

On “Multitude” and the Urban Question: Reading in Times of Pandemics

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ABSTRACT

“Multitude” is a term popularized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt to conceptualize the labor condition and its political possibilities in the post-Fordist regime of capital accumulation. This paper seeks to explore such a concept in the context of an Indonesian city. It argues that the Indonesian multitude is formed through the worldwide division of labor, which involves the urban majorities whose work cut across formal and informal sectors. It teases out the absence of the “urban question” in the Indonesian city as a context for understanding the challenges faced by the Indonesian multitude. The paper (in light of post-pandemic) calls for the role of the state to serve as a medium for achieving societal goals and a guarantor of public access to Universal Basic Assets covering education, health, housing, technology, and information.

Keywords: Multitude, labor relation, the urban question, universal infrastructure, post-pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

“Multitude” is an interesting concept that can invite interdisciplinary perspectives. It can be discussed theoretically, empirically or experientially, but it can also get us easily lost in language, in translation. The literary theorist and cultural critic, Edward W. Said (1983), wrote an important piece called “Traveling Theory” in which he indicated that all theories or ideas are developed in response to specific social and historical circumstances, and when they travel from their point of origin, the power and the meaning attached to them changes as they become assimilated or localized into a new context.

First, there is a point of origin . . . a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, . . . resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some

extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place.¹

It would be an enormous task to travel from point one to point four, but it is a journey that we need to bear in mind if we use a concept such as the “multitude.” Today I can only share with you some preliminary thoughts about the concept of “multitude” and how it might or might not make sense for the context of urban Indonesia. I organize my thoughts around the following three questions:

1. What does “multitude” mean to me, analytically and empirically?
2. How might my choice of focus—the “urban question” of Indonesia—engage with the concept of “multitude” as I understand it?
3. How might the link between the “urban question” and the “multitude” concept become useful for considering the challenges and opportunities for the “urban majorities”² of the pandemic era and its association with the “new normal”?

What does “multitude” mean to me, analytically and empirically?

We owe this concept to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who popularized it through their book titled

¹ Edward Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Harvard University Press, 1983: 226–227.

² The term “urban majority” is from AbdouMaliq Simone, “Cities of Uncertainty: Jakarta, the Urban Majority, and Inventive Political Technologies,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30, 2013: 7–8.

MULTITUDE (and earlier, *EMPIRE*).³ Let's just focus on the following two quotes:

The concept of multitude is meant to re-propose Marx's political project of class struggle. The multitude from this perspective is based not so much on the current empirical existence of the class but rather on its condition of possibility . . . such a political project must clearly be grounded in an empirical analysis that demonstrates the common conditions of those who can become the multitude.⁴

In order to verify this concept of multitude and its political project we will have to establish that indeed the differences of kind that used to divide labor no longer apply, in other words, that the conditions exist for the various types of labor to communicate, collaborate, and become common.⁵

From these quotes we get a sense that when Hardt and Negri conceptualized the idea of multitude, they had in mind a formation of a new labor relation. They were trying to change the focus on a fully constituted labor (such as the proletariat) to a consideration of "various types of labor" and the shared conditions within which they might be able to "communicate, collaborate, and become common" . . . so as to work out a "condition of possibility" for carrying out a political project.

Let me now consider this conceptualization of multitude in terms of "urban theory," such as the theory of "city in transition," which is connected to both Marxist urban theory as well as modernization theory. In classical Marxist theory, urbanization is a precondition of capitalist development. It follows that such a process of urbanization, which was in the interest of the exploiting capitalist class, requires a deal with the exploited labors. The "class peace" took the form of state-mediated "collective consumption" so the workforce is proletarianized, not only through wage work, but also through the provision of facilities such as schools, hospitals, transport, housing, leisure, etc.—all of which are "collective."⁶ It follows that the growth of collective consumption has been due to "the growing power of (the) worker movement which extends its bargaining power to all areas of social life."⁷ For Manuel Castells, the "urban question" of capitalism (in the Fordist of 1960s and 1970s), therefore, should be grasped in terms of contradictions

between "collective consumption" and private expropriation.

Yet, moving forward to the 1980s, state involvement in the means of "collective consumption" since then has been devalued, and private expropriation has become dominant in most of the core countries. The truce between capital and labor was over by the time of the "neoliberal" regimes of Margaret Thatcher (in UK) and Ronald Reagan (in the US). Since then, labor relations have been reorganized from what was once identifiable as "mass labor" (as in Fordism) to "assemblage of labors" who are dispensable and disposable or replaceable according to market forces.

In Fordism, labors were strictly controlled to avoid uncertainty and their lives were accounted for through statistics in order to constitute the idea of "society," whereas in Post-Fordist conditions, uncertainty is accepted as a new norm, and flexibility is the underlying structure. And for Thatcher: "Who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first [. . .]."⁸ This quote represents a new era of post-Fordist neoliberalism that emphasizes the role of the individual in society. It follows that the privatization of public goods is considered positive and liberating for it represents the entrepreneurial spirit of the individual in generating more capital and investment. The labor is understood as an individual who must look to themselves instead of relying on the government or a union, which has been dismantled. The identity and identification of the post-Fordist labors, thus, are always in flux, continuously constructed and recomposed in and through the market. In this new condition, labors could be seen more like an assemblage of workers who are not united under an identity or a position. Instead, they are relating with each other through antagonism, competition, and frictions.

The state too can no longer govern in a unitary manner as represented by the notion of "withdrawal of the state." Meanwhile, infrastructure has become an arena for investments by business sectors. This shift has also made the concept of "collective consumption" obsolete as indicated in a special issue of *Sociological Review* in the 1990s that opined: "The collective consumption approach has not continued to develop in

³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁴ Hardt & Negri, *Multitude*: 105–6.

⁵ Ibid, 107.

⁶ Manuel Castells, writing in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, used the term "collective consumption" to measure the substance of "class peace" during the Keynesian era. See Manuel Castells, *The*

Urban Question: A Marxist Approach, MIT Press, 1977 (French version, 1972).

⁷ Castells, *ibid*, 445.

⁸ Margaret Thatcher, "Interview for 'Women's Own' ('No Such Thing as Society')" in *Margaret Thatcher Foundation: Speeches, Interviews and Other Statements*. London, 1987.

a unified way since the mid-1980s and has shown some signs of overall loss of direction and vigor.”⁹

It is in this context of the hegemonic rise of neoliberal Fordism that Hardt and Negri were grappling with—the implications of the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism for labors. The concept of multitude is an attempt not only to identify such a shift to a new condition shared by those who become the multitude, but also to explore its condition of possibility, which for Hardt and Negri is a political project.

I am basing my line of thought on a gut feeling of what the “multitude” is about. But to move on, let’s ask ourselves a question: how we could/should “localize” the concept of multitude to address the specificity of the condition of our own space and time, say in Indonesia? In the next section, I consider the urban condition of Indonesia, which unlike the Western metropole, did not experience the Fordist/post-Fordist shift, but only a continuation of private expropriation from the past to the present (since colonial time!). In what way then is the concept of multitude helpful for understanding the different conditions of urban Indonesia?

The Urban Question of the Periphery

Moving to our own space, in the periphery or semi-periphery of the world’s capitalist economy, the Fordist/post-Fordist shift of production has resulted in the move of manufacturing industries away from the core countries to the developing countries, in such a way that a *new* international division of labor emerged. This spatial decentralization affected the core and peripheral countries differently. In the core countries, there was significant deindustrialization, unemployment (or shift of employment to precarious jobs), and the declining power of labor unions to bargain for pay and job security. In the peripheries, manufacturing production went to any country that offered a friendly climate for investment—low-cost labor and weak environmental laws.

With a new concentration of industrial labors in the Global South, we can ask a question: does the classic Fordist urban question (the contradiction between “collective consumption” and private expropriation) make sense for cities in the Global South? My answer to this is no. The reason is that Indonesian cities (unlike most Western cities), as I mentioned elsewhere in my study of Jakarta, “ha[ve] never implemented a unitary infrastructural ideal aimed at benefiting the wider public. Instead, the city has, from the beginning, been

represented by a series of fragmented, privately funded infrastructure projects, constructed to benefit only certain stakeholders.”¹⁰

The classic collective consumption issues, such as housing and land use, have never been prioritized, not to mention other services such as public transport, green spaces, water, electricity or gas, which are either neglected or unregulated if not “privatized.” In the absence of universal public good to foster social equality, there is no ground to formulate the “urban question” where “collective consumption” is central. Indonesians have been living with heterogenous and improvised infrastructures that do not constitute a coherent universal infrastructure for a formulation of “collective” consumption. What we have are agglomerations of unevenly constituted local or localized infrastructures.

Furthermore, industrial labors constitute only a fraction of workers in urban Indonesia. They are not the majority, and neither are they organized under a union strong enough to strike for fair pay and job security. The majority work in the informal sector.¹¹ In such a context, while capitalist development is taking place in the city, it has never fully proletarianized peasants or workers; and while deruralization is taking place (i.e., many more people indeed have moved out of the rural areas to live and work in the city), it has only incompletely urbanized the city.

So, we have here a set of disjunctures between the multitudes of the Global North and those of the Global South. There is a disjuncture on issues of labor identity and organization; disjuncture on the urban question (since there is no “collective consumption” in the form of universal infrastructural ideal for the state to mediate); and since the urban majority survive in the informal sector, there was never a truce between capital and labor. The condition within which the multitude of the Global South is constituted is very different from that of the North. In the South, there is no such dramatic shift from Fordist production to Post-Fordism. The South continues to experience a capitalist mode of exploitation sustained by semi-proletarianized households. In other words, in Indonesian and unlike in the West, the multitude is formed due to incomplete urbanization and the city’s incomplete proletarianization, not any condition that post-Fordist labors encountered.

Despite the historical disjuncture, the idea of “multitude” nevertheless invites us to raise the question of how the post-Fordist informalization of the workforce

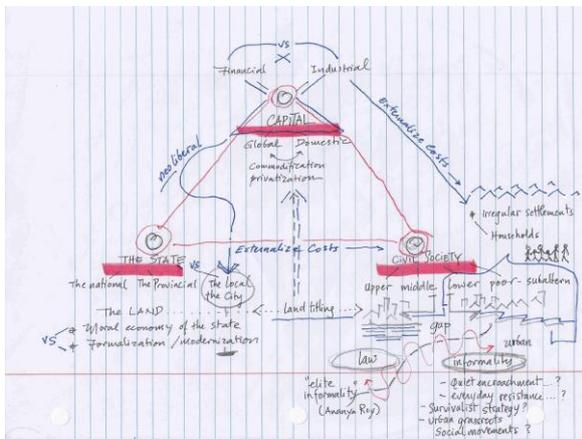
⁹ Keith Dowding and Patrick Dunleavy, “Production, disbursement and consumption: The modes and modalities of goods and services,” *Sociological Review*, Special Issue, 44, S1, 1996: 43.

¹⁰ Abidin Kusno, “Where will the Water Go?” *Indonesia*, 105, April 2018.

¹¹ The term “urban majority” is from AbdouMaliq Simone, “Cities of uncertainty: Jakarta, the urban majority, and inventive political technologies,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30, 2013: 7–8.

in the Global North might resonate with the long-standing history of informal workers in the Global South.¹² A consideration of multitude in the Global North might need to start with an understanding of the working of the multitude in the Global South.

A consideration of multitudes in an Indonesian city would need to unpack the organization of relations between capital, (informal) labor and the state. Let me consider this by briefly describing a kind of truce between the state, capital and (informal) labor under the notion of “middling Urbanism.”¹³ Central to middling urbanism is the existence and production of the irregular settlement of urban kampung (See DIAGRAM below).



We see in the diagram that the relation between the state and (global) capital requires that (formal and informal) labor be located spatially in and around the city. In the absence of land use for social housing, the relatively “self-built” and “self-managed” kampung offers affordable housing for low-wage labors and workers from both formal and informal sectors who are unable to survive elsewhere in the city.

Kampung, therefore, absorbs the costs of infrastructure and housing that the state and capital would otherwise have to cover. For both the state and capital, kampung is useful because it accommodates labor migrations, prevents unemployment, and sustains the low-wage regime of economic growth. The kampung thus forms a mutually constitutive relation with the state and capital in the co-production of a distinctive urban condition that is not based on state investment in “collective consumption” (which is lacking) or “private expropriation” alone. Instead, it absorbs the contradictory relations between the state and capital. It

serves as a spatial manifestation of “middling,” of being in the middle connecting the interests of capital, the state and labor forces.

In Hardt and Negri, the concept of multitude (and the condition of its existence) offers a way to explore the possibility of a political project beyond Marx’s definition of class struggles. For us, since kampung serves to moderate conflicts between the urban and the rural, the industrial and the preindustrial, the modern and the premodern, its existence moderate conflicts instead of serving as a site for class struggle.

As an intermediate space, kampung serves to moderate the increasingly polarized urban-rural system. One could argue, therefore, that such an arrangement prevents “class struggle” at the level of rural/urban divide. *Spatially*, the kampung is in the middle. It is not in opposition to the city nor to the countryside. Instead, it is an intermediate zone around which recent migrants from the countryside first recognize themselves as urbanites, not just in a territorial sense, but also in terms of socio-cultural practices. The collective aspirations for upward mobility of kampung inhabitants are tied to their (relatively autonomous yet dependent) relations with the state and capital.

It is in this sense that kampung could be seen as the milieu of the multitude as it too constitutes (in Hardt and Negri’s words) “the conditions for the various types of labor to communicate, collaborate, and become common.” While the conditions of the multitudes could be comparatively analyzed, it is important to remember that urban development in Jakarta is different from what has been assumed in classical Marxism that capitalist formation requires the turning of land into capitalist ventures and peasants/workers into urban proletarians. In Indonesia, such a process is necessarily incomplete because only incomplete urbanization and incomplete proletarianization could support the reproduction of capitalism in the peripheral zone.

Lastly, we also need to consider the inhabitants of kampung (unlike the urban West) in terms of their formation as a “household” (a conceptual term that world-systems studies developed).¹⁴ The works of members of a household cut across formal and informal sectors. The household consists of a group of persons whose livelihood is sustained by way of pooling together multiple incomes from a variety of

¹² Consider, for instance, world-systems analysis as in the collection of essays in *Informalization: Process and Structure*, edited by Faruk Tabak and Michaeline A. Crichlow, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

¹³ Abidin Kusno, “Middling Urbanism: The Megacity and the Kampung,” *Urban Geography*, 41, 7, 2020: 954–970.

¹⁴ See Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Creating and Transforming Households: The Constraints of the World-Economy*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

occupations such that they, due to their substantial reliance on informal sectors, are not fully wage-dependent “proletarians.”

Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization of the multitude (as a result of informalization of workers in the Global North) is useful for considering the intersectionality of formal and informal sectors in the Global South, but only to the point of understanding the exploitative work of capitalism. It is less helpful to consider the potential of multitude in constituting a united front that can serve as a basis for class struggle. Instead, to become common, members of *kampung* multitude relate with each other, not only through communication and collaboration, but also through competition and frictions.

The conclusion that we can draw from the Indonesian multitude is that it is formed through the worldwide division of labor, which involves the urban majorities whose work cuts across formal and informal sectors. They come together not because of any shift in labor relations (such as that which constituted post-Fordist situation), but by the internalization of conditions of uncertainty and improvised connectivity of the urban as a result of inadequate support of infrastructural goods.

The Indonesian urban multitude are not necessarily the overexploited masses, but they have been kept as a large workforce that can’t be easily defined in Marxian labor terms. They retain certain autonomy in self-managing with little state-provided infrastructural services, but they do not organize themselves around collective consumption against private expropriation. The patchily realized infrastructure systems have generated infrastructural improvisations at a local level and constituted only a localized collective identity formation—too weak to constitute a political block. Furthermore, what is to be defended when universal infrastructure is non-existent? As a result, there is no “class struggle” around collective consumption since the means of collective consumption (i.e., the universal infrastructure ideal) is limited or scarce and has never been fully state controlled or materialized.

The Post-Pandemic Question

The pandemic reveals contradictions of the current structure of the global division of labor. The connectivity of global cities has not been matched by

the infrastructure of the built environment and health services. Globally, the pandemic has indicated to us the failure of neoliberal policies of the privatization of public goods and the elimination of social safety nets. It has brought to our attention the unevenness of global development generally and shared infrastructural poverty, especially in Indonesia. The Indonesian multitudes that have sustained such a formation are the result of the old normal (or the abnormality of the long twentieth century) and its concomitant infrastructural scarcity. They have suffered most during the pandemic, since the restrictions dismantled their connectivity to the streets and their surroundings, and it changed the organization of their livelihood.

We have been accustomed to seeing the struggles of the multitudes as part of the old normal, as a tradition or a different way of doing things for urban majorities. Yet the pandemic has taught us that the previous neglect of socio-spatial infrastructure for the urban majority is a problem. We need a new approach to realize the well-being for all, and yes, that the goal shouldn’t be the speed of capital accumulation and competition for economic growth. But what sort of new normal do we want?

It seems to me that there are two ways to achieve a more egalitarian society, and out of them perhaps a third way could be proposed. The first is to consider differences as the strength of the urban majority or the urban multitudes (if these terms could be made interchangeable). We appreciate the works of urbanists whose deep knowledge of cities in the Global South have highlighted the potentiality of the self-reliance of the urban multitudes that cannot be easily summarized. But it is their:

different economic practices, demeanors, behavioral tactics, forms of social organization, territory, and mobility (which) intersect and detach, coalesce into enduring cultures of inhabitation or proliferate as momentary occupancies of short-lived situations (and which) make up a kind of algorithmic process that continuously produces new functions and new values for individual and collective capacities, backgrounds, and ways of doing things.¹⁵

It follows that such a set of capacities, “albeit facing new vulnerabilities and recalibration, will become increasingly important in shaping urban change in a post-pandemic era.”¹⁶

¹⁵ AbdouMaliq Simone and Vyjayanthi Rao, “Counting the Uncountable: Revisiting Urban Majorities,” *Public Culture*, 33, 2 (94), 2021: 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

This formulation for a post-pandemic era makes sense as the communing between the urban majorities has been developed out of the condition of infrastructural scarcity.

There is, however, another way to move forward, which is to seize the moment of post-pandemic to consider the unfulfilled promise of Indonesian revolution, which is the state provision of a truly universal infrastructure aimed at “collective consumption” to achieve a holistic approach to health, social cohesion, and the environment for the benefit of the urban majorities. In this sense, the role and position of the state must be returned as a medium for achieving societal goals and as a guarantor of public access to Universal Basic Assets covering education, health, housing, technology, and information.¹⁷ This perspective recognizes that what the pandemic has taught us is that fragmented efforts and improvisations are inadequate when they are not aligned to form a universal infrastructural ideal.

In the end, I think the third “middle” way is often a wiser path, that is to learn from both identity and difference, to seek lessons from both the improvised local infrastructure of the urban kampung majorities and the universal infrastructural ideal for the construction of the “common” for people to collaborate, to seek a social life so that they are not just subjects brought together by the deprivation of an infrastructural ideal.

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¹⁷ “To Build the World ANew: Joint Statement of Public Intellectual Forum,” unpublished paper prepared by Indonesian intellectuals during the COVID-19 situation, 2020.