

The Phantom World of Digul: Policing as Politics in Colonial Indonesia, 1926–1941

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Policing the Phantom or Phantomizing the Police? The Political in the Age of Digul

Shiraishi Takashi's *The Phantom World of Digul*, whose title was adapted from the subsection "The Phantom World of the Dark Continent" in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was originally conceived as "A Time of Normalcy." Combining these layers of meanings, the title embodies the related colonial processes that 1) invent the phantom of race to justify violent interferences (a phenomenon exposed by Arendt) and 2) establish normalcy under a strict law and order regime self-styled as an apolitical administrative polity (examined in depth by Shiraishi). Shiraishi's specific timeframe spans the communist-led Prambanan insurrections of 1926–27 to the Japanese Occupation in 1942. The Dutch were so haunted by memories of the 1926–27 disturbances that they shifted their policy from constructive engagement with Indonesian nationalist intellectuals to containment during the following two decades (pp. 6, 241). It was during this time—generally understood in world history as the late colonial period—that the Dutch built and operated Digul, the mass internment camp at the easternmost fringe of the Dutch East Indies, to contain the "wild and ungovernable natives." Shiraishi calls this period the Age of Digul (p. 62), a time capturing the revolutionary defeat and imperial consolidation that reversed the historical trajectory anticipated by Indonesia's early twentieth century radicals.¹⁾ Central to the late Dutch colonial dynamic—and here is both the book's argument and unique contribution—was a governing practice called political policing.

The heart of the book is in its analysis of state governance and repression in Indonesia through a historical comparison of Suharto's New Order and the late Dutch East Indies. While both regimes repressed dissident forces (primarily the communists), and are habitually conceived as continuous, *The Phantom World* cautions that if we consider the "peace and order" of the two regimes as one and the same, we overlook particular mechanisms, techniques, and meanings of late colonial governance. Whereas the New Order unapologetically killed political dissidents (hence, the equation state=death) (p. 26), the late Dutch East Indies government established a field of surveillance to police them (hence, the equation police=politics) (p. 27). In other words, while the military state kills and destroys, the police state surveils and rehabilitates (p. 8). A lazy observation would frame this comparison between the two regimes in moral terms, judging one regime more humane and civilized than the other, or the lesser of two evils, so to speak. To shatter this myth of colonial benevolence once and for all, Shiraishi points to the large-scale killing and repression predating

1) Studied by Shiraishi in his 1990 book *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926*.

the late colonial era as its violent preconditions (p. 27). Against the moralistic framework, *The Phantom* instead systematically examines “how the Dutch Indies government achieved and maintained ‘peace and order’ in the post-communist revolt years of the late 1920s and 1930s” (p. 26). In doing this, Shiraishi historicizes the term police=politics, taken from the renowned writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s short story “Kemudian lahirlah dia” (And then he was born), which consciously reflects on policing as the only mode of politicking in late colonialism. In this way, the book follows Cornell’s tradition of interdisciplinary investigation that does not place a strict boundary between the literary and the historical.

The seemingly disproportionate one chapter allocated to Digul may seem perplexing, given that the 7-chapter book is titled after it. However, when considering the book as a whole, it becomes apparent that Shiraishi aims to present Digul as, in his word, a “metaphor” for the East Indies and the late colonial regime (p. 31). What is so complex about Digul is its status as an “internment camp” where internees were allowed to live apparently normal but insulated lives under colonial surveillance, unlike abusive penal colonies or murderous concentration camps that destroy prisoners sense of normal living (pp. 29–31). As a political form, Digul was meant to be both governmental and pedagogical—a ground for *africhting*, or “training” (pp. 30, 158). Digul reformed the attitudes of its internees while simultaneously teaching all other Indonesians to self-police. In other words, it trained Indonesians to behave and thus cooperate with the colonial government (p. 41).

Normalcy in Digul, however, was not as normal as it seemed. Drawing from Rudolf Mrazek, *The Phantom* contends that Digul’s “normalcy” was profoundly perverted and deeply politicized (p. 51). The colonial government created this perverted normalcy—Digul—to establish relative normalcy and, resultantly, the colonial order in the Indies (p. 59). Shiraishi writes: “Life in Digul was perverted in a profoundly politicized way, and it is in the mirror of its pervertedness where we can see the perverted normal order in the Indies reflected” (p. 60). From many genealogies of the phantom in intellectual history, Shiraishi seems to use it most frequently to capture this sense of pervertedness. But Digul resembled the Indies in another important way: it classified political subjects into cooperationists, moderates, and recalcitrant. Digul thus carries two significances as a metaphor of the Dutch regime’s political policing and governing techniques. Whereas perverted normalcy demarcated the territories for policing, social classification kept the population under surveillance (p. 62). Chapters 3 to 5 precisely examine the operations of Digul, the prototype of perverted normalcy in the Indies, in policing the Moscow-affiliated political underground, the above-ground revolutionary nationalist movement, and the cooperative educational and religious institutions in rural areas.

The Phantom World of Digul is highly concerned with the political, as suggested not only by the book’s central concept of political policing, but also by the conceptualization of normalcy as a political fabrication. Shiraishi’s fascination with the political stems from the perceived apoliticism

of the late colonial state, presented by Harry Benda as its essential attribute in his notion of the *Beamtenstaat*, or the bureaucratic state (p. 14). Shiraishi, however, offers an entirely different understanding of *Beamtenstaat*'s apoliticism. By taking into account the anticommunist suppression and counter-insurgency methods subsequently developed to control non-cooperative subversives (p. 64), he reveals how political policing was first and foremost devised as an anticommunist practice and technique (p. 104). The greatest insight of this book comes from its treatment of this apoliticism as teeming with *political* contradictions. On the one hand, as Chapter 2 tells us, apoliticism was achieved through effective political policing across the archipelago to the point that politics was reduced to policing, and policing was normalized into a commonly held apolitical sense in a time of normalcy (*zaman normal*) (p. 20). On the other hand, as Chapter 6 illustrates, a shapeless network of ungovernable "wild forces" influenced from outside and operating underground—another phantom—continued to disrupt the seemingly formidable surveillance. As Shiraishi notes, "it was precisely this time of normalcy that incubated the revolutionary generation of 1945" (p. 24).

We learn from colonial studies literature, specifically by Ann Stoler, that the imagined antithesis of the colonial peace and order regime is a wilderness whose disruptive, mysterious, and ungovernable forces must be controlled at all costs (pp. 19–20, 84, 105). Because this was as much a fantasy as a reality, the practice of political policing often projected anxious imaginaries of these wild forces onto anything deemed subversive in the actual world, thereby creating a phantom (in a second sense, different from but related to the first sense of pervertedness) that mirrored their own fantasy (pp. 149, 237). Hence, in the logic of political policing, "anything that might lead to disturbance was revolutionary, and in this respect revolutionary/evolutionary, cooperation/non-cooperation, mala fide/bona fide, radical/moderate did not make much difference" (p. 241). In addition to the two senses of the phantom that the colonial government projected onto the colonized milieu and subjects, there emerges the third phantom: colonial apoliticism itself. While the first sense of the phantom describes the perverted normalcy imposed by Digul and the second, the phantomized "wild forces," the third sense, to deploy Shiraishi's oft-used word, *mirrors* the phantom back to the colonial government.

Colonial apoliticism was phantasmic in three ways. First, counter to colonial self-understanding, its apoliticism was never real—a perversion *par excellence*. Counter-revolutionary suppression and political policing, which was normalized through time, produced, and continued to condition, apoliticism. Second, as a colonial mode of governance, apoliticism was more aspirational than actual. It was a projection of an ideal political situation where the Dutch colonial government fully controlled the Indies and eliminated all "wild" forces. Third, this phantasm was built upon phantasm. The police intelligence reporting, itself a congregate of fantasies, became the colonial government's chief source of policy. Consequently, political policing dominated the government's understanding of the native movement, thereby reducing the question of anticolonial nationalism to a question of policing and denying all forms of Indonesian popular politics (pp. 97–98, 237–238).

Shiraishi observes that “the government was as much a hostage of its own political intelligence as the Indies population, . . . the [police reporting] . . . provided the government with its only way of mapping the terrain and guided it in formulating its policy to the native movement” (p. 237). Arriving at this conclusion makes one wonder what would have happened to the Indonesian popular movements if the colonial government had been unhinged from political policing.

Since there is only a handful of dedicated Indonesianists who can archivally evaluate and single-handedly create a new periodization for an entire subperiod of twentieth-century Indonesia (in this case, the Age of Digul), anything that Shiraishi Takashi publishes is guaranteed for its intellectual and historiographical contributions. However, Shiraishi discusses the global and regional conditions of Dutch political policing, including global policing (p. 7), the interwar British hegemony in Southeast Asia, Dutch neutrality (p. 21), white supremacism (p. 27), and carceral archipelago (p. 31), only in passing. If scholars of any discipline further pursue these questions, more contributions could be made to the fields of comparative colonialism, police studies, racial capitalism, and abolition geography from the Indonesian standpoint. Quite undeveloped also is the question, posed by the author himself both in the book and the blurb, of the relationship between political and economic crises—the prospect of war and the Great Depression—and the conservative turn to consolidate imperial power (p. 15). In addition to the psychoanalysis-derived approach (exemplified by ideas of phantom, perversion, haunting, and mirroring) and comparative historical colonialism (comparing and contrasting the Dutch East Indies to French Indochina, British India and Malaya, and American Philippines), a political-economic analysis of empire and trans-imperialism may be able to shed light on the interrelations between the conjunctural forces—global, regional, national, and local—conditioning the Dutch empire to resort to political policing amidst the interwar crises. All these questions for further research aside, this long-awaited sequel opens new and innovative ways of understanding late colonial Indonesia through political policing and all the contradictions therein.

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The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte

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Vicente L. Rafael begins his most recent book, *The Sovereign Trickster*, with a personal story about once meeting the former Philippine President, and subject of the book, Rodrigo Duterte. It is a fascinating testimony, both for what it says about the celebrity-like status held by the firebrand