

What Does Post-Modernism Do in Contemporary Indonesia?

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This paper historicizes the recent vogue of post-modernist thought in Indonesia by relating that vogue to the cultural politics of the country's urban intelligentsia. The writer welcomes post-modernism, but with some serious reservations. He relates the contradictory political character of post-modernism to the position of the middle class in contemporary Indonesia. While the homology between the middle class and post-modernism may well be global, the writer considers the specificity of the relation in the Indonesian case.

No intellectual vogue in the past ten years has made as impressive a debut in contemporary Indonesian culture as post-modernism. A phenomenon of comparable significance, and closely related in issue, in the immediate past was the debate over socially engaged literary production and criticism in the early 1980s (Foulcher 1994, p. 66). The current controversy around post-modernism culminated during the second half of 1993 and early 1994.

During those months, *Kompas*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Indonesia, perhaps in Southeast Asia, ran a series of polemics on post-modernism in its prestigious opinion columns. The same theme dominated too the Sunday edition of the cultural pages of *Jawa Pos* and *Republika*, the second and third largest newspapers in Indonesia. Both *Jurnal Filsafat* in 1991 and the recently launched glossy journal, *Kalam*, in 1994 devoted their first editions to post-modernism. In lesser degrees, the issue was covered in a wide range of other periodicals, from the prominent journal of the social sciences, *Prisma* (vol. 23, no. 1, 1993), to various "alternative" publications run by student activists. By the end of 1994 a group of young scholars published a volume containing a

selection of more than fifty essays on post-modernism previously published in different print media (Suyoto et al. 1994).

As expected, seminars on post-modernism have been held in many centres of social and cultural studies. Intellectual discussions grapple frequently with post-modernist jargon. Anecdotes with a post-modernist ring and jokes mocking post-modernism have flourished.

References to post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-industrialism had already begun to appear in Indonesia in the 1980s. However, until very recently, they met with no significant response. Today post-modernism has found small and scattered groups of enthusiasts who address each other in a distinct discourse. These groups, however, constitute a tiny minority of the nation's intelligentsia. The same familiar Indonesian figures reappear in most of the various publications and seminars addressing issues on post-modernism. Many beyond the inner circles have shown some interest in the subject, but for the most part they are unfamiliar with the issues and they lack the confidence to take an active part in the discussions.

What follows is a preliminary attempt to reflect on the significance of post-modernism for the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian cultural politics. In the more familiar language of the new vogue, this paper is a quick "reading" of the event. Admittedly, this is not easy. A minimal and sympathetic acquaintance with post-modernism is enough to change one's position, so that one can no longer engage in "reading" it as if one has never been familiar with it. Post-modernism has changed my perspective — but not completely. The ensuing discussion will oscillate between the perspectives of post-modernism and what it challenges.

Synchronic and Diachronic Contexts

I will begin with questions that are characteristically non-postmodernist. Can we historicize, if only preliminarily, the post-modern controversy in Indonesia, and explain why the controversy appears today in the way it does? Without going too far in pursuit of a uni-vocal answer, can we find any significant relationships between the phenomenon in question

and Indonesia's contemporary politics and economy? How does this new cultural trend affect the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics?¹

It is hard not to associate the post-modern controversy in Indonesia today with another debate on the formation and political orientation of the "middle classes". This debate reached its climax in the years immediately preceding the post-modernism debate, but it continues to attract considerable interest among Indonesian urbanites and their foreign observers. Participants in the "middle classes" debate come from the same social groups which are currently taking part in the debate on post-modernism: political activists, journalists, scholars in the social sciences, and professionals in the culture industry.

The link seems to reflect more than purely intellectual continuities. The link involves issues where a materialist analysis can offer some important insights generally unavailable or irrelevant in post-modernist readings. This is not to suggest that the link is necessarily "structural" (base-superstructure), with some sort of a definable determining centre "in the last instance".

To identify these links, we need to take into account some relevant features of contemporary Indonesia, albeit no more than in a bold and sketchy manner. The last decade was indeed a historical watershed in the nation's political economy. The early years of the past decade marked the dramatic decline of oil prices in the world market. This brought about irreversible consequences that continue to the present day.

These consequences include the "rise of capital" (Robison 1986), more and more deregulation and privatization, the emergence of the new rich, and the high profile of an increasingly confident middle class in public culture and politics. Since 1989 three keywords have come into prominence, namely "openness", "democratization", and "human rights". They directly challenge the regime's keywords: "development", "*Pancasila*" (the state ideology), and "the latent danger of communism". Today, Indonesia sees a striking radicalization of students and labour on a scale unprecedented in the thirty-year history of the New Order regime.²

The post-modernism debate in Indonesia, as is universally characteristic of most newly emerging “-isms”, is restricted largely to a few among the schooled urban middle class. In the context of intellectual radicalism in New Order Indonesia, two outstanding features of the participants in the post-modern debate must be mentioned here. First, it is striking that a majority of the most active participants in the post-modernism controversy (critical or sympathetic) in this country are youths, mostly male, in their twenties. They dominate the forums of exchange, notably the opinion columns of major newspapers. Many of them are undergraduates who are enrolled in departments where post-modernism is not part of their reading lists. A few of those participating in the debate have graduated from colleges and are now enrolled in Master degree programmes, but the number of Ph.D. holders seems to be very small.³

The profiles of the enthusiasts of post-modernism is easily distinguishable from those in previous decades who took up the issues of modernization, Parsonian functionalism, Geertzian interpretative anthropology, or (neo-)Marxist structuralism, all of which came to the country via the academic community. In these cases, Western-derived concepts were brought home by returning Indonesian Ph.D. graduates from overseas training, mostly in the United States. Debates on these themes in Indonesia were an extension of these graduates’ previous classroom seminars abroad. Many of these Indonesian intellectuals occupied privileged positions in the government bureaucracy or government-sponsored and severely controlled universities. They have now become major opponents of post-modernism.

Second, and closely related to the first, the young intellectuals involved in post-modernism generally have a fairly better command of English than their counterparts one or two decades ago. Some have a limited familiarity with French, allowing them some access to the writings of post-structuralism in the original.

The situation in Indonesia today reminds one of the situation in the colonized archipelago during the 1920s, where some of the first generations of Western-educated activists had an impressive fluency in at least one European language and had highly cosmopolitan outlooks. This changed remarkably from around the period of national independence

(1945) until the recent rise of the middle class in the 1980s. Most university graduates during the intervening period had no mastery of any foreign language, and their intellectual preoccupations were primarily inward-looking (for example, revitalizing “indigenous values” and discovering “national identities”).⁴

To appreciate the significance of the recent broadening of the intellectual horizon, a note on one basic feature of post-modernism is called for: post-modernism is not a new and coherent set of theoretical propositions made up of, and presentable in, the dominant language of pre-existing Western epistemological frameworks. On the contrary, it fundamentally subverts the latter. This partly explains why a first encounter with post-modernism demands some minimal familiarity with the “given” in Western epistemology, and also with modern European languages. This is why it is nearly impossible to explain post-modernism exclusively in contemporary Bahasa Indonesia to Indonesians with no familiarity with the languages and intellectual discourses in which it had previously developed. Small wonder that the so-called post-colonial scholars of post-modernism who have risen to prominence internationally have largely come from privileged families in former colonies where English or French was the language of colonization. In this regard, the case of the East Indies (Indonesia) is rather unique.⁵

It is politically significant that contemporary urban young Indonesians have acquired post-modernism on their own, that is, outside the school curricula, which offer little more than the official propaganda. One explanation for this new competence is the economic power of their families, which in turn must not be isolated from the specific relations of the national and global politico-economy after 1980.

These families travel abroad regularly, have easy access to international communication, as well as the option of following current intellectual debates in the West and other post-colonies.⁶ While there is no directly causal or mechanical relationship between the rise of the new rich on the one hand, and specific political or intellectual orientations on the other, one can propose a modest argument that the rise of post-modernism in Indonesia is not independent of the recent and sustained growth of its economy.⁷

The political significance of the adoption of post-modernism out-

side state-controlled formal educational institutions may be multiple and contradictory. It may be too complex to be examined here, and it may still be too early to assess it or predict its consequences. However, in Indonesia as elsewhere, people have made comments on two major and conflicting potentials that seem to be inherent in post-modernism. Both potentials articulate well the contradictory ideological inclinations of the middle class.

On the one hand, post-modernism can help radicalize the growing number of dissidents in challenging an authoritarian regime. On the other hand, post-modernism also has the strong potential to endorse a liberal consumerism (“anything goes”) which fails to accommodate a progressive agenda, let alone empower the underclass in a Utopian struggle to undermine the foundations of an existing social order, which gives such élitist radicalism its privileged position in the first place. In short, post-modernism has both politically liberating and self-defeating tendencies.

These contradictory tendencies are potentials. They are far from exhaustive of post-modernism, and they may be relevant to only some segments of the middle class. One cannot be too sure too soon about what post-modernism can or will do in Indonesia. But the two tendencies noted above deserve further examination.

Cultural Politics

As generally acknowledged, one critical edge of post-modernist perspectives, particularly the practice of deconstruction, is its profound rejection of all forms of essentialism, its radical subversion of any stabilized meanings, and of the social relations which render such meanings possible. Such a stance can be most serious in societies, such as New Order Indonesia, where militarist-styled “stability and social order” have been inaugurated as the sanctified norm.

As official propaganda would have it, “stability and social order” constitute a fundamental condition for the existing political structure (“national resilience”) and ambitious economic growth (“national development”). Such orthodoxy are easy targets for deconstruction. And yet, as often noted by critics, post-modernism and deconstruction can

easily (mis)lead us into a textual impasse, discursive silence, or the hedonist *jouissance* of the “writerly” self. The auxiliary “can” is used here to reserve an optimism that post-modernism or deconstruction may not necessarily, or not always, (mis)lead.

The issues raised above remain largely unresolved in the ongoing debates taking place in the homelands of post-modernism and post-structuralism. Thus, to question the significance of post-modernism in contemporary Indonesia is not a naive and outright rejection. It is not to mimic the stereotypical Asian state bureaucrats when they desperately avoid, say, allegations of grave human rights violations.

It is fair and mandatory to reconsider questions already raised among women, coloured people, and ethnic minorities in the metropole about the politics of post-modernism. Rather than simply repeat their questions in the abstract, we must locate them in our specific contexts. What do the contradictory political characters inherent in post-modernism mean in the context of present day Indonesia? Does anyone in post-colonial societies need post-modernism or deconstruction in the first place? If they do, in what sense? Do we have reasons to ignore or suspect them?⁸

Foucault’s account of the discourse of power and the power of discourse has its appeal in the late capitalist West because power has largely been perceived to be external, distant, and negative in the modern West. Power appears (or used to appear) evasive; and discipline appeared to be normal. Foucault made a significant contribution to the archaeology of knowledge by unearthing what was/is presumably “hidden” in the prevailing discourses of power in the seemingly democratic, rational, enlightened, and liberal West.

Likewise, Derridean deconstruction is a brilliant contribution to the long tradition of self-reflexive scepticism in Western philosophy. But we cannot afford to overlook the fact that such a critique is only possible in a social context where hierarchical dichotomies are well-established and deeply rooted in everyday activities, normalized and naturalized: men/women, nature/culture, East/West, consensus/coercion, legal/illegal, public/private, body/mind, and so forth.

Similar dichotomies are visible in post-colonial societies. Contemporary Indonesia is no exception. However, it is not difficult to recognize that hierarchical dichotomies do not operate as extensively or deeply in the post-colonies as they do in the metropolises. In fact, one is strongly tempted to say that the modern rational-bureaucratic ethos and their accompanying state apparatuses often serve as quickly transplanted official façades (or “simulacra”) of identity (perhaps “pastiche”) patterned on the official regalia of modern nation-states in the metropolises.⁹

There are indeed some grounds for retaining the contentious categories of metropolises and post-colonies, without overstating their distinction. As I have discussed elsewhere (Heryanto 1994*a*, pp. 91–93; 1994*b*), a variety of discursive practices similar to deconstruction have been a living tradition among several social groups in Indonesia. These practices have not gained attention or celebration to an extent comparable with Derridean deconstruction, because there has not been a similar need or basis for them as there has been in the post-war West, or more particularly, among the French intellectual Left in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Deconstruction or Re-Orientalism?

In New Order Indonesia, as in many other (but not exclusively) post-colonial societies, power presents itself in excessive violence and naked brutality. No Indonesian needs any erudite philosophy or cultural criticism, French or otherwise, to tell them that power is everywhere, or how carceral their schools, offices, and factories can be.

In this light I view with disquiet the increasing desire among some Indonesianists trained in the metropolises to conduct a deconstruction of New Order Indonesia with no due reflexivities. While being sympathetic with their intended political partisanship, I find some of their work ethically, politically, and scholarly questionable by their inclination to substitute aestheticism for issues of moral and political urgency.

The blatantly repressive exercise of state power is too obvious for Indonesians and their distant observers alike. Very often it is too vulnerable to be deconstructed on paper! But to respond to ongoing kill-

ings of unarmed civilians, political terrorism, environmental devastation, or avoidable mass starvation by treating them as no more than texts to be read as writerly is ethically questionable to say the least.

There is a curious difference between writings on post-modernism in Indonesian by Indonesians, and post-modernist writings on contemporary Indonesia written in English by outsiders. Most discussions on post-modernism in Indonesia present an expository account of what post-modernism is and how it evolved in Europe. Important names, dates, and key terms become the core of such writings. There is little, if any, explicit consideration of what it means or how it may relate to life in Indonesia.

In the increasing post-modernist writings on contemporary Indonesia, mostly written in English by non-Indonesians, deconstruction is applied seemingly without awareness of how it first developed in Europe. Aspects of contemporary Indonesia are analysed as if they were pre-existing empirical objects of interpretation, or deconstruction. These writers make use of deconstructive twists with no critical awareness of the working of their discourse and of the inevitable values that are responsible, at least partly, in the construction of the object of their study (and their privileged position as investigating subjects). In the very attempt to flesh out the interest supposedly inherent in the object of their narrative (the other’s “difference”), these academic narrators cannot but rely on the values which they share with their implied narratee (the “identical” Western self).

In its birthplace deconstruction developed initially as a series of radical self-critiques. It challenged, from within, the given in Western epistemology and social order. Its chief target of attack is Western violence and domination, both domestically and overseas. Ironically, in the hands of the younger and less sensitive Western-trained scholars (of diverse nationalities, Asians included) it can become a handy methodological instrument both for ridiculing post-colonial despots, and simultaneously for enhancing professional credentials in the increasingly competitive academic industrial complex. In other words, leaving the question of authorial intention aside, such use of deconstruction has recuperated the

colonial Orientalism that deconstruction was initially meant to attack.¹⁰

By no means am I implying that power relations in post-colonies are less (or more) problematic than their counterparts in the metropolises, either from an academic viewpoint or otherwise. Neither am I recoding a form of essentialism, nor declaring post-structuralism to be redundant in the study of post-colonies. Rather, I am speculating that the more serious problematics of power relations in post-colonies may lie somewhere other than what mainstream deconstruction in the academic metropolises has been mainly familiar with.¹¹

Rather than simply exposing gruesome details of the excessively vulgar violence in post-colonies, or condemning them, one needs to rethink further how such violence can constitute a sustainable (if not acceptable) mode of power relations in post-colonial societies. To reiterate Michel-Rolph Trouillot's recommendation, we need to examine

under what conditions is the vulgarity ... [of state power either in the post-colonies or elsewhere] ... enhanced or weakened through public discourses and manifestations? (1992, p. 79)

I join those who welcome post-modernism into Indonesian intellectual discourses, with some of the reservations indicated above. Post-modernism can offer a profound challenge to the currently dominant apparatus of the social sciences. This apparatus, together with its practitioners, is a crucial collaborator of various post-colonial regimes in establishing and reproducing power relations.

Like top government bureaucrats, post-colonial scholars enjoy the kinds of authority and material privileges generally not available in most of the metropolises. They share strong commitments to standardization, homogeneity, formal structure, hierarchy, centralization, discipline, stability, and an ambition for progress. They share a strong hostility towards ambiguity.

In one important area, however, they differ from bureaucrats. Officials lack resources in critical discourse, which the social scientists are there to provide. For some years, nothing seemed to be able to pose any serious threat to the scientific discourse that was crucial in sustaining post-war regimes. Post-modernism can begin its warfare at home (university departments), but it surely does not have to stop there.

NOTES

1. Tang's question, "What Does It Mean to Talk about Post-Modernism in China?" (1991), helps sharpen my observation of the Indonesian case.
2. One can find a strikingly similar atmosphere in China during the same years, when post-modernism was heatedly debated (Tang 1991, pp. 93–97).
3. For a quick glance at their identities, see the list of brief biographical notes of authors in Suyoto et al. (1994).
4. I am aware that this crude and sweeping generalization does not do justice to this issue. My purpose is much too simple here, so that a more careful account must be made elsewhere. I am grateful to Keith Foulcher for bringing this historical point to my attention in a private conversation. For more on the profound similarities or continuities between New Order Indonesia and the colonial East Indies, see Lev (1985, especially pp. 72–73) and Anderson (1990, pp. 94–120).
5. "This", observes Ben Anderson, "is the only case of a large colonial possession in which to the end a non-European language remained a language-of-state" (1983, p. 103 fn. 60).
6. For more empirical details on this new phenomenon in Indonesia prior to the post-modern debate, see Dick (1985), and for a comparison with its neighbouring countries, see Crouch (1985). Tang (1991, p. 97) presents a similar observation for China.
7. I cannot agree with the suggestions that the widespread discussion of post-modernism originated with the pioneering works of individual authors, organizations, or texts. Such a humanist "history of ideas" is implicit in Awuy's (1993) and Dewanto's (1994, p. 5) emphasis on the role of the first edition of *Jurnal Filsafat* in the discussion of post-modernism.
8. While intellectuals sympathetic to post-modernism are generally proud to think of their positions as both critical and libertarian, Terry Eagleton suggests that they serve neo-Stalinist bureaucrats in dispersing protesting masses. See Tang (1991, p. 107) for a reference to Eagleton and a rejoinder to such a cynical view.
9. This makes most observers of widely diverse political leanings see this post-colonial difference with a deep pity or contempt. In contrast, I am inclined to view such non-essentialist difference with relief or hope.
10. It is not difficult to agree emphatically with Barbara Christian's critiques of a post-structuralism that tends to be "as hegemonic as the world that it attacks" (1990, p. 572). Paul Stange's critical reappraisals of the deconstructive practice on Javanese tradition indicate new and rare sensitivities that deserve our congratulations (1990).
11. Achille Mbembe's provocative analysis of the "aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony" (1992), mostly with empirical references to cases in Africa, and the debate that he provoked, open a further field of post-structuralist explorations in the directions I propose here.

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