

The political: A view from Jakarta's *kampungs*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epn**Prathiwi Widyatmi Putri**

Section of International Agricultural Policy and Resource Governance, Faculty of Organic

Agricultural Science, University of Kassel, Witzenhausen, Germany

Global Partnership Network, University of Kassel, Kassel, Germany

Abstract

This article is a response to Leitner and Sheppard's recent publications on Jakarta. I argue that Jakarta's *kampungs* and the eviction of their communities is a topic that needs to be situated in the realm of social reproduction. The multidimensional problems in *kampungs* fall within capitalism's wider 'crisis of care'. From this methodological position, we can access the political domain of the *kampung*, from which a new political agency emerges as collective bodies beyond merely the sum of individual survival tactics.

Keywords

Jakarta's *kampungs*, social reproduction, the political, urban transformation, displacement and dispossession

Introduction

Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard have long contributed to the field of geography and the broader social sciences, explaining – among other things – the socio-spatial transformations of capital, labour markets and migration, as well as the local contestations of the global political economy, and the relationships between urbanisation and globalisation. In their relatively recent articles on Jakarta (Herlambang et al., 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018; Leitner et al., 2022; Liong et al., 2020), they seek to provincialise critical urban theories and transcend the binary oppositions that are often reproduced when only the overarching global features of urbanisation or its particulars are confronted (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016: 230). In the four articles cited above, the authors engage with the notion of 'accumulation' and various modalities of community displacement, yet also draw attention to ambiguous effects on spatial transformations that do not necessarily demonstrate the logics of capitalism. In a recent special issue written with their former PhD students, Leitner and Sheppard propose a thesis of speculative urbanism (Leitner et al., 2023) to make sense of everyday speculations that shape peri-urban spatial dynamics and involve diverse actors in taking individual risks and opportunities.

Corresponding author:

Prathiwi Widyatmi Putri, Section of International Agricultural Policy and Resource Governance, Faculty of Organic Agricultural Science, University of Kassel, Steinstr. 19, Witzenhausen 37213, Germany.

Email: prathiwi.putri@uni-kassel.de

The latter approach to the everyday life of big cities has become rather familiar in Indonesian urban studies through, for example, the works of Abdoumalig Simone (e.g. Simone, 2014).

During Jakarta's last decade I met Helga and Eric there, and brief email contacts followed. They showed an open and friendly approach to an exchange of views. I hope this article may open further constructive conversations, following their highly productive project and several resulting publications. I engage their scholarship and find it necessary to provide some critiques, as Jakarta has been my own research field for the last 14 years and the locus of my involvement in social movements for much longer. My main interest focuses on the first four articles and especially the 2018 publication that shows a strong intention to engage with Jakarta's *kampungs*. My main observation on the Jakarta moment of Leitner and Sheppard's long trajectory of scholarship is that they have taken a wrong turn in provincialising critical urban theories by disconnecting *kampungs* from the whole social reproduction cycle. As one consequence, they overlook the political domain of social reproduction and the possibilities *kampungs* hold as collective political bodies beyond individual survival strategies (see especially the speculative urbanism thesis).

Within the brevity of this article, the following sections aim to qualify the claims mentioned above. First, I acknowledge the value of Leitner and Sheppard's contributions, but point to junctures they may have missed for deploying more progressive urban theoretical options. Second, I explain key uncultivated areas of social reproduction to expand Leitner and Sheppard's research agenda in Jakarta, while echoing some recent contributions in the literature. Last, I urge the formulation of a new research agenda on 'the political', hoping that such a process makes sense for other Indonesian scholars and scholar-activists. I provide no conclusion.

A contribution on variegated urbanisation processes

Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard, in collaboration with Indonesian scholars, reveal the diverse roles of agents in shaping contemporary urbanisation processes in Jakarta: from global real-estate players to Indonesian private developers and contractors (Herlambang et al., 2019; Liong et al., 2020), as well as the involvement of statutory bodies, *kampung* communities and advocacy stemming from non-governmental organisations (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018; Leitner et al., 2022). It is a very exciting collaborative project, benefitting from decades of research and consulting practices within the University of Tarumanagara, focused on real-estate and town planning, development and management. Before the advent of the critical scholars, the works of the Jakartan scholars were rarely reflected beyond their interest in regulation and innovation of the property sector as part of a broader spatial development within the mechanism of growth redistribution; this academic tradition was very much influenced by the scholarship of the faculty's founder, Jo Santoso, who had been educated in late 1970s Germany. At the same time, Leitner and Sheppard seek to capture the (forgotten) empirical details while debunking the myths of some grant theories about capitalism and neoliberalism.

Three main empirical lessons could be drawn from their project (my summary in what follows). First, multiple agential interactions shape spatial urban development within particular social-political moments, wherein agencies asymmetrically influence the (authoritarian, neoliberal) project of place-making; physical access to a particular terrain (either state-registered land or *kampung* occupation) meets fluid capital and this creates another, potentially bigger, opportunity for profit accumulation and political influences (Herlambang et al., 2019; Leitner et al., 2022; Liong et al., 2020). Second, despite ruptures (economic crises or evictions), privileged agents (mostly developers, but also *kampung* elites) have managed to help thicken the institutions on which they used to rely to continue benefitting (and profiting); this has been made possible by the irregularity of informal policy processes, through which elites occupy the state domain and shape policy (Herlambang et al., 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018). Third, with unequal socio-economic processes, prominent places

acquire more central roles in the Jakarta Metropolitan Area for (future) profit making. The renewed spatial structures have re-embraced the institutionalisation of innovative real estate mechanisms and technologies (i.e. the translation from spatial planning acts to planning instruments as parts of the statutory regulatory framework), resulting in the landscape of high-rise super blocks (Herlambang et al., 2019; Liong et al., 2020).

Certainly, Leitner and Sheppard document important dynamics that are barely discussed in Indonesian urban studies. They name specific private companies and politicians as responsible for executing particular institutionalisation processes within the informal regulatory systems (Herlambang et al., 2019; Liong et al., 2020). Modalities of displacement in Jakarta have been categorised: forced displacements with state violence to guard state-led development projects (i.e. the case of river basin development evicting old *kampung*s in urban Jakarta) (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 448–450); negotiated displacements to lubricate capitalist land occupations (i.e. the development of new central business districts in urban Jakarta) (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 445–448); and market-induced displacements, neither voluntary nor forced, that occur at a rather slow speculative pace without necessarily involving direct transactions with big developers (i.e. the peri-urban transformations around the industrial regions of metropolitan Jakarta) (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018; Leitner et al., 2022). They show the everyday mechanisms that allow some re-creations of *kampung*s in lower-valued lands on the urban peripheries, in this way permitting communities to maintain certain commoning practices.

While they have documented interesting correlations among empirical dynamics (with diverse agencies, institutions and structures), I have some reservations regarding certain causal explanations and abstractions. To Leitner and Sheppard, the negotiated and market-induced displacements are a case of non-dispossessed communities. They exemplify resistance to the capitalist space-economy. Taking that view, Leitner and Sheppard offer some criticism of David Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' thesis (Harvey, 2003). They argue that displacements do not necessarily lead to dispossession, as they can facilitate 'micro-accumulation strategies'; 'not only capitalists have the opportunity to accumulate, but a variety of actors accumulate wealth and power through the land transformation process, albeit unequally' (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 442). In different locations, those evicted started a new life; some of them even managed to build extra rooms to rent out to the landless (Leitner et al., 2022). Not all displacements, they also argue, end with the commodification of the sites that have been seized. In the context of river basin evictions, the state was deemed to have no intention to commodify the land in the capitalist land market because it sought to manage it to prevent flooding (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 445, 448–449).

My response is given here. It is true that the state might not commodify particular lands in the capitalist land market, as in the case of the ecological modernisation of the river basin project (as reported in Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 445, 448–449). However, the forced eviction has opened room for regularising the social reproduction sphere under the capitalist logic by universalising several forms of basic services, from housing to water and electricity. Massive evictions in Jakarta have been accompanied by forced resettlements into high-rise public housing blocks (*Rusunawa*). There, access to basic services requires regular monetary payments that are ill-suited to the majority of household income structures. Households in *Rusunawa* are frequently indebted to the state housing management body, as many services can only be accessed through monetary transactions within the privatised-public and market provisions (rather than through reciprocal exchanges). They became 'equal' to the middle classes in regard to the piped-water tariff and its payment through bank accounts. Beyond *kampung*s, the Jakarta water sector has been at the heart of neoliberal experiments, from the distributive market (household consumption) to the more recent allocative market for channelling bulk water (to the massive development of high-rise super blocks).

It is a weak explanation to put *kampung* elites and developers within a shared category designated as 'accumulation'. It leaves unanswered the question of what petty rentiers do with their profits, if not

consuming them in the capitalist market while juggling to maintain their own social reproduction. In contrast, the developers tend to secure the accumulated capital for further investment and financial speculation. Consequently, it is too soon to qualify *kampung* characteristics, based on the experiences of the ‘non-dispossessed’ groups, as more-than-capitalist ways of livelihood practices and urbanity, or to glorify them as urban commoners (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 438–452). The explanatory propositions will sound different if *kampungs* and displacements are located within the sphere of social reproduction (see further in the second section). If we aim at ‘exceeding the capitalist space-economy’ (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018: 441) in the sense of paving possibilities for post-capitalist societies, provincialising will mean differentiating ‘local’ transforming agencies and institutions and separating them from the neoliberal-feudal-authoritarian mixtures, by recognising the conditions of possibilities for these agencies and institutions to flourish (see the last section).

Provincialising critical theories and the junction before the wrong turns

In stating my reservations, I am not promoting a broader empirical research with precision – as in the positivist approach – or relative truth, as in the extreme constructionism. I seek to advocate rigorous explanations of causality to improve our conceptual abstraction. Fundamentally, we need a clearer methodological position to qualify particular structural problems faced by agents and recognise possible institutional changes (for better or worse). It is at this junction of positioning that I think I discovered where the wrong turns of provincialising begin. Rather than taking up space to explain a critical realist methodological position, a brief discussion of neoliberalism will illustrate it – especially as the topic is also relevant for the rest of this article.

Pivoting on nuanced correlations of events, Leitner and Sheppard argue against the universalising claims regarding capitalist political economy and its contemporary regulatory politics, known as neoliberalism. With their sympathetic gestures towards more recent postcolonial urban studies (see their review in Leitner and Sheppard, 2016), they view place-specific political-economic formations not as a variegated form of neoliberalisation but instead as ‘a hybrid formation’ that feature aspects of both ‘neoliberalisation and its other(s)’ (Herlambang et al., 2019: 631). The meaning of variegation needs clarification in regard to its use for understanding the outplays of structural elements in general, rather than being conceptually agnostic towards neoliberalism in particular.

Perhaps Leitner and Sheppard’s approach to neoliberalism reflects an earlier position in viewing the necessary role of space in theorising societal processes (Sheppard, 1996), as a response to a critical realist question asking whether spatial structure enforces necessary causal relations or is contingent in bringing about particular differences (Sayer, 1985). While it is relevant to revisit the Sheppard–Sayer conversation on its own, for now I would hold onto the following. The power of spatial structures affects transformations contingently, depending on the formal configurations of other things (such as the international labour market, product market and capital as well as cultural and political traditions in resource management that might emerge at the national and local levels), but also depending on the outplays of all together (individual actualisations of the configurative elements and multiple reactions with emerging effects) (following Sayer, 2012). This is not to see the world in hyper-contingency or as a matter of agential instantiation; structures exist and some are more powerful and durable than others (Archer, 1982; see also Moulaert et al., 2016).

Methodologically, our explanations concerning ‘hybrids’ (if the word ‘variegation’ is deemed too determining) shall not be reduced to their appearance and/or contingent characters. We need to keep uncovering the deeper contours within which components are (re)produced and (re)shaped, but at the same time to account for the emergent attributes and effects beyond the sum of the components. Definitely, neoliberalism is an explanatory concept for emergent structural phenomena that cannot be reduced to the (original) attributes of their components, but we can observe and register neoliberalism in the concrete research by tracing diverse symptoms. I shall not repeat here the well-developed

arguments on the various constitutive components and materialisation processes of neoliberalism (as a mode of regulation and/or ideology of anti-collective subject formation) (e.g. Peck, 2013; Peck and Theodore, 2019). Left-leaning Indonesian scholars who engage with social movements (e.g. Bachriadi and Suryana, 2016; Habibi and Juliawan, 2018; Mudhoffir and A'yun, 2021) have shown how illiberal, feudal and patriarchal mechanisms in Indonesia are coexistently in play with capital accumulations, and in what ways these different mechanisms are co-actualised and even internalised within the DNA of capitalism and neoliberal development logics (see also Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 22). Certainly more nuanced discussions are needed; it is the capitalist gene that continuously needs to be implanted outside its own body (Katz, 2001) after copying different DNAs from others. Social reproduction is the sphere in which these mixtures may be observed and, perhaps, their becoming and being may be explained.

Dispossession: Locating *kampungs* within the social reproduction sphere

Time and again, *kampungs* are evicted. Time and again, they reappear. In Jakarta, they persist as rural-to-urban migration continues due to the 'concessionary capitalism' that necessitates massive land grabbing for industrialised plantations, mining and other forms of industry that separate rural communities from their traditional livelihoods (Batubara and Rachman, 2022). The relative surplus population has no option but informal labour with different positions towards the capitalist economy (Habibi and Juliawan, 2018). *Kampung* communities are not only sources of cheap labour for the (informalised) urban sector, but also provide housing and other services to new migrants. Despite growth, capitalists in Indonesia have shirked their responsibility to create social reproduction systems; as such, the social reproduction of *kampungs* has become its nurturing ecology. Households and neighbourhoods in *kampungs* serve as reproduction cells for maintaining the social relations of capitalist production and their own social-ecological metabolism. In an absence of secure waged work, eviction only jeopardises reciprocal mechanisms for community welfare and disrupts their subsistence reliance on nature; houses might be redeveloped fast elsewhere, but not their banana and bamboo bushes that perform inter-generationally as food system and environmental protection (Putri, 2019). However, dispossession is not only created through eviction, and takes other forms than the land or property grab.

Drawing on the works of Silvia Federici and Tithi Bhattacharya among others, and cultivating the gaps these leave, Naidu (2023) revisits the 'circuit of social reproduction' to account for the totality of works needed (including those nature must provide) in the reproduction of living life that is commodified, classed, racialised, gendered and, in general, socially divided. In her article – illustrated with stories and diagrams – social reproduction is a sphere that not only regenerates waged labour markets by supplying bodily workers to produce commodities, but also contributes values created through non-capitalist commodity production and subsistence provision that might include natural resource appropriation (with relatively simple technologies). The sphere contains nuanced processes of needs satisfaction beyond the consumption of capitalist commodities and/or monetary purchase via the market (Naidu, 2023: 99). With her help in detailing empirical categories within the circuit of social reproduction, we can make sense of the double movement of dispossession: to sell bodily work in the capitalist labour market, and to enter the capitalist individualist consumption sphere while losing often-more-sustainable self-provisioning systems (formerly in play, socially and ecologically). Even without being physically evicted from their homes, people are displaced from their own living domains into the sites of exploitation and expropriation.

The stories go on. The exploitative character of capitalism has exceeded the orthodoxy of what capitalist society might look like (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). It is within the sphere of social reproduction that the capitalist creations of property rights and mechanisms of (land) rent relations manifest as

distinct processes, different from accumulation through the productive relations of labour mobilisation and exploitation (Andreucci et al., 2017). A creation of new rent relations is a rather universal characteristic of neoliberalism, yet variegated spatially and temporally (Aalbers, 2016). Rent relation is necessary for the so-called value grabbing or ‘the appropriation of surplus value through rent’ (Andreucci et al., 2017: 42). Value grabbing happens along with ‘pseudo-commodification’ or creations of assets that partially or fully have no value as embodied labour time, but have use- and exchange value determined by the regime and institution of property rights (García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016). Particular forms of acknowledgement and institutionalisation of property rights and rent relations lead to assetisation and financialisation mechanisms, which matter for the neoliberal forms of accumulation (Ward and Swyngedouw, 2018). In Jakarta, these mechanisms take shape in certification of land and building in *kampung*s, as well as regulation of access to state subsidies and infrastructural services through banking systems.

Altogether, these contemporary processes occurring at the global scale only worsen the circuit of social reproduction even more. It is ‘capitalism’s crisis of care’ that we witness (Fraser, 2016), in which all are in struggle to put life back into quality with improved social bonds and needs satisfaction, while facing time poverty to practise solidarity. Yet another story to tell.

The political in the sphere of social reproduction

Marxist and other left-leaning scholars highlight the transformation processes in each mode of capitalist accumulation (i.e. conceptualised as ‘primitive accumulation’, ‘accumulation through expanded reproduction’ and neoliberal forms of primitive accumulation or ‘accumulation by dispossession’), but draw different political conclusions from their diverse readings on the socio-spatial transformations (see Glassman, 2006). As the main property of primitive accumulation, proletarianisation has political consequences for both peasants and the dispossessed who become wage labourers. It is the latter that are usually deemed potential social agents for radical change and post-capitalist society (Marx and Marx and Engels in Glassman, 2006: 611), despite diverse violent social relations under which labourers remain living (e.g. an unfair labour market, rather than a total freedom from slavery or a feudal system of oppression) are also experienced by peasants and non-waged workers, and this potentially become the basis for radical alliances. However, primitive accumulation is not merely ‘the origin’ of capitalism. Its evolving forms have proliferated in the Global South, where they have caused conflict and raised counter-movements (Harvey, 2007). Diverse forms of violence, a topic which has helped cross-fertilise the Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory (Glassman, 2011), have become the integral parts of today’s dispossession. The ambiguous postcolonial state – with its militaristic approach to evictions on one hand and its persuasive participatory yet marginalising approach to development on the other hand – operates along with all kinds of agencies (from thugs and paramilitaries to international donors and developmental agencies). With varying situations in which all modalities of capitalist accumulation operate, in concert or in chaos, it is harder to understand the political consequences, as groups affected by capitalist development are highly stratified by simultaneous diverse structures.

As capitalism works by riding on older institutions to facilitate the institutionalisation of newer spatial and economic productions, there exist internal counter-productive mechanisms generated by the hybrid institutions that operate with multiple (chaotic) logics. With varying contradictions and contestations reacting to it, neoliberalism keeps performing as ‘a political scheme aimed at re-establishing the conditions for capital accumulation and the restoration of class power’ (Harvey, 2007: 29). Neoliberalism does not necessarily advocate liberal democracy that supposedly channels varying claims to citizenship (Mudhoffir and A’yun, 2021). In this situation, the undemocratic state has often been seen as the common enemy of heterogeneous social movements.

Although hegemonic everyday relations in *kampung*s might perform as non-deliberative resistance to capitalist accumulative processes, it is no less important to represent those who have been consciously struggling over their livelihoods and rights to housing. These actors *collectively* contest the commodification of space, like the *kampung* resistance in Bukit Duri (partly documented in Putri, 2020). This quality of being collectively political is necessarily different from pursuing *individual* survival strategies. In Bukit Duri, the grassroots organisation Ciliwung Merdeka had already worked with the community long before the eviction and been part of a broader urban movement network, significantly linked and activated by Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota (JRMK, or the Urban Poor Network in literal translation). The role of JRMK is to help organise victims to defend the places to which they think they belong, and contest the existing state-led housing provision system. Rather than accepting forced relocation into state-owned social housing where they would be tenants, the movement demanded self-planned and self-managed housing blocks.

In Indonesia, the political properties of urban poor have often been disregarded. Interrelated historical factors have influenced the structural exclusion of the informal. Massive militaristic repressions targeting grassroots organisations during 1965, including the mass murder of communist-party members and leftist grassroots activists, has effectively enfeebled bottom-up and bottom-linked social and political forces to secure community welfare. There has been little precedence for the urban poor to consolidate with other sectoral struggles towards a robust transformative movement. Yet the time for consolidation has arrived; in the deep jungle of oligarchs' political parties, a grassroots Indonesian labour party has emerged from inter-sectoral coalitions, including the urban poor movement.

The political might not directly, or solely, address capitalist accumulation per se, but it helps to map processes of injustice while practising equality among the group members, eluding the established institutions and societal practices of unfair socio-economic development (see also Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). While fighting against the undemocratic state and its allies, it has to offer alternatives within the everyday sphere – and vice versa. Such breakthroughs open up a new political domain in the way they help unfold political sequences to overcome diverse contours of inequality. These sequences seem to unfold in infinite ways, embodying innovations and experimentations of conscious and organised yet resilient collectives. A political sequence may unfold when insurgent bodies address 'the necessity of social reproduction' for fostering community well-being, rather than for (unconsciously) nurturing the vagabondage of capitalist socio-economic relations (Katz, 2001).

Acknowledgement

The research agenda in this article makes sense to me as I witness *kampung* life from within. My parents, lower-mid-level hospital workers, began to reside in the most southeast corner of Jakarta in 1977, in a *kampung* some 20 km away from their workplace. They live in just enough space with three kids and come-and-go relatives, making it impossible to be part of a petty-rentier class benefitting from the landless. Their pure waged economy, in the absence of a formal state welfare system, was buttressed by the family medical service from the Catholic hospital and internal cross-subsidy of tuition in the Catholic schools (that today cannot avoid private school commercialisation). Recently, the hospital's foundation launched a policy to stop the regular monthly pension and paid the pensioners a one-off lump-sum grant. My parents are not the poorest in the *kampung*, in which a single mother also resided after being evicted from elsewhere, renting a room and getting irregular income by washing clothes from household to household. I received encouragement to finish this article from some friends: Amalinda Savirani, Bosman Batubara, Sofia Pagliarin and especially Penelope Anthias and Callum Ward. The last two have engaged in conversations and written comments on the earlier drafts. Callum has provided insightful discussion of rent theory literature. Beyond our time in Copenhagen, Penelope always shows strong positions on decolonising knowledge and academic practices. A virtual discussion with Jamie Peck as the journal's editor has been highly valuable, supported by helpful comments from two referees. I heartily thank all, while remaining personally responsible for the errors that remain in my arguments.

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