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Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Marina Welker. *Kretek Capitalism: Making, Marketing, and Consuming Clove Cigarettes in Indonesia*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir*

Mainstream scholarship, particularly within the field of economic science, has long refrained from using the concept of “capitalism,” perceiving it as laden with ideological baggage that hinders an understanding of modern market economies (Block 2019, 1166). The term is often replaced with various others that denaturalize the exploitative relations of production, such as “the economy,” “development,” and “industrial society” (Harvey 2010; Harris and Delanty 2023, 325). The alternative terms are claimed to represent a more positive image of the capitalist system associated with progress. Hence, when Marina Welker states in *Kretek Capitalism* that the supervisor of Sampoerna, one of Indonesia’s largest cigarette companies, rejected the capitalist label (p. 3), it mirrors a broader trend in the academic world—a trend that is not limited to Indonesia. It thus makes sense that, although the Communist narrative on anti-capitalism has been marginalized in Indonesia since 1965, “capitalism” remains “a jarring, dirty word, a slur reserved for enemies” and often evokes “negative connotations and asocial imperatives such as maximizing profits, exploiting labor, externalizing social and environmental costs, and taking license to reap private benefits from social suffering” (p. 3). However, through the case of Sampoerna, a subsidiary of Philip Morris International (PMI), Welker demystifies the natural process of capitalism. This is one of the most important contributions of her book.

Focusing on labor exploitation, the author discusses *kretek* (clove cigarettes) beyond the conventional health issue narrative. Specifically, she analyzes how Sampoerna “uses contracts, gamification, self-improvement logics, and class, gender, and age hierarchies to extract overtime, shift, seasonal, gig, and unpaid labor from workers, influencers, artists, students, retailers, and consumers” (p. 2). Welker frames Sampoerna as representing *kretek* capitalism, “understood as the accumulation of capital through the making, exchange, and consumption of clove cigarettes”

* Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship; GIGA Institute for Asian Studies; Hamburg Institute for Advanced Study; Political Science, University of Hamburg; Asia Institute, University of Melbourne

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3045-5327>

(p. 2). For the company, *kretek* represents the Indonesian national identity. This view justifies *kretek* capitalism and thus the exploitation of farmers and workers in the field.

Importantly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the book provides a compelling account of how the rigid and hierarchical work involved in making, exchanging, and producing *kretek* “serves as a powerful tool of capitalist exploitation” (p. 30). *Kretek* manufacturers, for instance, keep clove prices low while importing substantial quantities of the spice. However, they also encourage clove farmers to protest against tobacco control and portray themselves as rural smallholders whose livelihoods are tied to price fluctuations of a single commodity. Tobacco farmers are also precariously positioned as they have to rely on debt “to cultivate a capital-intensive and risky non-food crop,” while the laborers have limited choices aside from accepting low-paid seasonal work under unsafe working conditions (p. 30). PMI also engages in exploitation through a contract farming system while claiming to be more socially and environmentally friendly in controlling products. In reality, it more efficiently facilitates surplus labor extraction. The rest of the chapters substantiate how exploitation at the factory level, involving a female-dominated workforce, takes place and is justified by the narrative that *kretek* is part of Indonesian culture. However, as argued by Welker, *kretek* capitalism is integral to a global supply chain.

Thus, the book also contributes to deconstructing the cultural narrative, asserting that *kretek* is part of the Indonesian national heritage. The narrative states that *kretek* must be protected against global producers of “white cigarettes” (*rokok putih*), a term for non-clove cigarettes, and that the tobacco control movement is a “foreign, neo-colonial threat” (p. 2). The campaign of this narrative often involves communities, not only loyal consumers but also social groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. In 2002, for example, NU partnered with the *kretek* company Bentoel to invest in a hand-rolled *kretek* factory (p. 15). The marketing focus of this company was to recruit NU smokers in order to “bolster both NU’s economic fortunes and those of tobacco and clove farmers, many of whom are NU members” (p. 15). Another *kretek* company, Djarum, whose owner, Hartono, is one of the richest persons in the country, according to Welker, is “widely rumored” to be the primary funder of the *kretek* community (Komtek) founded in 2010 (p. 18). Welker does not explore this rumor further, but a study by Alamsyah (2011) has confirmed that Djarum funded several programs at the NU to support the campaign against tobacco control. The campaign included efforts to draft a tobacco bill that used a populist narrative, emphasizing the importance of *kretek* in the livelihoods of tobacco and clove farmers.

However, as the book suggests, the case of Sampoerna, one of the largest *kretek* producers, invalidates such narratives because this company has been a subsidiary of PMI since 2005. British American Tobacco (BAT) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) also took over other Indonesian *kretek* producers, contributing to over 40 percent market share (p. 6). These foreign capitals play a pivotal role in sustaining the *kretek* industry. At the same time, their investments

are viewed as a threat given their commitment to harm reduction, which serves as a cornerstone of their public relations strategies in higher-income countries and aligns with the tobacco control narrative (p. 6). Nevertheless, as material interests are the main drivers of the capitalist logic, investments in the *kretek* industry are also to ensure the survival of foreign capital in response to dramatic decreases in smoking rates in developed countries that allow only “reduced risk” products (p. 18). Welker argues that “kretek capitalism thereby provides vital support to foreign tobacco firms and shareholders at the expense of ordinary Indonesians” (p. 18). This statement implies that it is irrelevant to differentiate between *kretek* and white cigarettes or domestic and foreign capitals. The intertwined link between domestic *kretek* manufacturers and foreign reduced-risk cigarette capitalists shows that they both support *kretek* capitalism in opposition to tobacco control policies. While this interplay can help to deconstruct the cultural narratives surrounding *kretek* capitalism, the book does not delve deeper into it. As an ethnographer, Welker is more interested in “the ordinary people who are involved in the kretek industry and the mundane labor they perform” (p. 5).

The book’s failure to further explore other types of cigarette companies, especially with respect to their predatory practices in extracting surplus values, may result in its being viewed as merely producing another narrative that attacks the nationalist *kretek* movement. However, although focusing on just one aspect can be limiting, in an anthropological study it can also serve as a strength. Such an approach allows the author to look deeper into the labor exploitation involved in the vernacular practices of *kretek* capitalism.

At the same time, there is also a risk of overemphasizing details, something that is often seen in ethnographic writings and also reflected in Welker’s work. Too much of a focus on the detailed operation of *kretek* capitalism has resulted in the book’s lacking theoretical abstraction. To be fair, such abstraction may not be the objective of the book. Hence, readers should not expect to understand what *kretek* capitalism and its modes of exploitation contribute to the broader discussion of capitalism: What is new about the mechanism that we have found in the *kretek* industry to understand the exploitative economic system in the twenty-first century, other than simply applying a Marxist analytical tool? Specifically, how does the book respond to studies on the specificity of capitalist development in countries like Indonesia that many scholars (see Robison 1986; Sanyal 2007; Mudhoffir 2022; Chu and Kong 2024) have deemed as an illiberal, predatory, or Asiatic mode of production? These studies indicate that capitalism in certain developing countries continues to generate growth even though it is accompanied by corruption, cronyism, and other forms of disorder, unlike in developed countries. Although that may not be the focus of the book, engaging with these studies can help comprehend why Indonesia has not ratified the 2003 World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and why the government fiercely supports *kretek* capitalism and actively promotes the cultural narrative surrounding *kretek* while sidelining tobacco control arguments. It

may also help to further elucidate how contradictions between domestic and foreign capitals shape the works of capitalism and modes of exploitation in the country and how PMI, BAT, and JTI adapt to Indonesia's corrupt political and business environment. Apart from this limitation, Welker's book is an important work for understanding the intricate operation of *kretek* capitalism in Indonesia and is relevant to scholars, students, and policymakers.

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