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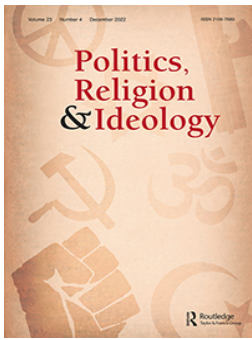
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Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia

by Arnout van der Meer, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020.
280 pp., \$19.95, ISBN: 9781501758584

Otto Linde

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numbers of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. is not random but was at least in part due to the living conditions of and discrimination against Latinos, as well their concentration in “essential” jobs that led to heightened exposure to COVID-19. In response to this crisis, De la Torre proposes “ethics para joder” (181), which translates roughly to “ethic to screw,” advocating for active sabotage of “power structures” like the laws that reinforce the privilege of white Christianity. These additional perspectives and experiences enhance the book’s argument about white religion’s role in the suffering of minorities, and they highlight, along with the chapters on the Black Church, the capacity of religious minorities to offer solutions that serve to the challenge injustices.



Ultimately, this book’s timely discussion of the role of religion over the last few tumultuous years extends a welcoming invitation to continue exploring the long-term effects of the pandemic and anti-Black violence on various aspects of religious and social life. The analyses in the book will assist all readers in understanding how different institutions like the Black Church have handled the pandemic, racial injustice, and public awakening. And, critically, the book cements an academic perspective on a crucial moment in time, capturing current thought on what is surely only a midpoint in long-term social transformations.

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Angel A. Escamilla-García

Migrations Initiative, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

 aae45@cornell.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3662-0063>

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Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia, by Arnout van der Meer, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020. 280 pp., \$19.95, ISBN: 9781501758584

Arnout van der Meer’s new book *Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia* makes for a fascinating and refreshing read. Within the context of the historiography of colonial Indonesia it is not often that one encounters books with a similar approach to history. Throughout his book, the author stresses the significance of performative statements within the context of power relations between different groups in colonial Java (despite its title, the book is really more about colonial Java than about colonial Indonesia as a whole). The Dutch – the colonizing power in colonial Java – aimed to communicate, sustain and enhance their hegemony in colonial Java by using (and in effect manipulating) various aspects of Javanese culture, customs and traditions: think language registers, etiquette, material status symbols, clothing and architecture. This is not, however, where the story ends. Arnout van der Meer makes a compelling case in his book that the colonized – the various ethnic groups of Java – did not passively accept the cultural projections of the colonial state. Rather than that, especially after 1913, the colonized started to contest and debate these

cultural projections and came up with their own alternative cultural formulations. In effect, therefore, Arnout van der Meer demonstrates that culture was not only used to prop up colonial authority in colonial Java, but was also well-understood and actively used by the colonized, who aimed to make their own symbolic and political statements on how they envisioned their future roles in (colonial) Indonesia. The book urges the reader to rethink the nature of anticolonial nationalism in colonial Java – and by implication also elsewhere. It does so by focusing on ‘the proliferation of everyday discursive acts that challenged colonial hegemony and strategies of domination’ instead of on the well-trodden path of looking at ‘political movements and organizations’ [p. 2]. The author applies the Gramscian concept of ‘cultural hegemony’ throughout his book.


In chapter one, the author takes his readers back to the nineteenth century. He does so in order to illustrate the argument that the Dutch – during the early colonial era – projected their power by adopting (hybrid versions of) Javanese cultural practices and lifestyles to prop up their own colonial regime. This chapter essentially serves as something of a background chapter: what Arnout van der Meer calls the ‘Javanized’ colonial order represented the context against which both ethical thinkers and Indonesian nationalists would be reacting during the twentieth century. Contestation of cultural practices comes into the picture during chapter two, when the author discusses attempts by proponents of the Ethical Policy to give the colonial state a more modern or European face. The author illustrates how this modernizing impulse (studied through the case of the ‘*hormat circulars*’) was contested and resented by conservative European colonial officials operating in the field – who cherished early colonial ‘Javanized’ traditions, because these were perceived by them as enhancing their own authority. In chapter three the author focuses more on the Javanese/Indonesian reactions to the introduction of the Ethical Policy, as well as to the conservative reaction by colonial officials in the field. A process of soul searching and an active quest to look for ways to regain Indonesian self-worth was embarked upon by the Javanese/Indonesian intellectuals and middle classes. Chapter four, five and six elaborate on this theme by looking at various case studies focused on topics such as what clothing was envisioned to be appropriate for modern Javanese/Indonesian men and women; the envisioned appropriate relation between Javanese cultural practices and Dutch/European cultural practices, and other topics such as consumerism and the *pasar malam*. The book ends with a short chapter on the pawnshop strike of 1922.

The book as a whole makes a strong and well-argued case for the importance of (everyday) culture as an arena of contestation with regards to power relations in colonial societies such as that of colonial Java. Through his discussion of the historical sources the author shows that cultural practices were actively contested between the ‘colonized’ and the ‘colonizers’. However, rather than falling into the trap of focusing on this dichotomy, the author also extensively shows that cultural practices were constantly contested *within* these categories: conservative colonial officials in Java contested the aims of the ethical thinkers and the colonized expressed differing preferences in the press. The book, therefore, apart from constituting a revisionist history of the Indonesian National Awakening, could also very well be read as a book on the historical process of *norm-setting*. This makes the book interesting not only for historians of colonial Indonesia and colonial societies more in general, but also for cultural historians, political historians and anthropologists.

Having said this, I do think that the book could have been more powerful if it had included more discussion on the ‘lower classes’ – who constituted the majority of the colony’s inhabitants. The book is, after all, very much a history of the elites and middle classes of colonial Indonesia. What about the Javanese contract laborers in East Sumatra, for example? Did any of the thoughts set out in the press by the Indonesian intellectuals and middle classes

influence the actions of this category of people? If so, how did their conduct towards their European and Chinese overseers change? While the contract laborers may not have a vivid voice of their own in the historical sources, their behavior, and therefore their performative acts, are nevertheless well-documented in both the press and in various archives.¹ This means that it would have been within the realm of the possible to study this category of people. Everything taken together, however, I would like to warmly recommend the book *Performing Power* to anyone who is interested in the overlap between politics and culture and to all scholars in any way occupied with political history, cultural history, colonial history, or (political) anthropology.

Otto Linde
Department of History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

 s.o.linde@vu.nl

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The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging, by Alma Rachel Heckman, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2021, 344 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781503613805

Alma Heckman's *The Sultan's Communists* offers a new account of Moroccan Jewish political history in the twentieth century by focusing on the trajectories of Moroccan Jewish radicals who were involved in national liberation movements in Morocco (including Léon René Sultan, Edmond Amran El Maleh, Abraham Serfaty, Simon Lévy, and Sion Assidon). This book challenges standard narratives about the Jewish past, and focuses on modern Jewish historiography, the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and international leftist and imperialist histories. Heckman aims to put two bodies of historiographies in conversation with each other, namely modern Jewish historiography and modern MENA historiography. While modern Jewish historiography has neglected Jewish political history of the MENA region by focusing mainly on the story of mass exodus or Zionist salvation, modern MENA historiography has been silent on the role of minorities to national histories. Through detailed archival work in Morocco, France, Israel, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the book offers a story that is deeply Moroccan and international at once when Moroccan Jewish communists traversed different national and intellectual boundaries to engage in anti-colonial struggle, to assert a Moroccan identity, and to envision a democratic Morocco.

The book centers around a core question: How could Moroccan Jewish communists—who were seen by the majority of Moroccan Jews as political liabilities under French and Spanish colonial rule and under the reign of King Hassan II later on—become symbols of Morocco's 'tolerance' and be claimed by the state as national heroes and the 'Sultan's Communists'? To answer this question, Heckman offers a breathtaking historical account of Moroccan Jews'

¹On the sources concerning Javanese contract laborers in various parts of colonial Indonesia, see Vincent J.H. Houben and J. Thomas Lindblad (eds.) *Coolie Labour in Colonial Indonesia: A Study of Labour Relations in the Outer Islands c. 1900-1940* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999).