

Rudolf Mrázek. *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. xvii + 311 pages, 31 illustrations.

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Rudolf Mrázek is a leading expert on intellectual history of Indonesia. He has written extensively on the developments of political consciousness of several Indonesian nationalists and the social conditions that shaped them. In his new book, Mrázek offers a much more ambitious and wide-ranging study and proposes a new way of looking at how technology interacted with intellectual consciousness in colonial Indonesia. The focus of the study is on the cultural crises of the colonial world and the attempts of the people in the colony to make sense of, and cope with, the crises by way of ideas of technology. Based on extensive use of Dutch and Indonesian archives, Mrázek's book examines the utopian plans of the Dutch engineers and the appropriations of their products by both the Dutch and the Indonesians (mostly the elites). The technologies discussed in the book range widely from land-based transportation, such as trains and cars, to the staging of architecture and urban space, from the sense and sensation of watching and being watched through optical instruments to the self representations of new consciousness through clothes, from the pleasures of listening to the radio and speaking on the telephone to the importance of the presence and absence of these technologies in the space of exile. By examining the responses of the people in the colony to these different technologies, Mrázek interprets how these people transformed colonial cultures, articulated different images of selfhood, and contributed to the concomitant discourses of anti-colonial nationalism. Mrázek's case studies demonstrate that while technology might appear to be universal, it is actually socially and historically specific because people are capable of imbuing it with different meanings.

This is a "happy" book in the sense that technology is not treated merely as a tool of colonial domination. Instead, it highlights the potential of technology to liberate in unexpected ways a colonial society (or to provide fantasies of liberation for both the colonizers and the colonized). Technology appears in Mrázek's account as a subjective noun. It speaks to the person or people who make and use it. It stimulates new and often creative languages. It mediates the dialogue between people as they encounter and discover each other. It allows and provokes people to act differently and to see themselves in a different way. "Encountering the 'unseemly' technologies, people in the Indies began to move, speak, and write in a way that broke through—at least scratched—the otherwise smooth surface of their behavior and language." (p. xvi) By analyzing the ways in which people in the colony modified their behaviors, identities, and perceptions of themselves, etc. in relation to the emerging technologies, Mrázek explores a new area in the history of technology.

This innovative book demands careful and patient reading, because the images of particular technologies and the voices responding to them quickly stream in and out of the pages. Mrázek maps the discursive processes of identity formation in the interface between humans and technology by pointing to the elusive evidences of their actions. But what is his ultimate goal in tracing how technology formed and transformed identities? In the preface, the author says straightforwardly that "nationalism is a

word that does not appear often in the book, but that expresses the book's undercurrent." (p. xvii) In the rest of the book, he only indicates the *possible* connections between technology and nationalism; with his suggestions, readers are guided to make explicit connections for themselves.

Although the book provides no narrative of nationalism, it nonetheless gives a fascinating account of the ways in which nationalism was shaped by technology. Mrázek finds in technology a major aspect of the genealogy of Indonesian nationalism. He argues that the struggle of Indonesians in the early twentieth century to discover a "national" form was a struggle mediated by discourses of technology. He looks at the meanings invested in technology during the last phase of Dutch colonialism and argues that the new behaviors of the colonized stemmed from their engagements with them. In the colonial situation, new technologies—for example, the asphalt roads, the car, the train, the radio, the telephone, modern buildings and fashion codes—constituted a discursive but meaningful network that allowed, unintentionally, the idea of the "nation" to be installed in the imagination of the "Indonesians." The various technologies, each with its modulation, articulated a network that made the form of a nation imaginable. By reconfiguring the Dutch engineer's dreams into the imagination of the "nation," the Indonesians, too, became engineers who envisioned a happy land. In making this argument, Mrázek makes visible a form of popular nationalism in colonial Indonesia that was variant from the postcolonial official nationalism of the nation-state.

Mrázek persuasively interprets the *common* experiences with technology among the communities in colonial Indonesia, but he is less attentive to other possible readings. What about, for example, the ways in which the circulation of technology divided the communities and rendered the nation, or the "imagined community," unimaginable? Also missing in the book is discussion of the relations between technology and ethnic Chinese in colonial Indonesia. The book indeed mentions some responses of the Chinese to technological changes, yet the roles of the Chinese were too historically significant to be glossed over. This ethnic group actively participated in shaping technologies, particularly in building construction, in colonial Indonesia. They also invested meanings into technologies by promoting and supplying them to the public.

Mrázek's book is not only filled with the ideas and visions of engineers, but also with voices of those who reacted to them. It encourages the reader to hear what is often unheard, namely, the voices of modernity on the distant margins of Europe. As we listen to the voices of the colony, we begin to appreciate that "often, the sound of hands clapping in Europe—clapping for fascism, clapping for the avant-garde—was heard in the Indies before the hands actually clapped." (p. xv) Thus the cultural origins of European modernity are transposed to its colonies. Mrázek places, although not always in a systematic way, the social, artistic, and cultural creations of the Netherlands within their colonial experiences in the Dutch East Indies. He suggests that "the Indies, always a place for pioneers, again seemed to tramp a few decades ahead of the West." (p. 101). This perspective re-conceptualizes modernity as an outcome of the intertwined histories of the metropole and the colony.