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Javanese cosmological layout as a political space[☆]

Ofita Purwani

The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
Sebelas Maret University, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Javanese cities, just like other Southeast Asian cities, are believed to be based on a cosmological layout. The basic of this layout is that there is a centre with the highest hierarchy, surrounded by circles with lower hierarchies, and axes. This layout can be seen as a practice of power in which it serves as a silent ideology (Bourdieu, 1977) that embodies social hierarchy. This article focuses on the 'cosmological' layout as a political space, in which a practice of power of the royal kingdoms or kratons is embodied. It focuses on the case studies of Javanese cities, namely Yogyakarta and Surakarta, which are recognised as the locus of Javanese culture at present. This paper seeks how different political power of the royal courts in both cities is reproduced in similar urban and architectural layouts.

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1. Introduction

Java has been one of the most researched areas in the whole of Southeast Asia; mainly due to its cultural richness. However, Java seems to attract debate, in that the theories about it are widely varied. One of the most important disagreements in the theories relating to Java is about the issue of 'essential Java' in opposition to the 'constructivist' tendency of Java. The essentialist assumes that there are particular and unique values intrinsic to Java; the constructivist approach is based on a different assumption, in which Java is socially and politically constructed.

In searching for the essential value of Java, there are several theories which assume that Java is a harmonic cosmological realm. Earlier theories on Java mostly assumed that Hindu and Buddhist cultures had the most significant influence on Java. This, it is argued, is reflected in Javanese spatial layouts which are considered to be based on Indic and Buddhist cosmology. This argument is based on several studies by Western colonial authors, who were intending to communicate to other people in Europe about Java. One of the earliest attempts was that of Thomas Stamford Raffles, who documented Java during his time as the British lieutenant governor in Java, from 1811 to 1816; observations that were published in 'The History of Java' in 1830. His account of Java is mainly based on the ruins of Hindu and Buddhist temples scattered all around Java, and native manuscripts (Raffles, 1830; Tiffin, 2009, pp. 525–558; Weatherbee, 1978, pp. 63–93). Following

Raffles' account, the Dutch colonial authority's legacy is their attempt to compile a comprehensive record of the 'traditional'¹ culture of the East Indies, including Java² in the early 20th century, based on an anthropological approach from the study of the customary law of the native people.³ This project is now blamed for defining traditions from the essentialists' point of view, in which the Dutch studied the local people using 'classification and simplification of customs and territories' (Antlöv & Hellman, 2005, p. 4). The studies which were considered to be 'scientific' have frozen Java, which was still in the process of construction, into 'a single comprehensible entity' (Antlöv & Hellman, 2005, p. 4), which fits the image of the 'other': mystical, magical, refined, and traditional. This type of classification was continued, after Indonesian independence, by the New Order regime between 1965 and 1998, with the 'Beautiful Indonesia' project, in which the national government, under Suharto, categorised particular cultures as belonging to particular people⁴ (Pemberton, 1994, pp. 157–158).

Constructivism, in contrast, is based on a relational approach between subject and object. Subject is an active human being perceiving an object. The object is the thing to be perceived. In this approach, the object does not have a true essence inherent in itself; instead, it is

¹ I use the term 'traditional' in apostrophes to signify that this term is biased, as it was used during the colonial period in opposition of modernity (AlSaiyad, 2001).

² East Indies is a term used to refer to the archipelago of the current Indonesia. However, Adarechtbundel also included other area such as Philippines, New Guinea, Timor, Malay Peninsula, Cham states and Madagascar (Spykman, 1932, p. 790).

³ Different from that of Raffles, this project based itself on the data from the people, while Raffles preferred to base his project on the ruins of temples, not the people.

⁴ Each province in Indonesia was defined as having one culture, so there were 27 cultures in Indonesia; which is the number of provinces that existed in the whole nation.

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constructed and given meanings by the subject. One of the earliest studies on Java using this approach is Pemberton's "On the Subject of Java" (1994). Pemberton focuses on the invented tradition by the New Order regime, particularly on those included in the Beautiful Indonesia project. This approach is problematic in that it ignores the existence of the object and lays full responsibility to the inventor or the subject. The product being invented, or the object, has no influence. This is very different from essentialism, in which the object has a determining role.

I decline to use both approaches mentioned above, because neither subject nor object has full control over the other. I prefer to use what Giddens and Bourdieu offer: a division of structure/agency instead of subject/object. This division, it is argued, is more reliable to represent reality than that of subject/object, in which agency and structure are interconnected. The division of agency/structure also enables us to focus on the issue of power, particularly the works of Bourdieu.

In this article, I focus myself on the case of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, two Javanese cities which have different fate after the Indonesian Independence. The reason for this is that both of them have similar history, similar culture, and similar physical layout but they have different political power after Independence. The royal court or the kraton⁵ of Yogyakarta had its territory recognised as a special province of the republic with the king automatically appointed governor while the kraton of Surakarta had its territory absorbed into the province of Central Java and the kraton has no political role. While both cities are usually considered 'traditional' from essentialist perspective, I am going to see it as a result of power practice while it also embodies power. I am going to analyse their similar urban and architectural layout in terms of their capability to reproduce power structure of the kratons. I expect to find differences in the practice of power in both cases since that they have different level of power. To compare both cases, I need to see architecture as something integrated to life, particularly because they are vernacular architecture which are not designed by an architect (Oliver, 2006, p. 4). In this respect, architecture and urban environment have to be seen as a part of a totality of life.

2. The issue of power

Giddens in his 'theory of structuration' (1986), underlines that agency and structure are closely connected. The structure, according to Giddens, is the outcome of an agency's action, while at the same time it enables actions, which he called the 'duality of structure' (Giddens, 1986, p. 25). The action of an agency is constrained and enabled by a structure, in the form of rules and resources, over which the agency has no control. The rules are gained through day-to-day experience of each agency, determining the motives behind every agency's actions. The agency is usually unaware of this structure, as it is mainly unconscious. In terms of actions, the agency is in a conscious state and every action is intentional. However, every action always brings unintended consequences which will contribute to the 'unacknowledged conditions of further acts' (Giddens, 1986, p. 8); that is, the reproduction of the structure. As mentioned before, Bourdieu shares a similar concept on the interrelation between agency and structure in his 'theory of field' or 'theory of practice' (Bourdieu, 1977). Like Giddens, he focuses on social practice, or 'actions' in Giddens' term. One major difference between the two authors is that Bourdieu focuses mainly on the unconscious, about which Giddens shows less interest.⁶ This is because Bourdieu focuses on the issue of social class, and the unconscious process behind it, that distinguishes 'high value'/'low value' and thereby forms social hierarchy. Giddens, in contrast, has deficiencies on social class (Atkinson,

2007, p. 546). I will go deeper into Bourdieu's account on social classification because it is very important in dealing with power issues.

A structure is the dominant system of thought inherent in the field, which distinguishes high class/low class, and therefore it determines the social hierarchy. The keyword for the structure in the field is domination (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 24). At an elementary level, an agency can acquire domination by generosity and virtue in personal relationships (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 190). The domination, which at first occurs in personal relationships, can be developed into wider domination up to the point where it is being objectified by law and education (Bourdieu, 1977). By that time, the domination is disguised as something natural, or objectified. It is no longer recognised as domination.

Domination however, is subject to challenges by other agencies and can lose its resources; therefore it has to be renewed by reproduction. This reproduction occurs when a structure is being put into social practice, over and over again. Every practice by an agency, which fits an established structure, is a means of reproduction of that structure. To make sure of the practice to be re-enacted, the structure needs to be unrecognised and to be considered as something objective and natural to do. In the case of architecture and the built environment, there is a mode of reproduction which is considered to be the strongest. This relates to what Bourdieu says about the 'silent ideology' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 188) which embodies the structure and puts it into unconsciousness. This kind of reproduction is mainly based on experience, in which it is being experienced by the people, unconsciously absorbed to contribute to the mental map of each person and when needed, it is being recalled by the people to decide what kind of actions to take in particular situations.

To analyse the Javanese 'cosmological layout', as a reproduction of power structure, we still need more theory on how an urban layout or architecture works to embody power. As vernacular built environment, it was built in integration to the life of the society (Oliver, 2006), therefore, the discussion of vernacular built environment has to include other aspects such as socio-cultural life in which it is situated. The built environment has to be seen as a totality with those other aspects. To this, I would like to borrow a concept from *Gesamtkunstwerk* to help with the issue of totality.

Gesamtkunstwerk, or 'total work of art', is a theory on art suggesting an art work composed of many small parts to create a holistic whole. This theory was first being passed by Wagner in opera, as a reaction to modernism which, according to Wagner, proposes egoism and rupture in society. *Gesamtkunstwerk* proposes to the human being who is being excluded from nature by modernity, to unify with nature in a total artwork.

I use the total artwork as a concept, apart from its socio-political context and historical relations to romanticism, communism and fascism. As a concept aiming at totality, total artwork consists of fragments (Finger & Follett, 2010) which should be synthesised into one artwork. These fragments can be in the form of human being/nature, conscious/unconscious, subjective/objective. They can also be the individual arts that are going to be gathered in one composition.

The fragments of human being and nature in the concept of total artwork in practice can be interpreted differently. In the case of Wagner and Cage, there is significant difference in that Wagner blend individual arts to represent nature which is "spontaneous and instinctive" (Finger & Follett, 2010) while Cage interprets total artwork as a composition with minimum human intervention. The difference between them is that Wagner classifies some human into 'subject' and some others into 'object', while Cage simply classifies all human to be the subject. Clearly there is a dichotomy of subject and object which does not fit the accounts of Bourdieu.

The fragment of individual arts is another issue for the total artwork. How to put several different arts together to create a totality is the main concern. All of those fragments need to engage reciprocally by dialoguing, corresponding, networking (Finger & Follett, 2010) to create a universal harmony. If we go back to Bourdieu and Giddens with their

⁵ The word 'kraton' refers to both the institution of the royal court and the palace. I will use this word to refer to both of them.

⁶ Bourdieu mostly focuses on the unconscious social process and put the conscious process aside while Giddens, even though recognising the unconscious, holds consciousness as important, particularly in the reflexive process of an agency.

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