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**Review of Meer, A. van der (2020) Performing power:
cultural hegemony, identity, and resistance in
colonial Indonesia**

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Arnout van der Meer, *Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press [Southeast Asia Program Publications], 2020, xviii + 271 pp, ISBN: 9781501758577, price: USD 125.00 (hardcover); 9781501758584, USD 19.95 (paperback); 9781501758607, USD 00.00 (Ebook)

This book investigates how everyday interactions in Dutch colonial society in Java determined the norms of power, as well as how that power was negotiated and contested. Focussing on uses of clothing, architecture, language, etiquette, hierarchies, lifestyles and behavior through the lens of 'cultural hegemony', the author shows how in the nineteenth century such norms were appropriated by the colonial state for purposes of social control, but how in the twentieth, they were contested by a new generation of Indonesian nationalists who refused to accept the colonial hegemonic exercise of cultural appropriation and the specific racial and gendered inequalities it imposed.

The book rigidly leans on the concept of 'cultural hegemony' as set out in the introduction. Although this concept is rather uncritically applied, Van der Meer does continuously ensure to connect his case studies to it and return to it in every chapter. He argues that, rather than as a carefully directed 'theater state', observing the power exercise through the lens of cultural hegemony allows for greater awareness of mediation, negotiation, and exchange, as hegemony is never "static or absolute, but inherently contested" (pp. 4–5). This provides for a coherent book, even though most of the chapters of the book are based on separate essays published before.

'Cultural contestation' is elaborately exemplified throughout the book's chapters. Chapter one sketches the 'conscious policy' of Javanization during which the Dutch appropriated specific elements of Javanese *hormat* culture rooted in deference, etiquette, and language hierarchy. *Hormat* helped to emphasize differences, express power and status, and legitimize colonial rule, as expressed, for instance, by the use of *payung*, ceremonial parasols signifying rank (exemplified on the cover photo of the book). However, as Chapter two shows, the changing nature of Dutch colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century made such practices seem increasingly inadequate. Through the adoption of '*hormat circulars*' in 1904 and 1913, the government aimed to curtail the use of Javanized administrative culture to allow for more modern styles of rule in accordance with the 'modern' emancipatory undertones of the 'ethical policy' in the twentieth century. The circulars were, however, poorly adhered to by more conservative officials who feared loss of prestige.

As the government itself made little progress in bridging the gap between 'ethical theory' and 'conservative practice', cultural practices became a site

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of contestation. The third chapter discusses how in the wake of the *hormat* circular of 1913 minor incidents over etiquette incited structural social activism by awakening Indonesian nationalists who contested colonial inequalities as expressed through cultural appropriation through the vernacular press or through “acts of hegemonic contestation” (p. 78). The fourth chapter identifies clothing as a central site of such contestation, arguing that colonial authority was challenged by undercutting specific colonial dress-codes imposed as visual markers of social status, hierarchy and class. In these and other ways, as Chapter Five emphasizes, the colonized constructed their own ‘modern identities’, critically reflecting on the supposedly harmful influences of Western culture as well, while the Dutch started marking their own ‘modernity’ vis-à-vis the supposed backwardness of the colonized to express a European lifestyle, also in fear of ‘degeneration’ imposed by the tropics. The Dutch ridiculed attempts of the colonized to establish modern Indonesian identity, by repeating ‘traditional’ ethnic stereotypes, for instance, as the sixth chapter shows, through organizing fairs at which European modernity and Javanese tradition were ‘staged’ and juxtaposed to show off ‘technological and scientific prowess as indicators of [Dutch] alleged superiority’ (p. 188) and emphasize differences among Indonesians to deny an Indonesian national identity (p. 196).

Thus, in sum, the Dutch tried to confirm and strengthen colonial hierarchies of race, class, and gender, while the colonized destabilized them through discursive everyday actions. While the importance of indirect rule and its socio-cultural vices for colonial power and political-economy, as well as for the subsequent emergence of a modern Indonesian elite, has received much attention in historiography on Indonesia (for instance Sutherland 1979; Van Niel 1984), Van der Meer is right to point out that the actual workings of such colonial power are less well understood.

A major strength of the book is the extensive use of practical examples of cultural contestation, supported with many illustrations. These help the reader to understand the obnoxious experiences of the colonized but also the ways in which they responded and often succeeded in negotiating and bending modern colonial hegemony. In this way, Van der Meer builds on literature that centralizes colonial cultural modernity as related to power (Gouda 1995; Schulte Nordholt 2011 and Protschky and Van den Berge 2018) and underscores arguments that colonial modernity was a mutually and discursively constructed space. The book is a relevant and timely contribution to growing historiography that shows colonialism was no one-way exercise.

This does, however, raise the question of the extent of colonial cultural hegemony—namely, if it was indeed continuously contested, how hegemonic was it really? Van der Meer demonstrates that the most effective way to deploy

hegemonic practices was itself disputed between different layers of the state. So what exactly constituted the 'hegemony' that was being contested, if in fact, the nature of the modernity it supposedly governed was constantly disagreed upon? Additionally, many of Van der Meer's 'contestations' seem to have taken place in interaction among conservative Dutchmen and young, literate Indonesian intellectuals in spaces associated with modernity (offices, train stations, stores, restaurants, movie theaters). But how representative were such spaces for daily life and interactions throughout the colony? How was cultural hegemony experienced and contested by the wider, non-urban Indonesian public—for instance, outside of Java? And if modernity was a mutually constructed space, than how should we understand Javanese cultural dominance in the Indonesian archipelago after decolonization? How, in other words, was the practice of cultural hegemony and contestation different in colonial states when compared to other contexts?

With these questions unanswered, the book still seems to leave space for further reinterpretation of which colonial hegemonic practices (or hegemonic practices in general), exactly pertained and how the formation of specific Indonesian nationalist identities responded to them. Nevertheless, the book does fill in an important gap of understanding cultural expressions of power in Indonesia that many readers interested in modern Indonesia or the development of colonial culture and society at large will appreciate. It is a welcome addition to advancing insights into how colonialism was itself often a paradoxical endeavor, showing many complexities to which the answers were largely provided in everyday realities negotiated by colonizers and colonized.

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