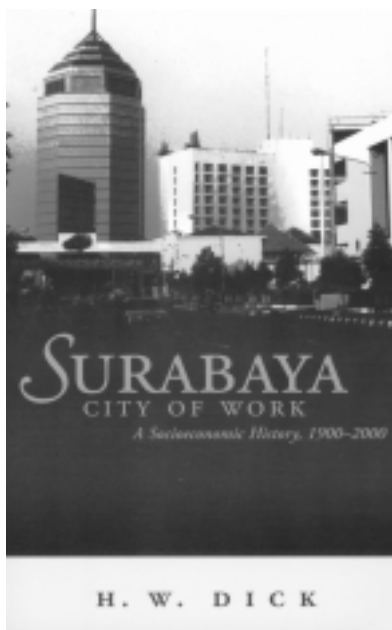


Surabaya, City of Work

Review >
Southeast Asia

Howard Dick has written a very interesting, easy to read, and scholarly book on Surabaya, the capital city of the province of East Java. Introducing the reader to various viewpoints, he presents a wealth of information on a wide variety of topics, providing a detailed description of the historical changes in the city during the twentieth century. This serves to corroborate three general conjectures, thus solving a historical puzzle. The conjectures are: (1) 'the city is the frontier of modern Asian society'; (2) 'nowhere was urbanization more dramatic than in Indonesia under the New Order (1966–98)'; and (3) 'the modern history of Indonesia – especially of Java – can be read as a tale of two cities, Jakarta (colonial Batavia) and Surabaya' (p. xvii). The 'historical puzzle is not the sudden and sustained vitality of the period after the 1970s but the long hiatus between the 1930s and 1970s' (p. xx), partly explained by the '[c]ollapse of the sugar exports during the 1930s depression, followed by the Japanese occupation, revolution, and independence, [which] brought on a long period of stagnation and retreat from the international economy', as Dick states on the back cover. Yet, what is presented in the book actually goes further than its limited purpose suggests.



By Jan Wuisman

Howard Dick's study is an elaborate and detailed analysis of one case, the city of Surabaya. Dick presents a wide variety of contextual information within which to understand the various processes that took place in twentieth-century Surabaya. The study is, perhaps aptly, described as a historical 'urbano-graphical' case study. It clearly indicates its aim: an in-depth, systematic, and comprehensive analysis of the unit of analysis as a complex, dynamic, open system in terms of a wide variety of constitutive dimensions such as: the relationships between the local and global (space); the temporal dimension of past, present, and future (time); the relationship between nature reserves and rural areas in the hinterland and overseas cities and countries (ecology); and the social relationships between men and women (gender), young and old (generations), ethnic affiliation (cultural identity), employers and employees (social class), work, leisure, and consumption (status), inhabitants and bureaucrats (governance), citizens and politicians (polity), national and foreigner (nationality), as well as those between ethnic groups and peoples (hegemony). By covering most of these dimensions this study not only reveals to the reader the complexity of urban life in the city of Surabaya, but also illustrates its pivotal role in the economic development and modernization of the eastern parts of Java and Indonesia.

What makes Surabaya's history?

Nevertheless, Dick's study has its own limitations. There is a rather sharp difference between his descriptive and analytic analysis. At the descriptive level, Dick claims to present a 'loosely structured and idiosyncratic twentieth-century economic history of Surabaya' by exploring a variety of 'key themes by taking several cross-

sections of the historical experience' (p. xxiii). By contrast, the structure of the analytic analysis is much more rigid. The seven chapters of the book are grouped into three rather tightly related clusters or parts.

The first three chapters describe Surabaya as the unit of analysis, and deal with the question: 'What is it that makes Surabaya an entity in the first place?' In chapter 1 the city is introduced to the reader: its geographical locations, appearance to inhabitants and visitors, and the daily cycle of urban life. In the next chapter, a variety of economic and political events that have shaped the city's economic history are described. The implicit idea is that these common experiences have contributed to an emerging awareness of common identity and historical relatedness. Chapter 3 presents a statistical picture of Surabaya and explains how all sorts of external factors, processes, and influences have moulded Surabaya and its identity. Employing these three perspectives, Dick suggests that Surabaya indeed represents a proper unit of historical sociological analysis; that it is an entity with a sufficiently distinct geographical, demographic, economic, institutional, administrative, and cultural identity.

In the second part, Dick outlines three processes of change: the changing structure and role of government in public health, education, and housing (chapter 4), industrialization (chapter 5), and the spread of the city and conflicts in the evolution of land use (chapter 6). The detailed and interesting treatment of these topics is based on a large variety of documentary sources and other sorts of information. What is missing, however, is their systematic treatment within a broader perspective: that is, as examples of specific social processes taking place within and directly contributing to the constitution and transformation of a distinct entity, namely Surabaya. What is more, it is not at all Dick's purpose to reveal the core of the city of Surabaya as a distinct social, cultural, and historical entity. In fact, he acknowledges having chosen Surabaya as a methodological means of studying various nationwide historical processes of growth and decline during the twentieth century. This aspect becomes blatantly clear in the conclusion in the third cluster, which is in the style of a moral discussion on the New Order, as reflected in the ups and downs that Surabaya has experienced during that period, and expectations for the post-Suharto period. The following analogy with a seventeenth-century portrait by the Dutch painter Frans Hals probably best illustrates my point.

From a distance of 50 centimetres, the sleeve of a painted jacket will appear to the observer as tiny strokes of white paint representing geometric figures on

a dark grey or black background. Though one may then justly marvel at the painter's incredible attention for detail and fabulous technical craftsmanship, it is utterly impossible to make sense of what is actually being represented. From a distance of three or four metres, however, these tiny strokes of white paint on a dark background appear to be shining sleeves made of openwork silk lace, reflecting the soft light falling through a window. The same applies to this study of Surabaya. Dick's approach to data, using a low-level of classification and analysis, presents very detailed information on numerous interesting aspects and facets, but, unfortunately, the big picture escapes the attention of the reader.

The metaphor of the painting is also useful to draw attention to a fundamental aspect of today's social scientific understanding of human social life.

Social life is no longer considered to be the sum of a myriad of individual acts and relations among a collective of people that need all be represented in minute detail. Instead, social life in all its varied forms and patterns is increasingly seen as the outcome of processes of social construction and cultural creation (Smith 1998). Unfortunately, the idea that Surabaya is such a construction or creation, a distinct entity that may through time evolve and devolve, remains implicit and is nowhere systematically elaborated.

'Work' as a label or a metaphor

A final consideration concerns the specific role attributed to 'work'. The concept of 'work' seems to have been chosen primarily to indicate a supposedly typical characteristic of this city, in contrast to other cities, rather than as a metaphor expressing what is typical

about Surabaya and makes it what it is in the first place. The concept of 'work' is too general to be of much use to differentiate between Surabaya and other cities in Indonesia that are also based on a work culture.

Notwithstanding the above criticism this book is an eye-opener, especially for those who are not closely acquainted with Indonesia's culture and society: it reveals the existing historical diversity, richness of social experience, and the enormous cultural variation that goes with this second largest city of Indonesia. <

- Dick, Howard W., *Surabaya, City of Work: A socioeconomic history, 1900-2000*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press (2002), pp. 541, ISBN 0-89680-221-3.

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- Smith, Mark J., *Social Science in Question: Towards a non-disciplinary social science*, London: Open University Press (1998).

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