

BOOK REVIEW

Social Unrest and Distrust

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Title:
Shadow Play: Information Politics in Urban Indonesia

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Shadow Play provides an ethnography of urban everyday life by showing Yogyakarta as a space of interaction with the relocation process. I am curious as to why Gibbings used the term Shadow Play to begin with. Is it referring to how Gibbings interprets from her research? I am also interested in the view on politics that Gibbings wanted to describe behind shadow play. For me, the terminology that Gibbings used offered a new perspective on how the relocation of traders was not solely about the displacement of a group of people but it also showed how the ecology of information was practiced (p.5) that proved politics was not exposed with from government to the citizens, especially the traders. The tug-of-war in treaty-making following the collapse of the authoritarian regime through the 1998 reform agenda has seen the government's power dynamics take different paths in maintaining relations with the citizens behind it and this book seeks to show how those tug-of-war relationships were shaped.

From this book, Gibbings explicitly offers two introductory arguments to evoke the readers as her main ideas. First, how the study of information politics control is a relation of subjects that can change at any time, along with the involvement of stakeholders daily. Second, by focusing on information politics, Gibbings exposes the relationship between the state and its citizens, particularly in post-authoritarian situations.

Gibbings shows the argument that various explorations of the relocation of traders in the Indonesian context can be traced by relating narratives from the dynamic social class and the



bureaucracy behind it. Gibbings tried to explore the possibilities for readers to avoid the dichotomy, temporary approval, or rejection of the relocation events. However, Gibbings also showed how the game of information politics has long-term consequences full of negotiations. Information politics has an explicit impact on the outcomes and conclusions, there would be no winner or loser for the victims after developmentalism.

WHAT IS INFORMATION POLITICS?

Gibbings' book consists of ten chapters with an introduction, eight chapters full of the ups and downs of Pethikbumi traders negotiating their position with the government, and a concluding section. I would like to underline that the conclusion of this book summarizes and explains more generally how the information circulating Pethikbumi traders, NGO workers, and the Yogyakarta city government works in its way, creating conflicting interests over who is the victim and the perpetrator.

The beginning of second chapter begins with an explanation of the information Gibbings received in terms of socialization as a way to carry out 'the politics of containment'. As we know, *sosialisasi* (socialization) is the government's way of conveying the expected truth and acts as an attempt to bring up a discourse in developing the politics of containment behind the threat of social unrest. Before the reformation in 1998, information chaos and resistance to development discourses once developed uncontrollably because the New Order government only placed socialization as a repertoire of democracy alone, this was what triggered resistance continued to occur.

In the third chapter, Gibbings shows us how *sosialisasi* (socialization) has a special meaning for information politics, which can be seen through two characteristics as the material aspects: first, '*sosialisasi*' is a space to access official documents regarding urban planning and management that are increasingly transparent but dynamic. Second, how the ease of access was supported by open dialogues with the government, the Pethikbumi association, and non-governmental organizations that did not exist in the New Order development era. Gibbings connects the implications of information politics that characterize the democratization process with the emergence of transparency-based public oversight, which is explored in the fourth chapter by creating spaces for dialogues and document dissemination.

Through the presentation of interactions between the Pethikbumi traders association, the Yogyakarta city government, non-governmental organizations, and the intervention of students as monitors of the relocation plan, Gibbings opens with her main argument that interactions can be considered as the easiest description of measurable and systemized surveillance daily. The interactions allowed Gibbings to see who was watching whom (p.92). In the main argument of this section, Gibbings then reinforces the belief that democratization makes it easier to observe each other.

In chapter five, the results of public scrutiny are linked to information disclosure through news releases to the mass media. The news release process is an effort to implicitly construct the truth, which Gibbings calls a hidden message (p. 124). The hidden message emphasizes the strengthening of the role of non-governmental organizations, advocates, and Pethikbumi community leaders in exposing the results of supervision in the veil of the mass media so that the public can assess it transparently. Gibbings also reveals that transparency became the new

desire for the growth of democracy without the pressure from the government's power in the post-reform era.

Gibbings' advocacy for the Pethikbumi traders, which has been mentioned in the previous chapters, reaches a peak of conflict as the possibility of relocation approaches and is recounted in the sixth chapter. The use of physical violence as an open negotiation over the city government's insistence on information transparency somehow becomes a rational choice. Gibbings explains coherently how the physical clashes with the authorities created by the Yogyakarta City Satpol PP (Public Order Agency) were initially formed because verbal negotiations were deadlocked. Unfortunately, violence became the way, so Gibbings argues, the initiation done by the activists of non-governmental organizations and the Pethikbumi traders' association showed that bargaining cannot be done only verbally or in writing, but requires physical insistence.

I examined that Gibbings brought up the relocation phenomenon in her argument as an event where seemingly never-ending conspiracies and settlements created 'oknum' (a certain group of people) in the making. This brings us to the basic assumption where Gibbings explains the finding of new actors that were created organically (p. 172), as a negotiation process that keeps the pros and cons vacillating and inconsistent during the relocation rejection process. The presence of 'oknum' illustrates actors who have agency, so that the relocation rejection then culminates in reaching a consensus with the mayor of Yogyakarta to carry out the relocation legally.

The exploration of the issue of the creation process of 'oknum', which is part of chapter eight, is again argued by Gibbings who explains that the role of the creation is used to cover the role of the public more thoroughly. The creation process is linked to the situation of the city government which has the assumption that the relocation will be conducted as a peaceful event if it was done by a fair dialogue. However, in the opposite situation, Gibbings states that some relocated Pethikbumi traders felt that the conflict created was not natural, but a conflict fabricated by multiple stakeholders (p. 185). Gibbings then presents several hypotheses at the end of the explanation regarding the actors who reportedly played a role in the relocation event.

However, when Gibbings disposed the results of an interview with a police officer who was one of the intelligence officers working in the Pethikbumi relocation riots, the findings obtained from the authorities' perspective emerged that the relocation was a formula for creating a politically engineered arena of social unrest to achieve a balanced economic negotiation agreement.

In the ninth chapter, Gibbings emphasizes that Pethikbumi traders who were both pro and contra to the relocation experienced different impacts according to their choices. An interesting conclusion from reading this chapter is that Gibbings illustrates that pro-relocation traders experienced vulnerability when new, well-capitalized traders came to compete. However, at the same time, some traders who chose the contra position gained access to assistance and realized political bargaining power in advocating their trade affairs with the Yogyakarta city government (p. 220).

Completing the last chapter, Gibbings reflects that *Shadow Play Information Politics in Urban Indonesia* aims to address the challenge of how ethnography can be applied to understand the relationship between street vendors and the state, as well as other interests around them. Likewise, in the paradox of information politics in Indonesia after the end of the Soeharto regime, information politics is a force that still inherits masculinity today because Gibbings found that men carried out all the negotiation efforts as representatives of the leading actors of each stakeholder (p. 226).

Shadow Play's book description and contribution to the dynamics of relocation involves the economic and political landscapes in Indonesia to date. Creating an information politics, without exposing -layer by layer- the "real" faces of community observers outside the pro and con relocation actors, non-governmental organizations, public advocates, student activists, and the role of mass media to convey messages that makes social unrest quite dominant at first but can suppress direct violence-based conflict. These factors shape activism in relocation that can no longer be expressed in moral terms, but in rational choices. Rationality often plays out in front of the screen which, of course, through Gibbings' study, the contribution of everyday stories of the various tug-of-war of relocation actions can reveal the failure or success of the city government in managing power relations for the residents within it. Thus, Gibbings' study for me is quite helpful for the readers to be able to know how development can work from each intersecting interest and not based on the assumptions of one-sided needs only. --