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**Review of Schrauwens, A. (2021) Merchant Kings:  
corporate governmentality in the Dutch Colonial Empire,  
1815-1870**

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Albert Schrauwers, *Merchant Kings: Corporate Governmentality in the Dutch Colonial Empire, 1815-1870* (New York: Berghahn, 2021, 268 pp., ISBN 9781800730519).

In *Merchant Kings*, Albert Schrauwers, Associate Professor in anthropology at York University in Toronto, unveils the strong corporate influences on the formation of the Dutch empire in the nineteenth century and the circulation of governmental techniques and strategies within it. Schrauwers argues that corporate initiatives, often rooted in welfare projects in both the Netherlands and colonial Java, served as ‘delegations of state sovereignty’ (2). Corporations became an ‘integrated part of a larger governmental assemblage’ to carry out state functions and projects (4) and participated in governmental programs of what he calls Dutch ‘benevolent colonialism’, which used disciplinary techniques such as policing and accounting to induce a capitalist transformation while contributing to popular socio-economic and moral development.

The corporate ‘merchant kings’, as Chapter 1 explains, derived from the regent families circling around King Willem I. They served as state and corporate administrators in both Java and the Netherlands, shaping a new elite of ‘gentlemanly capitalists’, organised and invested in colonial corporations such as the *Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij* (Netherlands Trading Society, NHM). The exact distinctions between these ‘merchant kings’ and ‘gentlemanly capitalist’, however, remains unclear in the book. Through these mixed corporate-state structures, the King delegated his sovereignty downward and governed without parliamentary interference. Subsequently, under the device of ‘developing a free market sphere in dynamic synergy with a lately introduced laissez-faire liberalism’ (13), the state was further ‘franchised’ as corporations increasingly carried out state functions and projects which participated in governmental benevolent capitalist programs during the nineteenth century in both Java and the Netherlands.

The modus operandi of the merchant kings is analysed in the following chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 exemplify the Colonies of Benevolence in Drenthe, founded in 1818, and the Cultivation System in Java, implemented in 1830, as developmental enterprises through which state activities were franchised. By disciplining, policing and governing the lives of criminalised ‘paupers’ in Dutch and ‘lazy natives’ in Javanese society, these programs contained and securitised social problems through moral reform and economic development. Simultaneously, as Chapter 4 discloses, these ‘charitable’ projects generated new, profitable commodity chains to the control of the gentlemanly capitalists, interlinking Javanese coffee and sugar production to cotton manufacturing in the Netherlands. Chapter 5 discusses

how the state increasingly intermingled with the sugar industry in Java, as the 'patrimonial state bureaucracy' was slowly replaced with new 'assemblages' of oligarchic 'expert-engineers', industrialists and government bureaucrats, which no longer belonged to the former regent families of the earlier nineteenth century. They aspired not simply profits but control and efficiency through scientific management. Chapter 6 focuses on these assemblages in the Netherlands, exemplifying the 'philanthropic' capitalism of the firm of G.&H. Salomonson and their model textile factories as another site of what Schrauwers calls 'technocratic managerialism' of moral and economic development, which 'sought to improve the disciplinary apparatus through which both dressage and production were organized' (163).

Such strains of utopian liberalism were strongly influenced by the French theorist and businessman Henri de Saint-Simon and, as argued in Chapter 7, helped to conduct social planning under the trusteeship of investment bankers challenging the NHM's role, such as the French *Crédit Mobilier*, to assemble corporations into larger wholes through the overlapping membership of regent capitalists on corporate boards, in imitation of the economic governance of the Crown. Chapter 8 shows how such credit provision contributed to the merchant kings getting replaced with more technocratic gentlemanly capitalists, as scientific management was deemed more capable and efficient than the 'free market'. Chapter 9 demonstrates how accordingly the liberal state granted control of its highly capitalised rail network in the Netherlands to a corporate monopoly of technocratic engineer-regents.

Consequently, as emphasised in the conclusion, governmentality and its techniques of 'benevolent' rule were no longer in the hands of the sovereign. Instead, they circulated within the 'assemblages' of increasingly scientific corporate elites who by the end of the 1860s had assumed a dominant position in the parliament, the bureaucracies and the industries of both the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies.

As such, Schrauwers frames the Dutch empire as coordinated by a hierarchical administration of corporate engineers, industrialists, officials and bureaucrats rather than through free market forces and state sovereignty. This happened under a form of controlled capitalism that occupied state power and organised the planned economy that made the Netherlands a global power. The merchant kings allowed little room for public involvement and used scientific management techniques and shared forms of governmentality aimed at social engineering and generating profit. Schrauwers successfully interconnects the paternalistic 'benevolent' and moralising undertones usually associated with twentieth-century colonialism into a larger paradigm of Dutch public and corporate political-economic 'benevolence' from the early nineteenth century onward across the empire.

This way, the book rigorously unveils how corporatised the Dutch empire actually was. It thus contributes to the ongoing deconstruction of the

myth of liberal and transparent rule in Dutch (colonial) politics and society.<sup>1</sup> Few, the book shows, were considered able to bear liberal rights and hence became targets of intervention of the ‘benevolent’ reform programs of Dutch colonialism and industry governed by select, elitist groups of autocratic regents and capitalists. Schrauwert rightfully identifies the corporation as an important and previously overlooked pillar in colonial power structures. This bears some relevance to our understanding of current forms of corporatism and neoliberal governance in general. In the introduction, Schrauwert uses the brief analogy of Facebook and its use of data as a strategy to bring people under governmental control. It would be equally interesting to see if traces of technocratic, corporate styles of governance identified by Schrauwert are still present under the banner of liberalism in the current fabric of Dutch and Indonesian society and governance.

The value of *Merchant Kings* is found in these insights rather than in disclosing new facts. The perspective of corporatism, industrialism and commercialism as a driving force behind (Dutch) imperialism, colonial state formation and socio-economic development is not novel – it has already been applied by, amongst others, Thomas Lindblad, Jeroen Touwen, Ulbe Bosma, Arjen Taselaar and Anne Booth<sup>2</sup> – neither is putting metropolitan and colonial developmentalism in the same analytical framework, which is a key component in the tradition of the ‘New Imperial History’.<sup>3</sup>

1 See for instance Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995); Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten: Vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische archipel, 1877-1942* (Utrecht 1981); Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, ‘Imperialism after the Great Wave: The Dutch Case in the Netherlands East Indies, 1860-1914’, in: Matthew P. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Liberal Imperialism in Europe* (Basingstoke 2012) 25-46. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137019974\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137019974_2); René Koekoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000*. Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies (Cham 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27516-7>.

2 Thomas Lindblad, ‘The Contribution of Foreign Trade to Colonial State Formation in Indonesia, 1900-1930’, in: Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic*

*Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942* (Leiden 1994) 93-115; Jeroen Touwen, *Extremes in the Archipelago: Trade and Economic Development in the Outer Islands of Indonesia, 1900-1942*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 190 (Leiden 2001). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004490680>; Ulbe Bosma, *The Sugar Plantation in India and Indonesia: Industrial Production, 1770-2010* (Cambridge 2013). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139626323>; Arjen Taselaar, *De Nederlandse koloniale lobby: Ondernemers en de Indische politiek, 1914-1940* (Leiden 1998); Anne Booth, *Colonial Legacies: Economic and Social Development in East and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu 2007).

3 See for instance Remco Raben, ‘A New Dutch Imperial History?: Perambulations in a Prospective Field’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128:1 (2013) 5-30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8353>.

Many of Schrauwens' observations on colonial economic reforms in terms of governmental developmentalism will sound familiar to scholars of Dutch political, economic and colonial history, or readers aware of the debates on the Dutch Cultivation System – not in the least since Schrauwens himself has contributed to these debates, having published some of the book's chapters as separate articles over the last two decades. Based on twenty years of research, the book is packed with multiple explanations on different elements shaping this 'corporate-governmental assemblage', among others the classes of merchant kings or gentlemanly capitalists, their techniques of governmentality, and the undermining of sovereignty. It is, however, not always clear which elements are prioritised by Schrauwens. Many of them are explained in different, yet ostensibly similar and exchangeable ways ('cameralist policies and discourses', governmental 'ensembles, assemblages and dispositions', 'merchant kings' and 'gentlemanly capitalists', 'scientific' and 'technocratic management').

The clearest example of this is the concept of corporatisation itself. On the second page of the book, this is explained as a 'social technology for implementing governmental programs of improvement [...] that contributed to the governmentalization of society' and 'a political strategy that delegated state (not specifically "economic") tasks to ancillary jurisdictions'. Later on, it is also described as the 'legal and political processes through which the corporate form is strategically used to solidify or fix in place the disparate elements of the messy assemblage of a governmental program in order to lend it institutional consistency, efficiency, and permanency' (6), a 'means of addressing how particular governmental strategies circulated within and between corporations and the state despite resistance in order to create a networked assemblage capable of managing global commodity chains' (7), an 'economizing discourse that framed the internal market of the corporation [...] (103), 'the process by which corporate governmentality is established' (119), and an 'attempt at fixing contested commodity chains in place' (230). The concept of corporatisation hence is inflated with so much meaning that it sometimes obfuscates more than it clarifies.

This renders an insightful but conceptually bulky and densely written book that may require some stamina to finish and fully apprehend. It is, nonetheless, worth the effort due to its compelling exposition of corporate governmentality as distinctive of the Dutch political economy, which confirms the intertwined development of modern corporations, colonial power, and the merchant kings behind it.

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