A race horse among work horses in Dutch archival pastures [Review of: A. Stoler. Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense]

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A race horse among work horses in Dutch archival pastures

In a recent *New York Times* review of Simon Schama’s latest treatise, focusing on the American past rather than the arts and culture of the Dutch Republic, the conservative columnist David Brooks indulged in an amusing peroration about ‘The Brilliant Book […] the sort of book written by a big thinker who comes to capture the American spirit while armed only with his own brilliance’. If we were to replace ‘American’ with ‘(post)colonial spirit’, the same expectations resonate with regard to Ann Stoler’s newest contribution to her already substantial body of scholarship on the Dutch East Indies. *Along the archival grain* is also written by an author sustained primarily by her own thoughts and talents in producing a book that is resplendent with questions and insights. As suggested in this review’s title, among the many work horses grazing in the pastures of Dutch colonial archives, Stoler has once more distinguished herself as a race horse.

In ways that are more subtle and empirically grounded than her previous work, in *Along the archival grain* Stoler revisits her long-standing fascination not only with the political origins but also the affective resonance of a ‘racialized common sense about people and places’ that pervaded the authorities and the settler community of the Dutch East Indies and, by implication, other European colonial regimes in Asia as well (p. 24). In fact, her direct appeal to a postcolonial and cultural studies audience beyond the specialized world of Dutch colonial scholarship is again the reason why this book’s title makes no reference to its geographical situatedness in the Netherlands Indies. In this instance Stoler first trains her analytic gaze on the Dutch archival record, not simply using it as a privileged source of historical information. Instead, she treats the archives as a subject in and of itself demanding painstaking scholarly attention. She explores the manner in which a range of ‘imperial dispositions’ (p. 3) and alternating forms of ‘epistemic uncertainty and clarity’ (p. 43) are buried in archival holdings, thus constituting a ‘repository of good taste and bad faith’ (p. 41). When historians excavate such an untidy storehouse of documents in order to expose the hidden nooks and crannies of a European colonial ethos, Stoler underscores the necessity to read *along the grain* before trying to read *against* it, as many postcolonial scholars in recent years have
Debate advocated. She encourages historians to enter the archives and surrender to them as a ‘force field’ in which a shifting vocabulary of political authority, affective knowledge and racial anxiety gives documentary voice to ‘the habits of the [colonial] heart’ (p. 53)

Stoler’s ruminations are complex. In the first two chapters she sets up a relentless one-way conversation with a wide range of anthropologists and political scientists as well as philosophers and historians. Her purpose is to enhance our understanding of the constant shifts back and forth between epistemological confidence and existential doubt, reflected in the archival record, that troubled and occasionally disoriented colonial authorities. In Along the archival grain, however, she now seems to contest the notion that colonial societies like the Dutch East Indies, British India or French Indochina constituted political vanguards or ‘laboratories of modernity’, as proposed by anthropologists such as Gauri Vishwanathan, Paul Rabinow and Gwendolyn Wright. Indirectly, she also calibrates Bruno Latour’s analysis in 1988 of the Pasteurian revolution in France, when he insisted that Europe’s transformation through modern experimental science may be best understood by looking at the ‘colonies’ rather than the ‘home country’. Rational social policies were not first tried out in what French policymakers during the Third Republic called colonial champs d’expérience. Echoing Peter van der Veer’s apt description of the colonial state as a provisional ‘nexus of projects and arrangements’, in her newest book Stoler maintains that political calculus and dispassionate rationality were neither credible nor indelible ‘hallmarks’ of Dutch colonial rule (p. 58). Instead, the management of a vacillating spectrum of private sensations and public sensibilities concerning the Europeans’ superior status, the nature of race relations, and the consequences of miscegenation constituted the core of colonial governance. She implies that the task of the historian, therefore, is first to identify and locate and then to decipher the erratic emotions anchored in ‘the social relations of power’ that are reconfigured in millions upon millions of words, only to be stowed away in the never-ending rows of bookshelves of archival repositories (p. 35).

The above discussion barely scratches the surface of Stoler’s reflections on the political preoccupations and affective undercurrents buried in Dutch archival holdings. In contrast to earlier statements about a generic ‘colonial project’ in, among others, Race and the education of desire in 1995 – such as ‘the micromanagement of sexual arrangements […] was critical to the distinctions between ruler and ruled’ – this time around she offers variations on the same theme that are solidly grounded in the particularity of the Dutch colonial record. The empirical rigour on display in Along the archival grain therefore presents a theoretical conundrum. In the thriving academic cottage industry of postcolonial studies, paying homage to Ann Stoler’s work has become de rigueur. In order to establish their bona fide credentials as postcolonial crit-
ics, many feel obligated to cite her books and articles, almost on a par with acknowledging the genealogical influences of such classics as Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) or Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). In the process of mobilizing her meditations on the ‘tense and tender ties’ connecting Western imperialists to colonized subjects in Asian societies, however, the historical and geographical specificity of Dutch colonial culture in the Indonesian archipelago often falls by the wayside. As a result, the question as to how we can extrapolate from the conclusions in *Along the archival grain* to a general understanding of the nature of European colonialism in Asia appears more urgent than before.

In terms of her call to submit to the flow of the discursive ‘force field’ of the Dutch colonial archives, the proof of the pudding is located in Parts II and III of the book, where Stoler heeds her own injunctions by analysing a series of historical events she labels as ‘non-events’ because they allegedly have not previously emerged as relevant occurrences worthy of historiographical attention (p. 5). In her first exploration of such non-events she delves into the multiple implications of the political protest mounted in 1848 by *inlandsche kinderen* (literally, offspring of the Indies) – residents classified as European but born and educated in the Indonesian archipelago – against legislation that excluded them from the higher ranks of the civil service. Stoler’s next chapters focus on the investigative reports issued by state-appointed Pauper Commissions in 1874 and 1901, charged with examining the material conditions and social comportment of poverty-stricken Europeans in Java. In this detailed analysis she incorporates an assessment of trial-and-error governmental efforts to establish vocational schools for poor Indo-Dutch and indigent European inhabitants. Her final chapters concentrate on the melancholy life and disrupted career of Frans Carl Valck, a civil servant stationed on the east coast of Sumatra when on 19 October 1876 a group of former plantation workers murdered and dismembered a Dutch planter’s wife and his two children.

The chapters in Parts II and III reflect Stoler’s creative reading of the archival record in which she exposes fascinating new angles on the ambivalent workings of a Dutch colonial state that displayed, over time, constantly changing ragged edges. She enhances our understanding of the racial disquiet – or the multi-layered and often incongruous imaginaries – of a Dutch settler community long since organically intertwined with the native population of Southeast Asia through interracial reproduction. By focusing her historian’s lens on ‘the affective knowledge that was at the core of political rationality’ (p. 98), she scrambles the one-dimensional picture of the European colonial project in Asia that sometimes inflects the work of historians employing a postcolonial perspective. In this instance, Stoler implies that the Netherlands Indies society was not moulded by iron-clad racial hierarchies in which
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putatively white-skinned Europeans functioned automatically as lords and masters while the native and mixed-race masses were summarily relegated to positions of subservience. The overall impression left by Stoler’s newest book mirrors the recent findings of Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben in *Being ‘Dutch’ in the Indies: A history of creolisation and empire, 1500-1920* (2008; first published in Dutch in 2003). These authors also conclude, on the basis of equally wide-ranging research in Dutch and other national archives, that this ‘attractively simple image of colonial society […] is false’.

Given the breadth of her scholarly references, it is startling that so little engagement with the work of contemporary Dutch historians is evident in Stoler’s lengthy footnotes dangling at the bottom of every page. Her reliance on I.J. Brugmans’ *De arbeidende klasse in Nederland in de 19de eeuw* (1929) is curious, for instance, because during the past 40 years social historians in the Netherlands, guided either by a liberal or neo-marxist model or by a sociogenetic approach inspired by Norbert Elias, have written a plethora of dissertations and books on nineteenth-century class relations, labour history, and the industrialization of the Netherlands. It is also regrettable that Stoler does not more fully interrogate the prolific work on Dutch-Indonesian political and cultural interactions produced by Dutch historians since the 1970s, some of whom have also achieved the track record of a successful race horse.

It may be tempting to lament such slights or oversights. But perhaps our response to these omissions should be reframed. Why is it that Ann Laura Stoler, as the foremost expert in the Anglo-American academic world on the history of Dutch colonial culture in Southeast Asia, tends to ignore the scholarly output of historians in the Netherlands? Yet another question might be added: why is the political impact and cultural heritage of Dutch colonialism so often glossed over in contemporary transnational efforts to assess the meanings of European imperial legacies in Asia? Can this neglect of the Dutch case be attributed to linguistic obstacles, hampered further by Dutch colonial historians’ apparent lack of interest, with a few notable exceptions, in participating in international debates concerning comparative colonial histories in Asia? While Stoler is not restrained by linguistic barriers, she nonetheless skips over most of the corpus of Dutch colonial historiography, as if historians in the Netherlands participate in a discursive universe that functions separately from the intellectual excitement that animates discussions about postcolonialism and transnational history currently taking place in the Anglo-American academic world.

We can only hope that *Along the archival grain*, rooted as it is in the debates of the English-language scholarly world, will contribute to the incorporation of the empirical realities of the Dutch case into the most salient transnational discussions. Just as Simon Schama accomplished in his work on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, Stoler has used her outsider perspective
to shed incandescent light on the meanings and implications of Dutch culture not only in Southeast Asia but also as it refracted back to the European heartland. As befitting a race horse, she has travelled with dispatch along the countless tracks of the Dutch archival colossus. She has shown that imperial governance, whether in colonial Indonesia or elsewhere in Asia, was often beholden to a precarious sense of theatricality that was rehearsed and restaged in constantly changing ways in order to perform European power as a representation of a supposedly natural order of things. The result is a provocative addition to the field, compelling (post)colonial historians in the Netherlands and elsewhere to take notice of the ways in which fluctuating policy measures as well as erratic psychic processes haunted policymakers and residents of the Dutch East Indies with a ‘logos and pathos of empire’ (p. 278).

References

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Ambiguities of reading and writing

There was a time when colonial historiography was performed by going to the archives, reading what colonial administrators had to say about the topic, and writing it down. Later, there was a time when perusing those same archives was an extremely suspect, if inevitable, activity that often gave rise to bitter comments on the limitations and bias of such documents. Times have changed again. In line with the view that sources tell something primarily about themselves and their makers, Ann Laura Stoler has written a captivating account about reading the colonial archives. Those who have followed her work will be acquainted with her themes, her questions, and her love of words. But never before was she so enjoyable. This is not meant as a criticism of her previous work; it only acknowledges the joy that has obviously gone into writing this book and the contagiousness of that delight for the reader.

To a large extent, Stoler revisits the themes of her previous investigations, such as the plantations of Sumatra’s East Coast and the Eurasians of Java. A chapter typically focuses on a small selection of archival documents – a report,