

# Professional Blindness And Missing The Mark ~ Preface



The articles contain the edited versions of the presentations discussed during the Wertheim Seminar, held on June 4, 2008 in the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam. The subject was Blind Spots and Preoccupation in the research on Post War Indonesian Political Crises. The seminar was part of the 3-day Wertheim Centennial. It was hosted by the International Institute of Social History (IISH), the ASIA Platform of the University of Amsterdam and the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) and organized by a team from the Wertheim Foundation, i.e. Ibrahim Isa - secretary,

Farida Ishaya - member, Jaap Erkelens - member, and Coen Holtzappel - chairman and convener of the Wertheim seminar. The speakers, guests and audience honored the legacy of Professor Doctor Wim Wertheim with this event, the distinguished academic who after World War II founded the Amsterdam school of the historical sociological analysis of modern Asian history and political development. Wertheim also played an important role in the Dutch and international resistance against the murderous war on Indonesian communism, which President Suharto started after the 1 October 1965 Affair, and his destruction of Indonesia's Sukarno legacy. The seminar was opened by Emil Schwidder, research staff member of the IISH, with a special task on the China collection. He reminded the audience of the close professional relationship that Professor Wertheim and IISH maintained during his life, and the fact that Wertheim's children donated their father's correspondence, publications and other documents and tapes to the institute. The IISH was founded in 1935 and has become one of the leading institutes in the world to rescue, conserve and register important archives of socialist social movements. Before the Second World War, archives were rescued from Austria, Germany and Spain, including papers by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. War archives from Eastern Europe, Turkey, the Middle East and Asia followed. The collection of Wertheim's personal and official correspondence, publications, personal and press photographs is now

part of the archives.

Coen Holtzappel, convener of the seminar and chairman of the Wertheim Foundation, thanked Emil Schwidder for his kind opening words and welcomed the speakers, the audience, and the special guests. He called to attention the subject of the seminar, i.e. the disturbing role of political and social ignorance, taboos, neglect and denial in the study of historical events and phenomena. They should not be mistaken for “white spots” in our knowledge of the world; i.e. not yet discovered domains of research and phenomena. The real focus is on subjects and domains of knowledge that governments and political elite groups close for research, for example to hide specific aspects of their political behavior, such as crimes, irresponsible wars, blunders, and crimes against humanity. The speakers of the seminar would discuss examples of such disturbances they encountered during their studies of major political crises in and between the Republic Indonesia and the Netherlands during the first two decades of Indonesia’s existence. For many Indonesians, the Netherlands is still the former colonizer and occupier. For many Dutch people Indonesia is the former Netherlands East Indies. They call Indonesian food “Indies food.” According to Wertheim, such ‘blinkers’ have a history. In authoritarian states they are the products of carefully maintained systems of political myth formation, created by elites. To cite the closing statement of Ben White’s chapter in this book, which stems from Wertheim’s *Elite and Mass*, “The blind and the ignorant, in general, are not busy making themselves or others blind and ignorant. What Wertheim drew our attention to, in contrast, was a process by which elites, and scholars, *choose* to describe societies and history in ways which made both themselves and others blind to social reality.” In other words, the sources of blindness and ignorance that we should pay attention to, are the elite groups and scholars that use their power and influence to make people look at the things they want them to see and refrain them from looking at things they want them to ignore or deny.

Although I am convinced that such tyrants also exist in people’s personal life, bringing others to crime and suicide, in social and political history we are primarily interested in the political and public social level at which political tyranny occurs. The level where political and religious leaders program people to follow their prejudice and abstain them from using their innate human capacities to study the unknown. In this respect the chapters presented in this book reflect an effort to tackle the problem of how to approach the prejudices in the Dutch-

Indonesian discourse about the history of the first decades of Independence War and subsequent decolonization. Instead of the dislikes that burden Dutch and Indonesian views of each other, we should work on a value free and neutral historiography of the shared process of separating Indonesian and Dutch households and interests, and the development of their own ways of continuance. Central in this effort should be the urgent advice to historians, social and political academics to base restudies of past crises and events on the primary sources and eye witness reports. It is the only way to stay as close to the past as possible.

The subjects covered by the seminar are as follows:

- [1] The ignorance in Dutch and Indonesian literature regarding the role of the Republican Pemuda units as protectors of Indo-Europeans after the Japanese capitulation. The findings of Mary van Delden appear to challenge conceptions that still exist on both the Indonesian and the Dutch side,
- [2] Coen Holtzappel calls attention to General Nasution's analysis of the roots of the Madiun Affair of 1948 as exposed in Part 8 of his 10 volume *Publication on the Indonesian Independence War*. Instead of delivering a tale about how he crushed the communist Madiun coup, Nasution went back to his notes, and the available Indonesian and Dutch sources. He produced a study of the registered and unregistered events that caused the Indonesian military Madiun uprising of 1948 and the communist support of it.
- [3] Pieter Drooglever emphasizes the ignorance regarding the roots and meaning of Papua nationalism during and after the conflict about the international status of Netherlands New Guinea between the Netherlands and Indonesia.
- [4] Holtzappel uses the minutes of the first two martial law trials against two leaders of the Thirtieth September Movement of 1965 to show that Western and Indonesian analysts ignore the conflict that ignited the movement. Their focus is too much on the view of "winner" General Suharto and ignores the view of the "losers" which reveals a different story.
- [5] Saskia Wieringa turns our attention to the ignorance and denial after the Reformasi of 1999 of the use of sexual slander against the communist women's organization Gerwani by General Suharto. Sexual slander was used to stigmatize communism, and communist women in particular; and to legitimize genocide in order to destroy President Sukarno's political and social legacy. Apparently, Reformasi has not created the clean break with the Suharto past many had hoped for in 1999. There still is no room for reconciliation and truth finding, unlike other countries with a communist past and a dirty war against it.

[6] Ben White points to the conservative roots of a renowned American anthropologist's unwillingness to analyze the massacre, which fitted existing standards of scientific knowledge and morality. Referring to outsiders in order to explain the massacre as having cultural roots shows elitist escapism. It asks the question but leaves the answer to the anonymous and politically disabled victims and the perpetrators.

Four special guests participated in the seminar. Dr. Ruth McVey, pioneer of international 1965-studies, chaired the afternoon panels, and Mr. Martin Sanders, board member of the Bilateral Dutch-Indonesian Chamber of Commerce, chaired the morning sessions. We also welcomed Jan Breman, one of Wertheim's best-known pupils and intellectually closest to the model of historical sociology as established by Wertheim during his academic career in Amsterdam. Last but not least, we welcomed Benny Setiono, winner of the Wertheim Award 2008 for his interesting evaluation of the long-term history of turmoil experienced by the Chinese communities in the Indonesian archipelago during their stay in that area.

We picked Preoccupation and Blind Spots as a theme for the seminar, better known under the label Ignorance when it emerged in the early 1970s. Although in daily English parlance Ignorant means "behind the times", "rude" and "improper behavior", the methodological Ignorance movement refers to the fact that prejudices and lack of knowledge, as well as lack of the proper concepts and instruments of observation, can blind researchers to features and properties of their subject.

After the 1970s, the Ignorance concept developed into a constant component in the detection of observation errors and mistaken arguments in psychology and social science. At the end of his academic career, Wertheim also dived into the Ignorance hype. He pointed to the fact that Ignorance as a subject of methodological research had a predecessor in the Sociology of Knowledge. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Lukacs and Karl Mannheim were its founders and main protagonists, and focused on structural societal causes of ignorance, like Ideology, the religious concept of the Chosen People and Class. They studied the societal forms of false consciousness that hamper the development of true knowledge about social phenomena and their causes, in particular the bias caused by the social inequality between researcher and informant. Moreover, the founders identified groups in society like the ruling and middle class, which would structurally be unable to understand what people in lower and/or higher echelons

of society feel, see and think. The recent experiences with Dutch movements like the Party for Freedom, and Proud of the Netherlands, the following of which belongs to the new emerging middle class, expose these features as well. With the exception of some scholars of the Mannheim School who developed techniques for the interviewing and observation of German war criminals, and Post Structuralism, the founders were generally not involved in developing the technical side of observation and concept formation.

In his article, *The State and the Dialectics of Emancipation*, Wertheim took Emancipation as the opposite and only sensible alternative to social inequality and the related ignorance phenomenon. He defined emancipation as follows: “any form of collective struggle of groups that feel themselves to be treated as ‘underdogs’, fighting against the privileges of the ‘upper dogs’”. In this sense, emancipation includes a whole range of social groups struggling for recognition as being at least equal to those who thus far exercised political, economic or social power over them. One may think of emancipation of laborers, peasants, middle class, colored nations, racial or ethnic minorities, women, youth and many other categories (Wertheim 1992: 257-281). In *Mass and Elite*, Wertheim devoted two chapters to the Ignorance theme, in which he related Ignorance to the conservative political restoration movement that developed in Europe immediately after the bloody French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century this reactionary elitism developed into a structural source of people’s ignorance and deception, which fiercely condemned and fought any deviation from the way to restoration of class, status and elitism. Typical for that elitism is that it divides society in worthwhile and worthless subjects and events, in wise and dumb, and strong and weak people, in born leaders and born losers. It blocks any view of the people or what the elite judges to be not worthwhile knowing. It also blocks any efforts of people fighting for emancipation, i.e. to liberate people from social inequality and physical, social and intellectual oppression. It is interesting to note that at the end of his life Wertheim positioned either deliberately or unwittingly the elite-mass distinction as basic of all forms of Social Inequality. Indeed, reading Wertheim’s book about Elite and Mass leads to the conclusion that elitism is present in communism, socialism, fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, racism, ethnicity, ideology and religion, i.e. in any social movement, transcendental or inner worldly in nature, that claims to hold the eternal truth about the Chosen People.

Wertheim's last Masters' Course in the academic year 1972/1973 was devoted to the theme of Ignorance and contained a serious warning against the at that time emerging form of structural ignorance - Neo Liberalism. This movement dismissed the empirical value of Marxism, Structuralism and Historical Sociology as leftist constructions and intellectual fancies, and threatened to refer established empirical knowledge about structures and institutions to the garbage can. However, most of Wertheim's examples regard colonial capitalism in the Netherlands Indies that served the rich in the colony and at home, and forgot to properly reward the serving indigenous part of colonial society. The colonial government's cover up of Rhemrev's 1904 report about the bad labor relations in East Sumatra's plantations is one example of many instances of colonial and Dutch neglect of bad labor relations in Indonesia's plantation areas. In 1992 Jan Breman published a long-term study on these relations in his book "Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek: Het arbeidsregiem op de grootlandbouwondernemingen van Sumatra's Oostkust in het begin van twintigste eeuw (Coolies, Planters and Colonial Politics: The labour regime in the plantations of East Sumatra at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)." New in this field of interest is Breman's study *Kolonial Profijt van Onvrije Arbeid. Het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen koffieteeelt op Java, 1720-1870*. Amsterdam University Press 2010. [Colonial Profit from unfree labour. The Preanger scheme of enforced coffee culture on Java, 1720-1870].

At the proposal of the late Frans Husken we chose the concept of Ignorance as discussed by Wertheim in his *Elite and Mass* and his last Master Class of the 1973/1974, and looked for colleagues that could provide new Ignorance material. That material is contained in these articles, which also aim to show that research of primary sources, contemporary to the revisited events and crises and preferably produced by them, is a basic requirement in revisiting the past.

The discussions during the seminar showed that these subjects and issues still draw attention. About 50 people participated in the lively discussions between speakers and attendees about the new data, insights and interpretations presented. The discussions whet the appetite for more news about these subjects.

### *The discussions*

As might be expected from a seminar about the effort to search for material and insights that until now remained outside the attention of mainstream analyses

about Indonesia's early postwar political and social history, most discussions served to link the audience to the subjects by informative questions and using related issues to get started on the subjects. Mary van Delden was asked to what extent her study differed from existing camp studies, or complemented them. She explained that the archive material in her study had never been used by other authors, regarding camps that had never been studied before. Pieter Droogleever was questioned about the facts he revealed and the extent to which the Dutch effort to prepare the Papuans of Netherlands New Guinea for independence was immoral in light of the Indonesian Irian war theater. He answered that in his exposition he did not touch upon moral issues. His endeavor was to demonstrate that Papuan nationalism was a direly underestimated force, not only by the Indonesian administration, but by most foreign participants in the dispute as well. There was also discussion about the question to what extent the presentation of Nasution's view ignored the political dimension of the Madiun Affair, i.e. the ideological confrontation it was part of, and the subordination of the military problems to the political struggle that the Indonesian government fought in and outside Indonesia. Coen Holtzappel repeated that General Nasution wrote about the period in which he was chief of staff of Supreme Commander General Sudirman and his efforts to counter the urge the Dutch put on the Indonesian government to demobilize its troops. Nasution focused on the technical military problems he had to solve in contact with the field; on the military preparations for an uprising to force the government into an all-out assault on the Dutch; and on the meetings of the Indonesian parliamentary committee. His story showed how the so-called communist coup attempt exploited from the outside, and for its own interests, violent inter service problems. Of course these were political problems, but the military, and in particular the local militias, viewed them as existential problems. They pragmatically sought support from those sides that promised to serve their interests best. For many of them, ideology was for primarily a support device, not a class station yet. Ruth McVey commented that in the given situation of a young country fighting for its life, the standard differentiations between political and military affairs as we know them in our Western world are irrelevant.

The afternoon discussions did not focus directly on the subjects presented but instead focused on the 1965 massacres and the number of victims and their suffering, the role of the CIA in the massacres, and the option of reconciliation and illumination by national discussions and research. Ruth McVey opened the panel discussion asking if there were questions from academics or activists – for

example, why academics tend to be silent about the massacre whereas the activists are not very effective. An Indonesian man stood up and asked if Ben White could say something about CIA activities during his stay. White answered that he is not an expert on Indonesian communism, the Indonesian killings and Indonesian politics since he is happier counting chickens and coconuts and things like that, and that is what his research is about. He was talking as a non-expert who wanted to see what the experts had to say about the massacre. As to the CIA involvement, he did not know. He knew that someone from the US Embassy who operated on his own account, had handed over a list with names of communists to the Army. No one told him to do that. But it was also known that the embassy gave fifty thousand US dollars to carry out the anti-PKI campaign in Central and East Java and in Bali. This was revealed by a telegram sent to Washington and these telegrams recently became publicly accessible, albeit with some names deleted. Ruth McVey replied that she knew that the CIA's role in events always excites people. She also knew that before 1 October 1965 some generals had contacts with the CIA about money and sources of money, just to ensure themselves of the backing of some Western powers in the future. Suharto had contacts with the CIA, the British and the Japanese. In the period after the coup, it was important to get the Americans on your side. Nasution, who survived the coup, was the highest in rank in the armed forces and officially the man to deal with. Both Nasution and Suharto sent emissaries to the US Embassy saying "I am the man to deal with." The embassy very quickly decided that they were dealing with Suharto. Therefore, Nasution was cut out.

Ruth McVey continued that if we are looking at foreign relations, almost everyone had a finger in the pie. However, that does not necessarily mean that the origins of the massacres rested outside Indonesia. Saskia Wieringa continued that she fully agreed with Ruth McVey. It is very clear that it was very much an Indonesian coup. The CIA intervened afterwards and gave their support to those who surrendered people to the killers and so on. However, it was easy to find them. The PKI operated in the open; they had their signs in the front yard of their offices. Holtzappel remarks that talking about THE army as the agent active in the aftermath of G30S is just too easy. As most of the combat ready troops were either consigned for the Malaysia campaign or stood at the frontiers with Malaysia, Java was more or less short on troops ready for combat. At the time, there were four units that were strike ready. Three of them participated in G30S and one of those chose Suharto's side afterwards. Hence, as to the American



decision about whom to deal with, the choice was easy. Suharto could do something; Nasution had no troops, since he was a bureau man. He had nothing to strike with against the PKI. This automatically disqualified him for a leading position.

Ratna Saptari returned to Ben White's story of a renowned anthropologist who refused to speak out about the foreign, political, military and moral side of the massacre. As for the recent Indonesian discussion about 1965 and the massacre, she had two comments. First, she pointed out that the activist and academic discussion in Indonesia generally takes place outside the universities, and is open to debate. Second, several platforms have been created that feature sharp and good discussions. She teased Ben White about whether he agreed with her that counting chickens and coconuts in a country like Indonesia can also be considered a blind spot. Ben White replied that it was his job to do so.

Ruth McVey ended the seminar with some closing comments. The discussions covered two subjects on two different levels, i.e. the massacres and the question Who Did It. The massacre discussions produced two main points, [1] whether it should be made a principal discussion and head for a judicial procedure or leave the matter to die out, and [2] who did it. As to the last issue, everyone loves a good puzzle, and the best approach might be to allow everyone's story to be told. If there is a lesson to be taught by the seminar, then it is that new ways of research need a constant effort of reporting about it and that we should build on the recently gained insights.

## REFERENCES

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