

# Out of Agriculture: The 1850s - 2010s Java and Southern Germany Compared\*

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My dear friends, good evening, *goeden avond*.

Thanks to you all for attending this speech. Thank you for the honor of allowing me to discuss a rather hidden issue in anthropological studies in Indonesia and other former colonies, the non-Western, or the Global South. So far, the production of anthropological knowledge in the East, or humanities if you prefer, has been more a one-way traffic of Western scholars observing us. This trend is reflected in research publications about our societies, which are dominated by Western scholars. When we, non-Western scholars, try to study ourselves, we tend to reproduce the Western perspective, turning us into a kind of half-bred scholar: Westernized non-Western researchers. I am, in fact, an example of this half-bred. Following the lead of my teachers in Amsterdam, Nijmegen, and Leiden, I reproduced their perspectives in looking at Indonesia. Their perspectives are not wrong. Not at all. The problem is, as we know, perspectives in the humanities are not value-free—never were, never will be. Every researcher has their view, shaped by what they consider important, what they consider worthy of dedication throughout their academic career, and what they consider critical for the existence of their society.

Our curiosity and views on what is important are strongly shaped by our social experiences; what Indonesians find interesting and important to study to a great extent is different from what European scholars are curious about. They are structured by our experience as a member of a certain society—whether we are Thai, Filipino, Dutch, German, American, and so on. This issue is underscored by the Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University in their 2024 broadcast series *Zonder ons onderzoek is Nederland in gevaar*, Without our research, the Netherlands is in "danger". Following Joachim Radkau (2008), what people consider important is often related to long-standing trauma they have experienced. For instance, people from drought-traumatized societies would logically think it is crucial to understand the causes of droughts and do not consider it necessary to learn about floods and flood protections—and vice versa.

The curiosity of Western researchers is a reflection of their experience of living in the West, which they often project onto non-Western society. Back in the mid-1950s, Eric Wolf published work on villages in Mesoamerica and Central Java, describing them as a closed corporate society. Sheilagh Ogilvie's (2010) historical research reveals unequivocally that close corporate society was the rural German society's institution to safeguard the villages'

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production assets and wealth from outsiders. In the pre-war period, Wolf lived in Germany before migrating further to the United States. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the closed corporate society that Wolf operates to understand the Mesoamerica and Central Java rural societies, was born from his experience while living in Germany.

When conducting fieldwork in Mojokuto in the 1950s, Clifford Geertz (1985, 60) was astounded by how, amid a poor and gloomy life, the Mojokuto people could have "astonishing intellectual activity" where, "destitute peasants would discuss questions of freedom of the will, illiterate tradesmen discoursed on the properties of God, common laborers had theories about the relations between reason and passion, the nature of time, or the reliability of the senses." Geertz's sense of wonder did not just fall from the sky. It arose from his reflection as a member of affluent American society, which—perhaps—no longer has time for such philosophical deliberations.

When researchers from Australia and North America sincerely raise concerns over the land grabbing in rural Indonesia, these concerns reflect their experiences witnessing the occupation of First Nation lands in Canada, Native American lands in the United States, and Ab-Origin lands in Australia by white farmers. A sad situation that Tania Li (2011), back at Euroseas Conference 2010, Gothenburg, bitterly protested "when the lands are needed but the people are not". Similarly, the sincere worries of European anthropologists over the transformation of millions of hectares of village lands into oil palm plantations in Indonesia reflect their concern witnessing the agrarian transformation in Western Europe over the past two centuries. A transformation that successfully undermines the social life of smallholders and the social fabric of rural life. A transformation that reduces agriculture from a way of life into a profit-driven business in the hands of corporate giants. These giants now control access to millions of hectares of farmland. Capable of cultivating the lands with just a handful of labor due to mechanization--and soon, automation through robotics. At the same time, the number of smallholding farmers is decreasing, as they stubbornly try to survive under the pressure of rising production costs and an increasingly competitive market.

Adopting Western perspectives does not mean the non-Western researchers lose the ability to make contributions to knowledge production, but it does reduce their potential to produce knowledge relevant to the challenges of their own society, as seen and defined by themselves. Social distance allows Western researchers to take a critical look and see what "needs and can be improved", in non-Western societies. These critical studies arise from valid intercultural reflectivity, where Western researchers use their social experiences as a point of departure for formulating research questions and methods of inference when observing other societies. However, when adopted by Indonesian researchers, that basis for reflexivity may become void. Observing one's society without consulting the experiences of other societies has the potential to eliminate critical thinking and lead a researcher to propose normative questions: "It should be like that, but why are we like this?" Normative questioning will lead to normative conclusions, which have little, if any, power to induce social change.

## Fieldwork in Southern Germany

My introduction as an ethnographer to German farming communities began in the early

2000s, when Pak Frans Husken, may he rest in peace, gave me a *prentah alus*, a gentle hint to go sightseeing in Europe. I took the train on a whim, *sak paran-paran*. From Amsterdam, the train took me to Koblenz, where I saw rows of vineyards on the slopes of the hills along the Rhine valley. At that time, I dreamed of how interesting it would be if I, a villager from Indonesia, could learn about the life of farmers in Germany. What is their life like? How can they produce wine which is highly valued among Europeans but branded as a haram drink in my country--although many people secretly enjoy it?

It was in 2017 that my wish came true, when Bu Judith Schlehe from the Institute of Ethnology Freiburg University offered, “Why don't you do fieldwork here? I have a close friend in a wine-growing village who has a room for you to stay in”. I jumped at the chance, and so my fieldwork in Germany, in the Upper Rhein Valley, began.

Java and Southern Germany experienced agrarian liberalization at almost the same time: the 1810s and the 1800s. Similarly, the legalization of private land ownership occurred around the same period: in the 1850s for Southern Germany and the 1870s for Java. However, agricultural liberalization in Southern Germany was soon followed by manufacturing industrialization, whereas in Java, industrialization was focused on agriculture through the establishment of global market-oriented plantations. In Southern Germany, the agricultural labor force steadily migrated to the manufacturing sector, and by the 1890s, manufacturing had overtaken agriculture as the highest contributor to the gross national product. Meanwhile, in Java, the agricultural labor force was remained in agriculture and was transformed from free farmers into cheaply paid colonial plantation koelies.

It was only in the 1970s that Java experienced significant out-migration from agriculture, with millions of Javanese leaving their villages to find work in the cities. This heralded the madness of the *mudik*—the annual rite of going home for the Eid festivities—when hundreds of thousands of vehicles fight their way out of Jakarta, and millions of dollars are burned on gasoline to allow ex-farmers to show material success in their home village.

Until the 19th century, peasants in South Germany as well as in Java were feudal subjects with varying degrees of independence, ranging from bonded tenancy to servitude. In general, they did not have the socio-economic freedom to choose the course of action they deemed favorable to their interests. That right was in the hands of feudal landlords—kings, princes, and lower aristocrats, as well as bishops of Catholic churches and monasteries in Southern Germany, and dukes and lower aristocrats in Java (Carey 2007; Wrede 2023). As landowners, these figures earned income from “taxes and land rent” in the form of labor, crops, and cash, and they also played a major role in cultivation management. The expansion of the market economy, which increased demand for agricultural products, and the French Revolution, which demanded for equal rights for citizens, forced landowners to rationalize agriculture. New, more intensive cultivation methods were adopted, and farmers were freed from servitude. They became a free labor force, filling the agricultural, service, and industrial sectors. In Southern Germany, church-owned land was secularized by the state, and in Java, the lands of the dukes were taken over by the colonial government. By the government, the land was handed over to the peasants in return for the payment of land rent (Bastin 1854; Sagarra 1977).

To the farmers' dismay, the liberalization of the peasantry from feudal rule in

Southern Germany was not immediately followed by the granting of land ownership. Peasants, disillusioned with this situation, demanded that they be given private land ownership rights—not just as tenants of aristocratic lands. These demands culminated in the German Revolution of 1848 and the government's policy of land distribution to tenants. The peasants were allowed to buy the lands they had been cultivating for generations from the landlords for a price of 25 times the annual land rent. Funds for the purchase of land were provided by a government bank, to be paid in long-term installments (Wallner 1953; Fairbairn 1991; Behr 2000; Esser 2000).

In Java, private land ownership was introduced with the enactment of the 1870 agrarian law. Through this legislation, the colonial government recognized the private land ownership of farmers—land that at the time of registration was cultivated by farmers, while land that was not cultivated by farmers was claimed as state land—to be leased to private plantation companies, used for protected forests, or reserved for government facilities (Govt. of Netherlands-India 1870). The law paved the way for land grabbing by the government and put Javanese farmers in a difficult economic position, as they lost access to land reserves covering 30% of the entire territory (Jacoby 1949).

On this occasion, I will explore the background of the differences between out-of-agriculture migration in Southern Germany and Java, and the consequences of these changes in both societies. By any means, comparative study is not new in humanities, as exemplified by J.S. Furnivall (1939), Eric Wolf (1957), Clifford Geertz (1971), and Jack Goody (1983). Most such studies are comparisons of two or more “other” societies, rather than the researchers’ society vis-a-vis other societies. This approach allows the researchers to engage in reflexivity to understand other societies (Schlehe and Kutanegea 2006; Schlehe and Simatupang 2008; Schlehe and Hidayah 2014). In this case, I wish to understand the dynamic of German rural society, where capitalism is a homegrown political-economy force, based on my experience as a Javanese scholar, where capitalism came as an external force brought about by colonialism.

## **Agricultural Industrialization in Southern Germany, 1800-2020**

In Southern Germany, I saw incredibly productive agriculture, capable of producing enormous harvests for humans as well as wild animals—so much so that at least 1.2 million deer and wild boars must be taken annually. Hectares of fields of wheat, rye, potatoes, corn, and vegetables, sprawled vastly from the valleys to the foothills, where the landscape turned into forest. In my mind's eye, if Javanese farmers cultivate land the size of a postage stamp—as researchers of the green revolution in Southeast Asia say—then these German farmers are cultivating farmland the size of a football field. Visiting the farmer's house, I saw tractors and various farming tools, plows, grass cutters, fertilizer sprayers, and pest sprayers, all mechanized. Some questions slowly emerged in my mind: How can the German farmers afford such productive agriculture? What price do they have to pay for the industrialization of their agriculture? Is there a crossing path between the experiences of Germans and Indonesian farmers who are also being subjected to industrialization?

In the early 19th century, affected by the French Revolution and Napoleon's expansion, the German political system was reformed. The Holy Roman Empire was

dissolved, and the lands of the church and secular nobility were bought by the government and sold to peasants through long-term credit (Wallner 1953, 45; Clapham 1936, 46).

This process was especially rapid in the West. During this century, like other societies in Western Europe, Germany underwent a socio-economic transformation from agriculture to industry. Supported by the availability of iron ore and coal in the country, the German steel industry grew rapidly and expanded tenfold between the 1870s and 1910s. Until 1885, agriculture was still the main contributor to German GNP with 7,525 million marks, while industry ranked second with 6,110 million marks. This position changed in 1890, when industry contributed 7,941 million marks and agriculture came second with a contribution of 7,732 million marks. In the following years, the positions of the two economic activities did not change, and the gap continued to widen. In 1913, the industry contributed 19,902 million marks, and agriculture 11,270 million marks (Hoffman 1965, 454-455).

The opening of industrial and service jobs based in cities requires an ever-increasing number of workers. Facilitated by the railroad network, newly built in the 1840s, labor flowed to the industrial centers (Taylor 2001 [1945], 69). The concentration of the labor force in agriculture shifted into mining, manufacturing, transportation, trade, and public services. In 1871, 49% of the German population was employed in agriculture; by 1907, this had fallen to 35.2%, and down to 1.2% in 2023. In the meantime, industrial employment rose from 31% to 40% and 98% (Braun 1990, 19).

Slowly, the number of smallholder farmers shrank. Data from Ihringen, a village whose farmers I have been working with, clearly shows this trend. In 1932, there were 668 farming units in the village, which dropped to 122 in 2020. During this period, farmers with less than 2 hectares of land fell from 449 to 78, farmers with 10 hectares of land fell from 217 to 78, while farming units with 10 to 50 hectares of land rose from 1 to 31, and those with 50 hectares and above rose from 0 to 3 farming units (Statistik-BW 2020). A similar pattern took place over a wider area (Wilson and Wilson 2001, 33). In the mid-century period 1960-2020, the number of farming units in the state of Baden-Wurttemberg shrank by almost 90% from 334,241 to 39,085.

Mechanization and intensification have increased farm productivity. Right before the war, a German farmer fed around 10 people. Nowadays a farmer feeds 135 people. The harvest is so abundant that the market is practically inundated by all kinds of agricultural products. The current situation among the German farmers is best termed as being drowned in a flood of milk and honey and buried under piles of wheat and potatoes—overproduction.

With a total vineyard of 103,000 hectares, South German winegrowers annually yield between 800 and 1,100 million liters of wine (Dressler 2018). This figure is supplemented by 1,389,000 liters of imported wine per year (Schaller et. Al. 2023). This high productivity was achieved through the intensification of using improved seeds, fertilization, pest protection, and the support of agricultural machinery. Flooded with products, the German wine market is saturated, and farmers are struggling. They have to fight hard to stay in business. Small farmers are losing out and being thrown out of business. Even with almost 10 hectares of vineyard, Hannes, a young wine farmer in Ihringen, found it hard to keep his winery afloat. For the past four years, he has tried to keep production costs down by recruiting volunteer harvesters from among students and young people seeking life experience in wine cultivation. But his efforts were in vain; Hannes' winery's production costs remained

higher than the selling price of the product. Unable to bear the brunt of market pressure anymore, he regretfully opted out. This year, 2024, will be his last harvest.

A similar situation is faced by dairy farmers. Farmers with 150 goats could only find a market niche for cheese made from the milk of 10 goats. Small farmers who failed to reduce production costs were pushed aside, leased their land to agricultural companies, and made a living from other sectors. Those who stubbornly held onto agriculture must depend on subsidies, which account for up to 70% of household revenue. However, state, federal, and EU government subsidies are not without a price. Farmers' work has become highly bureaucratic, with farmers busy filling out all kinds of forms from the state government, the federal government, and the European Union (Bär 2024). The subsidies also regulate the execution of farmers' work, from the types of agrochemicals they can use to when they can cut the meadows, from the number of sheep they may raise to the type of wire they must install to fend off wolves, which heavily curtails farmers freedom of work. So exasperated with the bureaucracy of subsidies, that a farmer in Westphalia decided to live as best he could without them.

Under stiff market competition, labor costs in agriculture have been pressed down to the floor. Germans are less and less interested in working in agriculture, and some agricultural works, such as harvesting asparagus, grapes, cherries, and apples, still requires human hands. This labor shortage is made up by bringing in seasonal foreign laborers who are willing to accept low wages (Bogoeski 2022). Many farm owners complain that the younger generation is now soft and no longer willing to work hard. From the youth's point of view, they refuse to work in agriculture not because they are unwilling to work hard or become a lazy generation, but because of low wages.

The younger generation prefers to enter the manufacturing and service industries, which in the last two centuries have made the German economy one of the richest in the world. However, these industries tend to be unfriendly to human labor. In the pursuit of efficiency, increasing production, and maintaining profit margins, new machines are constantly being invented. Just like in agriculture, humans are gradually excluded from industrial jobs that could be handled by machines and, later, by digital systems. Germany's industries which initially drew labor from the agricultural sector, have become automated and need fewer human labor. People are being put in competition with machines and artificial intelligence. Human skills that require years of education are being pitted against the exponentially increasing intelligence of computers. Even with such higher training and education, young Germans struggle to enter the job market. Industrialization has brought German society into a paradox of unemployment: there are many unfilled jobs, while at the same time, a growing number of educated young people cannot find a job that pays a decent wage.

An EU politician, the Spanish Prime Minister, passionately argued that a rich country cannot have poor workers, yet this is exactly what has been going on in Germany. Quietly, poverty is creeping up in one of the richest countries in the world. One percent of Germans own over a quarter of the country's assets, whilst half of the country's citizens have no assets at all, as Deutsche Welle (2018) reported. By 2023, 14 million out of 83 million of the German population, and one in five pensioners, were poor—with a monthly income below 60% of the national income per capita. The old agrarian institution, which served as a safety net mechanism to protect marginalized villagers by providing subsidized meals for the

needy, is stretched beyond its capacity. These days, to keep ends meet, an increasing number of citizens are taking multiple jobs. The government is pressed to issue an unpopular policy extending the retirement age—from 65 for those born before 1947 to 67 for those born after 1967.

Where does the prosperity of this industry go? Annelies, a retired vegetable farmer from Ihringen, whom I have been working with, can only speculate: “It has been taken to the Devil’s party, where people proudly annihilate life and destroy farms, villages, and cities using expensive panzers, canons, rockets, and bombs in Ukraine and many other troubled spots around the globe.” Germany provided €8 billion in military aid to Ukraine in 2024.

One of the social consequences of this situation is the growing collective self-protection sentiment among citizens who have not benefited from Germany’s economic development. In market politics, the sentiment is manifested in the Da Heim campaign, which encourages buying and consuming local products. In the broader political sphere, the sentiment has led to the rebirth of the anti-foreigner movement, which perceives refugees and migrant workers as a threat to the survival and prosperity of society, rather than as providers of services that keep the socio-economic functions in the society rolling.

## **Agricultural Industrialization in Java, 1870-2020**

After the 1885 Berlin Conference, each colonial power launched a race to enlarge and secure its possessions to control the trading routes and to develop the production of primary goods necessary to feed the growing needs of its own industry (Maurer 2010, 869).

Industrialization in the agricultural sector also took place in Java and Indonesia, in the form of plantations. It was started in Java by Dutch and European planters to produce agricultural commodities for the global market, not to feed Indonesians themselves. The presence of plantations began with the takeover of village communities’ lands by the colonial state through the 1870 Agrarian Law, which continues to be reproduced by the Indonesian national government. The presence of plantations has transformed independent peasants into cheaply paid coolies.

The growth of plantations in Indonesia, now reaching 20 million hectares, from a colonial peak of only 1.3 million hectares, is considered by the government to be a great achievement, strengthening the backbone of the national economy and creating job opportunities. In reality, the labor absorption of plantations is lower than that of small-scale agriculture. Less than one person per hectare in plantations compared to around two person per hectare in small holdings (Li and Semedi 2021). Moreover, the plantation industry produces raw export commodities. Indonesia’s palm oil plantations allow the world’s food and domestic industries to create products that are affordable to buyers - without palm oil, their products would be two or three times more expensive. However, all the value-added from palm oil is created and circulated abroad. The same applies to tea, cocoa, and coffee. Of the 200 euros of value generated by one kilogram of coffee, from plantation to ready-to-drink beverage, only 3-4 euros are made in the coffee plantation. Unlike Germany’s agricultural industry, whose products are processed and consumed domestically, and unlike its manufacturing industry, which produces expensive finished products, Indonesia’s agricultural industry produces raw or slightly processed materials with low power to dynamize the domestic economy.

As in South Germany, mechanization and intensification in Indonesia drove people out of agriculture. The difference is that in 19th-century Germany, most of the labor could be absorbed by industry and services. In Indonesia, industry and services only began to grow in the 1970s, 150 years later than Germany, and were not strong enough to absorb rural labor. There are many explanations for this industrial lag in Java, one of which is that the colonial government did not want to see and deal with the prickly and demanding industrial workers. It was not until the 1990s that manufacturing became a bigger contributor to GDP (26%) than agriculture (17%). However, agriculture, especially plantations, remains a significant component of the Indonesian economy, contributing around 12% of GNP. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, this sector does not absorb much labor. Another difference is that Germany's industry and services have developed into such powerful sectors, capable of generating taxes, which can be used by the government to provide a basic income for unemployed citizens. In Indonesia, this capability has not yet been established, so the basic income—provided in a direct cash transfer program—must be budgeted from foreign countries' loans (Hanna and Olken 2018).

A direct consequence of the low absorption of labor by the plantation sectors is the increasing exodus of labor to the service and industrial sectors in the cities near their homes, which then extends to Indonesia's major cities, to other islands, and finally to other countries. Overseas, their employment networks expanded, from the nearest neighboring country to the farthest and most distant. Believe me, even in the Arctic Circle, in Tromsø and Bodø, some Indonesians work as deckhands in the Norwegian North Atlantic fishing fleet. Interestingly, some of them originated from agricultural, rather than fishing villages in Indonesia.

In Germany's major cities, large communities of Indonesian overseas workers can be found. Some workers are properly documented, with certified skills in various fields, while some others are not and fall into the category of undocumented workers. They fill the jobs abandoned by the German labor force due to low wages. Of course, work has its ups and downs. The upside is that they earn a nice income that can be sent home to support their families, pay for children's schooling, and pay off debts. The downsides are many: homesickness, language barrier, being looked down upon, and being perceived as a source of social threat. This stressful situation is felt even more by undocumented workers. They live and move under the radar, taking manual, unregistered, untaxed jobs. They must tread carefully to avoid breaching any trivial rule that might attract attention. They must always be vigilant to avoid detection by the immigration police, which inevitably would lead to deportation and loss of livelihood. The presence of migrant workers clearly illustrates the socio-economic predicament of Germany and other industrialized countries.

One morning—this was in one of Germany's neighbors—an undocumented worker, specializing in housecleaning, was shocked—pardon my language—out of his wits. The door he knocked on for work was opened by a uniformed immigration policeman. "*Huastoghfirullahhhhhh ...*" "God, have mercy on me ...". Life slowly trickled back to him, when he saw the policeman smile and kindly invite him into the house. The policeman called him because, ironically, his salary as an official tasked to keep undocumented workers out of the country was not enough to allow him to hire a documented house cleaner. Capitalism has pushed descendants of Indonesian farmers and descendants of European farmers to meet in black markets, a social exchange that is painted black by state regulations



(LeVoy, Verbruggen, and Wets 2004).

Looking at Germany and the West through the eyes of non-Western researchers increases our chances to raise new questions that were previously hidden behind the horizons of Western thought. I envision non-Western researchers getting opportunities to see the West, not with a colonialist agenda but to develop balanced knowledge production—*mitreka satata*, as equal friends and neighbors—based on the spirit of mutual exchange and *rahmatan lil alamin*, "compassion for all the universe". In this position, we can engage in reflective processes and ask, "In our village, it is like this; how could it turn like that in your village? How is it possible, and why?" The ability to ask these simple questions is important. Cultural relativity makes people insensitive to their own social life, accepting many things "taken for granted". In his culture, people tend to correct mistakes when it is long overdue. Communities along the Rhein River came to their senses after 150 years the river had been heavily polluted and the river alluvial plain ecosystem had been damaged beyond recognition (Cioc and Cronon 2002). Following Clifford Geertz (1985, 58), with all its limitations an outside observer is "a spectator in the country of the blind" who has the potential to see what might be "wrong" and "needs to be corrected or improved further". For the non-Western scholars themselves, observing Western societies also has high strategic value, following Radkau's example, for building knowledge about "how to deal with floods, which may occur if we ever get out of the drought ecology".

To ask questions like these, we need an adequate academic network sympathetic to our academic curiosities. For this reason, we ask for your helping hand to open a path for us to conduct research in your lands, in your home village. Please, when any of our students come to learn with you, do not send them back to do research in Indonesia. Encourage them to do research in your or another country, so we can escape the prison of our own culture and not live like the proverbial Malayan frog happily staying in a coconut shell—*katak dalam tempurung*. It is good for Indonesians to know something about Indonesian societies, but it will be even better if they know something about other nations and societies. "How can we love you, if we know nothing about you?", *Tak kenal maka tak sayang*, thus another Malayan proverb teaches us.

I hope that the Euroseas conference in the future will become an arena for knowledge production and exchanges that accommodate the European view of Asia and the Asian view of Europe. With this knowledge, we can work further to build intercultural, inter-societal dialogues, where we can learn from each other as an equal global citizen.

Thank you.

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