

Conspiracy Theory and The City/ Prima Abdullah Surya

In 2008, 23 public schools were about to be closed by DC Mayor Adrian Fenty, whose political agenda includes aggressive educational reform. Claiming that public education in the US, particularly in troubled urban neighbourhoods, has been broken for a long time¹. At the beginning of his term, public schools in DC were considered as the lowest performing in the US. Collapsed infrastructure, non-merit based teacher salary, and bloated central office bureaucracy are said to be the main cause of low performing students. He defined the problem and aimed to fix it.

One of his working examples was Sousa Middle School, where only fewer than 16% of its students could read and do math at grade level by the beginning of his term. The school has improved within a year. Enough to meet federal benchmark for progress the first time in its history, while other schools that couldn't meet the standards were closed.

However, not everybody was pleased with this vision. John Burrough Elementary School was one of the 23 schools that were closed down. One of the parents claimed that the reasoning for closing the school down was unfounded. The school was 15th in reading out of 81, it's in the top 20% in math, the parents work well, PTA body was active, and the community loved the school.²

The community came up with an explanation, it must be a land grab. Looking the way down the road the school is located in a beautiful long block. And there's a great green field that was available for the children to play. Everyone in the community seemed to think that developers have converged upon DC going after the property they want. Other school buildings have been closed and replaced with a million-dollar condo.³

The Plan

The Plan is a conspiracy theory in Washington DC that has been around at least since 1968. The believer of the theory is sure that a plan was hatched to remove black population from DC to give them to the white population through calculated gentrification⁴ and urban renewal⁵.

Their modus operandi goes as follows: Real estate developer conspires with home-builders to neglect and tear down affordable housing in poorer neighbourhoods and replace it with expensive lofts and condos, with high-end shops and hip restaurants to follow. Legislators who are friendly to the disenfranchised are ousted thanks to trumped up scandals. Government cronies kick-in tax breaks and friendly zoning laws, and soon, less-wealthy African-American families are pushed out and replaced by richer young whites⁶.

The Plan itself has not manifested anywhere on paper—as many conspiracy theories, therefore has no historical records to support it. However, the blacks who are marginalized believe the theory to be true, although they don't think there are any codified laws, but more of a nebulous and ever-changing concept, manipulated by unseen forces.

Implausible as it may be, Washington DC has been experiencing demographic changes since the 60's. Once a majority black city, immortalized in George Clinton's 1975 "Chocolate City," Washington has been a special place for black Americans. Historically, DC was a slaveholding state, but Lincoln has freed the slaves nine months before the emancipation proclamation, which prompted blacks from surrounding regions to flock there⁷.

However, the black population is dropping. From 2000 to 2010, the district lost about 39,000 black residents while 50,000 whites moved in. The black decline 11% while the white increase 31.4%⁸ by 2011 statistics. Black population reached its peak in 1970 at 71%, now the blacks occupied 49% comparable to 49% whites⁹. Adding salt to the wound, median black household income is \$42,161 while for whites is \$132,698¹⁰. The Chocolate City is facing an uphill battle to turn into Vanilla Village.

(Fig. 01)

The unseen forces in the conspiracy theory may not be true, but the effect seemed real to the disenfranchised. American cities have gone through a massive wave of gentrification in the last few decades. But to a lot of people, that process does not represent the natural ebb and flow of the real estate market, but something more sinister, more orchestrated. It's a plot, and they are its targets.

The Giant Wall

On the other side of the world, there are also battle for a wall in Jakarta. On one of his visits during campaign, Anies Baswedan—current governor of Jakarta, promised to contest against the states plan to construct a reclamation project in north of Jakarta. Claiming a land reclamation project as a sign of the hubris of manmade structure against the natural will of god. The rhetoric's was in a coded language that rouse an old divide that can be traced since the colonial age. Clothed with religious verbiage, his speech was aimed to the religious and racial minorities.

At the time, his campaign was against popular incumbent, Basuki Purnama or Ahok, who was not of the majority religion and of Chinese minority descent. His public level of satisfactory reached 67%. But the campaign was so dividing, and he was caught in a blasphemy case. A snowball of hate speech and misinformation are sown in social media and private messaging group¹¹. In the end Baswedan wins, and Jakarta reclamation project was at the time suspended.

However, Jakarta is one of the fastest sinking cities, due to groundwater extraction for ever-growing water supply caused by the rapid urbanization and population growth. Millions of residents, uncovered by city water plumbing system, tapped into shallow underground aquifers. A third¹² of that number was caused by business and industries usages. Missing its structural integrity, the layer of rock and sediments slowly collapse into itself.

Climate change also caused the rise of water sea level as much as 3mm per year. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predict¹³ the rise from 3-10mm per year until 2100. Jakarta has sunk by 4 meters in the last 30 years. Another study¹⁴ concludes that by 2050 about 95% of North Jakarta will be submerge.

To counter that, Jakarta is building The Great Sea Wall with area half the size of Manhattan which will function as a sea barrier as well as a dam that collects water from the rivers and canals that can function as a sustainable source of drinking water¹⁵.

(Fig. 02)

Fortunately, Baswedan disagreement to the reclamation slowly changes¹⁶, he published building permit for some of the reclamation project. The same sentiment wasn't shared among his voters. What seems to be a simple solution can't be executed without political turf war. There are plenty of other issues that Jakarta is facing, but this exact issue is what some of his vocal follower say as only reason why he was elected because of what it symbolizes.

On the other hand, there are valid issues with the reclamation projects. There are fishermen whose livelihood would be disturbed, while also environmental group who considers the necessity to conserve the mangrove forest in the north of Jakarta.

Talk of how nebulous Chinese descent conglomerate is funding the giant sea wall overcome a more legible issue. The discussion is not progressing, there are still no solutions to submerging Jakarta. Instead of the giant sea wall, there is only a giant wall that divide the people.

Cambridge Analytica

A great divide also happened In 2016 United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum. Leave.EU—a political campaign group that supported withdrawal from EU, hired a political consulting firm named Cambridge Analytica (CA)¹⁷. The firm collected data from Facebook users and managed to construct a profile of millions of users. This profile was used to determine impressionable users that were susceptible to false information and target them with ads that would push them to vote for Brexit. The ads themselves were not accountable and due to the effectiveness of the algorithm, the ads were only isolated to those who fit the profile. ¹⁸

The ads also don't target those who had a differing opinion, creating no measure of check and balance in the form of discussions¹⁹. This isolation then forms an echo chamber that strengthen their beliefs of a black and white worldview—with their view being righteous, and others bad. While policy making was never black and white.

In one of her TED talk, Carole Cadwalladr explain how one resident of Ebbw Vale, the city with highest leave vote, argues that staying in EU would mean UK would be invaded by immigrants, despite the city itself has one of the lowest rates of immigration. Another argument was how the EU has never did anything to the city, even though there are several of urban development project funded by the EU from college, sports centre, to railway station. After the referendum, investment started to leave the city.

Fingers are pointed to CA for causing the referendum to end in UK withdrawal from EU—famously coined Brexit. But CA was only using tools of targeted ads provided by big tech companies the likes of Facebook and Google. During the Myanmar conflicts, thousands of local Islamic populations, threatened by genocide, are expatriated from their hometown. The confrontation was acerbated by social media the likes of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp—all coincidentally owned by the same company²⁰. Now CA has declared bankruptcy, while the spread of misinformation still happened.

Misinformation is not exclusively a digital phenomenon. In the middle ages the Jewish community has suffer persecution because they were blamed for the black plague²¹. False information is not anything different than any propaganda in any authoritarian regime. The difference is that in the past false narrative has always been enforced. Today, social media user wilfully listens and be divided.

There are neurological explanation to why conspiracy theory and misinformation grow, while willingness to follow rational logic discussions decline. To work efficiently, human brains require to simplify and find patterns of the universe. Conspiracy theory is a tool to see patterns in a naturally complex, random, and unrelated data²². Growing conspiracy theory that is working against the disenfranchised is a symptom, not the illness. There are many ways to define the illness that we are facing, and there are also many treatments that has been proposed. But, the first step is to raise awareness to susceptibility²³.

With a similar tone In one of his interviews, Slavoj Žižek mention that fake news has always happened, during the cold war by the east and the west or even the past decade. Sometimes fake news, are not entirely fake, it's constructed by selecting facts that actually happened and ignoring other facts that misconstrued arguments being build. The difference is that now, it is not institutionalized. And what's interesting, although he insisted that there are facts—things that actually happened, he also considers fake news as a continuity of post-modern view of no objective truth²⁴. In the interview, one tends to conclude that Žižek seems to encourage the society to learn how to live side by side with fake news.

Unfortunately, Žižek seemed to avoid the significance of fake news that may look like coming from the grassroot can sometimes come from a highly funded institution that aim to misinformed the public. Sadly, there is no cure for fake news, and there is no way to differentiate between a benign

superstition and malign misinformation. The best that we can do is having a discussion and coming to an understanding.

Suspicion against race, religion, and nationality is only a signifier of further underlying problems. The racial distrust in Washington has its counterpart with political polarization in the Midwest called the white replacement conspiracy theory. In Jakarta anti-Ahok Islamist discourses drew explicitly and implicitly on old narratives about the dominance of an ethnic Chinese capitalist class, of whom Ahok was considered as the champion. A racialised, sectarian campaign against Ahok, was a way for many people to channel their frustrations with what they saw as the injustice of that supposedly Chinese-dominated economy²⁵.

This can also be visible in the election map in Jakarta. By superimposing data of the 2017 Jakarta election with identity i.e religion demography, we may see more than what we may already know, that there are positive correlations between religion and voting behaviour. Percentage of the highest vote for Ahok comes from Glodok (90.1% vote for Ahok) and Pluit (77.3% vote) that has 80.8% and 67.4% of non-muslim population. While the lowest vote comes from Sukabumi Utara (20.8% vote) and Tegalparang (22.0% vote) with 4.9% and 3.9% of non-muslim population.

However, there are also other area where religion and voting behaviour has significant opposite. In area such as Cipete Utara (43% vote) and Melawai (69% vote) has 5.8% and 29.6% non-muslim population. In Untung Jawa, where the muslim population reaches 100%, there still 40.7% for Ahok. However analysing data only can give us incomplete perspective. To add this with context: while Glodok and Pluit has a high Chinese minority population, Cipete Utara and Melawai has one of the most expensive land prices in Jakarta. Perhaps there is are further underlying problems.

(Fig. 03)

Similar notes were voiced by Prof Michael Sandel, on his book the Tyranny of Merit. The problem of false information is not on the lack of education, but on the failed distribution of wealth.²⁶ The left-wing individualist the like of Obama, Clinton, and Blair thinks that to solve globalization and inequality one must work hard and play by the rules, this will reward one to rise as far as their effort and talents will take them. Sandel coined this as the 'rhetoric of rising', where it became an article of faith. However, the playing field is not level. Those who were born within a higher social class will most likely get a better education, and consequently a better live. While Americans born to poor parent tend to stay poor as adults. The populist backlash of recent years has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit, as it has been experienced by those who feel humiliated by meritocracy and by this entire political project. However, Sandel was a well-known left. Avoiding to sound like the law of instrument: a hammer sees every problem as nails, a Marxist only see every problem as class warfare. He mentions that it will not be the only prescription, but it should start with that.

The City

In the prehistoric times, communities consisted only in the thousands. In the past 200 hundred years we see an increase in the number of populations in the community to the millions. And as we enter the digital age--with all its imperfections, the possibility to interact increased by the billions. Technology has allowed us to stretch our ability and test the seams of the fabric of society. Perhaps we are not evolutionary equipped with the ability to create a community in such magnitudes, but humanity needs to adapt to its vices of their own creations.

Can city offer a refuge to oceans of misinformation and its effect on us? There are two ways to analyse the spread of misinformation. First: cognitive bias--and its derivative false narrative, as part of an identity. If Ziek implied that we need to learn how to live with false narrative and that there is no objective truth, the best that we can do is create a dialogue that can serve as Hegelian dialectic. Rather than trying to dispute the beliefs--which will not change anything because of false narrative

can sometimes be a part of one's identity, one should try finding a middle ground acknowledging that there is truth in ~~in~~ every argument. In the end there would not be an objective truth, but there would be an agreeable truth.

The second analysis is to see that conspiracy theory is a tool to understand the world that is working against the disenfranchised and now the middle class. The will to consume false narrative came out of the need to survive amidst inequalities that keeps on increasing. Empowering the middle class and involving them in policy making can provide a sense of agency in the day to day happening in the society. However, this can only materialize in communities within the city or a district level. With grassroots based policy making, the general public can benefit by bettering the lives of the disenfranchised as much as deteriorate the fertile ground of misinformation.

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