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LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

Routine work: Authorizing representation in East Javanese regional politics

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

'Indonesian politics are broken.'

'All politicians are corrupt.'

'They don't care for the little people.'

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, ladies and gentlemen,

During the time I spent in East Java, in the years 2011, 2013, and 2014, I heard countless variations of these criticisms, from all walks of life, in response to my admission that I studied the activities of politicians. What is it like to be a politician, when, at least behind your back, practically nobody respects you? Max Weber (1946 [1919]: 128) once said that only the kind of person who can take this kind of criticism, his phrase was 'shall not crumble', has the calling for politics. My PhD dissertation is a study of these kinds of persons, an ethnography of East Javanese politicians.

Weber had a typology of four kinds of politicians—the prophet, the gang leader, the demagogue, and the parliamentary party leader—which implied a modernization narrative from magic to rational parliamentary politics (2004). However, this study shows that this narrative is false. These kinds of political figures coexist in most, if not all, political systems. Moreover, they might coexist within a single politician as various repertoires or voices for the politician to utilize depending on the context.

In this PhD dissertation, I have examined how East Javanese municipal politicians argue for their views, and what kinds of authorizations they use for their politics. Specific attention has been paid to the way conflicting viewpoints are mediated in political practice, and through what kinds of ideologies these plural viewpoints and authorizations are framed and interpreted.

The data analysed in my dissertation was collected during two periods of fieldwork, the first one in 2011, which lasted two months, and the second one in 2013–2014, which lasted twelve months. The focus of my efforts were the two regional councils in the city and the regency of Malang. Initially, I went to every single public event organized by the councils,

in order to meet with the councillors and introduce my research to them. Gradually, the councillors began to invite me to political events organized by the local party chapters, opening up the range of political events that I was able to access. Towards the end of my stay, when the campaigning efforts of the party chapters intensified because of the impending general elections, I got to know people from the smaller extra-parliamentary parties as well, widening my political palate even further.

While I conducted a lot of interviews as well, the core of my fieldwork data consisted of political events, where the politicians, mostly councillors or would-be-councillors, gave speeches. These oratories and their reception are at the heart of this dissertation. I focus on four different contexts: town-hall type meetings during parliamentary recess, public hearings on draft regional bylaws, campaign events, and plenary sessions in the regional councils. Even though these are all singular events, and for the audience members, somewhat special, for the politician, my argument goes, participating in these events is routine work. Their days are filled with these kinds of events, which comprise the public side of politics in Malang, in Indonesia, and in much of the rest of the world.

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Before moving on to discuss the results of my study, I will contextualize my findings for those not familiar with Indonesian history. From a European perspective, on the face of it, Indonesian politics might seem to be exotic or radically different, but on closer inspection, there are significant similarities. I will give three examples. First, during the reign of President Suharto, which lasted from the year 1966 to the year 1998, political parties—well, except his own—were not allowed to campaign outside cities. While this sounds like a radical curtailment of political rights, Weber (2004: 60) has noted that during the formative period of party politics in Europe, the situation outside the cities was similar: political participation and organization did not exist.

A second historical continuity relates to the concept of political streams that Clifford Geertz called *aliran* (1959: 37), in his analysis of the social organization of East Javanese society in the 1950s. These streams were groupings of people based on political affiliation, combined with a set of social organizations. Originally, there were four of them: one for the communists, one for the nationalists, one for so-called modernist Muslims, and a fourth one for the so-called traditionalist Muslims. I argue in my thesis that these streams have continuing relevance in Javanese politics. In her study of the organization of traditionalist Muslims, Robin Bush (2009: 21) argues that the idea of *aliran* is based on a Dutch system of representative pillars of society, which for a long time characterized Finnish politics as well. Integral to this idea is having parties and associated organizations that represent different groups or classes of the society.

Thirdly, we have the concept of patronage, which means the use of money or influence by a patron, to advance the interests of someone or something, for example a politician or a political party. In Europe, it is still often thought that patronage is something peculiar to political systems in the global South, a line of thought that has echoes of Karl Marx's orientalist thinking regarding 'Asian despotism'. In reality, however, as recent anthropological evidence from around the world shows, patronage is an integral part of democratic politics everywhere. The discourse of liberal democracy denies this history, the fundamentally hierarchical nature of political action, or at best, relegates it to a residual category of the analysis.

So, we have three historical characteristics of a political system: geographically limited political rights, party choice based on group characteristics instead of individual political thinking, and, finally, hierarchical relationships instead of egalitarian ones.

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As I encountered the echoes of this political history in East Javanese contemporary political practice, I often wondered during my fieldwork, what is democracy, then, from a genealogical perspective? Rule of the people, but with historically contingent caveats? For example, caveats such as I just described: arbitrary restrictions based on place, collective organizations that struggle against each other, and finally, individuals using their disproportionate influence to effectuate the direction of politics.

These boundary conditions point to the problem that was already posed by Thomas Hobbes and other Enlightenment thinkers: what is the moral authority of a political system? Joel Kuipers, recontextualizing Hobbes from the perspective of linguistic anthropology, contends that for Hobbes, authority was a communicative phenomenon (Kuipers 2013). Hobbes (1998 [1651]: 107) argued that politicians do not own their words and actions, but instead, they are owned by the people the politicians represent. These owners—the people—he calls authors. When the politicians act according to these authors, they act with authority. In this communicative model, the representatives authorize the politician's acts. While philosophically this makes sense, in practice, things are not as straightforward. For example, what if it is unclear if the politician's actions are according to the representatives' wishes? In other words, there is a dialectical relationship between the one who represents and the one who is represented. Both seek the recognition of the other.

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that in these kinds of situations, when somebody attempts to speak on behalf of others and represent them, conflicts of authority are inevitable. So who authorizes whom in these situations? Bourdieu calls it—true to his verbose style—'the misrecognized circular circulation of recognition' (2005: 61), meaning that the representative needs to mobilize the group, but they owe this power to the same group, the people they represent. In Bourdieu's words, this is the 'mystery of ministry', meaning that there is an ideological component to the authorization of representation, which is only partially recognized by the people involved. Politicians and their electors are aware of their codependency in a democracy, but the exact dynamics of this relationship are not explicitly spelt out.

In this study, I argue that this 'mystery' of authority should be studied from the perspective of communication. More specifically, I adopt a perspective that emphasizes the performative effects of language, as advocated by Judith Butler. Her analysis of 'linguistic vulnerability' (1997), the interpellative power of language to fail us against our best efforts, applies, with due alteration of details, to the predicament of East Javanese politicians as well. In a nutshell, Indonesian politicians face a continuous risk of not being recognized as valid representatives by their constituents. Because of the bad public image politics has, this risk of failed communication, what I call, after Webb Keane (1997), 'semiotic risk' in this thesis, is significant. If the communication fails in its performative of authorization, the politician is revealed to be somebody, who is not worthy to act on behalf of others—a selfish pseudo-politician.

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Back to Indonesia's political history—in 1998, after months of popular protest, President Suharto stepped down. Suddenly Indonesia was plunged from being a dreary dictatorship into a poster child of democracy in Southeast Asia. Political rights were much improved—to list a few examples, the restrictions on political parties were lifted, steps were taken to improve the accountability of politicians, and from 2005 onwards, governors, mayors and regents were chosen in a direct election, making local politics much more oriented towards the constituency. In short, during the first ten years of Reformasi, Indonesian politics took a long leap towards the liberal democratic model.

James Siegel, who has studied the challenges of representation and recognition in Indonesia both during the times of Suharto, and the ensuing Reformasi era, has argued that in Indonesia, there is a fundamental problem within the dynamic of representation and recognition, because the social hierarchy of the colonial era was never really upturned, but on the contrary, brutally reinstated by the communist purge of the 1960s (Siegel 1997: 6). Reformasi brought increased power to the people, but the hierarchical models of society mostly stayed the same. This means that politicians have a bit of a schizophrenic role to play: they must be *tokoh*, or big shots, but ideally, also servants of the people. In this way, hierarchy and egalitarianism are irrevocably intertwined. Also, Reformasi brought increased voter mobility, which means increased instability in the political system, making elections very competitive.

So, Indonesia has a competitive political system with a bad reputation. In these circumstances, voters get tired of politicians quickly. How do politicians attempt to sidestep this built-in problem of antinomy in representation? I will give three concrete examples from my dissertation.

One of my research partners that I call Bu Lia in the thesis was a wealthy, educated, middle-aged woman, whose expertise was educational policy. In many ways, she epitomized the radical democratic promise of the late 1990s called the *Reformasi*, in the way she viewed the policies she had been implementing as an expression of the people's will. When she discussed the improvements in educational policy with her constituents, she used a distinct style of speaking that implied a shared intimacy between herself and her constituents. But this was not her only style of expression. She also spoke to her electors as their superior, as a public administrator, advising the citizens on how to behave and how to act. Within a single oratory, both of these styles of speaking could appear. It was a balancing act of a politician acutely aware of the contradiction between the figures of a *Reformasi* politician and a patron.

My second example is the *sakera*, a dance style recently invented in East Java, where men dress as an anti-colonial and magical hero of the past, and menacingly swing the traditional curved knives from the island of Madura. Symbolically speaking, the *sakera* dance is a concentration of opposites. Historically speaking, Sakera was one of the main characters in a theatrical genre called *ludruk*, which was considered to be a coarse, transgressive, and anti-Islamic artform. This contradictory cultural hero, and a contradictory form of performance art, was used in an election rally of an Islamic party to dramatic effect: the message conveyed, effectively, was that the traditional orthodox Islam of East Java was capable of expressing all religious orientations of the region, from conservative Islam to more syncretistic expressions of faith. This idea of power being

able to combine contradictory principles is a long-running metaphysical principle in Java. In this case, the dance form communicated the idea that the political party was authorized to represent everybody in the region.

My third and final example is the rituals conducted in the regional councils of Malang. In the public plenary meetings of the councils, the councillors did not use their right of speech. Instead, a single councillor gave an oratory on behalf of the whole council. Moreover, in these speeches, no criticism towards the executive branch of the regional government was presented. A vast majority of the plenary meetings were conducted in this manner and were considered by the councillors to be successful examples of the democratic culture, a celebration of a public consensus, modelled after the most important ritual in Javanese culture called the *slametan*, which emphasizes public consonance, while tacitly acknowledging private dissonance in opinion.

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These three examples from my thesis—an oratory that oscillated between different stereotypical voices, a campaign rally with an art performance that symbolically encompassed the constituency, and a council plenary session that followed a ritual model of consensus—illustrate the breadth of politicians' repertoires in their attempts to authorize their status as representatives of the people. They also show the creativity of politicians, of the people 'who shall not crumble' when the general public thinks little of them, coming up with solutions to the problem of representation in politics. The more ritualist contexts of performance arts and plenary sessions showed clear continuities from the history of Indonesia, and the more immediate interface of the town-hall style meetings during parliamentary recess evidenced the immense change that has taken place in Indonesian political practice: the routine work of East Javanese politicians consists both of partaking in ritualized activities and presenting oneself as a politician that is accountable to her constituency.

All of this is part of the work of democracy. The lesson to learn from all this is that democratic politics should be understood as a communicative phenomenon that is much more general and varied than the usual framing of politics, consisting of sincere discussions and exchanges of opinions. As the evidence from this dissertation attests, a political system can contain various understandings of how political communication works and should work. These understandings, which, in the dissertation, I call the semiotic ideologies of democracy, inform all political activity. These semiotic ideologies and their variance in a given setting should be apprehended prior to attempting to understand, criticize, or assess the functioning of a political system.

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