BOOK REVIEW

Proliferasi Pemikiran Sosial Kritis: A Review Essay

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Extract

The genealogy of critical social thought finds its constitutive locus in the long-standing debates surrounding social science methodologies, from positivism to postmodernism and poststructuralism. This book delineates the framework of critical humanities knowledge while simultaneously engaging with a wide array of contemporary social issues.

Although grounded in sociological reasoning, the book adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, addressing themes such as medical regimes, the political economy of higher education, and the vulnerabilities of digital subjects. These include challenges such as data concentration, surveillance capitalism, algorithmic power, and the logic of sharing economies within digital capitalism. The urgency of this publication lies in its potential to balance discourses of development with emancipatory and democratic ideals while also providing an academic impetus to strengthen civil supremacy in society.

Background

Critical thinking is not merely the ability to reason rationally and systematically when processing diverse sources of information for problem-solving or decision-making. In the social sciences, critical thinking entails a scientifically grounded inquiry, continuously produced and reproduced through a series of paradigms and methodological debates as reflected in social realities. Few publications in Indonesia have focused on this terrain.

Over the past two decades, efforts to localize critical thinking rooted in critical theory traditions have been initiated by Heru Nugroho (2000) in his seminal work *Menumbuhkan Ide-Ide Kritis*. That book served as an academic stimulus for advancing emancipatory, egalitarian, and democratic developmental discourses in Indonesia. Hence, this new publication, *Proliferasi Pemikiran Sosial Kritis* (Nugroho et al. 2024), should not be viewed as an entirely novel contribution. Rather, it reads as a sequel to the earlier work that emerged during the dawn of democracy in post-reform Indonesia.

The impetus to provoke critical thought is now driven by an accumulation of social afflictions: democratic decline, the rise of oligarchic politics, false consciousness, and exploitative practices in cyber societies. One of the book's most compelling strengths is its refusal to be confined within the disciplinary boundaries of sociology. Instead, it is enriched by interdisciplinary critical social theories that explore and dissect multifaceted social issues within the dynamic tides of our contemporary era.

Intellectually, this book contributes to the development of contemporary social theory, particularly where it intersects with disciplines beyond sociology. Socially, it lends meaningful support to ideas of civil

supremacy oriented toward emancipatory empowerment in addressing both national and global social issues.

Keypoint

The book unfolds in three conceptual movements. In its initial part, it invites readers to trace the logic of sociological reasoning, which serves as a prologue to the broader methodological debates in social sciences. The second part addresses the global waves of social transformation and how these shifts drive the expansion of market fundamentalism, notably within the domain of higher education. In the final section, the book critically interrogates the phenomenon of cyber society, highlighting the rise of false consciousness among vulnerable digital subjects.

To introduce readers to the reasoning of sociological logic, the author employs a thought experiment featuring three archetypes: the layperson, the philosopher, and the sociologist. According to Berger and Luckmann (1991), the layperson—termed *the man on the street*—tends to perceive social phenomena without questioning their essence or existence. The philosopher, on the other hand, often scrutinizes the nature of existence in society through ontological and epistemological inquiries (Jary and Jary 1991).

The sociologist, distinct from both, neither passively accepts values nor seeks their absolute essence. As Berger and Luckmann suggest, sociologists occupy a reflective space between the layperson and the philosopher engaged yet critical (Berger and Luckmann 1991). The book then progresses to an in-depth discussion on methodological debates within the social sciences. It charts a historical trajectory from Weberian positivism to postmodernism and poststructuralism, immersing the reader in what feels like an intensive course in social science methodology. This chapter serves as a foundational pillar where the

genealogy of critical social thought is most vividly articulated. This section also calls upon social scientists and readers alike to equip themselves with a reflective and emancipatory mindset. In their intellectual praxis, whether in producing knowledge, applying methodologies, or interpreting social realities, they are encouraged to become contextual intellectuals: those who take a stance, who are committed to emancipatory principles, and who dedicate their scholarship to empowering communities.

Contextualizing Critical Social Thought: From the Campus Paradox to the Vulnerability of Digital Subjects

Although this book is grounded in theoretical inquiry, it is enriched with critical analyses of pressing contemporary issues. Two prominent examples include the political economy of higher education and the exploitation embedded in digital society. Higher education institutions, particularly universities, are examined in a dedicated chapter that interrogates the paradox of market fundamentalism.

For the authors, the university is not merely a collection of grand architectural structures, but rather an academic institution inhabited by scholars engaged in intellectual activity. It should serve as a site where minds converge where intellectuals meet to exchange ideas through discussion, innovation, and the publication of scientific work rooted in research. Ideally, the university functions as a meeting of minds among its academic community.

Yet the authors offer a sharp critique of the political-economic dynamics shaping higher education in Indonesia today, specifically the shift in academic culture and the transformation of the university into a space of power contestation. Academic life is increasingly driven by economic interests, with individuals prioritizing teaching and research activities that generate quick financial returns. Those with political and

social capital often ascend to strategic positions within the university hierarchy and those with strong networks may exit academia entirely for posts in government bureaucracy.

Drawing from a Marxian perspective, the authors analyze higher education through the lens of political economy, portraying Indonesian legal-entity universities as akin to convenience stores selling an assortment of commodities. They further argue that higher education today has undergone a process of McDonaldization, echoing George Ritzer's (1996) framework characterized by four principles: quantification, efficiency, predictability, and technologization.

Quantification is reflected in the emphasis on graduation rates, with faster completion equated with better outcomes. Efficiency is reduced to economic calculations, programs that are financially profitable thrive, while less commercially viable disciplines like the humanities face decline. Predictability involves aligning study programs with labor market demands under the banner of link and match. Lastly, technologization refers to the compulsory use of advanced technologies in educational delivery.

Strikingly, these paradoxes are unveiled by authors who themselves are members of the academic community. Their critique is not only bold but self-reflective, challenging the very institutions that sustain them. In their view, universities in Indonesia have become paper tigers, impressive in form, yet hollow in their academic culture.

Among the many issues explored in this book, the final chapter engages the most current theme: the cyber society. This digitally mediated society is increasingly vulnerable, though often unconsciously so. A particularly salient example is the rise of online lending platforms (*pinjol*). In times of economic uncertainty, such services are presented as digital lifelines for immediate financial access. In reality, however, they ensnare

users through mechanisms of data concentration and surveillance capitalism.

Continuing with the Marxian tradition, the authors adopt a critical digital humanities perspective inspired by Shoshana Zuboff. They argue that *pinjol* exemplifies a surveillance economy that monitors, manipulates, and exploits the precarity of the cyber public. As Zuboff (2019a; 2019b) notes, digital technologies are not designed to empower users, but rather to ensnare them within exploitative economic systems governed by algorithmic knowledge and control.

Further exploring the structural inconsistencies of digital society, the book also scrutinizes the nature of social media. In using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, users voluntarily surrender their identities. Features such as likes, comments, subscriptions, and shares function not merely as engagement tools but as data extraction mechanisms that record behavioral patterns and social interactions (Maly 2022).

These data allow platform companies to construct predictive models of user behavior, which are then repurposed for commodification processes such as targeted advertising and content suggestions. This process termed platformization is geared toward harvesting and monetizing user data for economic and political ends (Bucher 2018).

To interrogate these dynamics, the authors deploy a Foucauldian perspective using critical discourse analysis. They examine how power and ideology operate in digital spaces by deconstructing the texts behind the discourses. A compelling case study explored is the agrarian conflict on Rempang Island, Batam, where the Indonesian government promoted a Twitter hashtag, #RempangHappyEnding, to frame the narrative.

The authors also problematize the rhetoric of partnership promoted by digital companies, who claim to offer mutually beneficial collaboration between platforms and 'partners'. They argue that the term partner conceals exploitative labor relations characteristic of the sharing economy. Rather

than empowerment, so-called partners are subjected to gamification regimes systems that apply game logic to shape behavior and maximize economic engagement.

In this analysis, the authors draw on Juliet B. Schor's Marxian reading of the sharing economy. According to Schor (2016), the sharing economy encompasses four key activities: goods recirculation, asset intensification, service exchange, and the distribution of productive assets. In this view, platform-based partnerships are extensions of advanced capitalism that continue to encroach upon the lives of digital society.

Conclusion

This book offers not only a methodological dialogue within the social sciences but also critical reflections on the pervasive social problems of our time. Theoretically, it encourages us to transcend disciplinary silos and embrace diverse critical perspectives from Marxian to Foucauldian recognizing that social issues rarely stem from a singular structural source. Rather, they emerge from the fissures and fault lines embedded in everyday life. Hence, the urgency of critical social thought lies not only in academic circles but also in its role in defending and advancing civil supremacy amid the pressures of political and economic regimes.

The insights presented in this book are by no means absolute. They require further reflection and expansion to sustain the vitality of critical social thought. Particularly now, when the nation finds itself in a period of profound uncertainty especially for the intellectual middle class this book resonates with the spirit of civil movements such as 'Emergency Warning' and 'Indonesia Gelap'. In such a context, the imperative to produce and reproduce critical thought must not only endure, but intensify.

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