

Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia.
By Doreen Lee. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
Softcover: 278pp.

Almost two decades after the fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998, we still know very little about the student movement that was the driving force behind Indonesia's turn to democracy. In the post-Suharto era, the student movement lost the limelight to other actors better equipped for the game of politics, and thus moved ever deeper into the realm of collective memory as a feverish episode in history, aligned with the longer history of *pemuda* (youth) activism in Indonesia. Yet, as Doreen Lee persuasively argues in *Activist Archives*, it is from the edges of history that “*pemuda* fever” continues to “infuse the present with urgency and legitimacy” (p. 3), animating a “youthful culture of democracy” that firmly established radical styles and ideas within the political and cultural landscape of Jakarta.

Remedying the dearth of literature on post-New Order student activism, *Activist Archives* offers a sophisticated ethnography of “Generation 98”, ingeniously structured around key tropes of the “material and ideational spaces” that student activists inhabit. With a keen eye for detail and paradox, Lee delves deep into the micropolitics of these spaces, starting with the “Archive”. She shows how activists’ feverish “drive to document, consign, and assemble signs of *pemuda* nationalism” (p. 11) served as an “authenticating practice” to compete with state discourse, which was, however, complicated by the concurrent need for secrecy, epitomized by the tacit rule: “Burn after reading”. By highlighting the social life behind the documentation, Lee uncovers significant findings that many other researchers might have overlooked. A charming example is a scene reconstructed from scribbles found on the back of official statements used during the 1997 subversion trials; it shows how two activists, waiting for their turn to testify, exchanged insolent jokes, conveying “the undercurrent of youthful nonchalance and puerile lightheartedness even during the gravity of the subversion trial” (p. 55).

Youthfulness also pervades the chapters on “Street” and “Style”, which show how the performativity of protest and the carefully cultivated *pemuda* look helped to make subversive symbols of the left trendy and less threatening, thus creating “a new model of citizenship for Indonesian youth by making political participation desirable and accessible” (p. 91). In an engaging section on the production and circulation of protest T-shirts, Lee further illustrates

how this visual economy served purposes of collective identity as well as propaganda. But while she properly contextualizes the iconography in political history, crucial differentiations in style between different activist communities, which symbolize the deep fractures in the post-Suharto student movement, are neglected. Not all student activists identified with the appearances of the Molotov cocktail-throwing urban warrior pictured in two illustrations (pp. 92–93). Though this image dominated protest scenes and media reports in the early years of reform, it was acceptable to certain groups only, and rejected by others opposed to their mode of protest. Leaving the image unproblematised risks making a caricature of negotiated self-presentation, as happened with the clichéd image of the revolutionary *pemuda* of 1945 that many Indonesia scholars uncritically accepted.

The chapter on “Violence” presents a more careful analysis, introducing the notion of “student counterviolence” as a dynamic practice that solidifies and simultaneously disrupts students’ moral superiority over the state. This is illustrated by various fascinating vignettes. But most gripping is the story of former student activist Iblis, who was abducted and tortured by the military in the 1990s. With great sensitivity, Lee recounts his sense of devastating defeat at realizing his nothingness as a sacrificial scapegoat subjected to his torturers’ whims. Eluding “the general consensus among victims that they would work to transform the story of human rights abuse into a political resource for the student movement” (p. 130), his response speaks of deep trauma that cannot be reduced to the political. It is a powerful reminder of the significance of irreducible intimate experience, which is, however, not followed through. The rest of the chapter discusses how students “lost their claim to the legacy of counterviolence as political strategy” (p. 132) as their actions were labelled “anarchy”. But how they dealt with the loss and the label, and how it impinged on their sense of self, remains unexplored. A more intimate account might have usefully challenged common perceptions of a student movement gone wild.

Intimate experience does reappear in the chapter on “Home”, which discusses activist dwellings — the boarding house, the “posko” (temporary command post), and the “base camp” (headquarters) — as “politically charged spaces that renew and instruct community” through “intense socialization” (p. 148). Lee offers valuable insights into the affective logics of comradeship as an alternative familial model, and shows how this was marred by the sticky problem of “logistics” (i.e., need for money), and the consequent awkward

dependency relationship between juniors and seniors. Finally, as Generation 98 outgrew the student organizations they founded, their ambiguous status drove them away from *pemuda* homes and into formal political arenas. As the final chapter “Democracy” shows, during the 2004 elections, many registered as legislative candidates, or joined the “success teams” of presidential candidates, while others attempted to regroup into civil society movements — each invoking the *pemuda* legacy to legitimate their political position. By then, though, lingering sentiments over past conflicts had made it impossible to rally behind shared political goals — “Too many bridges burned” (p. 205). Thus, Generation 98 was left with another dream shattered. Not that their role in public political life was exhausted, but insofar as they clung to the *pemuda* legacy they were bound to become mere shadows of their former selves.

Lee’s narrative of Generation 98 is convincing, but the trope of “Generation” could be unpacked more critically for its political uses in both activist and state discourses. While it is true that “the archivization of *pemuda* identity into a stable entity in Indonesian nationalism” became “a source of activist power”, providing a “fertile and stable foundation for dissident thought and a sense of alternative history to the New Order’s official-speak” (p. 10), it should be noted that this *pemuda* identity was also part of “New Order official-speak”, as a construct called “Generation” that the state effectively deployed to contain student movements in past political crises. Lee also observes: “As Generation 98 gets enfolded into nationalist history as one more wave of youth politics, appropriate for the past but not the present ... Indonesians are impatient for the student movement to please leave already. Only when the *pemuda* leave will a new era be marked” (p. 115). Such relevant insights could be elaborated further.

Yet perhaps the main strength of *Activist Archives* is that it raises important questions by *not* providing all the answers. In this way, it invites frequent re-reading, creating a richer understanding of the micropolitics of student activism upon each re-read. The book ends with the note that there is something good about the inability of Generation 98 to let go of their past selves. The reader can explore for his or herself why this is so.

YATUN SASTRAMIDJAJA is a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Postal address: Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018WV Amsterdam, Netherlands; email: y.sastramidjaja@uva.nl.