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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony by Rudolph Mrázek

Review by: Clifford Geertz

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identification with some form of social change or critique, even as authors divide over questions of whether cultural studies is still conscientiously adhering to materially grounded, rigorous analysis. Importantly, such contentions are continentally inflected. Paul Smith, for instance, hints at U.S. culpability in hijacking cultural studies away from a more Marxist engagement characteristic of Britain. Conversely, Robert Stam suggests that the important British emphasis on class may also elide a more postimperial, world historical perspective for a cultural studies that would figure race—and Frantz Fanon—more centrally. Latin Americanist scholars Yudice, Marsical, and Ochoa Gautier implicitly critique Euro/North American biases in maintaining a blindness to Spanish speakers “within” and in keeping a clean distance from cultural policy intervention. Debates notwithstanding, Miller’s introduction upholds a unifying vision to define cultural studies: “The concern is the reproduction of culture through structural determinations on subjects versus their own agency, and the method is historical materialism” (p. 1). It is left to readers to ascertain, through their circuitous meanderings through the thicket of this rich collection, whether a sense of continuities in the field can be maintained.

**Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony.** Rudolph Mrázek. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 368 pp.

#### CLIFFORD GEERTZ

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Writing the history of the immediate pre-present, the time just before “now” began, raises awkward and unsettling problems of perspective. The knowledge one has directly before one of how, apparently, it all has “finally” come out, what all the foreshadowings, presentiments, promissings, and imaginings seem to have at length led on to, bears down on description with an enormous weight. The visible outcome, dominates interpretation to a much greater extent than it does in histories of remoter, more self-contained times. Seeing the past as prologue and the present as destination is a nearly inescapable temptation when “only yesterday” is the object of attention.

This is even more the case where the “yesterday” involved is that of one of the so-called new nations torn away from colonial rule by World War II. What turned out to be the closing phases of a whole social formation, the end not just of a regime but also of a regime of regimes, is extremely difficult to see in its own terms, independently of the dramas and transformations in which it perished. Triumphalist, out-of-bondage accounts, in which everything that happens is seen as a step toward freedom, independence, and national self-assertion in the face of pervasive, mindless oppression, practically write themselves, and are about as useful, and as lifelike, as most moralities are.

Rudolph Mrázek, a Czech social historian trained in the United States, whose subject in this extraordinarily origi-

nal, beautifully written book is the last days (c. 1891–1942) of what used to be “The Dutch East Indies” and is now “Indonesia,” avoids such anticipatory, future-driven narrative by concentrating on the technological developments—in communications, architecture, fashion, record keeping, urban planning, transport—that produced what he calls “the surreal significance of late-colonial duration . . . the time of the Indies as a premonition.” Beginning with the Siak expedition of 1891, in which the chief engineer of the Dutch State Railways and later founder of the colony’s first technical college, led three other Dutchmen, a dozen Javanese servants, 20 Javanese railway workers, and about one hundred-twenty helpers recruited locally from the Sumatrans through the jungle east of Padang (“clambering over fallen trees, balancing on their trunks, skidding down, and stumbling through the muddy holes in between”) to lay out a path for the building of a transisland railway. Mrázek traces the movement of the engineering, plan-filled mind of Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam, and Utrecht across the jumbled, irregular, *sauvage* Indies. One after the next, the science-based improvement campaigns, products of “one of the boldest and most profound of [early-20th-century] modernist movements in Europe, the Dutch . . . avant garde” are described: the laying out of “hard clean roads” the expansion of the electrical grid, of telephone communications, of popular radio transmission; the manufacture of tailored clothing; the building of glass-and-iron, villa-and-bungalow cities; the development of refined techniques of political control (fingerprinting, photography, certification, licensing). Late colonial Nederlandsche-Indië was more than an imperial end game or a preface to popular violence. It was “a dream and a plan—in its sweep comparable to Le Corbusier’s *Ville contemporaine*”—of Dutchmen and Indonesians “living in a future, well-equipped, modern, happy, and efficient Indies, together.”

It did not, of course, exactly work out that way. Utopias rarely do. Following out the lives and works of various late colonial intellectuals: A Dutch romantic novelist, whose characterization of “our space in the Indies” as a narrow shaft of Western light in a surrounding, threatening Asian darkness was the most widely read portrayal of settler life; a Javanese journalist, whose premature nationalism and “peddler’s language” led him from prison to prison until he died in one of them; a Javanese “princess,” dead in childbirth at 25, whose lyrical letters to Dutch friends and mentors celebrated the promises of modernization for “our people”; and a government “expert on native matters” whose fatuous radio speeches in school Indonesian glossed the endgame bankruptcy of the entire project. Mrázek delicately conveys the curious mixture of hope, complacency, enthusiasm, anger, and self-deception that the Japanese invasion finally brought to a sudden, brutal end, and that, to a greater extent than is sometimes realized its successor, *Republik Indonesia*, inherited. This fascinating book about a fascinating time is a major contribution to the cultural history of colonialism and to the understanding of engineered modernism.