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## SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

### *The Making of a Periphery: A Review Dossier*

#### EDITORIAL

Colonialism and the ways in which it has influenced or defined various forms of labour relations (especially forced labour relations) and migration patterns has been an important part of both empirical and theoretical research in the field of Global Labour History from the earliest stages of its development. Some theories and concepts predating the development of Global Labour History have been particularly influential in enabling global labour historians to better understand how colonial relations have shaped labour relations and conditions in those parts of the world that have come to be understood, in the course of the history of colonialism and imperialism, as belonging to the periphery, with the core of capitalist countries in the West constituting the metropole. Prominent theories in this context are the dependency theory of Raúl Prebisch, and Arthur C. Lewis's concept of "periphery", adopted in the world-systems approach of Immanuel Wallerstein. More recently, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson developed the influential "reversal of fortune" thesis to explain why parts of the world that were relatively prosperous in the past have sunk to the lower or even lowest echelons of economic performance today.

In his latest book, *The Making of a Periphery: How Island Southeast Asia Became a Mass Exporter of Labor* (New York, 2019), Ulbe Bosma takes issue with various forms of "compressed history" that result from these unifying theories and concepts. He explores how once-prosperous Island Southeast Asia was transformed into a "peripheral" region as a result of the dominance of the plantation economies under colonialism. As global comparisons and connections are at the heart of this journal's scope and profile, Bosma's book offers a welcome opportunity to discuss the usefulness and drawbacks of unifying theories in explaining the processes of peripheralization as a result of colonialism and imperialism. By exploring how labour relations and migration patterns, together with demography and the adaptation of pre-colonial power relations under colonial rule, are connected to meagre

economic growth and mass unemployment as a heritage of these plantation economies, he aims at “decompressing” this history.

For this occasion, a panel discussion was organized at the International Institute of Social History on 31 October 2019, where five colleagues, from five different perspectives, gave their comments on Bosma’s main arguments and findings. These have been reworked for this review dossier. Corey Ross shows how the plantation economies in Island Southeast Asia not only caused long-term economic and social inequalities in the region, and between the region and the metropole, but also had huge – and sometimes devastating – ecological consequences, which in turn exacerbated the position of the impoverished population. Using a variety of economic and demographic data, Pim de Zwart shows that specialization in primary commodity exports did indeed lower long-term economic growth rates and adds that indigenous institutions regarding family systems and property rights play an important role in patterns of economic development. In her contribution, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk offers three comments: that the role of colonialism and imperialism might have been overly downplayed in the book; that the book’s arguments might have benefited from more solid empirical/quantitative underpinning; and that the question remains how unique the “plantation economies” of Island Southeast Asia are. In a final comment, Alberto Alonso-Fradejas argues that the long-term effects of peripheralization have led to a modern extractivist, labour-expelling agro-industry that exacerbates convergent socioecological and political crises.

In a rejoinder, Ulbe Bosma responds to these comments and argues that a socioecological perspective, as taken in the recent development of the concept of “cheaps”, can help us to understand the history of colonialism and global capitalism as a system in which the “cheapness” of nature is also applied to the work, care, food, energy, and lives of the population in the periphery. The resulting peripheralization has resulted in the modern migration patterns making Island Southeast Asia an important exporter of cheap labour.

*Editorial Committee*