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Cultural Studies' Significant Others: The Case of Indonesia¹

Ariel Heryanto

(University of Melbourne)

Abstrak

Kajian kebudayaan dan aliran ilmu sosial dan humaniora konvensional sering digambarkan secara negatif. Dalam artikel ini, penulis membahas suatu paradok. Meski tidak bisa disebut sebagai 'syarat', tradisi kuat dalam ilmu sosial dan humaniora merupakan dasar terbentuknya dan berkembangnya kajian kebudayaan, dan sekaligus menjadi pengkritik utama kajian kebudayaan itu sendiri. Disiplin-disiplin ilmu konvensional tersebut merupakan pihak lain yang signifikan bagi kajian ini; mitra yang menantang dan sekaligus berlawanan yang membantu. Untuk menunjukkan pentingnya paradok tersebut di Indonesia, penulis menggarisbawahi kekhasan yang muncul saat melakukan kajian kebudayaan di Indonesia dibandingkan di "Barat". Penulis juga mengidentifikasi bidang-bidang khusus di mana kajian ini di Indonesia dapat memberikan sumbangan berarti pada usaha-usaha intelektual sejenisnya. Seraya menunggu istilah yang lebih pas, kajian ini memusatkan perhatian pada isu-isu kekerasan politik secara nasional, kaitan politik dan agama yang semakin erat, dan pertumbuhan generasi baru budaya populer yang pesat.

Key words: Intellectual legacy; Indonesia's universities; multidisciplinary; Indonesia's pop culture.

The relationships between cultural studies and the mainstream social sciences and humanities have too often been painted in existing literature in more negative terms than warranted. This is understandable when we consider the polemical nature of many of such discussion in the early formation of cultural studies in different countries, and the intense competition for increasingly scarce resources within the academy. In the following I will discuss a paradox.

¹ This essay is a slightly edited version of a paper presented at the *Indonesia International Cultural Studies Conference*, Trawas, 3-5 February 2003, co-hosted by Universitas Indonesia and Universitas Kristen Petra. The author is grateful for the organizing committee for the privilege to take part in it.

Although by no means a 'pre-requisite', a strong tradition in the social sciences and humanities both provides a necessary foundation for the formation and growth of a rigorous cultural studies, and becomes its main intellectual critics. The conventional disciplines are cultural studies' significant others; both its challenging partners and helpful opposites.

To show how important such a paradox can be in Indonesia, an brief outline of the critically constructive relations between cultural studies and the mainstream social sciences and humanities in the 'West' is helpful.² This detour

² This is a convenient, though tricky, shorthand for North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Of

is necessary for the second part, where I will highlight what is distinctive about doing cultural studies in Indonesia in comparison with its counterparts in the 'West'. This has to do with the character of Indonesian social sciences, and its universities' commitment to utilitarian values as a matter of policy. I close this discussion by identifying specific areas of interest where cultural studies in Indonesia can make critical contribution to the wider intellectual endeavor of its kind. These areas are, for want of better terms, the nation-wide political violence, the recent rise of religious politics, and the unprecedented vibrancy of a new generation of pop cultures.

Intellectual legacies and antagonism

As already noted by many, there is a wide diversity of cultural studies in several countries in the West. What we can do here is necessarily a crude simplification. Notwithstanding their diversity, in most cases cultural studies finds its birthplace within the pre-existing, and relatively strong establishment of one or several conventional schools in the social sciences and the humanities. The relationships between cultural studies and the mainstream academic disciplines in many 'Anglo-American' settings are evidently complex and dynamic, oscillating between hostility and mutual nourishment.

In more than few situations, cultural studies came into existence following a strong dissatisfaction with the mainstream social sciences and humanities. Despite this common antagonistic history, rarely can cultural studies deny its indebtedness to the intellectual traditions

of that mainstream scholarship that precedes it. The creative dynamics and divisions within schools of thought (e.g. Marxism) or university departments (e.g. English, philosophy, anthropology, or history) gave birth to many cultural studies across nations in the West.

Phrases like 'multi-disciplinary', 'trans-disciplinary', 'cross-disciplinary', 'inter-disciplinary', or even 'anti-disciplinary' are so often invoked to characterize the enterprise called cultural studies. These designations, or slogans, bear witness to a close and yet ambiguous relationship between cultural studies and these schools, as much as they express cultural studies' anxiety and sense of insecurity. As such, they do not remarkably differ from the positions of women studies, development studies, or area (e.g. Asian) studies in the preceding two decades in many of these countries. All these emergent intellectual endeavors are not independent enough of the established disciplines (thus the need to self-identify in relations to 'disciplines'), but at the same time they articulate the desire to assert a difference, to transcend, and break free of them (thus the hyphenated modifier).

Although the enthusiasm and dedication of its individual pioneers have shown impressive results (as attested to by the sizeable portion of Routledge's list of publications), the general response of scholars and administrators in many universities to date has been mixed at best, and hostile at worst. Notwithstanding their successful growth and achievements of their advocates, the diverse cultural studies are not equally well-entrenched institutionally. When universities suffer financial difficulties, cultural studies often falls victim to an institutional 'restructuring'.

The launch of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* was not warmly welcome in a review in *The New York Times Review of Books* in 1999. Indonesia's first international confer-

ence of cultural studies was held in February 2003, just months after practitioners across the globe were astounded by the abrupt closure of the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at the University of Birmingham, leaving its 43 postgraduate students and more than 200 undergraduates stranded. The school has often been regarded in Indonesia and beyond as the birth place of the world's cultural studies (see Webster 2002).

I mentioned the situation above only to suggest that the difference between cultural studies in the rich, liberal, and industrialized 'West' and the 'rest' is not between a well-respected establishment versus its poor imitation. The precarious status of cultural studies is as universal as the dedication of its few and staunch practitioners. One of the things that distinguishes cultural studies in places like Indonesia from those in the 'West' is the lack of a long and strong consolidated tradition in the social sciences and humanities. It is a cultural studies with no 'significant others'. The consequences are very serious.

Elsewhere a long and established intellectual tradition in the social sciences and humanities—even the more conservative ones—often become helpful critics in the formative years of cultural studies. They occasionally fail to understand, let alone appreciate, the concerns of cultural studies, but then in such event cultural studies cannot simply dismiss or ignore even misplaced criticisms. Needless to say there are the more open-minded and well-informed critics who have actually helped cultural studies students to improve and mature.

For instance, one recurring criticism is that 'cultural studies' is just old wine in a new bottle; it does nothing new as its advocates often claim. Such criticism argues that major claims and preoccupations in cultural studies have in fact been part and parcel of classical thoughts in the social sciences or the humanities but

somehow get lost, marginalized, or forgotten in contemporary practice. Such criticism is healthy and can be productive when a strong foundation of classical social sciences and humanities have existed and continue to be widely available for re-examination and debate.

Even if the above criticism holds some truth, it does not immediately render cultural studies redundant. The criticism does not readily explain why selected treasured elements of the social sciences could have been 'lost, marginalized, or forgotten' in today's mainstream practice; or why it takes the so-called cultural studies to revive them at this particular point of history. One critic observes that '[c]ultural studies happens when a literature professor wander into the territory of sociologists without a map' (Wolfe 1996:489). Leaving its exaggerating overtone, I sympathize with the statement's call for cultural studies to pay adequate attention to the established social sciences before dismissing or abandoning them wholesale as something obsolete and politically incorrect.

Disenchantment with Marxism and the New Left among their former followers are partly responsible for the early emergence of cultural studies in places like Great Britain and France. Cultural studies with Marxist intellectual legacies is usually in a better position to maintain sensitivity to the broader contexts of specific issues under discussion, and to the imbalanced power relations in discussion of complex, subtle, textual, interpretative and ambiguous subject matter. Many who disavowed fundamental tenets of Marxism have usually done so without losing awareness of the implications of their decision, distinguishing themselves from those who pursue similar intellectual endeavor in non-Marxian perspectives.

Indeed another common criticism of cultural studies is its occasionally apolitical edge. In the eyes of such critics, selected practices of

course it is politically incorrect to resurrect the Western/Southeast Asian distinction, especially when Asia has rapidly industrialized itself, and Asian scholarship has been both partaking and profoundly affected by the process. For the present purpose, however, I cannot resist the convenience of adopting guardedly the West/Asia difference.

cultural studies have been disappointingly too self-reflexive, indeterminate, playful, esoterically erudite, or supportive of the currently reigning neo-liberalism. My concern here does not pertain to political correctness, but to a kind of intellectual deficiency when cultural studies grows in an environment with no serious challenges from the social sciences and humanities, regardless whether or not the latter have particular ideological inclinations.

In Indonesia and its several neighboring countries, Marxism has been officially declared as one of the nation's top enemies. This does not preclude practitioners of cultural studies in Indonesia from getting acquitted with inherited or smuggled fragments of Marxist writings. The zealous anti-communist, anti-leftist, and anti-populist measures of the New Order government of Indonesia (1966-98) provoked a series of backlash (see Heryanto 1999). The spirit of intellectual activism that comes with cultural studies at these formative years has made it easy for its practitioners to sympathize with, if not romanticize, legacies of Marxist thoughts and slogans. There is no way, however, to compare all these underground activities in Indonesia with the more rigorous Marxist intellectual engagements as taking root not only in the liberal West, but also in countries like India or the Philippines, and perhaps Thailand.

The New Order government's restrictions, with considerable support from the general public, are not wholly responsible for the near total absence of Marxist perspectives in Indonesia. In no less profound ways this has also been attributable to the long tradition of 'Indonesian studies' conducted outside Indonesia, by Indonesians and non-Indonesians alike. Foreign scholarship (mainly Dutch and American) that has made crucial contribution to the formation of Indonesian social sciences and humanities has largely been unfamiliar or unfriendly with class-based theoretical insights.

The only exception of any significance is the foreign works come from Australia in the 1970s-1980s, especially in politico-economics. The latter, unfortunately, has been usually hostile to any studies on culture, and disappointing when dealing with the issues of cultural politics more generally.

The social sciences and humanities, of course, are not reducible to Marxism and its derivatives, although the latter have constituted one of the most salient components of the former as well as of cultural studies. It is worth recalling that even in the West, where Marxism once enjoyed a prominent status, and where cultural studies fare much better than elsewhere, Marxism has increasingly become 'sugar-free, low-cholesterol, no-fat, decaffeinated Marxism lite' (Michael Bérubé cited in Wolfe 1996: 492). I do not want to overstate the importance of Marxism or any of its derivatives. But I do maintain the importance of a strong intellectual tradition in the social sciences and humanities to the growth of cultural studies.

Indonesia's universities and intellectual activism

The problematic status of Indonesia's social sciences and the humanities is well noted by locals, but especially by those who have access to, and can make comparisons with the situations elsewhere (see Nordholt and Visser 1995). Less clear are the details and precise extent of such state of affairs. Few Indonesians are aware that this largest country in Southeast Asia was also the region's 'poorest educational legacy' (Booth 1999) in post-independence. Half a century later Indonesian scholarship may not have managed to upgrade its rank any better among its immediate neighbors.

Indonesian scholars and education administrators may have no problems in admitting their systematic inadequacies, as attested to by the many official pronouncements and jour-

nalistic reports and opinion columns. Unfortunately, the matter has not been examined much beyond terse commentaries and broad generalization. Their observation and laments find expression in moral, political, religious or philosophical abstraction, with little empirical data and analysis. Until recently, Indonesia's social scientists were rightfully proud to have *Prisma*, the most prestigious and authoritative journal of the social sciences. Ironically, while the journal published no less than six times of a special edition on education and universities, not a single article has examined the social sciences as practiced in this country!³ For a comparison, the Philippine counterparts have recently completed a three volume series of *The Philippines Social Sciences in the Life of the Nation*, published from the fourth national Social Sciences Congress in 1998.⁴

Outside Indonesia, the so-called Indonesian studies is much more rigorous than the social sciences and humanities inside the country. Indonesian studies makes up the largest component of within Southeast Asian studies in the world's major centers of area studies. However, even here, the state and status of

Indonesia's social sciences and humanities have failed to attract any serious and sustained attention of its scholars. Philanthropic foundations and foreign governments have poured in generous financial assistance in support of talented Indonesians in the social sciences and the humanities, to enhance their training and the country's standards of scholarship. Strong evidence has yet to be presented to indicate that significant progress has been made in the nation's scholarship, as distinct from the career promotion of individual scholars.

I mention all the foregoing *not* to suggest that cultural studies is just impossible in Indonesia, or that there is completely no future for it. This is to pay respect to the formidable challenge that our colleagues in Indonesia would have to face today and in many days to come. The first Indonesia's international conference of cultural studies in Trawas (East Java) 3-5 February 2003 indicates the impressive achievements of local practitioners and supporters in overcoming some of the obstacles outlined just now. Although this alone is insufficient, it is a necessary asset for a future and more vibrant cultural studies in this country.

The foregoing also implies that any merit and success of Indonesia's cultural studies now or in the future are not readily attributable to the service of the country's social sciences and humanities. Not very different from the mainstream scholarship, the survival of Indonesia's cultural studies seem to have drawn its energy and inspiration mainly from the limited, if increased, contacts with the outside world. The 'failure' of Indonesia's social sciences and humanities in becoming critical partners to a home-grown cultural studies can be understood to have stemmed from their colonial origin that continued largely unchanged in post-independence. As common in many Asia's colonies and former colonies of Europe,

³ This reflects the old and often criticized positivist stance of the social sciences, which prompts the rise of self-reflexivity of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies. Another irony, which may not be wholly separable from the first, is the unexpected demise of the journal following the end of the authoritarian regime of New Order that it had critically analyzed.

⁴ The writer thanks Maria Cynthia Rose Bautista for a copy of the first volume, *The History and Development of Social Science Disciplines in the Philippines* (Miralao, 1999). For the situation in Singapore, see Khondker (2000) and Clammer (2001). For a glimpse of the contemporary situation in Malaysia, see a series of papers from the Third International Malaysian Studies Conference (August 2001), sponsored by the Malaysian Social Science Association. For Thailand see Satha-Anand (1998), and for a brief but informative account of the first department of sociology in Cambodia at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and its historical contexts, see Tomasi (2000).

universities and education in what is now Indonesia have persistently been strongly oriented towards utilitarian goals within the framework of high modernist paradigm. To what extent these goals have been achieved is a separate issue.

As observable in Southeast Asia more generally, here the social sciences and the humanities are invariably understood by their main sponsors (colonial and independent governments) as necessary tools for their technical and practical service to facilitate the project of nation building and modernization. There is little, if at all, consideration of the social sciences' importance for their more reflective, or universalist liberal values of human emancipation. In other words, what are missing here are things that constitute the core aspirations and ambitions of modern scholarship in the Western intellectual traditions, whose delusion and crisis prompted the emergence of the early cultural studies. A great proportion of foreign scholars, both past and present, who specialize on Indonesia, and who work in collaboration with their local counterparts, tend to conform to the hegemonic notion and practice of the social sciences as applied sciences (see also McVey 1995).

This is not simply a case of straightforward manipulation of the academic institutions by the powers that be. Tertiary institutions have not always served the interests of the state and the governments of the day, and the state cannot fully afford to operate without them. There has been recurrent tensions that arise from inter-elite factions. There have also been a constant dilemma on the part of academics between comfortable state patronage, and a desire for professional autonomy, cultivation of critical minds, and respect for moral integrity. Another point of relevance, is the importance of private schools. Due to the large and vastly diverse population plus the poor edu-

cational legacies of Dutch colonialism, the contribution of private foundations in education has been an absolute necessity. At time of writing (2003) there were 1,370 tertiary institutions in Indonesia, 293 of them universities, with 89 per cent of the latter privately run.⁵

Instead of pursuing excellence in academic disciplines, or striving to catch up with their counterparts in the West, many Indonesian intellectuals are actively engaged in several non-academic, but socially-prominent issues and projects.⁶ For many of them to profess social sciences implies first and foremost not pursuance of purely academic inquiry, a high abstraction of theoretical work, or excellent innovation and criticism about social life with universal significance.⁷ Rather, the profession

⁵ In neighboring Malaysia, private universities do not even take half of the total number (21) (Lee, 2001), and none exists in Singapore. Private universities make up 78 per cent of the total number (42) in the Philippines, but due to the generally more liberal outlook of the state and its educational apparatuses, the difference between state and private institutions matter less in comparison to the neighboring countries. Thai private universities make up 67 per cent of the total number (73), with the state-run Thammasat University historically being the hotbed of politically radical student movement.

⁶ Of late Singapore may be an exception, where international recognition for scholarly excellence, enjoys sustained and generous support from the state. However, even here the difference is not fundamental. Critically commenting on Singapore's intellectual culture, John Clammer (2001) notes Singapore's desire to 'keep up' with the track records of the world's centers of excellence in academic industry. This desire is extremely strong, perhaps stronger than in most Western universities. However, such desire has been motivated more by a compliance with the illiberal state policy on the basis of economic calculation rather than by passion for intellectual innovation and rigor, let alone social criticism much valued in the liberal West.

⁷ It should not be surprising, writes McVey (1995: 3), 'that many of the best Southeast Asian scholarly minds have found a purely academic life stultifying and/or repressive, and have turned their energies instead to politics, administration, or other non-research activities'.

implies answering a call for engagement in social activities, ranging from largely ceremonial political and religious rituals, to those with pressing moral or existential urgency, or far-reaching and long-term consequences on their societies. The values of such engagements vary widely, and not all are necessarily progressive. Some are materially rewarding, others are life-risk taking.

In any case, until very recently, the diversity of such intellectual activism has not included a sympathetic, or even mixed, stance towards pop cultures. The latter was seen by many as little more than the dregs of capitalist manipulation. They are morally and politically hazard. Thus in what appears today to be embarrassingly naive arrogance, nearly all these scholars who commented on pop cultures — as in the special editions of the journal *Prisma* (e.g. 1997)—invariably disparaged them in their empirically-oriented and sociological narratives. One of Indonesia's prestigious newsmagazines has even allegedly belittled pop cultures and those who produce them (see Henschkel 1994).

So, while Indonesia's fledgling cultural studies find itself in a remarkably infertile intellectual ground, it is fortunate to operate in an environment where intellectual activism, critical discourses, and various myths about their merit enjoy considerable respect in public. This is common in many 'Second' and 'Third World' countries, Raymond Williams (1980:43) reminded us. One must quickly add, though, that this has been increasingly eroded since the 1990s. But it is true that the legacies of such ethos and charisma of 'public intellectuals' remain relatively strong (for more see Heryanto 2003).

This leads us to a few implications for further investigation. First, can we speak of Indonesia's cultural studies as 'multi-', 'trans-', 'cross-', or 'inter-' or 'anti-disciplinary', when no strong disciplines have yet existed here? A

loner at home, Indonesia's cultural studies has to strive to maintain contacts with the transnationally circulated intellectual discourses and individuals. The list of Indonesian authors and titles of cultural studies works is so short, even if one includes those who do not explicitly and consciously identify themselves with cultural studies. Typically references in these local works consist of mostly foreign works which are unavailable in local university's libraries or bookshops.⁸

Second, and partly for the reasons outlined above, cultural studies in Indonesia as in many other Asian locations, would have serious difficulties to operate without a mastery of English, and at a level higher than that demanded of the positivist and utilitarianist social sciences and humanities in previous decades. In the old scholarship, foreign jargons are 'empty' signifiers, 'filled' with ostensibly universally valid concepts. In cultural studies 'medium is the message', as Marshall McLuhan aptly dubbed it in the 1960s. Significantly, in several Anglo-phonetic universities, training in cultural studies is offered under or with special connection to the Department of English.

If the cultural studies-friendly magazine *Latitudes* is published in English, the reasons may be several. One of which, I suspect, has to do with ease. Is this why *Kunci Cultural Studies Center* has adopted the English name, when it appears to make the conscious attempt to 'popularize' its impressively dedicated works to the general public? Many Indonesians who engaged in cultural studies are reluctant to adopt the common Indonesian translation '*kajian budaya*' for cultural studies. The many italicized phrases in English that scatter in the body of articles in Indonesia should come as

⁸ Of late Indonesian translations of works of relevance to cultural studies have been heartening, but I am not in a position to judge their actual contribution to domestic cultural studies here.

no surprise. How would you say 'subjects' as opposed to 'subjecthood' in *Bahasa Indonesia* with full confidence, and no clumsy footnotes? Or say 'others' as opposed to 'othering', or 'agent' and 'agency' as opposed to 'individuals', 'persons', or 'self' in that language? Several attempts of Indonesian translation have been made, and their success depends not only on the crafting skills of the translator and their persistence, but also on the audience's level of familiarity with relevant literature in English.

Third, in many rich and liberal advanced capitalist countries there has been a debate among its practitioners whether cultural studies should seek shelter and anchor within the university structures. A different but related debate has been over its desired relationships with the 'conventional' academic disciplines that have been well rooted within the university. In countries like Indonesia, no comparable options exist.

Although individuals or small groups of academics and students have been productive in cultural studies, until recently (and depending on one's definition of 'cultural studies'), there has been no place for cultural studies as an independent department, degree program, or research unit within the university for reasons indicated earlier.⁹ One would have diffi-

⁹ I am keen on learning what has transpired, or will do so, from the efforts pursued at Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Kristen Petra, and Universitas Sanata Dharma towards building institutional bases for cultural studies.

If established and traditional academic disciplines, such as sociology, history, or anthropology, have no clear boundary, let alone new and trans-disciplinary practices of cultural studies or post-colonial studies. For convenience, I adopt the rather broad conception of cultural studies as those intellectual activities that take "culture" (a) as a central, but not isolated, subject matter for analysis; (b) to mean various signifying practices in the broadest senses, rather than those of the elite and exemplary; and (c) as deeply contested notion and practices, rather than any static, given, or essentialist property, object, or quality.

culty imagining Indonesia's most prestigious scholarly bodies such as LIPI (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia*, 'Indonesia's Institute of Sciences) or HIPPIIS (*Himpunan Indonesia untuk Pengembangan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial*, 'Indonesian Association for the Development of the Social Sciences') to house a special division of cultural studies. Cultural studies usually makes no promise to deliver any utilitarian value, certainly not one that would contribute to the state-sponsored projects as has been the case for nearly all the history of colonial and post-colonial Indonesia.

Common in other Asian neighbors, Indonesia's social sciences and humanities since about 1970s have not been confined to the university. Two distinct institutions of major importance have complemented the university-based scholarship. The first consists of the recently expanded the media industry, and the second is the diverse internationally connected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in a wide range of activities: social work, civil liberty advocacy, feminist-related, religious-based, art workers and so on.

If Indonesia's cultural studies finds some sympathy within the poorly-resourced universities, it should feel fortunate. Anything more than that is a miracle. Like its counterparts in rich and advanced capitalist countries, Indonesia's cultural studies cannot afford to abandon totally its connection with the university network and the authority that accrued from such connection. Unlike its counterparts, Indonesia's cultural studies cannot grow by relying mainly on the university's ideological space and material resources. If Indonesia's cultural studies finds attractive allies within the media and NGOs, the reasons may have to do with their common commitment to the politics of the ordinary, and interest in the study of the politics of mass movements.

The contribution of the media and NGOs to the growth of Indonesia's cultural studies has surpassed that of the university. Some of the widely disseminated and compelling exchange on the status and character of Indonesia's cultural studies have taken place in the pages of 'Bentara' (a monthly edition of the daily *Kompas*), instead of scholarly conferences, academic theses, or academic journals in the country. The articles by Sahal (2000) and Supriyanto (2000) are the examples *par excellence*. Other regular venues for such articles can be found in *Media Indonesia* and *Republika*.

Many authors who publish cultural studies articles in the journal *Basis*, *Kalam*, and *Latitudes* have academic credentials or affiliations. Their discourse has an academic ring that is not always accessible to the general public. However, none of these journals is intended to be a peer-reviewed academic journal, and thus the articles published there are usually not a product of a long-term investigation with a rigorous analysis. Recent changes in the *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia* may herald the possibility of a new peer-reviewed, Indonesia-based journal that accommodates cultural studies works, though not exclusively so.

New books, mostly a compilation of previously published articles, authored by Indonesians can be regarded to be of relevance to the developments of Indonesian cultural studies, although not in any exclusive ways. The same titles can easily fall under the categories of post-colonial studies, pop-culture studies, literary, and/or feminist studies. These include (alphabetically): Arimbi, Saptaningrum, and Sulistyani (1998), Dewanto (1996), Eviandaru, Indriaswasti, Pratiwi Sulistyani, Wigati, Arimbi, and Washburn (2001), Faruk and Salam (2003), Gunawan (2003), Redana (2002), and Susanto (2000, 2001). Others published book chapters or short essays that make important contribu-

tion to the fledgling cultural studies in Bahasa Indonesia.¹⁰

The Bentara Budaya, Diskusi Bulan Purnama of the Jaringan Kerja Budaya, and Komunitas Utan Kayu have very distinct characters, but they all commonly host some of the most vibrant intellectual exchanges on cultures, many of which either fall easily under the category of cultural studies, or they are highly relevant to it. None of these operate within the university structures. These are just to name a few, for a more comprehensive review see Antariksa and Juliastuti (2002).

To conclude this section, let me reiterate some of the specific conditions of Indonesia's cultural studies. Universities have usually been neither the cradle, nor main home base of cultural studies. Cultural studies in Indonesia need to maintain connection with local and global academic discourses and institutions, but for the most part it has not been nurtured by academic disciplines in the university setting, as has been the case in many advanced industrialized countries. Notwithstanding this, Indonesia's cultural studies has not been totally orphaned and abandoned. It is growing, thanks to the collaboration with the expansive media industry, increasingly corporatized universities, and political activism of NGOs. All of these offer Indonesia's cultural studies the kind of opportunities and challenges that are neither wholly strange nor identical to its counterparts elsewhere. All the foregoing has dealt more with constraints than opportunities. Let me bring this discussion to a close in a more optimistic note, by highlighting the opportunities ahead, though they are by no means easy ones.

¹⁰ These include Degung Santikanna, Melani Budinata, Goenawan Mohamad, Alia Swastika and Ayu Utami, just to mention a few. I do not attempt any survey here. Please see Antariksa and Juliastuti (2002) for a longer list.

The questions of difference

Cultural studies has made its presence felt in several parts of Asia, and it appears to continue to grow for at least several years to come. Is it purely a historical accident that this happens as the world lost its iconic center of cultural studies in Birmingham? Elsewhere I have analyzed the curious paradox of the decline of Southeast Asian studies in its original centers of excellence (North America, Western Europe, and Australia) precisely at a time when the region has become more vibrant than ever before, and local Southeast Asian studies has just begun to flourish (Heryanto 2002).

I believe it is historically significant that cultural and media studies should have been on the rise as studies of class structure, nation-states, political parties, or modernization have been in decline. We witness the new conditions of life ('postmodernity'?), marked by a high degree of electronic communication and transport have undermined in fundamental ways some of the key institutions of high modernity that produced universities, politics, and economies: originality, authenticity, history, authorship, authority, copyright, and private rights. All of these have adversely affected the West, home of high modernism. In the 'inadequately modernized' parts of Asia the same process has given more favorable than adverse effects to the various practices, values, and dominant consciousness.

Perhaps the 'Asian values' propaganda can be seen as an articulation—alas a poor one—of the new Asian-based consciousness at this particular time of history. While the propaganda and the debate it sparked has now lost its appeal, we should not rush to assume that it was the end or the whole story of Asia's self-assertion in this world, where inequalities are obscenely rife, and Western-style modernity remains hegemonic. Even in the most economically successful parts of Asia, the self-contradictory Western-style

modernity still reigns (see also Chan 1997; Khoo 1999). The old project of indigenization of the social sciences in Asia may have been another expression of the same sentiment, and it may have also run its course. It asked all the right questions, but had not discovered the answers it sought. As the media technology, transport, environment, and economy changed our small world dramatically in the last 50 years or so, can we hope that cultural studies may have offered new insights towards the formulation of new answers? To consider this slightly further, let me point to three specific issues in the contexts of today's Indonesia.

Cultural studies may, perhaps must, take the task of throwing new light on serious public concerns that the old and ill-equipped social sciences have not done so well. For contemporary Indonesia, three issues come immediately to mind, namely (i) political and communal violence; (ii) religion-based politics; and (iii) the recent reverberation in pop cultures. Let me quickly elaborate each of these.

In brilliant theorization of the origin and spread of nationalism, political scientist Benedict Anderson argues that 'deep, horizontal comradeship' of nationalism 'makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for' an imagined community we call 'nation' (1983:16). What his seminal theory has seriously failed to explain is why for the last decade or so no one in Indonesia has been so strongly the object of hatred and fatal assaults by thousands of Indonesians as their own fellow nationals. Can cultural studies—and more specially Indonesia's cultural studies—offer any new and innovative intervention to the impasse of the existing social sciences to help explain, if not reduce, the dreadful incidents?¹¹

¹¹ In a preliminary work in progress, I have been contemplating on the discrepancies between the discourses of the body in many Indonesian communities, and

A great part the spread of Indonesia's communal violence has taken an overtly religious overtone. But the recent rise of religion-based politics is not reducible to the violence and vice-versa. Social scientists inside and outside Indonesia have appeared to date to fall short of shedding new light on our understanding of the heightened politics of faith. What are the chances for cultural studies in Indonesia to make any difference?

One crucial problem with nearly all variants of cultural studies world-wide is its notoriously secular bias. The problem is not immediately visible when the studies reflects on and circulates provincially in a secular social space, where religion is segregated as a detachable segment of social life. There is a lot for Indonesia to learn from secular cultural studies, but it cannot do just that. Most radical perspectives of Western epistemology now in vogue (post-structuralism, post-modernism, cultural studies) have tended to evade, overlook, or dismiss religious-based movements and discourses, despite the credentials enjoyed, and claims made by the former to privilege and celebrate the West's Others, as well as the disadvantaged, subaltern, or minorities (see Stange 1991 and Clammer 2000). Indonesia's cultural studies cannot possibly overlook the omni-discourses of 'the divine' that penetrate every aspect of everyday life. A home-grown response to this situation is called for, not only in Indonesia but Asia more generally.

Finally, the noted reverberation of Indonesian pop cultures. While Indonesia is far from recovery of its damming crisis that began in 1998, its *avant garde* art and pop cultures have

those of the modern social sciences as a possible reason for the latter's failure in studying the now popular topic among foreign scholars with special expertise in Indonesia. In response to the outdated 'culturalist' trends of the past, there has been a backlash in current analyses of Indonesia's communal violence, rushing observers towards a political-economic framework.

been thriving like never before. This has prompted the question whether there is any connection at all between the two, and seemingly opposite phenomena? When the novel *Saman* by Ayu Utami (1998), and three years later *Supernova* by Dewi Lestari, came out many literary critics and students of literature were stunned with sensation (see Hatley 1999; Clark 1999). Attention was initially focused on both female authors as individuals, and on their literary achievements as exceptions. But very soon similar things suddenly burst into the public in a broader scope, making the two novels and novelists less unusual.

Contemporary pop music since 2000 has hit sale figures that would be unimaginable just a few years before. Following over a decade of the demise of Indonesian film industry, and disdain of domestic films for a much longer period, new titles from a new generation of film makers have broken new grounds aesthetically, and broken records commercially, superseding imported top Hollywood titles of the time (see Grayling 2002, van Heeren 2002). The old sociological study of pop cultures can no longer disparage these developments, but neither can it be expected to deal with them. Can Indonesia's cultural studies make a difference?

Significantly, all these took place in tandem with several features of interest. First, during this short but vibrant period, the number of women who have taken leading roles increases remarkably, particularly in film production. Concomitant to this development is the prominence of gender-related themes in the recent pop cultures (see e.g. Clark 2002). Second, in a remarkable contrast to earlier decades, these activities have not been fully concentrated in Jakarta, although the capital city still dominates. Third, also unprecedented in the history of Indonesia's pop cultures is a period where a robust domestic production and consumption of pop cultures occur in tandem with a great popularity of works

from other Asian countries. Chinese, Indian, and Iranian films and television series have gained phenomenal respect along Hong Kong movies, Taiwanese pop music, and Japanese comics and animation series. One last feature worthy of mention is the remarkable popularity of horror themes in the new wave of pop cultures (see special supplement of *Tempo* 2003).

The great portion of analysts of contemporary Indonesia both inside, and especially outside the country, have failed to take note this cultural effervescence, let alone perceive and explain its historical significance in the broader contexts. Experts on Indonesia, and especially from the older generation, have been stuck with the old regnant paradigm in the social sciences and humanities. They focus their attention on Indonesia's elite corruption, party politics, mass

poverty and violence. They lament what they perceive to be a 'moral bankruptcy' of this big nation. One wonders the extent to which such trend has been responsible for the decline of Indonesian studies abroad.

Indonesia's cultural studies may have better chances than its mainstream scholarship to make the timely intellectual intervention, but it can do so forcefully only when it is adequately and critically informed of the insights of classical social sciences and humanities. This in no way suggests any evolutionary or nor hierarchical framework. Rather, it proposes that cultural studies should have the benefit to take the best of the conventional scholarship and go beyond it, rather than repeat the failure of such scholarship to consider the merits of its significant others.

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Riwayat Hidup Penulis

Ariel Heryanto adalah dosen senior di *Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies, The University of Melbourne*. Minat kajian penelitiannya meliputi topik-topik: budaya populer, studi mengenai media, politik identitas, dan studi mengenai Asia Tenggara. Ia menjadi editor untuk buku berjudul *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia; comparing Indonesia and Malaysia* yang diterbitkan oleh penerbit RoutledgeCurzon pada tahun 2003. Buku berikutnya yang berjudul *State Terrorism and Identity Politics in Indonesia; Fatally Belonging* yang diterbitkan oleh Routledge akan diluncurkan pada akhir tahun 2005.

Edi Indrizal saat ini mengajar di Jurusan Antropologi, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Andalas Padang, menyelesaikan pendidikan S1 antropologi di Universitas Andalas Padang (1989) dan S-2 sosiologi pedesaan di Institut Pertanian Bogor (1997). Sejak tahun 2000 ia terlibat dalam penelitian *Ageing in Indonesia* bekerjasama dengan *Oxford Institute of Ageing* disponsori oleh *the Wellcome Trust, UK*. Jabatan lain yang juga didudukinya adalah Direktur Lembaga Analisis Sosial dan Pembangunan (LASP) Padang dan *Area Coordinator* Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) Jakarta untuk wilayah Provinsi Sumatera Barat, Riau, Jambi dan Kepulauan Riau.

Esther Kuntjara menyelesaikan studi S1 Jurusan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga tahun 1982. S2 dibidang TEFL di *San Francisco State University*, California, tahun 1988. S3 di *Indiana University of Pennsylvania* di bidang *Rhetoric and Linguistics*, tahun 2001. Penulis adalah pengajar di Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Kristen Petra, Surabaya sejak 1988. Penulis pernah menerima beasiswa ke USA sebagai dosen tamu di *Central College*, Iowa, selama satu tahun. Selama studinya di IUP, penulis memperoleh penghargaan menjadi anggota dari Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi. Beberapa tulisannya banyak berkisar tentang jender, bahasa, dan budaya. Bukunya yang baru diterbitkan berjudul: *Gender, Bahasa, dan Kekuasaan*.

Linda R. Bennett adalah *research fellow* di *La Trobe University*. Gelar Ph.D. nya diperoleh dari *University of Ohio*. Penelitian yang dilakukannya antara lain *Ethnography of Indonesian Youth in Lombok* dan *Research into Islamic Education in Melbourne, Australia*. ♀, *Islam and Modernity: Single Women, Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Contemporary Indonesia* adalah buku hasil karyanya yang diterbitkan oleh penerbit Routledge pada tahun 2005.

Muhammad Adlin Sila memperoleh gelar sarjana dari IAIN Alauddin Makassar dan gelar Master dari The Australian National University. Sebagai staf Badan Litbang Agama Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, ia memiliki ketertarikan dalam kajian Islam dan Antropologi Indonesia. Sejak tahun 2001 hingga 2004 ia melakukan penelitian mengenai Salafi Groups in Makassar. Hasil tulisannya yang telah dipublikasikan antara lain *The Encyclopedia of Tasawuf*, 2005.

Nurul Ilmi Idrus adalah staf pengajar di program S1 dan pasca sarjana Departemen Antropologi, Universitas Hasanuddin. Gelar gelar masternya diperoleh dari Department of Anthropology, Sociology and Criminal Justice, Valdosta State University (VSU) Georgia, USA pada tahun 1992 dan doktornya diperoleh dari Department of Anthropology, Research School Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University (RSPAS-ANU) pada tahun 2003. Prostitusi, seks dan seksualitas, jender dan HIV/Aids, media dan pornografi, jender dan hukum, kesehatan reproduksi, tulisan tentang perempuan, pernikahan dan hubungan jender, juga kekerasan yang dialami oleh perempuan dan anak-anak, adalah minat kajian bagi penelitian-penelitiannya. Beberapa tulisan yang telah dipublikasikan adalah "Pornography in Media" *Jurnal Perempuan* No. 38, 2004, hlm. 31-42, dan "'Jandaku Sayang, Jandaku Malang': Stigma Sosial dan Seksualitas Seputar Janda", *Fajar* 16 Desember 2004.

Sri Lestari Wahyuningroem meraih gelar sarjana Ilmu Politik dari Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik Universitas Indonesia dan gelar MA dari Central European University, Budapest, Hungaria. Saat ini ia adalah staf pengajar tetap pada program sarjana Departemen Ilmu Politik FISIP UI. Minatnya tertuju pada kajian perempuan, kesetaraan jender dan politik.