

# Communications to the Editor

## TO THE EDITOR:

William G. Boltz's review of my book *China's Legalists: The Earliest Totalitarians and Their Art of Ruling* (M. E. Sharpe, 1996), which appears in *JAS* (vol. 56, no.1, February 1997), makes many distortions and unsubstantiated charges.

1. Boltz asserts: "The author talks about the Legalists as if they constituted a kind of political party . . . He never questions the assumption that they can legitimately be considered a "school" . . . nor does he allow for the possibility that Sima Qian's identification of *fa jia* as a school of thought. . . . Even the suitability of the English term "Legalist" and the appropriateness of its connotations as a translation for the phrase *fa jia* goes unexamined."

One has to wonder whether Boltz had really read the book at all? The book states at the very beginning that the Legalist school was one school "among the various schools of thought" in ancient China (p. 9), and "the Legalist school had no commonly recognized founder. Even in ancient times, the Legalists were grouped and labeled as a school by their peers not because their tenets were traceable to a recognized master but because they shared basic doctrinal theses" (p. 11). Moreover, "Although the name of the Legalist school is associated with law and they did advocate the use of penal code as an instrument of political control, their discourse did not deal exclusively or even mainly with jurisprudence per se" (p. 7), and "Although they were named as belonging to the 'Legalist school,' the ancient Legalists were absolutely opposed to the rule of law" (p. 159), etc. Moreover, the book contains separate biographies of Guan Zhong, Li Kui, Wu Qi, Shen Dao, Shen Buhai, Shang Yang, Li Si, and Han Fei, which make it apparent that they could never have formed a political party and many of them were not jurists. Hence, Boltz's allegation can only be characterized as a blatant fabrication not unlike the act of a magician pulling rabbits out of thin air.

2. Boltz asks: "It is difficult to gauge what sort of audience this book is intended to serve." If he really had read the book he will find the answer: "This volume about China's ancient Legalists is intended for the general Western public, including sinologists who do not specialize in ancient Chinese political philosophy. The purpose of this book is to give the reader a taste of the style and spirit of the Legalist discourse" (p. ix).

3. Boltz accuses the book of being "uninspired" and "offer[ing] nothing new" but fails to provide any justification for such a clichéd characterization. The fact is that this book is the first monograph in English that deals exclusively and systematically with China's ancient Legalists, including their life, work, thought, and impact. It points out: their indelible impact on China's political development, institution building, and political culture from the imperial era to the present; in term of Chinese politics their influence as being even more important than the Confucians; the congruence of Legalist tenets with modern Marxism-Leninism; the similarity of the Legalist tenets with modern legal positivism; their attitude towards the common people as human chattel; their proposed political institutions as the earliest version of totalitarianism; the nationwide campaign endorsed by Mao to promote the Legalists during the period from 1973 to 1976; etc. These are some of the themes of the book that have either never been treated or have been neglected by

most other books which have reference to the Legalists, including the one recommended by Boltz.

4. Boltz asserts that “the work shows little familiarity with earlier studies, Chinese or Western” solely because it does not mention a certain book on the general history of Chinese philosophy which devotes 25 pages to “Legalism.” While it is a good book and gives excellent treatment of the “Dao” and various subjects, it does not offer the “best representation of Legalist thought in English” as Boltz claims when compared with others, such as K. Hsiao’s *A History of Chinese Political Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1979). Is it fair to say that the neglect of Hsiao’s work shows Boltz has “little familiarity with earlier studies, Chinese or Western?”

5. Boltz faults the bibliography because it lists the works by Burckhardt, Weber, Gramsci, Arendt, and McNamara “but some of this finds no mention in the book at all.” The fact is all five works specifically named by Boltz are not only mentioned but are also quoted in the book. Burckhardt’s work is mentioned because his characterization of Machiavelli’s treatment of the state as “a work of art” can be equally applied to the Legalists; Weber’s work is referred to in order to compare his modern definition of power with the similar conception of the ancient Legalists; Gramsci’s work is quoted because his treatment of Machiavelli is similar to Mao’s promotion of the Legalists; Arendt’s work is quoted because the recognition of lawless terror as the essence of totalitarian domination is analogous to the Legalists doctrines; and McNamara’s work is quoted because its advocacy of centralization of decision making is similar to the Legalists’ advice to the ruler. If Boltz had really read the book and not only flipped over the bibliography and the first pages of each chapter, then the above assertion is another willful fabrication. Had Boltz done his homework and checked, then he would not have made such groundless and laughable allegations. Moreover, if these works were not included in the bibliography, as he suggests, then the author would be justly accused as violating the basic rules of scholarship and professional decency. Perhaps Boltz has little if any regard for these norms.

6. From the chapter “The Primacy of Power” Boltz picked out the opening three sentences and suggests that this is all the book has to say about the Legalists’ conception of power. Actually this chapter offers a full presentation of the subthemes of the Legalists’ treatment of power including: power as authority and status of domination, supremacy of the ruler, physical and human resources as forms of power, intelligence and information as forms of power, the institution of nationwide informer network, power as ultimate goal and value, power versus other values, the disdain against virtue and benevolence, the state as vehicle of power, treating the human subjects as domestic animals, etc. None of these substantive issues are even touched by Boltz.

Boltz quotes from the book: “For these ancient Chinese political pundits, nothing is more important than the possession of power” and “In the Legalist conception, the unique feature that distinguished the ruler from ordinary mortals is the possession of power.” Based on these Boltz concludes the book is “studded with cliches and platitudes” and asks “Is the author getting at something about power that is not virtually universal commonplace?” But is this virtually universal commonplace? In ancient China, Confucians taught what distinguishes the ruler from others should be benevolence and wisdom but not power, and what the ruler seeks should be humaneness and virtue but not naked force. The Daoists gave priority to the quest for the mystic Way rather than power. And the Moists believed the practice of universal love to be more important than the possession of power. Therefore, these are not merely cliches but summarize some distinguishing features of the Legalists’

conception of power in contradistinction with China's other ancient schools of thought. Boltz's question shows little familiarity with ancient Chinese political philosophy.

7. Boltz uses the same technique of distortion to misrepresent the chapter "Statecraft." He again quotes the opening two sentences and then suggests that this is all the book has to say about Legalist statecraft. He asks: "does it tell us anything about the Legalists in fourth and third centuries China that we could not have guessed for ourselves?" One would not have guessed from Boltz's misleading review that this chapter includes themes such as: the monopoly of power, necessity of being on guard against everyone (including one's spouse and offspring), importance of secrecy and how it should be practiced, active aspects of nonaction (*wuwei*), importance of thought control, suppression of heresy, suppression of targeted social groups, elimination of all unsupervised social groups, monopoly of organization, domestication of bureaucrats, various techniques to control the bureaucracy, institutions of totalitarian social control, grassroots organization under direct state supervision, Legalist theory of organization and management, state control of the economy, etc. None of these issues are even cursorily addressed by Boltz.

8. Repeatedly Boltz employs the same technique of distortion by quoting one or two sentences out of context and suggests that these are all the book has to say. He quotes two sentences about the Dao as the Way and asserts that the author "has given no idea of what the Chinese text means by the word "Dao" much less what this has to do with Legalist thought." By this ploy of misrepresentation he deletes the explication of Dao as the "totality of all things;" "the universal law governing every being;" "the absolute;" the way that "precedes the universe;" "the vessel used but will never be filled;" "the way of peaceful coexistence among fellowmen;" the way "of contentment" and of non-envy; "the approach of noninterference" and "the way of nonaction," etc.; and how this could also be "the Way leading to success and failure" and even be "the art of ruling." The book traces how such Daoist "way of passivity," "way of nonaction" and others inspired certain tenets of the Legalists, and how they reinterpreted and transformed Daoist principles. It appears that, for Boltz, a book review is not to enlighten but to misinform, and that distortion equals scholarship.

9. Boltz quotes a passage of the book which depicts the Legalist ideal social order: "At the apex, high up in Heaven, is the omnipotent ruler; below him are his ministers and officials; farther down, on the ground, are the soldiers and peasants; and finally, placed at the very bottom in the pit of Hell, are the untouchable human vermin, who consist of dissidents and heretics, to be perpetually condemned and consumed by the raging fire of the inferno" (p. 107). Boltz exclaims: "There is certainly no extant text that I know of that describes the ideal Legalist social order in terms anything like these. One can only wonder what the author was basing his description on . . ." This proclamation inspires little confidence in Boltz's knowledge of the basic works of the Legalists and familiarity with earlier studies, Western or Chinese.

Actually this depiction of Legalist "utopia" is not very original and is wholly based on the works of the Legalists which are all presented in the book. The ideal of the supreme position and omnipotent power of the ruler and his absolute domination over his subjects have been advocated in almost all Legalist works (*Guan Zi*, ch. 45; *Shen Buhai*, ch. 7; *Shen Zi, weide*; *Shangjun shu*, ch. 4; *Han Fei Zi*, chs. 28, 49, 52). Even Boltz should know the ruler is supposed to be the "Son of Heaven." The ideal roles of the ministers and officials as docile enforcers of the ruler's law and obedient assistants in the governance of the soldiers and peasants were likewise elaborated by the Legalists (*Guan Zi*, chs. 45, 52; *Shen Buhai*, ch. 1; *Shen Zi, minza, yiwen*; *Shangjun*

*shu*, ch. 17; *Han Fei Zi*, chs. 5, 8, 11, 36). The Legalists regarded heretics, dissidents, merchants, and others social categories as undesirable “lice,” “pests” and “vermin” which should be constantly harassed, punished and even executed (*Shangjun shu*, chs. 2, 3, 4, 13, 17; *Han Fei Zi*, chs. 45, 46, 47, 49, 50). Therefore the quoted passage is indeed a true rendering of the Legalist ideal social order. This depiction may appear novel (Boltz also says the book offers nothing new). But anyone whose knowledge of the Legalists is based on the classical texts rather than relying exclusively on secondary sources will not feel this depiction “outlandish,” as Boltz suggests.

10. It is interesting to note that a lengthy review of a book on China’s Legalists contains not a single mention of any Legalist, not a single comment on the theme of law, and not a single substantive issue of the many themes of statecraft and power is addressed. On the other hand, the reviewer argues at length why one book should and others should not be included in the bibliography. One has to wonder why Boltz circumvents the real substantive issues?

11. Boltz concludes that “there is no thesis in the book so there is no conclusion to be summed up.” Contrary to Boltz’s misrepresentation, there are quite a few conclusions. One can only guess why he did not see them. Probably Boltz did not read the book or finds none simply because they offend him. Perhaps he does not like the term “totalitarianism,” therefore he chose not to see “With very limited technological means, the Legalists saw the possibility of total control over society by the state and were the earliest advocates of totalitarianism. They designed a series of institutional arrangements that would ensure the ruler’s almost total and absolute control over the general populace” (p. 160). Or perhaps he was hurt by the critical tone toward Marxism: “For modern Western social scientists who still cling to classical Marxist economic determinism even more tenaciously than official orthodox Marxist-Leninists, the Chinese Legalists’ advocacy of the primacy of power could serve as a healthy antidote.” Or, possibly, some might have offended his sensibility of political correctness, like “The continued expansion of a paternalistic welfare state, which is armed with the means of social engineering and techniques of behavioral conditioning, may result ultimately in a totalitarian social order and an abject populace. After all, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions” (p. 162).

Based on the above, one can only conclude that Boltz’s review, though “full of sound and fury,” amounts to nothing more than an artless exercise in the art of distortion.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I regret that my review of Professor Fu’s book did not clearly convey to him the reasons for my reservations concerning his approach to the study of the “Legalists.” I shall attempt to explain my concerns further in the following notes, numbered in accordance with Professor Fu’s comments.

1. Professor Fu’s incomplete citation of my comment about Sima Qian’s identification of *fa jia* as a school of thought reduces the main point to a three dot ellipsis, and his response to it suggests that the substance of my concern is not clear to him. He responds by saying that he has indeed identified the “Legalists” as “one school ‘among the various schools of thought’ in ancient China.” I did not say that he had not made such an identification; rather, I objected precisely that he did so without considering whether or not the name “Legalist” and the notion “school (of

thought) are appropriate to the pre-imperial period. We owe the first identification of a “Legalist school” to Sima Tan and his son, Sima Qian, who listed *fa jia* along with five other *jia* “schools” in the final chapter of the *Sbi ji*. Although the Sima Tan/Sima Qian classification of these “schools of thought” purports to describe the philosophical and doctrinal landscape of the Warring States period, fundamentally it reflects the intellectual proclivities of the Han world at the end of the second century B.C.E., fully a hundred years after the founding of the empire, a social and political world very different from the pre-imperial one with which Professor Fu is concerned. To adopt Sima Qian’s classification is inevitably to impose an early Han scholastic paradigm on a pre-Han setting to which it may not have any applicability or pertinence. Not only has Professor Fu not considered this problem, apparently he has not even recognized it. Nor has he commented on his choice of “Legalism” as a suitable translation of *fa jia*. (Arthur Waley, for example, chose to call this group “Realists” rather than “Legalists.” See his *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939.) Does Professor Fu assume that just because modern Chinese *fa* matches English ‘law’ in much of its everyday twentieth-century usage it can be taken for granted that English ‘law,’ and its learned counterpart ‘legal,’ are appropriate translations for the word *fa* more than two millennia earlier? Professor Fu’s own comments here (citing himself, pp. 7, 159) regarding the “Legalist” opposition to the rule of law and observing that the “Legalists” had little if anything to say about jurisprudence per se, suggest that he himself senses the imprecision of the term “legalism” for what he wishes to discuss. To say that raising such questions is like “pulling rabbits out of thin air” strikes me as gratuitous and unresponsive.

2. I regret that I overlooked the statement in the preface indicating the author’s intended audience.

3. I did not dispute Professor Fu’s claim that this is the first monograph in English to deal exclusively with the “Legalists.” I simply suggested that it did not do it very well. More significantly, as I hope my reply to the next item will indicate, I am not certain that exclusivity in writing a book about the “Legalists” is a virtue.

4. Professor Fu objects to my mention of the late A. C. Graham’s *Disputers of the Tao*, especially that it was missing from his bibliography. He goes on then to ask why I failed to mention the late Professor Hsiao Kung-ch’uan’s earlier work on political philosophy. Beyond the fact that Professor Hsiao’s work is to be found in Professor Fu’s bibliography, and therefore calls for no mention as missing, I referred to Graham’s book in particular because it locates the so-called “Legalist” texts individually and naturally within the overall matrix of Warring States political philosophy, both synchronically and diachronically, instead of treating them artificially as a uniform class apart from all others.

All the same, Professor Fu is correct to have drawn attention to the value of the late Professor Hsiao’s work. Apart from an introductory discussion summarizing the political, social, and intellectual dimensions of the Warring States period where he perforce uses the term “school” to refer to “legalist” writings as they were categorized by Sima Tan and Sima Qian, and notwithstanding the traditional framework within which he works, Professor Hsiao focuses on individual texts and on how they appear to be related to one another, both contemporaneously and over time from earlier periods. Unlike Professor Fu, he always subordinates the term “legalism” to individual texts; he has no chapter or even section of a chapter called “legalism” per se. This reflects the point that I was trying to make in my own halting way: for the pre-Han period the notion of “Legalism” as a “school of thought” is an artificial construct, a retrospective category label, in short, a convenient fiction, originating late in the first

century of the empire, and it says more about that early imperial era and its perception of the past than it does about the Warring States period to which Professor Fu would like to apply it with perfect innocence. To treat it otherwise is to put the cart before the horse: in spite of the great differences among the pre-Han figures and texts that Professor Fu mentions, he labels them all as “Legalists” first and examines them second, their identification as constituting a single “school of thought” already having been set out as a given and therefore unavailable to further consideration.

By far the best Western language study on “the Legalists” is Léon Vandermeersch’s magisterial work *La formation du légisme* (Publications de l’école française d’extrême-orient, Paris: École française d’extrême-orient, 1965), mentioned so far by neither of us. This is the Western language source to which one should turn for a thorough, competent study of Warring States period “Legalism,” including considerations of the questions I raised in the review and have alluded to in the foregoing comments here.

5. My wording in the review was careless in seeming to say that none of these works was mentioned at all when in fact, as Professor Fu points out for five items, they are, though Burckhardt is mentioned, without any discussion, only in a single chapter 5 endnote reference to his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (which the bibliography lists as having been published in 1965 by the Phaidon Press in Greenwich, Connecticut, with no further details). Gramsci, Arendt, and McNamara are allotted from four to ten lines each. The extent of the pertinence of these to his overall discussion Professor Fu aptly indicates here; the book itself contains little more. Because I do not remember the discussion of Weber from my first reading, because the index does not include an entry for Weber (or for McNamara or Burckhardt), I have not found the Weber discussion to which Professor Fu refers; I don’t doubt that it is there, in a few lines, somewhere. What I meant to imply, but refrained from spelling out, is that these references are of only the most superficially passing kind, and contribute next to nothing of substance about either the “Legalists” of pre-imperial China or the political history of the west from the fifteenth century on.

6. I cited the opening lines here, and in my remarks on the chapters to which Professor Fu refers in his points 7 and 8 following, because I thought this would be less likely to lead to any inadvertent misrepresentation of his meaning than to cite from the middle of a discussion. To be sure, Professor Fu does discuss the further points that he raises here, but what he says in the book does not go much beyond the level of the remarks he makes here, and this is a level that does not invite much substantive comment.

7. True enough, I did pass over all of these specific topics in silence, averring only that “the author expands somewhat on these generalities” (i.e., on the references to statecraft that I originally cited). The fifteen topics that Professor Fu specifies here are covered in twenty-five pages of his book, under twelve distinct headings, for an average of two printed pages per heading, less than that per topic listed here. (The “etc.” here is gratuitous; his listing is exhaustive and there is no identifiable section remaining in chapter 5 to which the “etc.” could refer.)

The problem lies once again with what Professor Fu is trying to do and how he thinks he can do it. Let me give one brief example. On page 82, in his discussion of the “be on guard against everyone” topic, which in his book he labels as “Trust No One,” he says “The Legalists . . . believed that human nature is evil.” He then proceeds to discuss the extent to which the ruler should beware the selfish interests of his associates, even his immediate family members. Professor Fu’s discussion is based entirely on passages in the *Han Feizi*, in particular the well-known section (not

'ch.[chapter], as Professor Fu labels it) titled "Bei nei" ("Taking Precautions at Court"), and it is a fair and useful, if brief, summary of that. But nowhere does Han Feizi say "human nature is evil." This is an extrapolation served up by Professor Fu, who apparently thinks that the generalization from selfishness and deceitful self-interest to "human nature is evil" is natural and innocuous.

Not content with this level of generalization, Professor Fu in the same stroke extends his interpretation of the *Han Feizi* text to apply to all "Legalists," claiming not just that Han Feizi believed that human nature was evil, but that "*Legalists* . . . believed that human nature is evil" (emphasis added). In fact, the so-called "Legalist" writings do not express a uniform view in this respect any more than in any other. Guan Zhong, for example, to take the best known, the earliest, and in many respects most important precursor to these fourth- and third-century B.C.E. "legalist" doctrines, lived in the seventh century B.C.E., at least two centuries before any discussion, indeed any notion, of "human nature" appears in the whole of the surviving pre-Han philosophical discourse. Not only did Guan Zhong never comment that "human nature is evil," as far as we know from the entire extant corpus of pre-Han texts, he could not have commented about "human nature" at all, since the very notion of "human nature" seems to have been conceptually nonexistent at that early time. Neither do those later portions of the *Guanzi* text that date from a time when the notion of "human nature" had entered into the philosophical discourse characterize it as "evil." Shang Yang does not say human nature is "evil," nor does Shen Buhai, nor does any other "Legalist." However harsh their views on human behavior may strike us, nowhere do these texts, individually, much less in the aggregate, constitute an indictment of human nature as "evil." To the extent that one can generalize at all, a better generalization would be that "legalist" writings from the fourth century B.C.E. on suggest that whether human nature is fundamentally good or bad or neutral is entirely irrelevant to social and political doctrine.

The statement that "human nature is evil" is immediately associated with Xunzi, of course, as Professor Fu well knows. If Professor Fu wishes to explore the significance of this judgment about human nature, surely it is to the *Xunzi* that he must turn. But the way he has shaped his enterprise forbids him to do that, because *Xunzi* is not identified as a member of the "Legalist school." (See, for example, Professor Fu's listing, titled "The Prominent Members of the Legalist School," pp. 13–21; Xunzi is not included because the Han and post-Han tradition does not place him there.) My purpose here is not to dispute Professor Fu's claim about the "Legalist" view of human nature, wrong as that is, but rather to insist that meaningful and useful discussions about human nature, about statecraft, or about any other aspect of the pre-Han social, political or intellectual world must begin with careful study of individual texts. Uncritical adherence to a set of preconceived notions is no substitute for painstaking scholarship nor is reliance on reductionist generalizations a workable alternative to thoughtful analysis. Surely this should apply to books directed to a general audience at least as compellingly as it does to scholarly works.

8. Professor Fu accuses me of engaging in a "ploy of misrepresentation" by "deleting" [*sic*] his "explications" of the Dao as "the totality of all things" and nine or more other catchy phrases that he lists here. But even had I quoted them all I would still be unable to share his conviction that they actually say something meaningful about the "Dao."

9. Neither Professor Fu's references to various parts of the *Guanzi*, *Shen Buhai*, *Shenzi*, *Shangjun shu*, and *Han Feizi*, nor anything else in the corpus of extant pre-Han or early Han texts adds up to anything like his Danteësque description, with its *shudra*-

like “untouchable[s]” placed in the “pit of Hell . . . to be perpetually . . . consumed by the raging fire of the inferno.” Apparently on the strength of references to the ruler as the “Son of Heaven” and to “heretics, dissidents, [and] merchants” as “vermin,” together with a fund of simplistic preconceptions, Professor Fu sets up this ridiculous caricature which he now tries to pass off as based on primary texts. The title “Son of Heaven” is, of course, a virtually universal epithet from the Western Zhou on, and if it is the *Han Feizi* section called “Wu Du” (“The Five Vermin”) that Professor Fu has in mind in constructing this scheme, then his “heretics, dissidents, [and] merchants” ought to be “toadying and sycophantic ministers and scholars.”

10. Here Professor Fu seems to be revisiting grievances already expressed; any response from me would likewise be repetitious.

11. In their restatement here Professor Fu’s “conclusions” impress me no more than they did when I read them in his book. They are glib superficialities, largely wanting substance. Particularly irksome, for example, is Professor Fu’s insistence on identifying Warring States period “Legalist” writers as “the earliest advocates of totalitarianism,” an identification seen even in the subtitle of his book. The implication of this is effectively to equate “Legalism” with totalitarianism, and such an equation displays not only a gross oversimplification of the Chinese texts but also a seeming ignorance of totalitarianism itself. Totalitarianism is, properly understood, a phenomenon of the modern world, a term and concept defined entirely by twentieth-century events. This does not mean, of course, that it cannot be used judiciously, within explicitly stated limits, to help explain by comparison or contrast certain kinds of earlier expressions of political power. But the significance of such uses must arise clearly from some pertinent and precise aspect of the word’s established meaning. To invoke the term as Professor Fu does in his book, without the least caution or qualification, is to turn historical study into an empty terminological game. The further examples of his “conclusions” that Professor Fu lists here aptly illustrate my objection to his whole book: it is a patchwork of unexamined assumptions expressed in tired clichés and offered up against a backdrop of simplistic generalizations.

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#### TO THE EDITOR:

In her review of my book, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900–1942*, in the May 1997 issue of *The Journal of Asian Studies* (56, No. 2), Jean Gelman Taylor accuses me of being “irresponsible.” Her charge was prompted by my examination of a series of public discussions in the Netherlands during the post–World War II era; focusing on the history of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, these debates have displayed a tendency to view any analogy with Nazi Germany as a “forbidden metaphor.” At issue is whether I personally label Boven Digul, a Dutch prison camp for Indonesian nationalists established in the late 1920s in a swampy, disease-ridden jungle of New Guinea, a “concentration camp” comparable to Auschwitz. In most circumstances, an accusation of irresponsibility in a scholarly journal is serious business, especially when it implicates the historiographical uses and abuses of the Holocaust. But such an indictment becomes even more problematic when it is based on a complete misreading of an author’s argument and a distortion of the actual text of a book.

Instead, in my attempt to set the stage for an analysis of a soul-searching public dialogue in the Netherlands concerning its colonial record in Indonesia, I referred to

the thoughtful Indonesian nationalist, Sutan Sjahrir, who was banished to Boven Digul. In 1936 he wrote that in the Dutch East Indies “the official idea of a ‘concentration camp’ has not yet been institutionalized; it thus lags behind Nazi Germany. But Germany could have learned a lot about the creation of such institutions by studying the practices of Boven Digul.” I then introduced an editorial published in the American news magazine *The New Republic* on October 29, 1945. I prefaced the specific quote, “Boven Digul [was] one of the world’s most terror-ridden concentration camps in a swampy, malaria-infested jungle of Dutch New Guinea,” by pointing out that it contained “more than a bit of hyperbole.” I also identified the statement as “a tendentious and loaded one,” only to continue with an inquiry into the ways in which the parallels between Dutch colonial rule and the Third Reich were asserted or contested in the years after World War II and again during the early 1990s.

Despite its hyperbolic tone, I cited *The New Republic’s* editorial because it offered a useful international perspective. In this context, I also invoked an Australian delegate to the U.N. Security Council in 1948, who accused the Dutch government during Indonesia’s struggle for independence of committing acts of cruelty in Indonesia that “were worse than what Hitler had done to the Netherlands” (p. 20). Obviously, in the international arena a discourse existed that considered such analogies as legitimate, and these non-Dutch judgments were relevant to the ways in which they were either incorporated or challenged in the Dutch media. Jean Gelman Taylor misconstrues my analysis in the following manner:

Gouda quotes a source (p. 19) that Boven Digul was one of the worst concentration camps, on the standard of Auschwitz. And yet she provides no evidence on the treatment of political prisoners by the Dutch. Were there gas ovens in New Guinea? Had the Dutch a policy of exterminating every single Indonesian? That is the standard for concentration camps, as we know it from Auschwitz. A charge of such magnitude, unsupported by investigation, is not just “tendentious and loaded,” it is irresponsible.

She is right that the fate of Indonesian political prisoners in Boven Digul is a topic I only discussed in a lonely paragraph in a later chapter (p. 68). But the name Auschwitz does not appear anywhere in my text either. Professor Gelman Taylor ignores my rhetorical purpose in quoting *The New Republic*, which was obviously not concerned with the question of “gas ovens” operating in Boven Digul or whether the conduct of Dutch prison wardens in New Guinea during the 1930s anticipated the behavior of Nazi guards in Auschwitz during World War II.

In the late 1920s, the colonial administration had designated Boven Digul as the internment colony for those it perceived as the most dangerous activists in Indonesia’s nationalist crusade. As the U.S. Consul General in Batavia wrote to the State Department in 1935, the “despotic” colonial government persecuted most colonial subjects who strove for Indonesia’s liberation from Dutch rule; such people were always “at risk of being summarily banished, purely as a preemptive measure.” Many were exiled to Tanah Merah or Tanah Tinggi in Boven Digul, which Rudolf Mrazek characterized as a “hellish, debilitating, fast-killing place” in his 1994 biography of Sutan Sjahrir (p. 132). An occasional American diplomat or journalist may have had an inkling that Boven Digul was a frightening penal colony in the “phantom world” of New Guinea. But few among them grasped the full extent to which inmates, in the words of Takashi Shiraishi, were physically shattered, mentally broken, or driven insane, even if Dutch guards did not personally torture or execute them (*Indonesia* 61, April 1996, p. 94).

Colonial authorities, meanwhile, registered pride in their so-called “humane” treatment of Indonesian political prisoners. As the *Baltimore Sun* reported on April 7, 1940, officials in the Netherlands Indies claimed that the lenient British and Americans tended to “pardon all agitators,” whereas the French arbitrarily “shoot them.” Dutch authorities in Indonesia, in contrast, pursued a policy that was represented as a judicious middle ground. They merely deported troublemakers to the New Guinea highlands where they were left alone “to construct their own utopia,” the American writer John Gunther noted in his widely read book, *Inside Asia*. It would not be until the immediate postwar period that the American media acknowledged the horrific conditions that had prevailed in Boven Digul by calling it, as *The New Republic’s* editorial did, a concentration camp—a label that was newly informed by the harrowing discoveries made during the Allied liberation of Nazi death camps such as Auschwitz.

When concentration camps were first established in Cuba or Transvaal in the late nineteenth century, the incarceration of anti-Spanish guerillas and South African Boers took place without a proper process of adjudication. Even though political prisoners in New Guinea were not systematically exterminated, Dutch authorities detained them without due process of law; they also neutralized Indonesian nationalists with great efficiency by locking them up in a lethal malarial swamp. When Jean Gelman Taylor asks whether “there were gas ovens in New Guinea,” one could conceivably reply that disease and madness were quite effective in their own right. But words such as “Nazi,” “SS,” or “Concentration Camp” serve as (“forbidden”) metaphors for acts of excessive cruelty. These rhetorical constructions have entered the poignant public debates in the Netherlands about its colonial history in Indonesia. It is exactly this contentious discussion that constitutes the subject of my analysis in *Dutch Culture Overseas*, thereby provoking Professor Gelman Taylor’s charge.

Perhaps Jean Gelman Taylor read the book in haste, which also caused her to misstate its subtitle as *Colonial Practice in Indonesia, 1900–1942*. In addition to positive remarks, she makes some criticisms of my book that I find quite valid, although I simply disagree with her comment that it is based on an “unsound” question because I focus on the transformation of Dutch cultural values once they had rooted in southeast Asian colonial soil. The examination of the cultural and political linkages between “metropole” and “colony” constitutes a thriving intellectual enterprise in which many historians in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia are currently engaged. But this is the subject of an honest difference of opinion. However, her accusation of my being an “irresponsible” historian is of an entirely different magnitude, which needs to be addressed.

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TO THE EDITOR:

At issue is not that Professor Gouda personally labeled Boven Digul a concentration camp (review of *Dutch Culture Overseas. Colonial Practice in the Netherland Indies, 1900–1942*, *JAS*, 56.2, 550–52). She did not. Professor Gouda recorded the judgment of others who did without exploring the case. I believe facts are verifiable. More research is needed to document Boven Digul and assess its place in this century’s sorrows.

I apologize for the error of substituting “Indonesia” for “Netherlands Indies” in the title.

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