

*State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging*. By Ariel Heryanto. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. 242 pp.

As a non-Indonesian with an interest in Indonesian cultural politics, I first encountered the Indonesian word *teror* (terrorism) and its derivative verb *menteror* (to terrorize) in spoken and written statements by self-identified victims of the brief period of hegemony enjoyed by LEKRA, the cultural organization with links to the Indonesian Communist Party, in the period 1963–65. In the early to mid New Order period, it was not uncommon to hear or read of the way LEKRA artists and cultural workers had “terrorized” their opponents during this period. In English, it seemed to me, the term should have been “intimidated”, because despite its aggressive stance towards its opponents during this period, LEKRA lacked the ability to engage in physical and mental violence on a scale and with an intensity that the verb “terrorize” in English implies.

In the opening chapter of this important new book, Ariel Heryanto suggests that in the New Order period, most foreigners reacted with the same kind of hesitation to the Indonesian usage of *teror* to refer to the discursive power which the New Order regime exercised over post-1965 imaginings of Indonesia’s history, as well as its present and future. His sense of unease with the tendency of outsiders to regard “terrorize” in this context as an exaggeration is the starting point for the book. For just as in the case of those who spoke of LEKRA-inspired *teror* before 1965, Heryanto writes as a participant in the events and circumstances he analyses. As an insider, he was witness to the regime’s actual and implied ability to unleash violence of such an intensity and scale that it could only be adequately conceptualized by the term “state terrorism”. At the same time, however, he is also aware of all sorts of problems and contradictions in the exercise of that combination of violence and intimidation by the state in New Order Indonesia. In *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia* he attempts to find a way of describing the workings of this inherently contradictory system of managing the national imaginary. The result is an extraordinarily

rich and compelling narrative of “a world where signs and the world they represent were believed to be inseparable” (p. 32). The detailed exploration of this theme is handled with clarity and conviction, giving the lie to the familiar charge that the post-structuralist concern with signs and discourses is somehow removed from the materiality of social and political processes. In Heryanto’s hands, the attempt to read discursive systems as social texts goes to the heart of the instability that has characterized the exercise of political power in Indonesia during the New Order years and beyond.

Observers of Indonesia between the 1970s and 1990s, as well as those who experienced the New Order at first hand, will recognize the great intimidatory power that stemmed from words associated with what Heryanto calls the New Order’s “master narrative”. This was the demonizing of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and its supposed attempt to subvert the integrity of the Indonesian nation in the coup attempt of 1965, epitomized in the novel, and later the state-sponsored film of the events of 1965, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The treason of the 30 September Movement/PKI). The spectre of the massacres of communists and their sympathizers that followed these events lay behind the fear that a single word such as *terlibat* (involved) could evoke throughout the period of the New Order’s hegemony. From the late 1970s through to the mid 1990s, a series of government initiatives deliberately fostered the social anxiety and watchfulness associated with the master narrative in the minds of successive generations of Indonesian citizens. Yet the impression of a totalizing system of power such an effect might suggest was constantly undercut by counter-indications of slippage, arbitrariness, and a failure of control at all levels. Against those observers who suggest that the arbitrary exercise of violence and intimidation was an effective part of state control, Heryanto argues that it is a mistake to “think of a rationally calculating powerful subject” (p. 141) orchestrating the effects of state terrorism. Rather, what he finds is a “mutual paranoia” between the state and its critics. Following Baudrillard, he suggests that each side was subject to “statements, narratives and practices that ... claim a life of their own, quite independent of anyone’s material

interests” (p. 142). The result is still a “mode of domination”, but it is one where “consent, coercion and narratives are neither separable nor easily distinguishable from one another” (p. 194).

The core of *State Terrorism* is a fascinatingly-detailed ethnographic account of the subversion trials of three young activists (here referred to by pseudonyms) held in Yogyakarta in 1988. The arrests which led to the trials were originally sparked by a charge that one of the activists was found selling banned novels by Pramoedya Ananta Toer; later allegations involved suspect reading materials and study group discussions, all designed to prove the existence of a communist-inspired programme of state subversion. Heryanto shows that a series of identifiable developments in national-level politics provided the context which led to the arrests and the trials of these local-level victims. But he also provides ample evidence of the fantasy-like nature of the trials themselves: in one case, prosecutors charged that one of the defendants had, during study group meetings, made a series of ten statements, the first of which was that “there was a gap between the rich and poor in Indonesian society”, the last was that “the system of governance in Indonesia [is] undemocratic”; on another occasion, when one of the defendants pressed for a definition of “Marxism” and “communism”, terms repeatedly stated in the formal indictment, the prosecuting attorneys proved to be completely at a loss, even with the benefit of a few weeks’ adjournment granted them by the chief judge! As absurdity compounded absurdity, the trials acquired an air that to an outsider would have been laughable, so unbelievable as to be hard to take seriously. Yet serious they indeed were, as Heryanto’s description of the suffering of the young victims and those around them makes plain.

During the years surrounding these trials, foreign observers of Indonesia often found themselves treading cautiously, fearing that a misplaced word or a misplaced meeting with Indonesian activists could result in their being banned from entering and remaining in the country. Much was made in the foreign press of instances of such intimidatory acts when they were taken against foreigners. Little, however, was ever known internationally of those who experienced

the fear of arrest, detention, and torture because of the books and pamphlets which others like themselves had been found to be reading. The “communist threat” may have functioned, as Heryanto describes it, as an instance of Baudrillard’s “hyperreality”. But it is to Heryanto’s credit that his readers know too that the terror it occasioned in the bodies of its victims was widely experienced and horrifyingly real.

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