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No common cause? The spaces of urban collective identity

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ABSTRACT

Working from Michael Sorkin's expansive notions of public space, the article considers the ways in which figurations of the "we" emerge from the structures of mutual witnessing and the coordination of heterogeneities that operationalize multiple publics. Focusing on a relay amongst the Tanah Tinggi district of Jakarta and the estates of Hackney and East London, the problematics and volatilities of such a "we" are explored, particularly against the backdrop of pandemic conditions. Instead of regarding such collective identity to be a matter of settlement, the relays considered offer an opportunity to further conceptualize collective life in motion, as something continuously worked out as the very terrain of the public.

Committing to a public

In discussions with Michael Sorkin over several decades, what was most striking about his work was a commitment to the city as primarily the manifestation of a public will and the means through which a continuously updated public might recognize itself. Far from being a by-product of urban operations, the public was to be the motor that drove these operations, thus requiring specific allotments and characteristics of space and the curation of rhythms that ensured alternating periods of intimate withdrawal and anonymous encounter. Perhaps by virtue of his long residency and involvement in New York City, many of his ideas about the public and its concomitant spaces may be overly specific to this context. But in all instances, they do provoke a need to question how publics emerge elsewhere. In this brief essay, I want to offer some reflections on the ways a public shows up in multiple, sometimes unfamiliar ways, across two very different contexts – Jakarta and Hackney (London).

Public space as "stitch-up"

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected how basic manifestations of collective life are enacted and articulated in public. Given that the public becomes the locus of mutual witnessing and intercession, the impositions of distancing, the retreat into

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the confines of household, and a generalized wariness of navigating public space prompts new uncertainties as to the nature of that collective life and the stabilization of a sense of being part of a "we."

Take for example, how everyday life in Jakarta proceeds within the shifts of multiple registers. Now you see it, now you don't. As soon as detectable patterns seem to emerge to provide clarity around the locations and distributions of inequality, they dissipate in a series of blurs, qualifications, exceptions. It is possible to narrate the unfolding of everyday life according to the familiar tropes of extended family and neighborhood solidarities, a collectively shared perception of injustice and moral certainty. There are certainly shared procedures about what can be spoken about and to whom, about responsibilities for contributing to a collectively figured infrastructure of care, as well as a generalized openness to the concreteness rather than simply the principle of *rakyat*, of being part of the "people," a collective belonging that takes precedence over personal ascription and interest.

But this is only *one* modality; and as the common Jakarta adage goes, *nothing is one thing*. A dynamic co-existence of persons is predicated on the simultaneity of seemingly divergent modalities of being together, fading in and out, according to unpredictable rhythms and in different locales, so that the "tightness" of ties in one neighborhood is complemented, offset, or counterposed by the "looseness" of ties in another. In these interchanges, the composition and dynamics of neighborhoods do not exist only for those inhabiting within them, but for both known and unknown others as well. Internecine conflicts can erupt from seemingly nowhere in the most social cohered of spaces, while others constantly hanging on a knife's edge plod along without tipping points.

This has made an overview of pandemic conditions in Jakarta difficult to sort through. Throughout the past 18 months, it has been difficult for anyone to determine why districts that otherwise match up on most demographic and socioeconomic variables have experienced often markedly divergent rates of infection and morbidity. Well-known poor districts experience their expected high case rates, but this is also contingent upon the multiple interfaces with districts of varying compositions, functions, and economic activities. Some neighborhoods have attained large measures of self-sufficiency over time, of clearly marked forward and backward linkages among diverse economies. Others are full of tight solidarities but depend upon being the crossroads of many types of circulation, which bring an easily renewed dynamism but also potentially dangerous exposures. Still, others attain a functional balance where the interfaces are multiple but also tightly managed.

While areas with long histories of "curated" abandonment, such as Pandemangan Timur, reflect high levels of contagion, poor districts that operate as intensive hinges onto diverse geographies, such as Tanah Sereal, do not. Income, density, positionality, institutional profiles, porosities all exert a definitive impact. But these variables "wrap" their ways across each other with such heterogeneous proportions that general statements about pandemic disposition are difficult to make. But it is precisely this heterogeneity of composition as a backdrop to the multiple registers and vernaculars through which everyday life is enacted which may be the very thing that is being altered with greater speed in contemporary forms of urban regeneration and development. If this is the case, such trajectories promise greater levels of polarization, social and economic disparity.

In Jakarta, the varying arrangements operative within specific districts manifest an intricate architecture of vulnerabilities and opportunities at any given time, with certain opportunistic inclinations rendering the district more vulnerable to unanticipated events. On the other hand, those districts seemingly more protected may experience consequences for their ability to weather certain storms further down the line. The stability and territorial consolidation of a public in Jakarta requires participation in a wide range of external articulations in order to cushion the negative ramifications of over-entanglement. This participation is increasingly operationalized by steering inhabitants to more individualized orientations to livelihood formation but also a declension of a willingness to stay put. This may or may not reflect a broader range of physical circulations across the city. Sometimes people can "move" in ways whereby they largely stay put. Rather, it entails the capacity of inhabitants to piece together "territories of operations" – spaces of maneuver and collaboration, operational *publics,* through "strange alliances" among places, actors, and materials that seemingly would not necessarily go together.

Take the historically rambunctious district of Tanah Tinggi in central Jakarta, where residents have long lived the bulk of their lives on the street, in a seemingly public life. For it was the street that was the place to make things happen, to argue, embrace, test the waters, get a sense of what was going on. It was the place where residents learned how to "roll with things," in an everyday visceral and unruly time of spontaneous gestures, glances, and propositions. More than stabilized spaces of the public, these streets acted as a continuous refiguring of what it meant to be public – an always mobile form that somehow had to hold and give voice to changing aspirations and points of view. In the past few years, the district has gone through a lot, more overcrowding, sporadic outbreaks of youth violence often for no discernible reason, increased levels of flooding, and now COVID-19.

On one early evening in June 2020, and for several days after, a few hundred residents gathered in front of the *kelurahan* (district office) shouting, "we cannot live like this anymore." For my long-term friends and associates living in Tanah Tinggi there was something inexplicable about this gathering; there was no obvious precipitant or organizers, no clear object of complaint. Some claimed that it had started as a joke on the part of a few residents exasperated with the flood of mixed messages as to how people were to conduct themselves during the hit-and-miss lockdown procedures implemented in response to the pandemic. But it seemed that a wide range of more diffuse motivations was at work.

Here, I want to make some observations about this invocation, "we cannot live like this anymore" for it appears across geographies in various states of explicitness and reference. For many, it refers to the climate crisis and the culpability of human practices in the undermining of any kind of future social existence. For others, it refers to the strictures of pandemic control, excessive consumption, the diminution of public life. Whatever the reference, the "we cannot live like this anymore" generates a particular kind of time, for the expression cites a limit of endurance, yet its very articulation signals that the life being referred to as impossible manages to go on. Instead of the "cannot," the invocation seems to implicitly evidence "the can."

Instead of the "public" in Tannah Tinggi announcing its own imminent demise, it instead reiterates a long-proven capacity to endure seemingly impossible conditions, particularly as the district is one of the most vilified, impoverished and high-dense areas of the city. Perhaps the last thing residents gathered in public would vocally emphasize is

their explicit consent to continue to put up with bad services, thoroughly decaying infrastructure, and skyrocketing rates of unemployment.

Just as it has often been the case of the temporalities of Black life, Tanah Tinggi, widely known as the "black city" in Jakarta, time was less that of a transformative "event," and more the oscillations of seasons, renewals, unfolding, prophecy, returns and advents (King, 2019; Thomas, 2016). Every moment was both familiar and remarkable, uncovering new manifestations of cherished values or the possibilities of reversal. Youth gangs, clerics, local enforcers, street sellers, women's savings clubs, mystics, and fixers took bits and pieces of each other's ways of operating to carve out a niche with their own strategies for survival. Each was allowed to come into view, have its own space for operating as long they took "turns" and enabled others to re-adapt to whatever they seemed to offer, or potentially take away.

The ethos of the street centered on the conviction of what "could be," right here and right now. It was a potential that already existed, and the "we" of the public existed to bear witness to it. What was experienced as deleterious or incorrect suggested a re-description of the present as a precursor, an entry point, or a pragmatic veil for something else that had been there all along (Simone, 2020). As Ardi, the owner of a small tofu snack workshop in Tanah Tinggi puts it, *these gang* (alleyways)*, confusing though they may, always lead us to each other in a different way, always points to something different that we have been all along.* Given this history, it was somewhat surprising that what was foregrounded in the demonstration of June 2020 was "we cannot live like this anymore."

What is the "this" that cannot be lived. Which of the many components and instances of everyday life are those that best signal or manifest the "cannot?" Has COVID-19 provided an answer here? Does it mean that first and foremost everyone else is to be seen as a potential threat, that the very basis of a "we" is under threat?

Rina, an electrician and prayer leader in Tanah Tinggi, points out that the way the city is going makes it even difficult to think about oneself let alone others; my neighbors often say, well at least we have each other, but I'm not so sure; it seems I have found a way to think of myself first, even though I am not sure just exactly what this means and how to do it. So, even as the terms of biopower shifted from the disciplining of individual lives to the cultivation of populations, the need for individuals to stand out, to prove their relevance has intensified, as the sufficiency of any given attainment or characteristic seems short-lived.

The "we cannot live like this anymore" thus has different starting points and implications. Many residents of Tanah Tinggi understand that the infrastructures they live with are intended to fail, intended to work against them. To be public then emphasizes their ability to live without them, where what they profess is the unwillingness to "live like this," which doesn't mean they are unable to live at all. Rather, what emerges is a pragmatic "we" that tentatively emerges as a recalibration of desires, demands, affordances and entitlements. It is this process of stitching which is the public from which they derive any sense of what they have in common.

A gathering of estates

Far removed from the constant WhatsApp messages with residents in Tanah Tinggi these past months holed up in social housing in Hackney, London, I have often thought about

what "we" I belong to in these block after block of differentially shaped estates. In many at least superficial ways, parts of Hackney can be seen as a kind of equivalent to Tanah Tinggi as a centrally located district of an urban core, with its concomitant transformations of the built environment and the volatile mixtures of different economic practices. The estates of Hackney and East London are often referred to as some kind of problematic aggregate or "we," a social body that has to be settled outside of fully market conditions. At the same time, these estates are a concretization of a right to the city on the part of those who may have no part or, conversely, in acknowledgment of the importance of their residency beyond the value calculated by wage or economic contribution. It is also a means of assuaging the potential dangers posited by the presence of the working and lower classes. Whether these presumptions are true or not, given the increasingly private character of such housing, the common understanding is that of a particular kind of *sociality* being constituted and addressed.

Yet, the composition of this social housing varies greatly, especially when considering the elaborate territories of social housing that string one particular project after another. Intricate combinations of design, social composition and withdrawal, and governmental intrusion and indifference shape the ways in which estates are articulated to each other and the larger surroundings, as well as the collective strategies deployed to fight against dispossession (Lees & Ferreri, 2016). Each has its own distinctive proportion of leaseholds and renters, of leaseholders that bought cheaply under the "right to buy" policies of the Thatcher era, and those who acquired them under subsequent renditions of this policy. Each has its own form of management, where the specific relationships between those that nominally "own" them – such as local states, charities, trusts, community development groups, cooperatives, or private development companies – and the internal configurations of owners and renters on particular management committees, are often supplemented by the authority of "extra-parliamentary" groupings that exert control over specific facets of the housing scheme.

Social housing estates are also subject to various development plans, upgrades, privatizations, mandates to house specific kinds of residents, average lengths of stay, securitization of income streams, and work arounds. Schemes vary in the ratio of space per person given the year of construction and the prevailing regulations at the time, and so they vary in terms of relative density, as various degrees of oversight also render some more susceptible to informal arrangements than others. The distribution of experiences is also intensely racialized in terms of capacities to acquire housing assets, to mobilize household and ethnic networks, and secure preferential treatment (Slater, 2018).

While all of these settings may nominally fall under the supervision of specific boroughs, regulatory frameworks or sectoral authorities, they each embody distinctive residential experiences that exist side by side. While not existing as thoroughly compartmentalized bastions, they instill territories with a multiplicity of residential dispositions that themselves leak through each other in terms of an array of lateral exchanges among residents through different associations, gangs, religious institutions, and informal contacts.

While social housing as some kind of overarching entity may be vulnerable to the trajectories of spatial development plans, land value capture, gentrification, and private development, it embeds within it different intensities of exposure to such vulnerability.

As such, vulnerability is conventionally addressed through mobilizations of public solidarity. But, this, too, depends on the degree to which particular housing projects are willing and able to render the interiority of their operations visible to larger audiences and whether they are willing to translate often more tacit internal accommodations of resident differences into more formal vernaculars of representation. Here the racialization of estates as an ongoing locus of colonization, enforces specific lines of schism and solidarity (Cooper, Hubbard, & Lees, 2020).

In such landscapes of London, then, to what extent is it possible to think of a "we" that "cannot live like this" anymore, where both the "we" and the "this" within the immediate circumstances of everyday life vary even under more generalized and shared conditions of precarity at different scales. This is a particularly acute dilemma given the ways in which the residential practices of the estates have been blamed for the high rates of COVID infections. While living conditions may be dense, these blanket attributions occlude the intricate choreographies of care, where residents are attentive to their various exposures and engagements with high risk, "socially necessary" low wage jobs, the multigenerational compositions of many households, and the necessary entanglements among diverse households and extended families as key to everyday livelihood.

Some estates may form small, community control trusts whose sole responsibility is to manage the project, ensure that rents remain affordable and units well maintained, but which often confront diseconomies of scale, where transaction costs eat largely into available income streams. What I am suggesting is that policies, activisms, and advocacies that made sense at one particular moment in London's social housing history generate problematics that could not be anticipated at the time, and so that, in aggregate, what the heterogeneity of the landscape of social housing poses, is a series of unanticipated dilemmas for each, and possible incentives for recalibration, each with their own particularities.

This is set within a long East London history of multiple enclosures and openings organized around the distinctiveness and crisscrossing of race, religion, ethnicity and class. Manifestations organized, for example, around Black Lives Matter both are specific and generalizable across shifting boundaries and generations, and where Blackness is an always dynamic, recomposing trope of identification and organization (Gilroy, 2018).

In East London, the "cannot live" does not represent a "general condition" but a set of multiple and distinct problems that offer "something" to different actors attempting to come to grips with their own particular situations. In both Tanah Tinggi and East London, the elaboration of separate social groupings is less to mark difference or defensiveness than to open up the possibility of exchange, of experiencing the "same" through different tools and perspectives. So the "we" then is less entity than rhythm, a series of "back and forths" and "round and abouts" that enfold different kinds of bodies and sentiments at different times.

The public on the run

From Tanah Tinggi to London, then, this particular understanding of the public "we" is salient for thinking about urbanization processes today and what it is likely to become, particularly when non-human entities such as viruses have become thoroughly

urbanized. In a time of the urban, whose footprints far exceed the capacity to manage them under conventional forms of governmentality, that require new conceptualizations of territory and strategic approaches that go beyond the "municipal," "metropolitan" or "regional," it is necessary to leap out from both the familiar notions of collective life, the public, and the conventional categorizations of individual distinction. This is a matter of both space and time.

Too much emphasis has been placed on the disposition of space, the extent to which spaces are conducive to facilitating social cooperation and responsibility or their capacity to at least provide for a sense of self or household sufficiency, as well as address basic needs. Spaces are judged on their esthetics, whether they look right, whether they ensure the prospects of keeping things in hand (Ghertner, 2010).

Despite being valorized for their resilience, districts like Tanah Tinggi are often deeply disturbing not because observers really understand what it means to live within them, but primarily because they constitute an esthetic assault on the senses. While epidemiology may specify how built environments produce specific life expectancies, the assumption that life must be protracted and that toxicity must be identified in its ramifying versions have been repeatedly marshaled to undermine and invalidate the efforts of many bodies to do more than survive (Roberts, 2017; Roy, 2003). When Jakarta's government officials proclaim that thousands of residents in Tanah Tinggi are potentially wiped out because their spatial arrangements constitute easy conduits of viral spread, we see how the association of spatial designs with human survival only grows more adamant. The "cannot live" is perhaps associated not so much with material conditions but those political threats which undermine the very social reworking that enable the semblance of a viable if not satisfactory life.

Time is perhaps more salient to the elaboration of a "we." For, it lends ambiguity and potential to any statement of "cannot" issued in its name. If a neighborhood or people can no longer "live in a particular way," it is not necessarily the actual practices of living themselves, but the normative terms of judgment and valuation applied to them. The living may be ahead of its time, even if it is considered an anachronism, a relic of the past. Instead of Tanah Tinggi or East London simply "pressing on" to some ameliorative future in a way that conflates endurance with increased subjection, time constantly shifts the terms of proximity. The further away one gets away from the past the closer one is to it; to close in on the anticipated future seems to make it vanish. So biding one's time is perhaps a way to cover all of the angles (Garcia, 2014). In the obdurate working-class districts of Sao Paolo, Jakarta, and Delhi, it has long been evident that nothing remains the same as new words for what takes place within them appear daily. There are constantly events that alter the course of everyday neighborhood life. There are those that come and go, and adjustments have to be made on a daily basis as to who is really in charge of what.

Yet, for the most part, it is difficult to register concrete manifestations of such changes. In Tanah Tinggi, most houses and stores look the same way they did decades ago; children have of course grown up and moved on, many have passed away, but it seems in aggregate that if there is a "we-ness" to these places, that it has not altered that much. In part, perhaps this because these neighborhoods are changing all of the time in small, barely detectable increments. This is not to detract from the fact that many places in urban regions are unrecognizable in terms of the massive transitions that

have taken place, sometimes overnight. Suddenly there are huge vertical towers where rice was harvested the year before. Suddenly, a district full of thousands of migrant dorms disappears in a matter of weeks. Suddenly, a global pandemic wreaks havoc with every aspect of livelihood.

What I am suggesting is that these divergent notions of time, of the play of things moving on and not at all, of a continuous remaking of spaces where nothing changes and the persistence of others where things constantly change, renders time as a series of relays. These relays compel residents to look for something "out there" within the very midst of their neighborhoods and that simultaneously posits those very neighborhoods as something "out there," as embodying a potential yet to be fully experienced. Here, the "we" is not a clearly established subject in place, but a vehicle for such relays (Povinelli, 2017). It is the basic unit of identification since the "self" cannot be here and out there at the same time, even if those spatial designations are folded upon themselves.

The "we" is not a public summation of those positions, but rather a "call-response," an ensemble of players responding to and suggesting pathways to each other in a simultaneous performance of soundings (out), just like in the jazz ensemble, where every instrument has to keep time for the other.

If the "we" of the urban is something potentially in motion, then it only can be grasped in motion, through a series of relays (Adams, 2018). So, all households are also journeys, circuits of movement, and choreographies that recognize their capacity to provide care and livelihood depend on its members moving on, extending themselves into the outside world (Duchêne-Lacroix et al., 2016; Elias & Rai, 2019; Gago, 2017). Here, the "we" is less a matter of "common cause" than a multiplying the fields of investigation that can feed into each other, an appreciation and mapping of the interlocking configurations of residence, sense, and experience that coalesce in particular settings.

As was evident in both Jakarta and East London, the elaboration of itineraries during the pandemic became more important than sheltering in place. Of course, stability remains an important value and aspiration. But increasingly the modus operandi of residence has become circulation, and in environments characterized by gridlock, chokepoints, barriers, gates, and security regimes, circulation has to be strategized, aimed at working around the obstacles. As the intensity of traffic varies according to a multiplicity of strategic maneuvers, itineraries are not static. These itineraries, too, are constantly being readapted, moving bodies simultaneously across different scenarios, largely anonymous to each other, but yet visible and potentially engageable. They are based on shifts aimed less in terms of transformative events, and more in terms of small maneuvers sideways, of recognizing how lateral moves can quickly recompose the terms of one's sociality, open up new horizons with minimal investments (Kloos, 2015).

These shifts are less a matter of "we cannot live like this" but rather the ability to effect small movements sideways. These shifts do not necessarily pay off with more money or status, but with the confirmation of a capacity to simply move, which may be sufficient for now. They demonstrate the capacity to relay, to turn the self into a kind of "we," distributed across different places and terms, by being able to pay attention and engage others with whom one may never have considered oneself eligible for or interested in. This is similar to what Michael Sorkin (2018) has called the refrain of "particular publics," whose differences are enacted in full view and enunciated in terms of each

other. Wherever one is located now becomes the margins to access still other margins, places on the verge of being something else, which is something that all places inherently are in their capacity for re-description, for bringing the underdefined potentialities of an "out there" "in here."

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