

BOOK REVIEWS

RUDOLF MRÁZEK

A Certain Age

Colonial Jakarta through the Memories of Its Intellectuals

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. 328 pp.

This book attends to the quotidian experiences and articulations of and the possibilities engendered by colonial modernity in Indonesia through the recollections—at once fragile, vivid, lyrical, and recalcitrant—of elderly urban intellectuals. By weaving together the memories of these intellectuals, Rudolf Mrázek provides us with powerful, if fleeting, visions of how modernity, as a force, constituted and moved individuals, families, and a whole generation, neighborhoods and cities, and a whole nation. Movement here encompasses multiple dimensions: spatial, as when young men and women travelled to study in urban centers such as Bandung, Central Java, or for the more affluent ones, Leiden in The Netherlands; emotional, as when Mrázek's interlocutors became affectively invested on speaking Dutch (later on, Bahasa Indonesia) and eating on time and together with one's family as ways of distinguishing themselves as "modern"; relational, as when young urbanites learned how to interact as a group and in view of colonial racial hierarchies; and cognitive, most intensely demonstrated in the ways in which young intellectuals came to imagine their and Indonesia's place in the world. Indeed, colonial modernity and its passing is marked in terms of space and mobility: from the intimate confines of houses, to neighborhoods and roads, to educational institutions and prisons, to the world at large.

Mrázek's interviews were conducted between 1990 and 2000 mainly in and around Jakarta. This spatial and temporal location provides an important context for the kinds of memories elicited by Mrázek, a theme elaborated on early in the book (chapter 1, "Bypasses and Flyovers"). During this period, the city of Jakarta was experienced by its residents as a network of roads, highways, and flyovers, where sustained interactions and intimacies were becoming more and more difficult to sustain, or following Marc Augé as a "non-place." It was also a city ensnared in a crisis, as demonstrated by the riots that occurred in 1997 and 1998, which provide a backdrop to some of Mrázek's interviews. In a sense, the recollections of his interlocutors were struggling against this crisis. After all, the city was central to the project of Indonesian modernity, which their generation dreamt of, nurtured, and brought into being. Poignantly, a number of the interviews were straining against the noise of the city or of demonstrations. At the same time, the interviews were also struggling against the interviewees' own mortality: a number of Mrázek's interlocutors were already weak, ill, or dying during his fieldwork, and some of them passed away during that time and the ensuing years. On another level, the interviews were struggling against the temporalizing schemes of the Indonesian state and of historians. It is in the spirit of these struggles that Mrázek shies away from presenting his interlocutors' recollections within the context of a heavy-handed narration and analysis, a stance that is not without its own difficulties, but which provides a healthy antidote to grand historical schemes.

A major strength of the book is precisely its ability to render intimately both the interview process and the urban intellectuals' recollections. The former is best captured by Mrázek during moments when his interlocutors appear to not respond to his questions, when they chose to pursue other lines of thought, or when their recollections, narrated as it is in weak and scarcely audible voices, are interrupted by the sound of vehicles passing by. The latter is a theme that weaves through the different spaces and moments considered throughout the book's five chapters. We see it, for instance, in recollections of houses (chapter 2, "The Walls") that were evoked as solid and able to withstand time and the movement of people, including former Dutch owners, servants, and poor relatives, but also quite open to the world, not the least because these houses were sites of accumulation and display of items considered modern (e.g. kerosene lamps, electricity, radios, telephones, and even toys). We see this intimacy too in recollections

of neighborhoods (chapter 3, “The Fences”) that were described by Mrázek’s interlocutors, in contrast to late 1990s Jakarta, as peaceful, moving forward, and intimate; where people learned to live with one another notwithstanding racial and ethnic differences (i.e. “the art of not touching”). We also witness intimacy in accounts of how the parents of would-be urban intellectuals strived to send their children to school (chapter 4, “The Classroom”), even if it required immense financial burden—for instance, to buy the clothes and shoes that signalled that one is on the way to becoming modern—and even if it meant creating divides between themselves (especially for those not fluent in Dutch) and their children, and distinctions between siblings, friends, and neighbors on the basis of who is able to go to school (as well as the kind of school one goes to) and who is unable to do so—albeit some of the intellectuals Mrázek conversed with took great care in not creating too stark a distinction between themselves and the rest of their peers and kin. Finally, we witness this intimacy in discussions (particularly chapter 5, “The Window”) of how urban intellectuals in colonial Indonesia came to imagine possibilities of freedom through the books, newspapers, and magazines they read, the paintings and images that they consumed and produced, the movies they watched, and the journeys they took, all of which reveal a cosmopolitan sensibility.

In narrating his interlocutors’ recollections, Mrázek deftly interweaves what was said to him during the interviews and what philosophers and theorists of modernity have remarked, a narrative strategy that is informed by the argument that colonial experiences of modernity prefigure many of what philosophers and theorists of modernity have observed for metropolitan Europe. Here, a list of thinkers attain prominence, including Walter Benjamin, who is a major influence on Mrázek’s thinking, Charles Baudelaire, Martin Heidegger, and Georg Simmel; contemporary writers, such as Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Paul Virilio also make an appearance in the text. At the same time, Mrázek deliberately does not pursue a sustained narration of his interlocutors’ lives, opting instead to present his readers with fragments of interviews so as to capture the way in which Indonesian intellectuals recalled their past.

Together, theoretical dexterity and attentiveness to the process of recalling memories make *A Certain Age* a challenging read, especially to those expecting a more conventional historical narrative or those looking forward to full-bodied biographical expositions. This difficulty is aggravated by the author’s decision not to engage in sustained

analysis and argumentation, which raises the question of what the role of the historian and scholar should be. While this affords an intimate view of colonial modernity, it perhaps comes at the price of generating more insights from the interviews. Indeed, there is a sense of missed opportunity here, particularly in terms of creating conversations with recent scholarship on memories, kinship, time, and biographies, which could have been pursued in relation to the discussion of the intellectuals' houses, the various objects they contained, and the different forms of mobility they were embedded in; or conceivably through an exploration of the different temporalities at work when urban intellectuals were coming to terms with colonial modernity. Notwithstanding—or perhaps because of—its shortcomings, *A Certain Age* succeeds in imparting how it feels like to be modern and to grow up in a time full of possibilities.

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NISSIM OTMAZGIN AND EYAL BEN-ARI, EDS.

Popular Culture Co-Productions and Collaborations in East and Southeast Asia

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There are arguably no reliable figures to confirm the formal and informal, legal or illegal ways popular culture products permeate throughout East and Southeast Asia today. Movies, comics, music, games, television programs, and other popular formats have circulated in large waves from a country of origin to others, subsequently creating industries and producing material for fans and, inevitably, data for academic investigators.

The Internet and translation through subtitles or voice dubbing have facilitated the appreciation and acceptance of most products. But accommodating and eventually incorporating popular cultural fare from a different country into one's entertainment rituals is not necessarily easy to dissect. The cultural layers presented are varied given different historical perspectives, economic contexts, and social norms.