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## Comments on Benjamin White's "Demand for Labor and Population Growth in Colonial Java"

Clifford Geertz<sup>1</sup>

The historical demography of Java reminds one of what Voltaire said of etymology—that it was the science in which the vowels count for nothing and the consonants for not much more. The data are execrable enough to make an original scholar out of anyone. If Peper wants to slow down the growth rate, he raises the 1800 figure; if Wertheim wants to speed it up, he lowers it; if Geertz has a thesis with which the received rate fairly well comports, he concludes that, for all their admitted faults, *et cetera*, the early estimates are probably not that far off; if Widjojo wants to start the serious demographic history of Java with the 1920 census and then read the modern pattern back, all he has to do is describe the imaginative ways in which population estimates before that time were arrived at—and who is to say any of them nay? Thus White, trying to strengthen the plausibility of a rather special, rather ambitious, and rather controversial theory of population growth—that it is a response to the demand for labor—on the basis of the reproductive behavior of Javanese peasants in the nineteenth century, has at once his work cut out for him and a fair certainty of not being disproved, so long as he is careful to stick to strictly demographic arguments.

For the first half or so of his paper, White does so stick and the result is the expected inconclusiveness. He succeeds in suggesting that there might be something to the labor-demand theory, by showing that the alternatives—improved health, *pax Neerlandica*, famine control, and so on—are as difficult to establish on the basis of the nineteenth-century figures as it is. The advocacy of these other theories is thus condemned as “ethnocentric—an execration of some power in anthropology—though it is difficult for me to see why they are more so than the labor-demand theory, which is not itself exactly a

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product of Javanese culture. In any case, the conclusion that there is more behind population growth than the removal of Malthusian checks and that therefore “more positive factors” must also be invoked is not one that as many people as White imagines would seriously object to, nor is it one to which the demographic history of Java as such has anything more to say than that of anyplace else. What must be shown is that White’s chosen “positive factor” played a central—he seems to suggest a nearly exclusive—role in the evolution of the Javanese population. And that takes him beyond demography, narrowly considered, into historical sociology, where, in reverse of our usual stereotype, the data are rather harder and argument less untestable.

On this sociological side, the issue seems to me to come down to a single question: granted that Dutch colonial policy after 1830 demanded increased peasant labor input into the commercial side of the Netherlands East Indies agricultural economy, how was this provided? White says by increased production of children by the household unit; it was a simple quantitative supply-demand situation, and Dutch policies raised the equilibrium point. My own view is that though such a response may have to some degree occurred, the increased demands from the Dutch sector were more importantly met by social reorganizations, including work and technological reorganizations, in the peasant sector. In particular, labor time patterns were adjusted—which, as I say, included a good deal of technical innovation on the peasant side and, even more importantly, a close interweaving of peasant and plantation economies so that peasant workers could be used in the plantation sector without seriously undermining subsistence production.

This question—whether the main response to Dutch policies was a quantitative or structural one—is clearly quite open, but the fact is that White never squarely confronts it. The enormous amount of information concerning the manner in which plantation and peasant economies became symbiotically intertwined with one another is not even alluded to. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Javanese society—in particular, how villages were organized—is also neglected. The result is that the issue is not joined, and we are left with a simple, atomistic “supply-crowd/demand-crowd” picture of what was one of the most elaborate, intricate, and, in its rather perverse way, ingenious colonial agrarian sociotechnical structures the world has yet seen. The fact, if it is one, that famine-struck farmers in contemporary Java feed their children before themselves is interesting, but in advancing the cause of the labor-demand theory it is not worth much in comparison to a careful analysis of the classical Javanese social order against the background of that theory’s claims.

Taken as a partial rather than a sovereign force, there may indeed be something to the labor-demand theory in relation to the Javanese population rise. I myself very much think so. But it will take more than the census figures from the nineteenth century, a mere accounting of the colonial economic

history, and a few intriguing observations about present behavior to prove it. It will take a detailed sociological analysis of nineteenth-century Netherlands East Indies economy and society, on both its peasant and its Dutch sides, with respect to its implications for the labor-demand hypothesis, as well as a deep-going reconstruction of that hypothesis itself into less "merely economic" and more "genuinely sociological" terms.

Thus White has raised an important problem and introduced a valuable new perspective into the study of Java's demographic history. But to realize the promise of this perspective, he is going to have to move far beyond a random search for possible confirmations in a shadowy historical record to a large-scale reconceptualization of the nature of Javanese colonial society and culture (or at least the adaptive dimensions of it) and, concurrently, of the labor-demand theory of population growth as such. This may seem a lot to ask. But that is what one gets oneself into when, as White here so lucidly, suggestively, and courageously does, one turns from mere etymology to advancing large assertions.