

This is my written response for Muchtar Habibi's book at its launching with Indoprogress' Book Readers Forum. I write this in English because Habibi writes his book in English. I presented this at the forum in Indonesian. This writing follows three courses: 1) the strength of Habibi's book; 2) some dimensions that still need further exploration, especially for future agrarian scholars/scholarships; 3) critiques on Habibi's gender theory & book framing.

**Disclaimer:** I don't proofread/copyedit this writing, please don't mind grammatical errors.

## The Strength

- a) The book successfully shows *the materialization/abstraction of Marx's trifecta of capital(ism): land, labor, and capital*. The relation is as vivid as class differentiation. By showing such an abstraction on class & social differentiation, Habibi also sharply constructs the social relation of space and land in the rural areas.
- b) Relatedly to my first point, Habibi's class differentiation *overcomes the specter haunting Indonesia's agrarian studies that is to see peasantry/farmers as a monolithic class and further from labor-centric scrutiny, ignoring the relationship between land and labor*. While it seems that it's just a matter of political and evidential concern, such an underlying perception of peasantry and rurality has a serious political implication, particularly for organizing in rural areas. Class – often obscured by calling it “social” instead – relation will influence, if not determine, agrarian advocacies & justice. It will also shape what constitutes as a justice in land movement as well. Moving forward, from Habibi's research, one might want to know how the complex class relation among farmers can explain the outcomes of Indonesia's agrarian studies (that mostly result in abysmal and further penetration of capital and precarity)—and, possibly related, why the framework of indigeneity (problematic as it is for many) has been increasingly more successful in legally protecting farmers' land.
- c) As a sociologist of the state, I find Habibi's account helpful to study (and further the puzzle and problematizing of) Indonesia's struggle to downstream their extractive industries. Along with Habibi's previous research on labor rurality and village governance, could it be possible to center rural class relation as a variable that may explain state preference in extractivism? One of the questions I struggle with my dissertation is *why Indonesia is so adamant about the land size given to farmers?* Hence, what kind of landed (and labored) subjects that are being engineered by the state in rural areas to sustain their “rent-seeking” petty economy and control capital?
- d) Habibi's research overcomes the impasse pointed out by Bernstein years ago in his seminal *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*: what is exactly a farmer? Are they a labor, or property owner? In his guess lecture at the Bandung's Agrarian Research Center, Ben White correctly argues how unfruitful to make a binary of land and labor embodied in peasantry. After all, argued Habibi, as capital penetration and transformation deepen in rural areas, it is so hard to find farmers who exclusively only farm. And if we're to loyal to Marx's theory of absolute, differential, and ground rent, labor (be it from human or the environment) is always at the heart of land transformation and property value. I find Habibi's theorization of class more cutting-edge to also move beyond Wright versus Thompson – that it is of a dynamic social relation that can still be formalized within a demarcation line of what constitutes as “class”

under capitalist mode of production. Hence, while class is dynamic, some logical consistency can still be expected once we lay out the social relations in which class is molded.

- e) What Habibi does with his book is a classical agrarian studies *par excellence* that – I think – declines in its popularity despite its immense importance given our “poly-crises.” Land still matters, no matter how much arguments are made (especially by sociologists) for financialization – or financialization of land. Maybe what we need is to take a step back and go back to basic: to ask what land relation that has been operating that leads us to this stage of capitalism. For Politics with capital p, land still matters in the rural politics and power (this is why I find his research can inform us about rural organizing & movement). I cannot stop thinking about the classic study of power in political science and (political) sociology and how land (materiality and immateriality) can facilitate the power relation in [each face of power](#). Especially, one of the most informing event in the study of power is Gaventa’s study in the [Appalachian Valley](#), including the coal workers’ relation with their rurality.

A/B relations	First dimension	Second dimension	Third dimension
Power of A over B	Prevalence of A over B through A's control of superior bargaining resources	A constructs barriers to the participation of B through non-decision-making and the mobilization of bias	A influences and shapes B's consciousness about the existence of inequalities through the production of myths, information control, ideologies, etc.
Rebellion of B against the benefits held by A relative to B	A defeats B owing to B's lack of resources	B does not participate in the existing political agendas because of real and perceived barriers to entry and owing to anticipation by B that to participate would mean defeat	Susceptibility to myths, legitimization of ideologies; a sense of powerlessness; an uncritical or fragmentary and multiple consciousness about issues on B's part as a result of A's influence, shaping and barriers to entry
Powerlessness of B relative to A	Open conflict between A and B, with each holding competing resources, the conflict occurring over clearly defined issues	Mobilization upon issues and action against barriers	Formulation of issues and strategies

Dimensions of Power by [Stewart Clegg in Frameworks of Power](#) (1989)

## For Further Exploration

1. The state is very prominent in Habibi’s account, especially in shaping the labor and profit relation. I think it would be interesting if more people can research how the state shapes *the landed* relation that eventually correlates with the profit-seeking & labor relation in rural areas.

2. I think anyone who will be interested in Habibi's research should expand the historical analysis. This does not mean that he doesn't do it in the book, but the historical exploration seems to be more descriptive than analytical. Habibi is not alone in this methodological problem as many social scientists rather rudely use archives and historical events more as a evidential backdrop than as a means to interpret (see the third chapter of his book). John Goldthorpe writes extensively about this problem since the early '90s in his thought-provoking essay "The Uses of History in Sociology." Using historical events as a backdrop for the argument, rather than explicitly showing his own interpretation of history will limit Habibi's brilliant argument to a rather circumstantial finding – which for some (but not me) is not a problem. I will specify this call for further historization in the next point about plantations.
3. Habibi does a remarkable comparative analysis (which I think more people should do in agrarian studies and rural politics), but this is why I said history can come handy. Indeed, capitalist relation already sets and deepens in Indonesia's rural areas. Yet, it is important still to distinguish the material difference between rice farming and palm oil, as the latter operates in a colonial relic (ruin? Ruination) called *plantations*. While Habibi spends some time to introduce readers with the history of industrial and commodity plantations in Indonesia, plantations are flattened under capitalism and no more than a capitalist "colonial mode of production" (p.42). As a scholar of plantations, I defer from such an undistinguishable understanding of plantations and treat them as what Ferdinand Braudel calls "*a capitalist invention par excellence*" due to plantations' ability to gather land-labor-capital trifecta more efficiently with deeper extractivism and longevity.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, plantations require a certain spatial reorganization of land values and labor relation (and production) that creates gridlock, unfounded in other types of farmlands. To uncover plantations as they are then is a materialist attempt to complement class differentiation in plantation towns and villages. Plantations are the "wider social relations" (p.235) that can help us understand their social and class differentiation more than just "economies of scale" (*ibid*).
4. Further research on anyone occupying a certain class position beyond the production relation, but still shapes the production, might be needed. For example: land broker in the rural-urban areas. Land concentration in palm oil plantations often occurs and is caused by land brokers that may not be farmers in the area.
5. More on history: even smallholders in palm oil are differentiated by their titling status and method; transmigration? Partnership? KPPA? Each relation offers different outcomes on welfare and their social relation to labor(ers).

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphanie Barral, *Capitalismes Agraires. Économie Politique de La Grande Plantation En Indonésie et En Malaisie* (Sciences Po (Les Presses de), 2015); Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (42) (2013): 1–15; Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5, no. 1 (1971): 95–102; Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2015); George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (University of West Indies Press, 1999).

## On Gender & Book Framing

1. If I can offer one critique, I'd rather find social reproduction theory (SRT) tiring to understand gendered relation and how gender is inherent in class differentiation. Maybe I become more analytical as I grow older, but I tend to find SRT essentializes labor on women, or rather uncritical towards "work" itself. SRT's emphasis on women – often conflated as 'gender' itself—is also rather nauseating. Habibi's aim in integrating gender in his analysis is indeed not to reduce it, as he contends that gender is inherent in the class differentiation. However, he uses words of "intertwined" and "linked" to show how gender is at the center of rural class differentiation, and it is reflected strictly on gender division of labor. What capitalism needs to thrive is not only a gender(ed) division of labor, but a certain production unit called *family* or *household* in this context. Shifting to household also means to understand not only gender as "woman" but also what kind of male/masculine subjects indispensable to class differentiation under rural and commodity capitalism.
2. The book offers a brilliant argument, with such a rigorous method that anyone in social science/agrarian studies should aspire. I think the book can market itself to a broader, theoretical engagement – in class theory – and not just stop at Indonesian agrarian discourse and practice of this peasantry's monolithic image.

## Unpresented: My Thoughts on Discussion Response

The forum spent sometimes on postcolonial critiques on Habibi's book. It was early morning in Philadelphia, and I just landed two days ago. So excuse my jet-lag that prevented me to engage with the discussion. I'm thankful that Ridha said something in defense of Habibi from the "westernized" accusation against his class theorization. If anything, Habibi has advanced a multipolar understanding of class beyond the "western" Marxist canon. The discussion, if I can be very honest, was not particularly illuminating to talk about (post)colonialism. These days, whenever we accuse each other for not non-Western enough, I think of [Zakkiyah Imam Jackson](#): we should aim for the collapse of *hierarchical* distinction between the so-called "western" (often assumed without being outwardly written/called with capital W) and "non-western"<sup>2</sup> cosmology/understanding. It is not about to erase the colonial history, but to *actually* engage with knowledge that used to be redeemed as "primitive" (Jackson 2013, 680-681). In other words, let's not reproduce the antagonism of binary that reflects the very "western"/"rationality" thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Notice that "western" is still the reference