



Delft University of Technology

Abidin Kusno, Jakarta

The City of a Thousand Dimensions

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Book review

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Abidin Kusno, *Jakarta: The City of a Thousand Dimensions*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2023; 304 pp.; ISBN: 9789813252264, SG \$34.00/£23.95 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Gregory Bracken , TU Delft, Netherlands

Jakarta, capital of Indonesia (for now) was founded by the Dutch and is a venue for social and spatial experimentation, not to mention the corruption and mismanagement of post-independence ‘elite informality’ (p. 113), and the city is literally sinking under its own weight. Abidin Kusno’s wide-ranging yet in-depth study of the city and its multi-dimensional challenges contains a felicitous mix of theoretical investigations grounded in real-life examples to unfold the story of the ‘city of a thousand dimensions’ (a term borrowed from Seno Gumira Ajidarma). In it he argues that a lack of planning has actually allowed a degree of flexibility in accommodating formal and informal, which he sees as an ‘art of governing’ (p. xi). Using multiple sites and issues, Kusno shows a ‘socio-political dimension that is neither formal nor disorderly’ (p. xii). The routines of everyday life should not be neglected, he says, because ‘they are often governed by a spatial configuration that is inescapably political’ (p. xii).

Challenges

The city faces several seemingly intractable challenges, traffic and flooding being two of the most urgent. Chapter 3 deals with the

former and sees an ‘interface of politics, economics and culture’ shaping the city’s traffic congestion (p. 48), where there is ‘little coordination among stakeholders’ (p. 50). President Sukarno ordered the removal of trams in 1960, seeing them as ‘a remnant of colonialism’ (p. 51). Speed of progress mattered in his New Order, symbolised ‘by the provision of motorised vehicles’ (p. 54). Later, public transport was neglected while car ownership and toll roads (run by President Suharto’s family) flourished (p. 54). A para-transportation system based on the motorcycle (which is capable of filtering through traffic (p. 68)) emerged from the ‘ruins of public transport’ (p. 64). Indonesia now has the third largest number of motorcycle users in the world (p. 67) and Jakarta may well top the list for motorcycle accidents (p. 68). Kusno sees this para-transportation system as a rhizome that grows ‘across the boundary of the formal and informal’ (p. 66). In referencing the rhizome, he attempts to link Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘thousand plateaus’ to Ajidarma’s ‘thousand dimensions’, although this is somewhat tenuous. While it is an appropriate application, it remains tantalisingly undeveloped. As Kusno admits, ‘I do not know what *A Thousand Plateaus* and “A Thousand Dimensions” have or could have done for each other, but for this book, I simply take the liberty of appropriating them loosely to organize my own method, story and argument’ (p. 15).

Staying with French philosophers, Michel Foucault is referenced in the next chapter, one of the more important in the book,

which deals with the city's other major challenge, flooding (*banjir*). Here we see riverside flood victims as “‘docile subjects’, open for transformation’ (p. 95) through ‘regulatory discipline’ (p. 95; p. 106 endnote 38). Kusno, by showing how flooding is culturally perceived, understood, and managed (p. 72), says that ‘it becomes a form of “governmentality”’ (p. 72). In a city where 40% of land is below sea level (p. 105, endnote 17), there is ‘inadequate institutional, organisational and individual capacities for flood management’ (p. 71). ‘Jakarta has never implemented a unitary infrastructural ideal aimed at benefiting the wider public’ (p. 73); it has relied instead on ‘fragmented, privately funded infrastructure projects, constructed to benefit only certain stakeholders’ (p. 73). As flooding worsens, colonial-era infrastructure ‘shifted from being a tool for risk prevention to becoming an instrument for risk distribution’ (p. 84). Most residents see flooding as a natural disaster (*bencana alam*), meaning ‘no particular human or any agency or institution is to be blamed’ (p. 81). Interestingly, flooding can also be seen as a blessing (*berkah*) because it leads to mutual help (*gotong royong*) (p. 89). And ‘politicians, corporations, enterprises, and religious groups compete for a role in flood relief’ (p. 90), cynically mucking in to make political hay.

One other important issue is the emergence of ‘Islamist urbanism’ (mainly examined in Bandung). Indonesia’s constitution confirms a belief in God without reference to a specific religion; an acknowledgement of religious pluralism (p. 149), yet there are tensions between nationalists and Islamists, with the latter seeing ‘themselves as representing the politically- and economically-marginalised Muslim majority’ (p. 159) wrestling ‘for hegemony by investing meaning in the built environment’ (p. 149). Jakarta’s governor Ahok (2014–2017), a Chinese Catholic, was convicted of blasphemy in 2017. Some see his jailing as ‘the end of

Jakarta as a multiethnic and multifaith cosmopolitan city’ (p. 189).

The future

Given the city’s problems, the idea of moving the capital to Kalimantan was announced by President Widodo in 2019 (p. 169). ‘The city can fall, but not the nation’ (p. 179). Other Asian countries, like Myanmar and Malaysia, have done this, and there is also a national precedent: King Pakubuwana II moved from Kartasura to Surakarta in 1745 (after military defeat by the Dutch (p. 169)). This was ‘to transform the reality of defeat into an expression of progress’ (p. 170) via what Kusno calls an ‘exemplary center’ (Clifford Geertz’ term; p. 170). What is less well known is that President Sukarno planned a future capital on Kalimantan in 1957 (p. 171) but decided to make Jakarta his new exemplary centre for the 1962 Asian Games instead (p. 171). As Kusno says, ‘Sukarno wanted Indonesia to be seen as modern now, not later’ (p. 171).

President Widodo’s more recent yearning for a new exemplary centre is ‘defined by its contrast with Jakarta’ (p. 179). The idea of escaping the deteriorating city has become more pronounced since 2000 (p. 173), not just for the capital but for anyone who can afford to live in privately run new towns like Meikarta, a vast 5400-hectare development 34 km from Jakarta. Built by the Lippo Group, it is intended to be the Shenzhen of Indonesia (p. 108). Kusno asks ‘what will happen to Jakarta without the nation-state?’ (p. 179). Those in favour of relocating the capital ‘are confident that Jakarta would not only survive, but also prosper once relieved of the burden of being the seat of government’ (p. 179) – it could become like New York and compete with regional financial centres (p. 179).

The solution to Jakarta’s problems may lie closer to home, however. Referencing Terry McGee’s *desakota* (peri-urban developments), Kusno sees them as overlooking

‘a similar hybrid formation in the urban core of the city’ (p. 23): the *kampung*. The *kampung* is ‘an intermediate space ... necessary as a stabiliser of an increasingly polarised urban–rural system’ (p. 24). It is ‘central and yet peripheral ... simultaneously in and out of place. It is geographically in the “middle” of the city, yet it is seen and unseen at the same time’ (p. 31). ‘In the *kampung* we thus see complex infrastructure that is neither formal nor entirely informal; it is a mix of both’ (p. 35). What is interesting about this informality is that it applies equally to ‘shanty towns and upper-class compounds, for both are based on violations or irregular deals’ (p. 131). Kusno argues that the ‘conceptual divide needs to be revised as “not between formality and informality but rather [as] a differentiation within informality”’ (quoting Ananya Roy, p. 131). Kusno also sees informality being ‘produced by the state’ (p. 131) in the traditions of ‘elite informality’ we saw mentioned at the beginning, where ‘corruption, intolerance of difference, greed, selfishness, a tendency to use violence in problem solving, legal harassment, and opportunism’ (quoting Roy and Nezar AlSayyad, p. 131) were all hallmarks of Suharto’s regime.


The Afterword discusses Hardt and Negri’s concept of ‘multitude’ – the formation of new labour relations in neoliberal post-Fordism (pp. 219–221). Kusno asks if classic Fordism makes sense for cities in the Global South? (p. 221), especially as ‘industrial labourers constitute only a fraction of

workers in urban Indonesia ... The majority work in the informal sector’ (p. 222). One of the book’s most important points is that the *kampung* can serve ‘to moderate conflicts between the urban and the rural, the industrial and the preindustrial, the modern and the premodern [because] its existence moderates conflicts’ (p. 223). The *kampung* moderates ‘the increasingly polarised urban–rural system’ (p. 223 – echoing his sentiments quoted from page 24 above) and ‘prevents “class struggle” at the level of a rural–urban divide’ (p. 223). In the face of ‘the failure of neoliberal policies’ (p. 224), Kusno is convinced that a ‘middle way’, fostered by the ethos of the *kampung*, could guide Jakarta to a more inclusive future (p. 226).

Conclusion

This could be quite a depressing read, given the scale of the greed, shortsightedness and mismanagement of politicians and private developers, yet it is actually uplifting because we see communities’ responses to the challenges they face. Kusno shows what can be done when people come together, whether in the face of flooding, traffic or the desire of government and developers to flee the city. Left alone, the people who call Jakarta home will very likely flourish.

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