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Medan as a Colonial Economic Nexus: The Legacy of Plantation Capitalism in the Early 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence of Medan as a pivotal colonial economic hub in the early twentieth century, foregrounding the structural influence of plantation capitalism. Anchored in the broader trajectory of Dutch colonial expansion in Sumatra—especially in the Deli region—the study traces how large-scale plantation enterprises, predominantly in tobacco, rubber, and palm oil, fundamentally reshaped the city's urban morphology, socio-economic hierarchy, and administrative functions. The principal research inquiry centers on the role of plantation capitalism in engineering Medan's economic configuration and entrenching colonial hierarchies. Employing a historical-analytical approach grounded in archival materials, colonial-era documentation, and academic literature, this study demonstrates that Medan's accelerated urbanization and growing strategic importance were intrinsically linked to the imperatives of European capital and the systematic exploitation of both indigenous and migrant labor. The analysis further reveals that the spatial ordering of the city, investments in infrastructure, and patterns of social stratification were not merely coincidental, but deliberate outcomes of a capitalist logic institutionalized within the colonial apparatus. The findings suggest that Medan functioned not only as a logistical node in the transnational flows of commodities but also as a paradigmatic case of colonial urbanism shaped by plantation-driven accumulation. As such, the paper contributes to broader debates on the lasting imprint of colonial economic systems on Southeast Asia's urban landscapes.

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INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Medan in the early twentieth century is inextricably linked to its strategic role as a colonial economic center founded upon the logic of plantation capitalism. The city's transformation from a modest settlement into a modern urban space was a direct consequence of Dutch colonial expansion, which heavily relied on the extraction of natural resources and the exploitation of local labor (Suprayitno et al., 2020). From the mid-nineteenth century, the Deli region attracted considerable attention from Dutch companies that developed large-scale tobacco plantations. The establishment of the *Deli Maatschappij* in 1869 marked a turning point in the economic history of East Sumatra. This company not only managed thousands of hectares of plantation land but also invested in critical infrastructure—such as railways and ports—to facilitate commodity exports (Lindblad, 1995).

The implementation of plantation capitalism in Medan was characterized by a deeply exploitative labor regime. Thousands of workers were imported from Java, China, and India to toil on the plantations under harsh and inhumane conditions. This labor system exemplified the colonial capitalist ethos that prioritized productivity over human welfare (Breman, 2024). Rapid economic growth significantly altered the urban structure of Medan. Exclusive neighborhoods were developed for European settlers, complete with modern facilities, while local inhabitants and migrant laborers were confined to overcrowded, unsanitary districts. This spatial inequality mirrored the colonial social hierarchy produced and perpetuated by plantation capitalism (Colombijn & Barwegen, 2009).

The expansion of the plantation sector accelerated urbanization and reinforced Dutch colonial dominance in Medan. The city was designated as an important administrative and economic center in the region. Medan's integration into global trade networks became increasingly evident in the early twentieth century (Sadewo et al., 2021). However, these developments also produced complex social consequences. Class and ethnic divisions emerged as defining

features of colonial society in Medan. The social structure engineered by plantation capitalism fostered segregation among Europeans, Chinese, and Indigenous groups—divisions that continued to shape the postcolonial era. Medan stands as a concrete example of how colonial economic systems actively constructed urban forms and social relations within colonized territories (Sutherland, 2003).

The city's evolution as a colonial economic center was also shaped by the active participation of the Chinese elite. Prominent figures such as Tjong A Fie—an influential entrepreneur involved in both plantation and trade sectors—played a pivotal role in mediating between colonial authorities, the Sultan of Deli, and local communities. His leadership not only bolstered the economic standing of the Chinese community but also established a politically intermediary position within the intricate colonial power structure (Pane et al., 2018).

The construction of urban infrastructure, including the railway network, Belawan port, and public facilities, was largely motivated by the export demands of plantation commodities such as tobacco and rubber. However, this development was heavily biased by race and class: modern amenities were primarily available to European residents and the Chinese elite, while Indigenous populations were relegated to peripheral areas with minimal access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare services (E. L. Damanik, 2018).

Ethnic diversity—arising from the colonial labor migration policy—also had profound social implications. Javanese, Chinese, and Indian workers, brought in to fulfill the labor needs of the plantation economy, lived in crowded quarters with limited social infrastructure. While this migration contributed to a multicultural dynamic, it also reinforced ethnic stratification and sustained the hierarchical logic of colonial urban order (Sudarmadji et al., 2018).

Colonial authorities consciously designed the city's spatial layout to reflect and reinforce social stratification. European neighborhoods featured Dutch-style architecture and privileged access to modern services, while Indigenous and migrant communities were spatially marginalized. This segregation was not simply the result of cultural differences but part of a deliberate colonial policy to maintain dominance and social control over populations deemed inferior (Gultom, 2020).

The legacies of this colonial system remain evident in contemporary Medan. Spatial and social inequalities originating from the colonial period continue to shape the urban landscape. Understanding these historical structures is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for informing the development of more equitable and inclusive urban policies in the future (Furnivall, 1940).

Numerous studies have investigated Medan's role as a colonial economic hub structured by plantation capitalism in the early twentieth century. Affandi et al. (2022) examined the health impacts of plantation industrialization, showing how rapid urbanization due to estate expansion created overcrowded environments vulnerable to disease outbreaks. F. H. S. Damanik (2024) further explores the legacy of colonial capitalism through the revitalization of Lapangan Merdeka, originally designed as a symbolic space for colonial elites and plantation capitalists. In terms of urban planning, Sadewo et al. (2021) analyze how Medan's spatial organization was shaped by social and racial stratification, reflecting colonial policies aimed at sustaining power hierarchies. Fakih (2023b) observes that the city's development was categorized by social status and class distinctions imposed by the colonial regime, giving Medan a distinctly metropolitan and capitalistic character. Silver (2022) provides historical data on urbanization trends in major cities, with Medan emerging as a vital commercial and colonial elite center.

This study focuses on two core research questions. First, how did the Dutch colonial administration's plantation capitalism shape the economic structure and spatial configuration of Medan in the early twentieth century—specifically through land control, migrant labor exploitation, and export-oriented infrastructure development for commodities like tobacco and rubber? Second, what were the social consequences of this colonial capitalist system, as reflected in the emergence of a hierarchical and segregated urban society—evidenced by the division of residential areas, unequal access to public facilities, and the social relations among European, Chinese, and Indigenous communities? The aim is to demonstrate that colonial capitalism not only laid the foundations of the city's economy but also left a spatial and social legacy that continues to influence Medan's urban configuration today.

This study offers a novel contribution by highlighting the interconnection between plantation capitalism and the production of spatial structures and social relations in Medan as a colonial economic center in the early twentieth century. Departing from previous studies that often focused either on macroeconomic aspects or isolated ethnic roles,

this research integrates political-economic analysis with spatial and social approaches to demonstrate how the colonial capitalist system not only shaped economic structures but also produced spatial segregation and sustained social inequality. Its innovation lies in linking plantation capitalism to the multiethnic configuration and fragmented urban space of colonial Medan—an angle that remains underexplored in existing literature.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach using historical methods to reconstruct the dynamics of plantation capitalism and Medan's role as a colonial economic hub in the early twentieth century. The historical approach was chosen for its ability to trace causal relationships between colonial policies, economic activities, and their implications for the city's social and spatial structures. Data collection was conducted through archival research and document analysis, focusing on colonial-era records such as annual reports from plantation companies (e.g., *Deli Maatschappij*), Dutch- and Malay-language newspapers, and official documents issued by the Dutch East Indies administration.

The primary newspapers consulted include *De Sumatra Post*, *Pewarta Deli*, and *Bintang Hindia*, which captured the socio-political dynamics and public discourse of the colonial era. Archival materials were sourced from *Koloniaal Verslag*, *Delische Courant*, and the Annual Reports of the Dutch East Indies Government, preserved at the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI) and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden. Additional sources include colonial census reports and administrative maps of early twentieth-century Medan. Secondary sources, such as scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles, were also consulted to support the interpretation of primary data.

In line with Kaal and Lottum, the historical method centers on source criticism and contextual interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of past social dynamics (Kaal & Lottum, 2021). Data analysis was conducted through rigorous source criticism and historical interpretation, where each document was assessed for authenticity, credibility, and relevance to the research focus. The classified data were then analyzed using a colonial political economy framework, aimed at uncovering the linkages between plantation production systems, spatial control, and the formation of colonial social hierarchies in Medan.

This analytical approach enables the identification of patterns of domination and resistance embedded in colonial society and reveals how plantation capitalism served as a driving force behind Medan's economic transformation and urban development. To strengthen the validity of the interpretation, source triangulation was employed—cross-referencing multiple types of documents from varying perspectives to minimize bias and ensure a well-substantiated evidentiary base.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Economic and Infrastructural Transformation of Medan within the Colonial Plantation System

The economic transformation of Medan in the early twentieth century cannot be separated from the dominance of plantation capitalism orchestrated by Dutch enterprises, particularly the *Deli Maatschappij*. Leveraging land concessions granted by the Sultanate of Deli, the company began establishing large-scale tobacco plantations as early as 1869, laying the economic foundation for the city's growth. Its operations extended beyond export-oriented agricultural production, encompassing tight control over labor relations and distribution networks (Tarigan et al., 2017).

As the center of plantation-based economic activities, Medan rapidly developed into a key administrative and logistical hub. The *Deli Maatschappij* directly financed the construction of critical infrastructure, including roads, warehouses, and processing facilities, while consolidating its power through close alliances with both the colonial administration and the Sultanate of Deli to safeguard its commercial interests (Safitri et al., 2024).

A pivotal milestone in Medan's infrastructural transformation was the establishment of the *Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij* (DSM) in the early 1880s. This railway network was designed to connect inland tobacco and rubber plantations with the newly constructed Belawan Port, facilitating the accelerated export of commodities to European and American markets (Sabrina & Zulqaiyyim, 2023).

Belawan Port itself was developed in response to the inadequacies of the older Labuhan Deli harbor. As Sumatra's first deep-sea port with modern loading and unloading facilities, Belawan solidified Medan's position as a global trade node—especially for Deli tobacco, renowned on the international market. This transport infrastructure reinforced plantation companies' control over logistics and labor mobility. In this regard, colonial capitalism operated not only through production but also by shaping urban space through a system of planned infrastructure (Suriani & Anwar, 2019).

Colonial corporate dominance was also visible in the physical construction of the city. The *Deli Maatschappij* financed the building of monumental structures—including headquarters, hotels, hospitals, and recreational facilities—all concentrated in exclusive zones. The city became spatially divided along racial and social lines, with separate quarters for Europeans, Chinese, and Indigenous groups, reflecting the socio-economic stratification integral to the colonial economy. Urban planning in Medan adhered to a distinctly colonial logic of segregation: elite neighborhoods were located near administrative centers and transport hubs, while worker settlements and Indigenous communities were relegated to the urban periphery. Here, infrastructure functioned as a spatial tool of political control under the colonial capitalist regime (Stoler, 1991).

The infrastructural expansion also brought severe ecological consequences. Plantation growth and urban development resulted in deforestation, over-extraction of groundwater, and increased pollution from agricultural industry waste. These environmental degradations were largely ignored by the colonial government, whose overriding priority was capital accumulation. Plantation capitalism also reoriented local economies: subsistence farmers were converted into low-wage plantation laborers, creating a dependency on the colonial system and eroding local economic autonomy (Locher-Scholten, 1994).

While large enterprises generated employment, they simultaneously intensified class-based exploitation. Labor migration from Java and China was facilitated under exploitative contractual systems, with harsh working conditions, long hours, and strict punitive regimes becoming hallmarks of plantation labor (Stoler, 2010). Medan also served as a regional administrative center for the Dutch East Indies, with a bureaucratic apparatus designed to serve both colonial authorities and powerful corporate interests (Ludden, 1994).

These transformations not only reshaped the economy but also redefined Medan's urban identity. The city was celebrated as a symbol of progress within colonial narratives—yet that "progress" rested on deep social inequalities and the marginalization of local populations. Despite this, modernization efforts did result in the establishment of public facilities such as schools, hospitals, and electric grids. However, access to these services remained confined to the European and elite communities, underscoring the exclusivity of colonial modernity (Emmerson, 1980).

Within this colonial capitalist framework, education was instrumentalized to preserve the social order. European-style schools such as the *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* (HIS) and the *Europeesche Lagere School* (ELS) were restricted to elite groups, while Indigenous education remained limited in both quality and accessibility. Curricula were designed not to empower, but to produce compliant, skilled labor loyal to the colonial system. Colonial regulations—such as labor ordinances and contract laws—further entrenched employer dominance, binding workers to legal frameworks that favored corporate interests. Culturally, colonial capitalism shaped elite lifestyles through symbols of modernity, from fashion to architecture, which also functioned as visible markers of social and ethnic hierarchy within the urban fabric.

The enduring legacy of colonial capitalism is still evident in the urban and economic landscape of contemporary Medan. Spatial inequalities, once orchestrated through colonial planning, have evolved into stark disparities between city centers and peripheral zones. Public services, infrastructure, and economic access remain concentrated in central areas dominated by economically powerful groups, while lower-income communities are relegated to poorly serviced outskirts.

Today's urban layout reflects a persistent divide between commercial zones and residential districts. Major shopping centers, business areas, and office buildings are located in what were once elite colonial quarters, whereas former labor settlements continue to suffer from inadequate drainage, limited access to clean water, and poor road quality (Basundoro & Putra, 2019).

Colonial legacies also persist in contemporary urban planning processes, which remain largely top-down and often neglect public participation. New development projects frequently displace low-income residents to urban fringes, areas that are more affordable but lack essential services. In the economic sphere, corporate dominance

remains a defining feature of Medan. Many large firms controlling trade, services, and property trace their roots to colonial times, when access to capital, land, and economic power was monopolized by a privileged few. This continuity sustains local economic oligopolies (Raben, 2020).

Economic disparities are further reinforced through unequal access to education and employment opportunities. High-quality schools and vocational centers are disproportionately concentrated in affluent urban zones, deepening the human capital gap between urban core and periphery. Intergenerational social inequality is thus perpetuated. Even public spaces in Medan today reflect socio-spatial exclusivity. Parks, city squares, and recreational facilities are more accessible to middle- and upper-class groups, while marginalized communities have limited access to dignified communal spaces—reproducing colonial spatial divisions in contemporary form.

Local political dynamics also bear colonial imprints. Centralized authority and patron-client relationships between political elites and business interests mirror former alliances among colonial rulers, plantation corporations, and local aristocracy. Economic interests often override principles of social justice and participatory governance in policymaking. This is compounded by imbalanced spatial planning and environmental neglect. Economically strategic zones receive priority in infrastructure and public services, while poor and densely populated areas are left without coherent planning, resulting in ecological divides between well-maintained green areas and polluted, overcrowded slums (Hoogervorst & Nordholt, 2017).

Public transport remains another area where colonial legacies manifest. Rather than developing inclusive mass transit systems, the city government prioritizes infrastructure that supports private vehicles and commercial logistics. This limits economic and social mobility for low-income populations. Land use policies and licensing practices in Medan still favor large investors. Mega-projects in real estate often disregard social and historical contexts, leading to the displacement of informal settlements and heritage neighborhoods. Such patterns perpetuate the spatial marginalization rooted in the colonial era (Fakih, 2023).

Urban revitalization efforts, too, often fall into the trap of colonial aestheticism. Dutch colonial buildings are restored without critically engaging their historical and social significance. As a result, such projects tend to preserve symbols of colonial authority rather than amplify alternative narratives from affected local communities. In the labor market, colonial-era hierarchies persist in subtle forms. Managerial roles in major firms are often reserved for individuals with strong socio-economic networks, while lower-class populations remain confined to informal and precarious employment (Sitepu, 2024).

Digital inequality further reflects structurally inherited disparities. Central urban populations enjoy better access to internet and digital technology, while peripheral zones suffer from limited connectivity—affecting education, employment, and participation in the digital economy. These inequalities are not merely the result of post-independence policy but are rooted in persistent colonial patterns that have adapted into new forms. Addressing these challenges requires a historically informed and transformative approach to urban planning—one that acknowledges and reconstructs colonial legacies while fostering inclusive, participatory pathways toward a more equitable urban future.

Social Segregation and the Production of Urban Space under Colonial Capitalism

Social segregation in colonial-era Medan was not incidental but rather a deliberate strategy within the broader framework of colonial capitalist governance, designed to sustain power and economic control. The Dutch East Indies administration consciously partitioned the city along racial and class lines: Europeans were placed in the urban core, surrounded by modern infrastructure and elite amenities, while Chinese and Indigenous (Bumiputera) populations were pushed to the urban periphery, where infrastructure was underdeveloped and access to public services was minimal (Brunero, 2021).

This spatial separation extended beyond geography—it was deeply social and symbolic. European quarters were meticulously planned to reflect the superiority of Western civilization, complete with colonial-style architecture, tram lines, landscaped parks, and privileged access to modern schools and hospitals. By contrast, Indigenous and other ethnic settlements were unplanned, often overcrowded, and functioned primarily as labor reservoirs for the plantation industry.

Medan's urban space thus became a tangible expression of extreme colonial social stratification. This spatial architecture restricted inter-group interaction and, by extension, entrenched socioeconomic inequality. Segregation did not merely reinforce racial dominance but actively shaped access to education, economic opportunities, and social mobility. Indigenous populations, relegated to the outskirts of the administrative core, were spatially marginalized and, consequently, denied entry to formal education and higher-paying jobs—thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty within a fixed social stratum (Anwar, 2018).

Among local communities, traditional systems based on *adat* (customary law), communal labor, and collective values were disrupted by the imposition of colonial capitalism. Communities that once thrived within the spatial unity of the kampung (village) were forced into densely packed barracks and informal settlements. Kinship networks, customary deliberation, and collective land management practices were gradually eroded by contract labor systems and non-participatory urbanization, leading to a loss of community control over their living space and the rise of fragmented social formations subordinated to colonial logic.

The Chinese community occupied an ambivalent position within this hierarchy. While permitted to serve as intermediaries in local trade and finance, they were still denied access to elite European zones. Their neighborhoods, such as Kesawan, developed into dense economic enclaves yet remained politically marginal. Poor living conditions in non-European quarters were exacerbated by racially biased urban policies that prioritized infrastructure spending for European districts—demonstrating that segregation was not merely a product of market dynamics but also state-engineered (Safitri et al., 2024).

Spatial segregation served as an effective tool of social control. By physically isolating ethnic and social classes, the colonial regime could reduce the likelihood of intergroup solidarity and minimize the potential for collective resistance. The legacy of this system endures in Medan's current urban form: areas once designated for European residence are now central business and administrative districts, while former Indigenous settlements continue to experience poverty and infrastructural neglect (Nordholt et al., 2008).

This process also reshaped internal social hierarchies within local society. A small segment of the Indigenous elite, who cooperated with colonial authorities, gained access to quality education and respectable housing, while the majority lost control over land, social space, and communal identity. Patron-client relations between Indigenous elites and the lower classes reinforced internal stratification beyond colonial structures (Nordholt et al., 2008).

Contemporary spatial consumption patterns still exhibit these segregative tendencies. Modern upper-class housing remains concentrated in former colonial districts, complete with exclusive facilities inaccessible to the urban poor. Meanwhile, informal settlements grow without proper planning or public services. Colonial legacies also continue to shape how space is socially perceived: ex-European districts are still seen as prestigious, whereas former Indigenous neighborhoods are often labeled as "slums" or "non-strategic." These perceptions reflect how colonialism has shaped collective mentalities and spatial imaginaries.

Urban value in Medan today is not solely determined by physical characteristics but also by inherited social constructs. Areas that once housed European elites continue to receive priority in planning and infrastructure investments, creating the impression that these zones possess greater symbolic and economic worth. This prioritization results in skewed budget allocations favoring these historically privileged districts (Hoogervorst & Nordholt, 2017).

Inequities are particularly visible in the distribution of public services. Elite neighborhoods enjoy access to modern shopping centers, international hospitals, top-tier private schools, and well-maintained parks. In contrast, densely populated low-income districts often rely on underfunded public health clinics and poorly equipped public schools.

The formation of public space also mirrors entrenched social hierarchies. Many public spaces in elite districts are designed to be exclusive—gated, heavily secured, or accessible only through commercial transactions. Such exclusivity limits cross-class interaction and reinforces spatial polarization. Development projects such as reclamation, shopping malls, and highways are typically situated near former economic centers—not in response to community needs, but driven by investor-oriented calculations. In this context, urban space is no longer a shared public good but a commodified asset exchanged through purchasing power and social capital (E. L. Damanik, 2018).

Colonial legacies also influence how social mobility is imagined. Owning property or residing in central Medan is often equated with success and prestige. Conversely, life on the unplanned urban periphery is associated with marginality and failure. This fuels a widespread aspiration to move to the city center, intensifying property prices and triggering gentrification. As former working-class neighborhoods are redeveloped into upscale commercial or residential zones, original residents are gradually displaced by rising rents and living costs—adding a new layer of urban exclusivity (Veronica & Siregar, 2018).

The absence of equitable spatial redistribution policies exacerbates these inequalities. Urban planning often ignores the rights of marginalized groups to safe and dignified living environments. Instead, decisions are shaped by elite technocrats and local politicians beholden to investment-driven agendas. Former Indigenous neighborhoods remain neglected in terms of environmental quality—facing problems such as inadequate drainage, overcrowded housing, and insecure land tenure. Government interventions, where they exist, tend to be piecemeal and fail to address structural issues.

Negative perceptions of non-elite residential areas also diminish local participation in neighborhood development. Residents, long treated as second-class citizens in the urban system, feel disempowered to improve their environments. This entrenches a sense of collective disillusionment and reproduces cycles of structural disenfranchisement. Over time, such inequalities do not only impact the physical cityscape but also erode social cohesion. Populations divided by geography and symbols are more likely to develop mutual stereotypes, increasing the risk of social conflict and obstructing cross-group collaboration.

Contemporary Medan faces a critical challenge: dismantling the colonial spatial legacies that continue to encode social class into the urban fabric. This requires a planning paradigm grounded in social justice—not merely economic calculus. Inclusive urban development cannot occur without first recognizing that spatial perceptions are historically constructed and must be critically deconstructed. Challenging the symbolic meanings embedded in space is key to fostering collective awareness. Cities are not solely defined by historic buildings and financial centers, but also by the vibrancy of neighborhoods filled with social life, creativity, and solidarity that often go unrecognized in dominant development narratives. Policies that prioritize upgrading popular settlements without forced evictions represent a starting point for addressing these injustices. Strengthening community roles in spatial design and environmental governance can restore a sense of ownership over spaces long monopolized by capital and power.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Medan did not emerge organically as a regional economic center but was systematically constructed under the logic of plantation capitalism within the framework of Dutch colonialism in the early twentieth century. This capitalist regime not only established an export-oriented economy based on commodities such as tobacco and rubber but also engineered a hierarchical social and spatial order through mechanisms of racial and class segregation. The city was transformed into an apparatus of production and control—its spaces meticulously organized to facilitate colonial capital accumulation while marginalizing groups deemed economically non-strategic. The legacy of this structure remains visible today in the form of stark inequalities in access to space, public facilities, and social opportunities across contemporary Medan.

Going forward, further research is needed to examine the deeper connections between colonial legacies and post-independence urban planning policies. Interdisciplinary studies that integrate historical analysis, urban sociology, and spatial planning are essential to understanding how segregative patterns have been reproduced in modern development agendas. Such approaches may also provide critical pathways for reimagining urban planning strategies that are more inclusive, equitable, and historically informed ones that recognize and respond to the lived realities of contemporary urban populations.

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