

Correspondence

The “Ethic of Indolence”: Another View

In a recent issue of this journal it has been suggested that the relatively low level of living of the Indonesian peasantry can be explained in terms of an “ethic of indolence”.¹ Such a view of the Indonesian subsistence farmer as being lazy and indolent would be somewhat understandable if the writer were a Dutch colonialist of the nineteenth century. However, that such a view could be expressed by an American scholar in the last quarter of the twentieth century is very difficult to comprehend; and it cannot be permitted to go unchallenged.

Several elements of the “ethic of indolence” are disturbing; primarily the clearly ethnocentric bias which underlies the concept. An entire group of people are essentially characterized as lazy and hedonistic on the basis of Seavoy’s superficial impressions of work patterns. He seems to be reacting or rather overreacting to one currently popular perspective which explains some problems of developing nations in terms of the colonial legacy, that is, dependency theory, or even the concept of the “dual society”, which is less radical than the former but still takes into account the influence of colonialism.² Perhaps the colonizing nations *have* taken too much of the blame in explaining problems of development. Dependency theorists are guilty to some extent of relying excessively on historical arguments and explaining underdevelopment solely in terms of international relationships. At this point in time one must go beyond these explanations, valid as they are, and start to attack the existing problems rather than simply criticizing colonial and neo-colonialist powers. Solutions must be found; they do not lie in rhetoric. Yet to ignore historical and political realities is also equivalent to blinding oneself to sources of solutions. As a professor of history, Ronald Seavoy’s interpretation of Indonesia’s history — not only under Dutch rule, but the present — leaves much to be desired.

Professor Seavoy in effect dismisses Dutch colonial rule as a detrimental influence and as a causal factor in some of Indonesia’s current problems. Indeed he goes so far to claim that the Dutch actually helped Indonesia; one gets the distinct impression that he mourns the passing of Dutch rule and if the Indonesians had not been so hasty in throwing out their rulers in 1945, Indonesia would be much better off today. Some of the “beneficial aspects” of Dutch rule were, according to Seavoy: (1) the building of infrastructure, and (2) the introduction of the Chinese as merchants (which purportedly came about because the Indonesians were reluctant to take on certain non-agricultural roles). First, with regard to the claim that the Dutch “built” up any kind of infrastructure, it is difficult for one who lived in Indonesia during the 1950s and 1960s to figure out what infrastructure he is discussing. The Dutch did not move very far away from the cities (one might in fact suggest that the “ethic of indolence” applies more to the Dutch than to the Indonesians; they were the ones who led the comfortable lives). Indeed, one of the reasons Chinese merchants moved into

¹ Ronald Seavoy, “Social Restraints on Food Production in Indonesian Subsistence Culture”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (March 1977): 15–30.

² See, for example, Andre G. Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution. Essays on the Development of Underdevelopment and the Immediate Enemy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); Celso Furtado, *Development and Underdevelopment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); idem, *Obstacles to Development in Latin America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970).

the smaller towns was because the Dutch did not want to undertake this task. During the 350 years of Dutch occupation, the primary interest of the rulers was to exploit natural resources and agricultural products. Very few industries were built. Very few Indonesians even acquired an education. It is estimated that at the time of Independence only about 350 Indonesians had a university education, and the illiteracy rate was estimated at 95 per cent.³ The only others with an education were Chinese, many of whom had been educated in China. Indonesians who did receive an education during the colonial period had to be from the upper class.⁴ Further evidence of the inadequate contribution the Dutch made to the infrastructure is revealed by the poorly developed transportation and communication system they left behind. This lack of development was not due to the Indonesians' lack of interest, as Seavoy claims, but due to a lack of interest on the part of the Dutch. Compared to the British rulers who controlled Indonesia's neighbours, Malaysia and Singapore, the contribution that the Dutch made to the development of the infrastructure was at best very minimal.

With regard to their second "contribution", it was largely their fear of integrating or training the Indonesians that led the Dutch to import the Chinese and have them represent their commercial economic interests. It was not a result of laziness on the part of Indonesians, as Seavoy implies, and it was not a move particularly welcomed by them. If, as is claimed by Seavoy, the Chinese moved in because the Indonesians were not willing to take on the tasks, then why the smouldering resentment against the Chinese which erupted in mass violence in 1965?

Another source of confusion in the arguments involved in the "ethic of indolence" is the insistence that village subsistence farming and the social forms accompanying it were present before Dutch rule and persist to this day. It is hard to comprehend the fact that 350 years of colonial domination and the various upheavals which have characterized Indonesian society since 1945 have left no dent on social or economic patterns. One point Seavoy raises in support of his argument for the "ethic of indolence" is the fact that techniques which led to the Green Revolution have not been accepted by villagers, in spite of claims that some experiments conducted in Indonesia have been successful. Seavoy does not extensively document his claims. It is important to know in what context the experiments were conducted; who conducted them, and whether or not they were carried out in such a way that they fit in with existing social patterns. Perhaps the types of crops, form, texture, and taste were not acceptable to the villagers. It is easy to chastize others for non-acceptance of supposedly rational techniques and improvements. Yet in the United States, in spite of extensive documentation on deleterious effects of the dietary patterns (for example, heavy reliance on beef products), there has been little change. Professor Seavoy also overlooks the fact that life in Indonesia and many other developing countries is very precarious. The failure of a crop is disastrous, and not all experiments introduced by outsiders have been successful. It is safer to follow the traditional way and thus be reasonably assured of an adequate food supply (speaking in relative terms).

³ Benjamin Higgins and Jean Higgins, *Indonesia: The Crisis of the Millstones* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1963).

⁴ Ann Gregory, "Factionalism in the Indonesian Army: The New Order", *Journal of Comparative Administration* 2 (1970): 341–54.

To bolster his argument, Seavoy equates his “ethic of indolence” with Foster’s “limited good”.⁵ However, the two concepts are quite different. The former states that Indonesian subsistence farmers grow only so much, or work periodically at outside labour (for example, rubber-tapping) to maintain a certain standard of living and then quit. Any excess is spent in celebrations, parties, etc., so that a levelling device is at work: One cannot produce more than one’s neighbours. Foster’s concept of “limited good” describes quite a different phenomenon. Resources of all kind are *scarce*; there is only so much available to all — love, friendship, money, and material goods. If one possesses an excess of goods, it is at the expense of someone else. Only at certain times and under certain circumstances may one possess more, for example, if one worked in the United States and therefore acquired additional income from outside the local system. Therefore “limited good” is quite different from the “ethic of indolence” which implies that one works until an acceptable level of food and cash is reached and then one has “time off”. There is no such equivalent in Foster’s discussion.

A further objection to Seavoy’s concept is the argument that much more is available in Indonesian villages, for example, production could be higher. This is not consistent with the facts. Indonesia, at various times, has had to import rice and other food items to feed its population, and this includes Seavoy’s population. Seavoy also ignores the heavy in-migration to Djakarta by people from the villages in search of employment. If life is so good on the farm, why leave?

As a former resident of Indonesia and as one who has continued to follow events in that area, I cannot help but be dismayed by the “ethic of indolence”. It is a concept that is a classic case of “blaming the victim”⁶ while ignoring structural factors: that is, people are poor because they choose to be and are essentially lazy. Furthermore it is a classic example of the Western observer who seeks to project the values of his own society onto another. As well as being value-laden research — in the worst sense of the meaning — this type of thinking has been the source of poor developmental planning.

Anyone who is acquainted with Indonesia knows that it is a nation with great potential, but possesses great problems due to the colonial legacy and the subsequent disastrous Sukarno regime. Under the current regime some progress has been made. If one is to focus on the characteristics of the Indonesian people, it would be far wiser and more accurate to view them as a very hardworking group of people striving to survive under extremely trying circumstances.

Department of Sociology
Indiana University Northwest

Karen A. Laidlaw

⁵ George Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good”, *American Anthropologist*, Apr. 1965; idem, *Tzintzuntzan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

⁶ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

To the Editorial Board

Karen A. Laidlaw weakens her criticism of my article by not understanding the distinction between peasant and farmer. Peasants produce food mainly for household consumption and farmers for market sale. Her criticism would have been enhanced if she was aware that the inability of peasant cultures to adequately feed themselves is a problem of all peasant cultures, not just Indonesian.

Laidlaw assumes that peasants want to maximize food production in order to maximize money incomes in the same way as American farmers. This assumption is commonly made by American observers when they survey peasant cultures. The most visible social practice of all peasant cultures is many children. Many children are socially useful to heads of households because labour can be transferred to them at an early age. Any analysis of peasant cultures must explain the universal desire for many children and why peasants continue to have many children when land shortages make a subsistence food supply increasingly difficult to grow. The reason is that heads of peasant households prefer to maximize indolence rather than maximize money incomes.

I am not an apologist for Dutch colonialism. I merely say there would be no Indonesian nation without there first being a Dutch empire. The objective of Dutch imperialism was to create a commercial appendage to the Netherlands, but in the process they created political and economic unity and built an economic infrastructure that made viable independence possible. Historians find it useful to make distinctions between political conduct and political accomplishments. Dutch colonial accomplishments were a necessary foundation for Indonesian independence and participation in world commercial culture.

Quite correctly, Laidlaw sees that I place most of the blame for the precarious food supply of Indonesian peasants on the peasants themselves. Blaming somebody or something else is an ethnocentric interpretation because it assumes that all food producers are motivated by the commercial values of Western civilization: that subsistence food producers (peasants) and commercial food producers (farmers) have identical social and economic goals. The weight of evidence strongly indicates that neither colonialism nor independence has had much effect on per capita food production unless there has been a revolutionary reorganization of peasant cultures. Blaming somebody or something else is the easy way to explain food shortages in peasant cultures.

Bowling Green State University

Ronald E. Seavoy