

Book Reviews

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State of Fear: Policing a Postcolonial City. By Joshua Barker. Duke University Press, 2024. xiv+313 pp.

There is a word in the Indonesian language that outsiders might find curious. The word is *diamankan*, which translates to “to be made safe” or “to be secured” but really refers to a police arrest or subjugation of a perceived criminal. How a scene of violence might anchor its meaning in peace and security requires much historical, cultural and political context. Joshua Barker’s new book sets the stage for this understanding. Barker’s ethnography takes place in the city of Bandung, West Java, a city well known for its late colonial architecture, its role in the Indonesian revolution, and its postcolonial allure. Here Bandung performs a different role, serving as the ethnographic site from which we see the overlaps and alliances between informal sovereigns and formal state structures towards the end of Soeharto’s authoritarian rule in the 1990s. In particular, Barker shows how cities such as Bandung carried a “state of fear” in daily life, fostered through rituals of safety and security across institutional and municipal levels and internalized to make a police state from within. Fear is thus distributed, made technical, and felt across different domains in Indonesian cities, creating an ambivalent complicity between ordinary people and those who enact power over them. A prime example lies in the local perception of the gangster, who is both respected and feared: “He may be a vigilante, but he is *their* vigilante” (p. 58, italics in original). The gangster who extorts and intimidates locally can also be called on to defend or represent the community. The crux of the book explores this ambivalent tension between local autonomy and state oversight in co-producing governance and, more often than not, violence.

Understanding fear as a state apparatus and a tool for popular mobilization requires us to first trace its uses, means of production and meeting points with other ambivalent landscapes in which power, authority and legality are confused. Organized into three distinct parts (territoriality, surveillance and articulations), the book demonstrates ethnographically and historically how it is that the state-centric view from above and the view from the ground level are never quite transparent to each other. What counterparts arise when informal sovereignty holds hands with formal sovereignty? How is that alliance actually conducted? Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of mimicry of state power. This book gives us the texture of daily life in a postcolonial city where one is not allowed to sleep through the night for fear of thieves, and where self-policing is the norm under the auspices of a police force that has sworn to guide civilians in a lucrative, rent-seeking way. The tempo drops a bit in the middle chapters, which contain the historical chapters on late colonial state policies that permitted social surveillance, and which are reminiscent of a large body of work done by Dutch historians on health, hygiene and urban planning during this period.

The standout chapters of the book are in Part III, chapters 5 and 6, which contain some of the most unique cases of ethnographic fieldwork from late New Order Indonesia. The material reminds us that Barker had access to police stations and archives at a time when very few anthropologists could even dream of receiving permission to conduct research of similar sensitivity. Chapter 5 takes us deep into the imaginaries of vigilantes who grew strong under the New Order and were eventually tamed by a programme of spectacular state violence known as *Petrus* (Mysterious Killings), while chapter 6 follows the hierarchical fraternity structure of police academies, which utilize violent hazing rituals to develop the affinities and loyalties of individual police to each other. Such fraternities form the vertical structures for money to flow up- and downstream in yet another instance of paradoxical extra-legal power. As Barker writes, police-run protection rackets were viewed positively by businesses in Bandung, for they kept other opportunists out.

The book ends on a note of hope, which reminds us that the forms of gathering and assembly that draw together state power through its violent enforcers are also available to the general populace, who might gather for no stated reason other than to have some fun (p. 236). The Indonesian word for this is *iseng*—a word that expresses a spontaneity and exuberance that is completely organic (p. 34). Barker’s emphasis on fun as sociopolitical potential transcends the Indonesian example and reminds us of contemporary phenomena in which the crowd does not need an organized setting to appear, but rather composes itself organically, like with like, the milieu to the territory. That fun piggybacks on fear and security tells us something about how power remains extremely localized and potentially disrupted, even as the official narratives tell us otherwise.

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The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia. By Faizah Zakaria. University of Washington Press, 2023. xv+254 pp.

Faizah Zakaria’s *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* is a remarkable intervention in the environmental history and religious anthropology of North Sumatra’s uplands. It brings into focus the spiritual, ecological and colonial entanglements that reshaped the region from the late nineteenth century to the postcolonial present. Zakaria’s central contribution lies in tracing the processes of *disenchantment*—a Weberian term describing the “loss of wonder” (her definition, p. 156), which produces a world where “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (Weber 1946, p. 139). Disenchantment in this book is portrayed by the reduction of the spiritual and relational embeddedness of humans with non-human entities and landscapes through the intersecting forces of missionary