technology where the focus is on the production of subjects and the government of territories and populations. Political technologies, Foucault argues, are not cut from whole cloth. They comprise “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, moral and philanthropic propositions.”<sup>20</sup> They are pulled together to meet not one overriding purpose (e.g., corporate profit) but a number of purposes (production, revenue, development, order, prestige, well-being) that do not always align.<sup>21</sup> We draw especially on scholarly work that combines these approaches to study political ecologies and power-laden landscapes where the value of different land uses is under dispute, colonial and contemporary technologies of racial rule, and the making of resource frontiers as spaces full of potential for productivity and profit.<sup>22</sup>

Iterative research, reading, and analysis led us to theorize the constitutive role of corporate occupation, imperial debris, and extractive regimes in the formation of plantation life. In the following sections we introduce these theorizations and outline the traction they offer for our account.

## **Corporate Occupation**

Corporate occupation, we suggest, is the principal political technology that sets the conditions for life in Indonesia’s plantation zone. Here we parse its components, examining first the plantation corporation and its mandates, then the insights afforded by a focus on corporate occupation.

### **Corporate Mandates**

Economic geographer Joshua Barkan draws attention to the sovereign powers that governments since the Middle Ages have delegated to corporations to enable them to meet a dual mandate: to generate profits *and* serve a public purpose.<sup>23</sup> Corporations have built and run railways and water systems, cities and universities; they have organized imperial trade and the settlement of colonies; and for hundreds of years they have owned and managed plantations. To meet their dual mandate, corporations are delegated the sovereign’s right to privatize public wealth (land, water, forest) and to cause harms to

people and species that stand in their way. Assessing corporate harms, Barkan reframes Foucault's crucial question about biopower, "Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die?" to ask, "How [is it that] a global order of corporate capitalism, created and repeatedly justified for its abilities 'to improve life . . .,' results in a system that routinely denies housing, clothes, food, work, and essential medicines; that exposes populations to unsafe living conditions and environmental hazards?"<sup>24</sup> We make the tension between state-enabled corporate profit, purported public benefit, and licensed harm a cornerstone of our analysis.

Indonesia's laws make the public purpose of delegating sovereign powers to plantation corporations explicit. The 2007 Investment Law begins "in consideration of the need to promote a society which is just and prosperous as stipulated by . . . the Constitution there must be continuous national economic development." Hence the law facilitates foreign and domestic investment to meet national development goals. The 2014 Plantation Law number 39) states that "the earth, water and natural resources contained in the territory of the Republic of Indonesia [are] a gift from God Almighty to be exploited and used for the greatest prosperity and welfare of the people." It notes the capacity of plantations to develop the national economy and bring about people's prosperity and welfare in a fair and equitable way (*secara berkeadilan*).

Indonesia's focus on corporate-led growth as the centerpiece of the national development strategy ramped up in 2020 with an Omnibus Bill to Create Jobs which drastically overhauled land, labor, and environmental laws to ease foreign investment. The bill was met with public protests, and many Indonesians read words about corporate-led development and its contribution to the "people's prosperity and wellbeing" with suspicion. Yet there is no sustained national debate on what constitutes the people's well-being or how best to accomplish it. The current maldistribution of wealth in Indonesia is catastrophic: Indonesia is the third most unequal country in the world (after Russia and Thailand), where four men own more wealth than 100 million people.<sup>25</sup> Yet the position of the oligarchy is hardly challenged, and the neoliberal narrative, according to which corporations generate wealth that trickles down to secure "the people's prosperity," generally prevails. Plantation corporations thrive in this milieu.

In the name of public benefit, Indonesia's plantation corporations are granted many privileges. Laws favor corporations and grant them access to subsidized land, credit, bailouts, and other forms of "corporate welfare" that absolve them from the capitalist imperative to operate efficiently or be competitive in market terms.<sup>26</sup> Their privileges and monopolies are embed-

ded in what anthropologist Hannah Appel calls the “licit life of capitalism,” the one backed by laws, contracts, and corporate reports.<sup>27</sup> As we will show, corporations are also supported by officials and politicians at every level of the state apparatus who are officially tasked (and privately compensated) to smooth their path. Government agencies are supposed to regulate corporations, but their activities are ultimately an internal matter—a sovereign supervising its own instrument, a head directing its hand.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, the production of harm is a licensed part of the corporate mandate. Indonesia’s plantation corporations monopolize land and water; they destroy forests and exude chemicals; they burden out-growers (contract farmers) with debt; and they cast aside people and species for which they have no use. These harms are well known but they are normalized as the anticipated but uncounted cost that must be paid to bring prosperity to remote regions.

Building on the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Barkan explores “the paradox of the sovereign ban, in which legal exceptions and the abandonment of populations are justified as vital to the security of political communities.”<sup>29</sup> We examine the workings of this paradox in Tanjung’s plantation zone, where corporations ejected former landholders and abandoned old and injured workers without means of livelihood. For Barkan abandoned people meet Agamben’s criteria for *homo sacer*: they can be killed or left to die, but their death is not recognized as a sacrifice because their lives have no economic or moral value.

In Tanjung, plantation managers selected which people and species to nurture or abandon. To push back, unwanted people used theft and extortion to extract paltry shares of plantation wealth; they also attempted to rework the boundary of the corporations’ moral responsibility and insisted that the sacrifice corporations imposed on them be recognized and compensated. Sacrificing oneself for the common good has value in Indonesia—fighters who sacrificed their lives to achieve independence from the Dutch are one example. But a wasted sacrifice, called in Indonesian *mati konyol* (pointless death), betrays the sacrificiant and leaves a bad feeling. We explore this betrayal as a material, embodied, and affectively charged situation.

## Occupation

At the heart of the betrayal we encountered in Tanjung’s plantation zone was the overwhelming power of corporations that had been installed as an occupying force. The Indonesian term for occupation of land is *pendudukan*; for control of a territory and its population by a powerful alien force without

consent it is *penjajahan*, the term used for Dutch colonial rule. When we heard villagers say, “We are colonized by the corporation” (*kami dijajah perusahaan*), they were flagging illegitimacy: rule without consent that injured them in various ways. They were also noting the reliance of both colonial powers and corporations on an extreme social division that ascribes differential value to people and the places they inhabit. Villagers whose land was targeted for corporate occupation had little or no say in the matter. They were not deemed capable of participating in a dialogue with the officials who issued corporate land concessions, or with plantation managers. As in colonial times the extreme social divide that separated officials and managers from villagers rendered the concept of such a dialogue absurd.

The term “occupation” usually refers to foreign military seizure of a territory and the subjugation of its resident population. We stretch the term to theorize corporate presence in the plantation zone because it enables us to explore three key relationships. First, it draws attention to novel spatial and political arrangements: the forceful seizure and occupation of territory by a corporation, the presence of armed police and guards tasked with protecting corporate property, and the reorganization of rule over people and territory. As scholars examining occupied Palestine have noted, the spatial and political formats of occupation are plural.<sup>30</sup> In Tanjung plantation cores comprise a continuous space with a single boundary and a resident population governed by corporate management intensely and directly. Out-grower areas where farming households produce oil palm fruit to feed corporate mills are governed indirectly through a political and material infrastructure imposed by the corporations (block layout, roads, co-ops, credit schemes, harvest schedules, and so forth). Interstitial areas and remnant hamlets (called enclaves) look superficially like ordinary villages and have had no formal change in their legal status, but they too are occupied in quite specific ways.

The patchwork spatial arrangements of the plantation zone make occupation by corporations quite different from occupation by haciendas, a difference recognized in a comparative study by anthropologists Sydney Mintz and Eric Wolf. The hacienda format grants landlords formal control over huge areas of land and state-like powers over the entire resident population.<sup>31</sup> Production is secondary. With plantations the priority is reversed. In Indonesia it is *only* the state’s production mandate that is formally delegated to plantation corporations. Other public purposes such as the extension of territorial control, the management of populations, and the development of remote regions are treated as by-products.<sup>32</sup>

The novel political arrangements set in place by corporate occupation are undeclared. Plantation corporations have no legal responsibility or jurisdiction outside their concession borders. Nevertheless, they curtail villagers' access to land, water, and livelihood and remake their political institutions to conform to corporate requirements. Like villagers in occupied Palestine described by Saree Makdisi, villagers in a plantation zone are subjected to a ban without a ban—an exclusion from “normal citizenship” that is not legally inscribed. Corporations and their state allies engage in what Makdisi calls the “denial of denial”—denial that an occupation occurred or that an occupied population is present or that anyone has suffered a loss.<sup>33</sup>

The implications of denial are especially profound in Indonesia because of the way citizenship works. Villagers living outside plantation boundaries are classified as ordinary citizens (*rakyat biasa*) who enjoy “normal” legal rights under the constitution including “human rights” upheld by a national commission (Komnas HAM). Yet ethnographic research has shown that effective citizenship in Indonesia is not primarily a matter of law.<sup>34</sup> The term *rakyat* flags both legal rights and a relationship of acute hierarchy (sometimes called feudal) in which ordinary people must rely on the mediation of people in power (*orang besar, orang kuasa*) to advance their projects or provide protection when their survival is under threat. People in power are expected to help “small people” (*rakyat biasa, orang kecil*) to solve problems. No ordinary Indonesian, rural or urban, would approach a site of higher authority (a government or corporate office, a court) without being accompanied by, or bearing a letter of recommendation from, an official or person of power who can vouch for them.

The language of Indonesia's constitution confirms hierarchy. It does not focus on the rights and entitlements of citizens but on the duty of the state (politicians and officials) to furnish benefits such as peace, prosperity, and development. It is a state modeled on the family in which parents have duties but children have few rights.<sup>35</sup> It is intrinsically infantilizing and it leaves “small people,” who are shorn of protection, radically exposed. Under corporate occupation, government officials, politicians, and local leaders back the corporations and “small people” are on their own.

Second, theorizing corporate presence as occupation helps to account for the novel social positions, subjectivities, and moral evaluations that emerge when people are conscripted to a form of life—a plantation life—the conditions of which they cannot control. It is well known that in zones of military occupation government officials and village leaders collaborate with the occupying force; ordinary residents become complicit; people who

are initially intent on removing the occupier settle into modes of coexistence; and uprisings have limited goals. Moral evaluations morph as stealing from the occupier becomes routine. Theft may take the multiple forms James Scott identified as the “weapons of the weak,” but predatory practices that target neighbors are also defended on the grounds that everyone needs to hustle. Wealth, and the practices people use to acquire it, become a domain of contention in which the boundary between the licit and the illicit is prized open and allegiances fracture and realign.<sup>36</sup> Our research in Tanjung indicates that military occupation and corporate occupation operate in a similar way. Workers and villagers in the plantation zone did not mobilize to remove corporations; local elites both collaborated and stole from them and ordinary people took what they could. Corporate giants were firmly installed yet beset by thieves from all sides.

Third, conceptualizing corporations as an occupying force resonates with the dual mandate of both colonial and military rule. Occupying powers often present themselves as a benevolent force intent on improving the lives of the subject population and treat the seizure of assets and profit-making as secondary. As an occupying force, plantation corporations are supposed to bring prosperity and introduce the subject population to new and improved ways of living. Like the colonial technologies examined by David Scott, corporate occupation is “concerned above all with disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions and with constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable—indeed, to oblige—new forms of life to come into being.”<sup>37</sup> In the idiom of Talal Asad and David Scott, residents in Tanjung’s plantation zone were “conscripts of modernity”: their previous ways of organizing their landscapes and livelihoods, their families and communities, were thoroughly disabled and they were obliged to develop new ones under conditions the occupiers imposed.<sup>38</sup>

To trace the contours of subject formation under corporate occupation we pay attention to the emergence of novel desires, dispositions, and institutions. We attend to the futures that workers and villagers in the plantation zone imagined for coming generations, and the pathways they saw as open or closed. We ask what they considered to be a “rightful share” of plantation wealth—the share due to them as original landholders, workers, or neighbors of a plantation.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, we found that the benefits of the promised modernity were unevenly distributed, as some people enjoyed a full package of modern facilities while others were deprived of access to even basic means of livelihood. People who were excluded from benefits did not accept their relegation to a permanent waiting room, or to the peculiar temporality

identified by Elizabeth Povinelli as “the future anterior tense,” in which problems will have been dealt with “from the perspective of the last man.”<sup>40</sup> But their non-acceptance of relegation was not heroic. As Povinelli observes, for people who have been seriously harmed survival is an accomplishment. They may disappear from public discourse but they persist in living, they endure; hence the form taken by their “plantation life” is a crucial part of our analysis.

## Imperial Debris

Imperial debris is the second pillar of our theorization of plantation life. *Imperial debris* is Ann Stoler’s label for “the rot that remains” from the political technologies of colonial rule.<sup>41</sup> Behind the dual mandate extended to plantation corporations past and present is a racialized proposition that has been embedded in Indonesian law and political discourse since colonial times: corporations must make land productive because Indonesian farmers are not capable of doing this on their own. Racism, defined by Cedric Robinson as “the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the ‘racial’ components of its elements,” was not eradicated with the removal of Indonesia’s white colonial masters.<sup>42</sup> Rather, it looped around remnants of Indonesia’s version of feudalism, was entrenched in law, and continues to be enacted in the everyday comportment of “big people” toward people they regard as social inferiors.

Robinson theorized “racial capitalism” as a format that both builds on and produces race-like divides as it marshals land and labor to generate profit. He noted the “immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies” that were required to create the figure of “the Slav,” “the Irishman,” and “the Negro” as persons naturally suited for brute labor, and to produce “Ireland” and “Africa” as wild spaces available for appropriation.<sup>43</sup> His insights continue to have global traction. In colonial Southeast Asia the production of empty spaces ripe for corporate occupation and the selection of bodies suited to manual labor centered on the “myth of the lazy native” famously explored by Syed Hussein Alatas.<sup>44</sup> According to this myth, which ever natives were present on the spot were sure to be incompetent farmers and unsuitable workers. Colonial officials used these racialized assessments to justify the installation of plantations and the importation of migrants to do plantation work.

The myth of the lazy native continues to embed an extreme social divide at the core of Indonesia’s plantation life today. Government officials, plantation managers, and many ordinary plantation workers whom we met in

Tanjung were convinced that they were utterly different from and superior to local villagers. Education and concepts of ethnocultural pluralism may modify the social divide to some degree, but a rot remains.<sup>45</sup> Indonesians do not usually call this deeply hierarchical social divide racial; they call it feudal or colonial, terms that recognize the divide as a social fact but hint that in modern Indonesia where the constitution declares all citizens to be equal, such a divide is not quite legitimate. Beyond everyday comportment, it is in the fields of land law and assessments of productivity that the imperial debris of racial rule is most deeply entrenched.

## Land Law

As Brenna Bhandar has shown, racial (or race-like) 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.<sup>46</sup> In Indonesia the chain of reasoning goes like this: the national land agency grants concessions to plantation corporations on the grounds that they can utilize 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.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing directly on the colonial land law of 1870, Indonesia's 1960 land law (which is still in force) treats much of the nation's land mass as state land that can be granted on concession to plantation, mining, and timber corporations. The law offers very weak protection for customary land rights that may be recognized only if they do not interfere with national economic development. Vigorous campaigning by activists has pressured the Ministries of Forestry and Land Affairs to create procedures for the formal recognition of customary land rights, but the conditions are difficult to meet and require decades of NGO facilitation and significant funds. By 2020 such rights had only been recognized for a tiny portion of the 40 million hectares of state-claimed forest land that activists argue should be returned to the jurisdiction of indigenous or customary communities (*masyarakat adat*).<sup>48</sup>

Villagers who do not claim membership in customary communities are also exposed to land seizure. Circa 2015 formal individual land titles issued by the national land agency covered only 20 percent of rural farmland parcels; for the rest, tenure continues to be based on custom.<sup>49</sup> Villagers have a clear



sense of what is theirs; they have customary processes to resolve disputes that arise among themselves; and their land rights may receive vague and partial forms of state recognition in formats like tax receipts, but their rights are not strong enough to prevent a corporation bearing a government-issued concession from occupying their land.<sup>50</sup> Officials acknowledge that corporate land acquisition is often handled incorrectly: consent is falsified or coerced, compensation is inadequate, prices are manipulated, and corporations make promises they fail to keep. But they do not recognize the colonial basis of the land law that discounts customary land rights and turns all corporations into vehicles of occupation. As Christian Lund points out, corporations complete the “primitive accumulation” that was already accomplished in law in 1870; they make the legal seizure real as their bulldozers clear homes and farms from land to which the state laid claim long ago. “Theft,” Lund writes, “was laundered in advance.”<sup>51</sup>

### Productivity

In Indonesia official assessments of who is or is not a productive farmer continue to be replete with imperial debris. Colonial officials acknowledged that farmers in Java and Bali were skilled at producing rice in their intricately terraced fields, but they had no respect for farmers who grew rice by the extensive forest-fallow or swidden method that they saw as wasteful. Their assessment was entrenched in transmigration, a program of internal colonization initiated in the 1920s when the colonial government sent land-short farmers from crowded islands to settle on the so-called outer islands where land was said to be underutilized. After independence, state-sponsored transmigration continued and new policies supplemented the goal of population distribution with an explicit mandate of social and economic development.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary transmigrants sent to remote areas are supposed to model modern farming techniques for emulation by local farmers who are still defined as backward. Unsurprisingly, when transmigrants arrived in Tanjung, local Malay and Dayak villagers regarded them as elements of the occupation: they occupied villagers’ customary land and their presence, together with their presumed superior farming skills, embodied an insulting claim that villagers native to Kalimantan are social inferiors.

When it came to global market crops, colonial authorities readily dismissed native production as inefficient. Yet scholars have shown that Indonesia’s small-scale farmers have been adept and enthusiastic producers of global market crops for three centuries. As Clifford Geertz and many

others have recognized, colonial agrarian policies were not designed to pull reluctant villagers into the market economy; their purpose was to confine villagers to subsistence pursuits and protect state-backed corporations from local competition.<sup>53</sup> Circa 1700, farmers in Java eagerly planted coffee to take advantage of a new export market. They were successful until their production was suppressed by the Netherlands East Indies Corporation (VOC, 1602–1799) that imposed a monopoly on trade in coffee and set prices so low that farmers burned their coffee bushes in disgust. From then on they had to be coerced to meet quotas for coffee and, later, for sugar, but wherever they were paid a fair market price their productivity doubled.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1870s when the colonial government started to grant plantation concessions to foreign investors, the rationale was again productivity, but planters were nervous. In Sumatra planters lobbied colonial authorities to forbid local villagers and former plantation workers from producing tobacco for fear they would outcompete plantations. In Java planters insisted that local farmers be discouraged from planting tea. In the 1920s farmers in Sumatra and Kalimantan adopted rubber cultivation so eagerly they put the less efficient rubber plantation corporations into decline. During the 1930s Depression smallholder rubber production was deliberately suppressed, this time to sustain the market price for struggling corporations.<sup>55</sup> As Michael Dove has long insisted, the privileges and monopolies granted to contemporary oil palm corporations at the expense of willing and productive smallholders continue this colonial motif.<sup>56</sup> Plantation corporations are not especially efficient producers nor do they bring development to remote regions, but they are very effective technologies for generating and extracting streams of revenue and profit, the topic to which we now turn.

## **Extractive Regimes**

Our theorization of extractive regimes as constitutive elements of plantation life hinges on the recognition that extractive regimes are plural. One purpose of plantations is to extract a global market product from natural elements such as soil, seeds, water, and human labor. Another is to extract profit for corporations, their shareholders, and the banks that finance them. A third is to extract revenue to fill state coffers and generate foreign exchange. A fourth, of particular relevance in contemporary Indonesia, is the extraction of unearned income (rent), which is funneled to diverse parties both within and far beyond the plantation zone. These four elements work together in different configurations. Here we outline the contours of the extractive regimes