

# BALANCING URBAN HISTORY BETWEEN INTERPRETATION AND A FACTUAL STORY

*Studying the Environment in Indonesian Cities*

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## What are the Important Issues?

**W**hat are the most important issues in urban studies today? The UN has declared that the world population reached the figure of seven billion people on 31 October 2011. For the last two years, more than half of the global population has lived in cities. The UN picked a baby born in a Mumbai slum as the seventh billion citizen of the world, but it could just as well have chosen a child born in kampong Ledok Ratmakan in Yogyakarta or any other Indonesian urban kampong. After all, Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world and rapid urbanization is also an important characteristic of this country, and has been a constant factor for at least the last century and a half.

Nevertheless, by themselves rapid population growth and urbanization are not the most important present-day issues today. The really important question, I think, is how we, humans across the Globe, can adjust our behaviour to ensure our lifestyles are ecologically sustainable. This is the biggest challenge people living in the Global North and the Global South have to face. The contemporary, multifaceted, global environmental crisis is arguably the single most important issue facing our world.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the stimulating comments received at the international conference "Indonesian urban cultures and societies" (Yogyakarta 8-9 November 2011) and the English corrections by Rosemary Robson.

Whereas the majority of Northern (or Western) politicians and scholars are highly concerned about the health of the global ecosystem, biodiversity and the depletion of natural resources (the green agenda), for millions of inhabitants of cities in the Global South, the brown agenda is more urgent. The brown agenda consists of local issues of human health, under immediate threat from air pollution, dirty water, inadequate collection of solid waste and a failing sewerage system (Drakakis-Smith 1995).

The enduring combination of continued urbanization and economic development has thrown the issue of urban pollution, the treatment of waste in particular, into sharper relief than ever. Economic growth produces greater pollution, but paradoxically, growing pollution can erode the social and environmental basis of sustained economic development. Between 30 and 50 per cent of solid waste generated in cities in the Global South usually lies uncollected; waste accumulates in open spaces and clogs drainage canals, especially in poor neighbourhoods (Satterthwaite 2003: 78). Urban pollution not only puts economic growth at risk and affects human health (hence the productive capacity) negatively, it also imperils human well-being in general. Various forms of urban pollution can contribute to 'urban blight', the combination of a polluted environment, violence and lack of social cohesion. Unquestionably the root cause of the social and physical problems on the brown agenda is social and political inequity (Davis 2007; Jaffe 2006).

My aim in this article is to probe deeper into urban environmental problems, looking at these from a social science angle. I shall begin by examining the nexus between income, pollution and environmental behaviour, and end with the conclusion that a historical perspective is imperative. Actually for a long time I have entertained doubts about whether 'The need for a historical perspective on environmental issues' might not be a better title for this article than that I have chosen. As it is, the main title refers to the final subject matter in this article, namely -accepting that solving today's environmental problems will be a futile exercise if a historical analysis is not included- an assessment of the state-of-the-art of Indonesian urban history writing. The focus in the article therefore shifts from section to section, and before we come to the section which gives this article its title, we must first go back to the relationship between income and environmental behaviour.

## Between Shopping Malls and the Garbage Dump

The influential World Commission on Environment and Development, dubbed the Brundtland Commission, states that urban poverty is a major cause of environmental degradation, because poor people are unwilling or unable to care for their environment (WCED 1987). This statement is not undisputed. David Satterthwaite, for instance, argues that although poverty can put urban residents at environmental risk, but it is not itself a cause of environmental degradation. In his view, the key to environmental degradation is found in middle-class and elite consumption patterns and the urban-based production and distribution systems, which serve them. 'Ironically, at a [...] global level, high levels of urban poverty in [...] Asia (which also means low levels of consumption [...]) have helped to keep down environmental degradation' (Satterthwaite 2003: 74). If we agree with Satterthwaite that urban poverty does not necessarily cause environmental degradation in the Global South, this raises the question of what impact growing prosperity will have.

Although the North is notorious for its indulgence in consumption, people in the South aspire to the same 'modern' lifestyle as people in the North. Economic growth is the key to enabling the latter to realize these aspirations. What will happen when the populations of China (the second largest economy in the world), India, Brazil (the sixth economy in the world), Indonesia and other emerging economies can consume at the same level per capita as the North? This concern, I hasten to emphasize, is not meant to distract attention from the Northern responsibility for its problematic consumption and production methods, nor to deny emerging economies their fair share of global resources and high consumption levels!

What puzzles me most is the question of why people continue to behave in a non-sustainable way, even when they know their behaviour is, ecologically speaking, not sustainable. Why do people in my country, the Netherlands, continue to drive to their work by car, regularly eat meat or have more than two children, knowing that this is bad for the environment? (And I myself am guilty of two of the three sins just mentioned, so I do not claim moral superiority in this respect.) However, since the topic of this conference is Indonesian urban cultures and societies, in the rest of this article I shall focus on Indonesia,

and not on the Global North or the Global South in general. (Besides, if I were to begin to discuss the environmental degradation in Europe, I would need more than one whole book, whereas I have only the space allotted to one article!)

I have just embarked on a research project which will examine the questions I have sketched so far. The question central to this project is: to what extent are inhabitants of Indonesian cities aware of environmental problems and how far are they willing and able to adjust their behaviour first to mitigate, then resolve these problems? It is still too early to present general conclusions from this research, and I shall restrict myself to some observations.

Under the Orde Baru, the Jakarta city government already issued a regulation obliging drivers to car-pool in certain streets during the rush hours. People can only drive a car along these roads if the vehicle carries three or more occupants. The purpose of this sensible regulation is to reduce traffic jams and decrease the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. What has happened? Owners of a car employ a driver and take a *joki* on board at the beginning of the car-pool lane. A *joki*, or jockey, is a school kid who is paid a small sum to get into the car, and at the end of the car-pool lane walks back to the beginning to complement the occupants of yet another car. In practice, the car is therefore still effectively used by just one passenger, despite the fact the vehicle does carry three human bodies. Hence, the sensible regulation of car-pooling is to all intents and purposes vitiated. The jockey system is, by the way, only possible thanks to the huge income inequality, which means that what is the major income of one person, the jockey, is no more than a tip, a mere parking fee, for the other, the car owner.

Another fascinating example is the wearing of ski-jackets by the Indonesian middle-class and elite. It is apparently trendy to copy this style of clothing from the west, but since the elite does not live in the snow, but under a tropical sun, wearing a ski jacket is only tolerable if the air conditioning is set at a freezingly cold temperature. This behaviour harms the environment twice: firstly by the production of a ski-jacket and then the waste of energy used to lower the temperature.

However, these negative environmental effects of development might be offset by a growing environmental awareness among middle-class people,

who espouse global notions of environmentalism. As much as it is trendy to drive a private car and wear a ski jacket, is it equally trendy to show one's concern about the environment. This kind of behaviour is sometimes dubbed eco-chic.

I borrow the term 'eco-chic' from Rivke Jaffe and Bart Barendregt, who recently convened a conference on eco-chic in Linköping, Sweden, from 11 to 13 October 2011. In the call for papers for this conference, they describe eco-chic as a counter-movement in the current accelerating pace of living in many societies. Like the Occupy movement, the eco-chic movement opposes globalization, and seeks answers in 'nostalgic, neo-traditional and explicitly local solutions: the slow, the natural and the authentic. Consuming the natural and the slow is instrumental in creating and maintaining class distinction: examples include the middle-class popularity of eco-tourism, and organic and fair-trade food and clothing. As radical societal change towards sustainable development appears increasingly difficult to achieve, "green" lifestyles [...] have emerged as attractive alternative propositions in moving towards environmentally friendly societies [...]. Where previously the environmental movement saw excess consumption as the global problem, green consumerism now places consumption at the heart of the solution.'<sup>2</sup> This activism through consumerism is, by the way, not always good for the environment, for instance, if people, take the plane from Jakarta to Bali to discuss how bad the deterioration in air quality is at a conference in a fully air-conditioned hotel.<sup>3</sup>

For reasons I do not have the space to explain, the negative effects of greenhouse gases (hence climate change) and solid waste produced by the rich will be felt most acutely by the urban poor. However, the poor are no saints and also produce waste in their own way. The urban poor are neither just passive victims of pollution nor just indiscriminate polluters themselves, because they also process a lot of waste. To scavengers, waste is a resource (Nas & Jaffe 2004). Scavenging, the treatment and recycling of waste, is another part of my current research.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.esf.org>, accessed on 3 November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Once again, I do not claim to occupy the moral highland in this respect, as I took the plane from Jakarta to Yogyakarta to attend the international conference 'Indonesian urban cultures and societies', whereas I could have taken a more environmental friendly train.

One of the things which struck me when I began my research on the environment was actually how *clean* Indonesian cities are. The explanation for this cleanliness is the fact that at any hour of the day somebody will be processing waste in any street, in any city. Waste moves through cities in an extremely intricate network. In Surabaya, where I have studied this phenomenon most closely, waste is collected at the neighbourhood or RT (*rukun tetangga*) level. Residents of an RT put their waste in a waste bin in front of their house. The head of the RT collects monthly contributions from the residents to pay a garbage collector to collect the waste door to door in a pushcart and take it to small refuse dumps (*tempat sampah sementara* or TSS) where it is temporarily stored. There are over a hundred such refuse dumps in Surabaya, each one used by, perhaps, a dozen of RTs or more. From there, municipal waste-disposal service trucks transport the waste to its final destination, the central dumpsite (*tempat sampah akhir*). Waste can also be deposited in public waste bins, usually made of old oil drums, which are also emptied by the municipal service. Most waste, however, follows a completely different path from this official waste collection system and never makes it to the central dumpsite.

Scavengers (*tukang sampah* or *pemulung*) connect to the 'official' flow of waste at many different points (Versnel 1986). Scavenging already begins before the waste is picked up in the afore-mentioned pushcarts at the RT level. Most popular of all waste among scavengers I found were disposable cups of Aqua, closed with a thin plastic lid. Some people go haphazardly from bin to bin and search for goods which can be sold, but I have also seen two sturdy, pretty well-dressed men, who walked down a road, one on each side, systematically going from one public waste bin to the next in search of specific goods using an iron hook. The second point I want to make, therefore, is that not only does the waste move around, the scavengers do too. It is a very dynamic system. Little waste is wasted.

My impression is that the most profitable point in this network of waste is at the temporary collection points, TSS. At this stage, not very many of the valuable goods have yet been extracted so the volume and quality of waste are still substantial, to the effect that the scavengers do not need to make an effort to go around in search of useful waste. Theoretically, the scavengers could sit and wait at the temporary dumpsite while the waste passes through, but in

practice this is not feasible, as only the collectors who go around in the RTs to collect waste have access to the TSS. So they will have to go around anyway, before they can separate the waste at the TSS.

One scavenger at such a temporary dumpsite told me about his work. As he talked to me, he worked steadily using one hand, as he either maintained his balance or held a cigarette with the other. Like the others, he strategically combined two jobs. Half of his earnings came from collecting waste from several RTs in the morning, for which he was paid a regular salary. In the afternoon, he sorted out the waste he had brought to the dumpsite himself. He fished out disposable plastic cups, other plastic, white trash paper, other paper and specific objects (iron, shoes, etcetera) and put them in different baskets or large bags. When a basket or bag was full, it was placed in a corner of the dumpsite until a collector bought up the material. The man did not separate glass bottles, although they too were worth money, because he did not want to run risk of splinters. He set about his work very nonchalantly and picked out only the larger pieces of recyclable material. At a later stage, less fortunate scavengers would go through the waste with a finer tooth comb at the end of the chain, the municipal central dumpsite.

This man had done this work for over twenty years and had been ill only once. His illness was not caused by his work, but by his habit of drinking too much coffee and neglecting to eat proper food. His wife and two children also work at the same dumpsite. Together they earned more than a university teacher and they displayed conspicuous signs of a certain standard of living. They arrived at the dumpsite by motorcycle, and to dispel her boredom his daughter listened to an i-Pod as she sorted out the waste. That the family could afford to ignore the smaller pieces of plastic and paper, and glass altogether, also says something about their financial status.

At the same dumpsite worked another good-humoured man, who had also been in the business for over twenty years. They both talked about their nice little earners of jobs as the best-kept secret in town. There was another, still youngish man who had begun just two months earlier. In contrast to the experienced men, he evaded my questions and did not want to be photographed. Presumably he still felt embarrassed about the low status of his job: any sensible person would hurriedly skirt around the stench and flies of the dumpsite. I do

not know what the people at the final refuse dump of the city earn, but undoubtedly it is considerably less than at the TSS. In short, the extent to which people are willing to separate recyclable material fairly meticulously depends on their economic need. In other words, the collection of waste and the separation of the recyclable is run on economic principles. It is axiomatic that, in our capitalist world, activities become sustainable when they make a profit. However, the scavengers look beyond the pecuniary arguments; self-esteem and the low social status of the work must be included in the assessment of their work.

My hypothesis is that the whole system of separating and recycling waste is contingent on the existence of poverty. The current economic growth in Indonesia might produce several simultaneous effects, especially if it reaches larger segments of the population. Rising consumption is likely to produce more waste but fewer people might be willing to take on the task of scavenging, usually derided by society at large. As we have seen, despite the fair income it could earn, collecting waste was scorned and hence was an unpopular job, except by the people who had discovered its profitability. So, economic growth is a double-edged sword which might worsen the problem of solid waste in two ways: more is produced and less is recycled.

## An Historical Understanding of Environmental Problems

Accepting the definition of the Brundtland Commission that sustainable development is a development that ‘meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (OECD 1987; see also Anand and Sen 2000), any study of sustainable development must have a time depth of at least one generation. Therefore adding a historical perspective to study contemporary environmental sustainability is imperative.

Indonesia is an ideal place to study the interconnections between poverty, economic development and pollution from a historical perspective. Because of the Indonesian-Dutch (post)colonial legacy, there are very rich sources in both Indonesia and the Netherlands which enable human-environment interactions to be studied in depth (Colombijn 2010: 21-24). As the fourth largest country in the world, situated in one of the most dynamic parts of the world,



Southeast Asia, Indonesia should be of prime concern to a study of the environment in emerging economies under all circumstances. I hope that many scholars inside and outside Indonesia share my interest and will devote the best of their research time to the study of the environment, ideally adding a historical perspective to their analysis.

## The Future of Urban History in Indonesia

I would like to use the remainder of this article to discuss the state-of-the-art of the study of urban history in Indonesia. A growing public interest in urban history is manifesting itself in many ways. The Jaringan Kota Pusaka Indonesia is a network of cities, or perhaps more correctly a network of mayors of cities, established two years ago which already has forty members.<sup>4</sup> In Jakarta one can drink a cup of tea in the colonial-style Café Batavia. More surprisingly, the new football club team in Jakarta, set up for the Liga Primer Indonesia, is called Batavia United. And then, of course, there is the private airline company Batavia Air. To the company it seems no more than a name and in its advertisements there is no reference to allegedly Dutch ‘reliability’, ‘punctuality’ or ‘*Gründlichkeit*’.<sup>5</sup> However, the colours of Batavia Air (white, orange and light blue) might be a vague reference to the Dutch flag and the royal family, the House of Orange. Even more surprisingly, some young people like to go on a heritage tour, when, for instance, they dress up as soldiers of the KNIL, the colonial army, and parade through the city wheeling an old-fashioned bicycle (Yatun Sastramidjaya 2011).

■ Nostalgia is perhaps not the right word to describe the way people in Indonesian cities interact with their local histories. They have no yearnings for a romanticized past. Instead they operate like scavengers on a garbage dump: digging in archives, oral histories and the built environment to select what is useful to them, but ignore what does not serve a purpose (Colombijn 2011a).

Writing about Zanzibar, East Africa, William Bissell (2005: 217) has remarked that ‘any attempt to cast colonial nostalgia as purely retrograde or

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this information to Hasti Tarekat, founder of the Bandung and Sumatra Heritage Trusts.

<sup>5</sup> Batavia Air started its operations in 2002 and was founded by a tour operator and ticket office bearing the same name. Perhaps the name Batavia made more sense in a tourist industry catering to foreigners. Until at least the 1990s, bridges, irrigation works and locomotives dating from colonial times had a reputation of good quality.

reactionary seems dubious at best'. Bissell feels that scholars need to ask the question of what social and political desires a post-colonial people wish to express when they speak approvingly of the past. Importantly, constructions of the past are used as a commentary on the present. He also reminds us that reconstructions of the past are far from uniform; different actors hold different views or pursue different goals (Bissell, 2005). ■

A more academic sign that urban history is alive and kicking in Indonesia is the frequency of historical conferences held in the past few years, the blossoming of publishers in Indonesia and the publication of a large numbers of monographs and edited volumes. In Indonesia there is a brilliant future for history!

## History Between Interpretation and a Factual Story

It is time to move on to what was announced as the central topic of this article: the different approaches to the study of (urban) history in Indonesia. It is not so long ago that a typical Indonesian historical thesis or article on an urban topic, say labour unions in the *kretek* industry in Surabaya, would begin like this: Surabaya lies at 7° south latitude and at 112° east longitude. It has 2,435 mm of annual precipitation. Its population size is 2,473,212 persons.<sup>6</sup> All these facts are, of course, not relevant to labourers in the *kretek* industry and do not help to introduce the reader to the real subject.

Fortunately by and large this style of writing has been abandoned and historians have adopted a more analytical style of writing, beginning by setting out the definition of the problem and not by listing dry facts. In their adoption of this change of style, Indonesian historians have clearly been inspired by foreign examples. International, hegemonic, mostly English-language historical studies are widely read and discussed in Indonesia (Heryanto, 2002). Consequently, Indonesian studies no longer look like a card-index box of facts, but a clear narrative is discernible. Following post-colonial studies originating principally from the US, Indonesian scholars have on the whole also adopted an obviously anti-colonial stance, condemning the racist practices of the Dutch colonials.

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<sup>6</sup> These figures are fictitious as is the topic of this imaginary thesis; any possible resemblance to a real thesis is incidental and unintentional.

## These Changes are a Giant Step Forward

Nevertheless, I sometimes think that the pendulum has swung too far. In some cases, interpretative history writing has become an excuse for writing ‘just’ a good narrative, without bothering to test it by allowing empirical facts ‘to intrude’. History has become fantasy. It resembles people joining a heritage tour who imagine that what they are acting out is historical reality. Allow me to demonstrate my point by giving a few examples of work written by scholars working outside Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

The first example is from the work of Abidin Kusno. He is of course Indonesian, but holds a degree from an American university and is currently working at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and therefore by training arguably more American than Indonesian. Before I mention what I think is problematic about his work, let me emphasize that I greatly appreciate the marvellous works he has published (Kusno 2002, 2010), in his typically beautiful, fluent style of writing, adorned with many attractive images. His conclusions always give me food for thought, and more than the work of most other scholars stimulate me to think. Despite these qualities and others passed over at this moment, or perhaps more correctly, precisely because of these qualities, I am critical of his work, at the risk of (erroneously) being accused of *sour jalousie-de-métier*.

In 2010, Abidin Kusno published *The appearances of memory; mnemonic practices of architecture and urban form in Indonesia*. In this book he analyses how the fears, anxieties and expectations and other thoughts of Indonesian urbanites have been embodied in architecture and urban space. In Kusno’s view, the built environment is not merely the product of these various thoughts, but is at least as much a constitutive element in the making of the history of the Indonesian cities. In his own words: ‘This book focuses on the visual environment and the ways in which it helps to articulate a general anxiety over the sense of change in everyday life’ (Kusno, 2010: 3).

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<sup>7</sup> I prefer to discuss the work of people working outside Indonesia, in order to keep some distance. When I am critical of anti-colonial narratives in the following pages, because they are not based on empirical data, I am criticizing the narratives as historical works. My critique is not meant to argue that racial discrimination did not exist in colonial Indonesia. Absolutely not.

Kusno focuses on periods of rapid social transformation (modernization in the early twentieth century, the Indonesian Revolution, the fall of President Soeharto and the years thereafter). The unmanaged anxieties of these periods of change cast long shadows both backwards and forwards in time. Architecture and the urban environment help to shape memories of political crises in the past: 'buildings serve as a reminder of the practices of the past and the starting point for both the performance of unfinished fantasies and the desire to overcome troubling memories and remake oneself within, as well as beyond, one's particular time and place' (Kusno, 2010: 3).

The book opens with a discussion of the 'looseness' at the centre of the State since the fall of Soeharto in May 1998, which encourages citizens in Jakarta to act of their own accord, 'creating a condition in which everyone safeguards his or her own space' (Kusno 2010: 37). Many middle-class people want to bury the violence and insecurity of the May 1998 riots, with the concomitant severe loss of property, killing of people and the gang rapes of Chinese women. Both the State and many of its citizens long for, and work towards a certain order and 'normalcy'. The crucial point is that, in striving for normalcy (for instance, by rebuilding ruined shops), the memories of the 1998 terror are silenced, 'thereby enacting still further violence through the suppression of the stories [of the Chinese women and shopkeepers]' (ibid,103).

It is impossible to summarize all of the contents, but Kusno also delves into shopping malls and 'superblocks', the re-use of colonial architectural styles, the dissonance between feudal power in the older Javanese centres and modernization (explaining why political radicalism emerged in Solo and Yogyakarta, rather than in the more 'modern' cities of Jakarta/Batavia and Surabaya), mosques and guardhouses. These are important topics usually overlooked by other scholars.

To a large extent the book is Kusno's reading of Indonesian society. He reveals daring connections between events which seem unrelated at first and often gives a startling and fascinating interpretation. For instance, discussing the Transjakarta, the exclusive busway using separate lanes in Jakarta, Kusno writes that it 'can be seen as an "apparatus" of power that, through the experience of riding the bus across the city, seeks to reintegrate "Indonesians" [into the State] through imageries of progress, authority, and discipline' (ibid,

50). Perhaps. But how can Kusno tell and to what degree does this interpretation correspond with an empirical reality on the ground? It does not seem that Kusno has interviewed either city planners, directors of the bus company, drivers or passengers to get their views on the matter. The empirical underpinning of the argument that the busway is an apparatus of power which seeks to reintegrate Indonesians into the State seems thin at best, remains uncertain or is based on just a few sources. In other parts of the book, Kusno makes use of the ideas of a few novelists and architects which are discussed in detail, but I wonder how widely their ideas are known, let alone shared, by the public at large.

One regrettable flaw, I believe, is the neglect of Dutch texts from colonial times, which diminishes the empirical basis of the historical analysis. The interpretation of contemporary pictures, although worthwhile in itself, cannot replace the reading of texts. For instance, Kusno argues that the 1930s was defined as a '*zaman normal*' (normal time), superseding the revolutionary enthusiasm of Indonesian nationalists, which was quelled after the failed communist uprising of 1926/1927. Unruliness was suppressed and, as an illustration of this intensified state control, Kusno mentions the building of new market halls and the fact that street vendors were 'no longer allowed to move freely on the streets' (ibid, 189);

■ A picture of the new market in Malang plays a prominent role in making this point. However, to the best of my knowledge, state action against hawkers in the 1930s was not a change of attitude towards an old predicament, but a response to a new problem, the mushrooming in their number as a consequence of the Depression. It looks like the picture of the market hall in Malang has been over-interpreted and this overly extravagant speculation could have been put back to its feet again with the help of colonial –alas in Dutch- sources.<sup>8</sup>

In short, my critique boils down to the point that sometimes this work seems more an interpretation enshrining from Abidin Kusno's own views, rather than based on empirical fact. The other side of the coin, and this is the greatest strength of the book, is the fascinating views, often presented in a fine, personal

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<sup>8</sup> I also believe that the term *zaman normal* did not make a contrast to the preceding decade of Indonesian nationalism, and only came into fashion in the 1940s in contrast to the uncertainty of the Japanese occupation and Indonesian Revolution.

style of writing. Although I was often not convinced by the argument, Abidin Kusno definitely gives me plenty to think about.

Another example of an interpretative study is the work of Ann Stoler, an American anthropologist and historian. Her ideas are even more widely read than those of Abidin Kusno, but unfortunately there is more room for scepticism. Not only does she sometimes resort to a free interpretation of empirical evidence, sometimes she draws conclusions which plainly go against the empirical evidence she has at her disposal. To make her point and my critique of her clear, I should explain a little about the background of the case, interracial relationships in colonial Indonesia.

The colonial State made a legal distinction between indigenous people, other Asians, and Europeans. Although nowhere did the State explicitly say that one 'racial' category was superior to another, State policy was clearly discriminatory in several respects. The hegemonic ideology put Europeans in a supreme position, and Europeans also occupied the top ranks in many multi-ethnic organizations. At the other end of the scale, the Indigenous group was the only category subject to *corvée* labour for public works. One very serious academic problem is that we know very little about the extent to which non-Europeans ever accepted the hegemonic view that Europeans were at the top (Sutherland 1986). Unsurprisingly, we are much better informed about the thoughts of Europeans.

Abundant examples testify to the superior status which Europeans claimed in daily life. The distinction seemed so obvious that many people were not always conscious of it, or perhaps simply accepted it without overt resistance. Once when I interviewed a former Dutch resident about social differences, she answered: 'There were no differences; we all had servants'. Her unspoken understanding that the servant was an indigenous person - not a fact which needed to be explained to the interviewer - is as significant as her lack of awareness that the Dutch master-indigenous servant relationship was actually not self-evident. Even westernized indigenous employees who had worked their way up in the colonial hierarchy could not shake off the habit of displaying undue deference. For instance, an indigenous itinerant inspector travelling with his own car and driver described his cordial reception by a Dutch Assistant-Resident and his wife. The story seems to be about two colleagues of equal

rank in the civil service, until the inspector writes: ‘*even* Madam shook my hand’ (my italics). Despite all these forms of daily discrimination, the proverbial signboard ‘prohibited for Indigenous people and dogs’ in swimming pools and at sports grounds is none the less a popular trope in the collective memory, but one for which I have never found hard proof. Despite the many counter-examples of warm inter-racial relationships (Colombijn 2010:79-80), generally speaking inter-racial relationships were generally hierarchic and aloof in colonial times.

The boundaries between different ‘racial’ categories were definitely not cast-iron and watertight. Not only were the legal boundaries between the racial categories occasionally changed, the ethnic boundaries were also permeable in daily practice. Their anxiety aroused by their uncertainty, some European people made a strenuous effort to maintain the boundaries. Ann Laura Stoler argues that the women especially should be held responsible for upholding the ethnic distinctions.

■ Race was linked to gender. Maternal concerns about the dilemma of raising children in a European or indigenous tradition and the virtue of women marrying men of their own ‘race’ were the cornerstones in the construction of ethnic boundaries. Anomalies and blurred cases of European or indigenous status became a growing source of worry to the superior European group: white women marrying indigenous men, hence having sex with indigenous men, caused horror among conservative Europeans. The children of mixed marriages also formed a potential crack in the wall of European hegemony. Eurasians who had a formal European status, but a hybrid culture - not speaking perfect Dutch, for instance, - formed such anomaly (Stoler, 1995:1-54, 2002:22-78, Goudah, 1995: 157-193) ■

According to Ann Stoler (1989) –and now I come to the case I want to discuss–, poor Europeans also threatened the boundaries of colonial categories. Therefore, during the Depression the sight of unemployed Europeans (often Eurasians) formed, Stoler argues, another dreadful anomaly, a potentially disruptive group in the eyes of employed, conservative Europeans. If possible, they were sent home to remove them from public view.

This is true but Stoler makes too much of the anomalous poor Europeans packed off home during the Depression. Close reading of the source to which she refers (De Braconier 1919 in *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië*) shows that she has sacrificed three empirical facts which contradict her case, in order to be able to make her point.

Firstly, the unsightly Europeans sent home she is talking about formed a peculiar group, composed not just of any poor Europeans. They were soldiers who had been recruited in Europe, served their time and should have been demobilized in the place they were recruited, Europe, unless they had found alternative employment in the colony. Hence, they were not removed from the colony because they were an eyesore but to fulfil the terms of the original labour contract, taken to their final destination, namely the point of recruitment.

Secondly, her use of a 1919 publication to say something about the Depression is anachronistic. Thirdly it is pretty gross exaggeration to change the ‘over 9,300’ *jobless* Europeans living in kampongs’ mentioned in the source (De Braconier 1919:367) into ‘tens of thousands’ of ‘*dangerously impoverished*’ Europeans (Stoler 1989:151). In her attempt to demonstrate the racism inherent in colonialism, Stoler’s interpretation of the sources has strayed widely from empirical fact (Beaulieu, 2009).

To avoid flawed interpretations, it is essential we pay more respect to historical sources, to *facts* if you like. This, at least, is the goal in my own research (Colombijn 2010) and for a successful example of empirically grounded research I refer to the history of Surabaya written by Howard Dick (2002). Before I conclude, a few additional points need to be made.

First, my call to pay more heed to empirical facts should not be misread as a plea to have one’s research be fully guided by the archival sources. Adherents of the Leiden School of Indonesian History (Colombijn 2011b) methodology argue that facts ought to speak for themselves and merely need to be dug out of the archive. If one collects enough facts in the archives in an unbiased, open-minded way, a story will almost automatically envelop them. I would say, in contradiction, that facts do not speak for themselves and are only found if one looks for them with a particular lens. This lens consists of theoretical preconceptions, which do not make the scholar biased as much as rather sensitive to what he or she needs and what is missing in the archives.



Secondly, historical facts in archives and printed sources are, of course, not an objective representation of the past. A whole series of choices has been made between a historical event and what is recorded and kept in the archives or in a newspaper, journal or book. Archives are instruments of administration in the hands of people in power and therefore politicized by nature; on this point I agree with Stoler (2009). The facts must therefore be approached with caution and with a certain mistrust.

Thirdly, the corollary of this grounded approach to history is that archives are of crucial importance and much more attention needs to be paid to preserving them. Think of the archives of municipalities, courts of justice, companies, private collections, newspapers and so on. Many of the archives in Indonesia are in a poor condition and run the risk of being lost forever. Another corollary of this empirical approach is that Indonesian historians must continue to make a determined effort to learn to read Dutch sources, hard as this might be.

Finally, qualifying the previous point, of course many groups are barely represented in archives at all, not even in a negatively stereotypical way: women, children, the elderly, ethnic minorities, peasants, urban tramps, the unemployed and so forth. An empirically grounded approach to history writing does not need to rely solely on written sources and can also make use of oral history, myths, songs, archaeology and careful observation of the cityscape.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let me sum up the points I have tried to make. I began by pointing out what I see as the biggest issue in urban studies: the destruction of the environment and the question of why people often behave in a way that is detrimental to their environment, even when they are aware that they are destroying their resource basis and own health. Using the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, I came to the conclusion that any study of environmental behaviour must include at least two generations, hence must be a historical study.

■ From this point, I moved on to discuss the current state of affairs in Indonesian history writing. It is good, I believe, that we have left the purely factual descriptions behind, but the pendulum has swung too far. I have tried to

demonstrate my point with examples from scholars based in North America, but sometimes discern a similar trend in Indonesia. It should be obvious by now that I am not in favour of a historical narrative that is interpretative to the point it is actually plainly contradicted by the historical evidence.

I much prefer a historical study -and this conclusion can easily be extended to other disciplines like sociology, anthropology and social geography- which is based on hard-won, sound empirical data. A study firmly rooted in empirical data might sometimes be a little colourless and with too many nuances (because usually there will be empirical data which contradict, hence temper, outspoken, spectacular statements). Dull it may be but this dullness must be accepted, because historical study must be empirical or be nothing.

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