

Laudatio Dr. Jan Breman

I met Jan Breman for the first time in the nineteen sixties, when I was working with Jan Tinbergen at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Jan Breman came to visit us in the framework of his studies about India. He had been a student of Wertheim, who had published views on development very different from Tinbergen. At the time there was a fair degree of antagonism, not only between disciplines, but also politically, though not in terms of engagement. Jan Breman, having studied cultural anthropology and non western sociology was highly critical about mainstream development economics and about policy planning, development programming and shaping society in general. This he considered as too macro, too much top down, too technocratic, too mono disciplinary. However, Jan Breman wanted to talk. Maybe development economists and anthropologists could learn something from each other.

We have learned a lot from him. Jan Breman is an admirable scholar, a persistent student of society and a bridge builder towards students in other disciplines, provided that they show curiosity and some form of engagement. That is what Jan Breman himself has done for about half a century, choosing India as his main country of concern, and within India in particular South Gujarat. His main concern was not the development of the country as such, but the plight of the people at the lowest level of society.

As a social scientist studying processes of development Jan Breman is a master. I know no other scholar who has been willing to live for long periods in the field, returning to the same places time and again, for decades. To him in the beginning field research was a very new experience. Jan Breman taught himself how to do it and how to stick to it. In doing so he was able to deepen his understanding of processes of change. He became the eternal student in the proper sense of the word. He has delved deeply into villages and their surroundings and was never tired of asking questions. Villagers, noting that he was asking the same questions as decades earlier, sometimes thought that he, or the boss who had sent him, was a bit stupid, because had been

made to repeat the same question. But that is, and should be, the attitude of a student of development: society changes, but the questions are the same: who did benefit, who lost?

In his work Jan Breman has brought together three disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology (non western sociology in particular) and economics, notably development economics. The objects of his research: rural and urban poverty and the changing position of labor, require an interdisciplinary approach. In his studies he has always tried to analyze how a situation had evolved in the past. He did his own historical research, visiting libraries, consulting primary sources and forgotten original documents. But he has also learned to work as a statistician, not only analyzing trends on the basis of statistics produced by others, but documenting facts and figures himself, making his own calculations and systematizing the data in order to present a better understanding of processes of change.

This has made him an exemplary researcher as well as a unique teacher, who can write and speak with the authority of somebody who really knows. Jan Breman came as a visitor from outside, stayed welcome as a guest, looked around as a participant-observer, spoke with the people as a fellow, wrote about them with a clear analytical mind as well as with a heart, and has become a person from within.

He could only do so by letting the people speak. In his books he has given them a voice. In a fascinating interview, recently published as an introduction to the Jan Breman Omnibus, he said that this is essential in empirical research: “It may be important what I think for myself, it may not be inessential, but rendering that voice is much more important than interpreting it. It should be clear that we are talking about people, why they do what they do, why they behave the way they behave. To give them back the dignity that has been taken away from them. To be able to do that, you have to depict their reality as closely as possible. And to let them speak for themselves.”

As a sociologist Breman has contributed to our knowledge of processes of social mobility, analyzing class and caste relations. As a development economist, analyzing modes of agricultural production,

rural-urban migration and employment relations in industry he has deepened the understanding of formal and informal relations on the Indian labor market. Though Jan Breman has also done research on these themes in Indonesia and China he has never claimed that his findings would have some general validity for development processes in Asia, let alone in the world of developing countries as a whole. However, as another reviewer of his work has written, he “has provided the building blocks for a truly global non-Eurocentric labour history”.

The study of the changing position of landless workers belonging to the underclass in a rapidly changing society has been the core of Breman’s contribution to our understanding of the workings of capitalism in agriculture and industry and the mechanism of globalization. In his first book *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat*, Jan Breman had described the development of patronage/client relations between masters and servants into more modern employer/labourer relations. The character of relations, traditionally based on coercion and loyalty, had become instrumental, reflecting conditions of demand and supply on a widening labour market. New modes of production paralleling economic growth made an ever larger part of the agrarian labour force redundant. Daily commuting and circular migration grew into enormous rural-to-rural labour movements and movements of surplus workers driven out of villages seeking a job in industry, construction, transport and trade. In a series of books following his first study, and together covering a period of nearly fifty years, Jan Breman has described how both industry and agriculture increasingly got a pure capitalist character, resulting in informalization of labour in order to lower the cost of labour and to lessen the control of capital. Casualization and contractualization of labour relations result in outsourcing, in wages not based on the length of the working day, but on piece rate. People do not find employment, but a job. Deliberate abandonment of regulation and legislation, which could provide a minimum form of protection of labour, results in back-breaking work conditions and in some form of neo-bondage, the tying of labour to employers in such a way that the labourers are not only landless, but

also without any property: they even do not own their own labour power.

Breman's description of the plight of the poor, the expulsion from their livelihoods, their exploitation as workers, their exclusion from social and communal amenities, the treatment which they receive from people belonging to a higher class or caste, and the response by the poor themselves, trying to preserve their dignity is compelling literature. You cannot stop reading. I never could. Breman has established himself as an investigative scholar, who is able to reveal existing conditions in society, to present new insights and to provide a convincing analysis of processes leading to ever more pauperization. He has demonstrated that the transition to modern capitalist modes of production does not result in the uprooting of traditional labour during an interim period only, to be followed by a gradual integration of poor labourers into formalized and civilized economic and social relations. No, it is a structural decline of the living conditions of people doomed to stay on the move in a huge underbelly of the economy, in order to survive, but without any perspective. The growth of the informal sector is not temporary, not incidental, but essential to contemporary global capital.

The titles of his books tell it all: "Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers", "The Poverty Regime in Village India", "Wage Hunters and Gatherers", "Footloose Labour", "Working in the Mill, no more", "Down and Out", "On the Way towards a Worse Existence".

This is the opposite of development. The picture that is emanating from these books, which together form a Magnum Opus, is sombre, but the analysis is compelling. Jan Breman never resorts to a superficial critique of global capitalism, but presents a well documented analysis of its devastating effects. The high quality of his studies, his persistent analyses, and the example that he has given as a consistent and dedicated field researcher, determined to render the voice of those who, in the view of others, hardly count on the social and economic scale, have made Jan Breman a unique scholar.

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So,

By virtue of the powers invested in us by statute and in accordance with the decision of the Board of Graduate Studies of the International Institute of Social Studies, I hereby confer upon you, Johannes Cornelis Breman, the title of Doctor honoris causa, together with all the rights which statute and custom attach to this degree.

As a token and proof thereof, I present you with the corresponding charter, duly signed and sealed, and clothe you with the cappa.

Prof. Dr. Jan Pronk

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