Social Generation, Class and Experiences of Youth Transition in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the transition process of the contemporary Indonesian generation in the neoliberal era. I use social generation, the concept of class and youth transition perspective to analyse the impact of neoliberal domination on the constructed meaning of transition among young people from different classes. Public higher education has been commoditized and the majority of companies have started practising the flexibility concept in the job markets. For lower class youth, they have had to bury their dream to continue to higher education, had to enter badly paid work and support their parents. In contrast, young people from the middle class have enjoyed the privilege to continue to higher education through the support of their family, they have not had to work earlier or support their parents. However, in the stage of transition to work, young people from both classes have had to deal with the logic of flexibility in the job market such as training, internship, outsourcing and low rate of salary. They have also had to postpone their transition into marriage and are still living with their parents. This article concludes that transition processes of contemporary Indonesian youth in the neoliberal era are insecure and uncertain.

Keywords: Social generation, class, youth transition, meaning, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Youth as a social category between childhood and adulthood resulted from the precarious position that youth has in experiencing transition to adulthood. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) differentiate three types of transitions: school to work, domestic and housing transition, each of these transition stages are no longer experienced linearly but are more extended and fragmented (Threadgold and Nilan 2009). The changes of socio-cultural and economic context impact on how transition processes are experienced differently in every generation (Wyn and Woodman 2006).

One of the transition phases is from school to work; this is one of the most important stages because it defines young people's economic independence as well as their identities represented by the jobs and careers they pursue in everyday live (Banks et.al 1992). In the Indonesian context, economically independent and autonomous status after finishing school (including higher education) is important in order to achieve transition to adulthood because one of the cultural obligations for young people is to support their parents and extended family, a concept known as berbakti (Sutopo and Azca 2013). Furthermore, in order to continue transition into marriage young people have to be able to provide for the family and demonstrate competent status in the public sphere, or being mampu (Parker and Nilan 2013, p. 150). School to work transition is also important because the Indonesian government does not provide a welfare safety net. In order to negotiate with these condition, higher education is one of the options young people must take. However not all young people are lucky enough to continue to higher education, social class is still an important factor that influences their chances (Nilan et.al 2011).
In the new millennium, participation levels in higher education are higher than the previous generation (Naafs and White 2012), as a result of policy made by the New Order regime through the wajib belajar program and through the mainstreaming of investment on human resources. However, increasing amounts of educated young people are let down by the inability of the government to provide jobs. These conditions were even worse when Indonesia was entering the regime of neoliberalism. The IMF and the World Bank forced the Indonesian government to carry out Structural Adjustment Programmes. This resulted in privatization, deregulation and liberalization in every aspect of Indonesian life. In job markets, it reduced the role of the state in providing jobs for its citizens. This resulted in fewer jobs being offered and implementation of the contract system and outsourcing by companies. This generated a climate of uncertainty about prospect of jobs and the future for young people.

Based on previous arguments, I will explore the experiences of youth transition as a unique generation who has to experience transition in the era of neoliberalism using generation perspective in youth studies. This proposes a dialectical relationship between social changes and youth subjectivities. Social changes, in particular the shift to a neoliberal regime, has affected how young people construct new meaning of the transition process. Their subjective experiences are different from the previous generation who grew up in the New Order when the role of the state was still strong. Besides that, I also take social class into account to show the different experiences between youth from lower and middle classes. The relevance of class in youth studies has been continuously explored by Furlong and Cartmel (2007) in England, Andres and Wyn (2010) in Canada and Australia and Nilan et.al (2011) in Indonesia.

SOCIAL GENERATION AND CLASS

In classical sociology, social generation is proposed by Mannheim (1952). He tried to relate between cohort, class location and social change. Mannheim differentiated generation into three concepts: as a site, as an actuality and as a generational unit. As a site, generation always related to a social historical context, furthermore, it constructed similarities in knowledge production and created political forces (generation as actuality). The influence of Marx is clear in Mannheim's proposal that it is primarily through class consciousness that a generation can be defined as a social phenomenon. Class is defined as a formation of economic structure in the society. If people belong to the same class location, they will share a common class consciousness. The last concept is generational units, as Woodman explained:

Groups of people identified by the particular and contrasting to other groups, ways of reacting they develop in response to the conditions of that generation (Woodman 2013, p. 5)

In the subject of youth studies, social generation emerged as a response to the dominant youth transition based on developmental and socio-biological processes. Youth transition perspective assumes universal and linear progression in three main domains: family, school and work as well as a normative standard marker from youth to adulthood that is often based on the standard values of the previous generation (Wyn and Woodman 2006). If young people cannot follow the standard normative timeline of transition then it is constructed as extended and fragmented (Threadgold and Nilan 2009). On the other hand, aspect of culture, economy and politics only become added flavour or context to the development process (Wyn and Woodman 2006, p. 498). Based on longitudinal research in Australia, social generation offers the prospect of understanding youth in the context of historically specific material conditions, the important role of state policy and subjective element of youth (Wyn and Woodman 2006). The importance of subjective elements is also explored by Andres and Wyn:
Social generation provides a framework for researcher who seeks to understand the active role that young people play in constructing the kinds of reflexive subjectivities that will enable them to navigate their way through life. It gives significance to the meanings that young people themselves attribute to their lives (Andres and Wyn 2010, p. 34).

Andres and Wyn (2010) argued that social class is still important and related to social change as well as the construction process of subjective experiences of youth from different generations. According to Crompton (1998), the meaning of class can be both as a structured inequality in terms of economic production and also as a culture manifested in consumption and lifestyle. Marxian tradition differentiated between two main classes; bourgeoisie and proletariat. The former being the owners and controllers of the material means of production, the latter owning only their labour power, which they are forced to sell in order to survive. On the other hand, Weberian tradition mainly focused on symbolic aspect of class such as prestige and status. Both of these traditions were eclectically reconstructed by Bourdieu in theory of practice (1998). The class struggle happens in a relatively autonomous field of struggle with its own rules of the game that are continuously contested between the dominant and subordinate. The field as a site of struggle means that there are limited and valuable resources that social actors want to obtain. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) proposed capital (economic, cultural and social) as the source of power that is unequally distributed in the field. The accumulation of capital constructs the different positions of social agents in the field, later the reproduction of the dominant position is maintained through the habitus.

Jones (2009; p. 115) argued that if the concept of class is lost, then one of the main intellectual spaces for critical inquiry also disappears. However in Indonesia, class analysis was absent during the New Order regime especially after bloody, systematic holocaust of leftist groups between 1965-1970 (Rossa, Ratih and Farid 2004), all aspects related to the left were marginalized and banned in public discourse. The dominant discourse shifted to economic growth combined with military power and a jargon of national stability (Samuel and Sutopo 2013). During the New Order regime, some Indonesianists preferred to construct the emergence of a middle class (Robison 1986; Gerke 2000). In the case of Indonesian youth studies, previous studies by Minza (2011) on youth transition in Pontianak and Nilan (2008) also mainly focused on youth from the middle class. However, one of the interesting findings on the relevance of class in relation to hopes and ambitions of contemporary Indonesian youth was made by Nilan et.al,

Briefly, respondents in less privileged class locations anticipated material obstacles (e.g lack of money and resources, lack of social network and job opportunities) while those in more comfortable economic circumstances anticipated non-material obstacles (e.g laziness, lack of motivation, personal dilemmas) to the achievement of their dreams (Nilan et al. 2011, p. 722).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research applied qualitative methods specifically in-depth interviews and participant observations. Informants are young people who are 15-24 years old, following the definition of UNESCO, and still in the process of transition both from senior high school to work and from higher education to work. Field work took place in urban and rural Yogyakarta, Indonesia during 2012. As a class background is important in this study, informants are divided into two categories: young people from lower and middle class backgrounds. Family income based on the socio-economic context of Yogyakarta becomes one of the main indicators. For lower class, monthly family income is less than 100 AUD (Rp.1.000.000) and for middle class, family income is more than 300 AUD (Rp.3.000.000). Another indicator is parent’s
occupation, following Threadgold (2009) who distinguished between self-employed, managers, professional and para-professional as indicators of middle class and those working as supervisors, sales and clerical, manual and those unemployed as indicators of lower class. Based on the data, the majority of parent’s occupation are manual labour for lower class, in contrast with those in the middle class consisting predominantly of managers, professionals and para-professionals.

NEOLIBERAL SHIFT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

In contemporary Indonesia, major social change happened from a centralised authoritarian regime to a neoliberal regime. The initiation into a neoliberal system occurred in the 1980s when the authoritarian government carried out deregulation (Robison and Hadiz 2004). The trend towards economic liberalization and privatization became clearer after the process of reformation began; the New Order had collapsed in 1998 due to financial crisis. The main global neoliberal actors or “The unholy trinity” (Peet 2003) consist of the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and Trans/Multinational Corporations. These forced post-reform Indonesian governments to reduce protections, open the domestic market for investment of foreign capital and privatization in every aspect of Indonesian life. For example, in education there was commodification of higher education (Nugroho 2005). Once public higher education was commoditized and privatized, it became an expensive and rare commodity so that the public could not access it freely. This reduced the chance for high-achieving young people from less privileged background to minimize risk in the future by obtaining cultural capital (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

On the other hand, the job market demands higher educational credentials even for the purpose of internships. Besides education, the majority of companies started practising the concept of flexibility in their management system. This logic of flexibility resulted in more outsourced contracts for workers (Dhanani, Islam and Chowdhury 2009). The logic of flexibility in the job market means insecurity for the future of young people who are in the process of transition. Moreover, according to Naafs and White (2012) youth policy made by the Indonesian government, rather than trying to protect young people, suggested pro-neoliberal solutions especially in the mainstreaming of entrepreneurship.

EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH TRANSITION FROM LOWER CLASS

What is the meaning of experiencing youth transition in a neoliberal era? The majority of informants from the lower class expect to continue to higher education, to find a stable job and to form a nuclear family, three aspirations logically related to each other. Below I will explain how young people constructed the meaning and relation between each of their expectations.

Value of competition and individual achievement become one of the doxa (Bourdieu 1998) that are continuously reproduced in the neoliberal era. Furthermore, it affected how youth are constructed as human capital. It means young people have to develop their skills and capabilities in order to be ready to compete in education and the job market. One of the pathways to increase the quality of human capital is through higher education, it is believed by companies, the state, families and also by youth themselves. The impact then to have a university degree (undergraduate/Sarjana) becomes one of the administrative requirements to apply for a job provided by state or private company. It means families have to invest their money to support their children’s education; on the other hand young people also value formal learning because it offers the possibility of future success and security, and because educational credentials are increasingly a necessity for employment (Wyn 2009; p.103). For young people, having a good job and a stable income will increase their chance to form a family in the future.
All informants were conscious about this new trend, however their lower class background objectively became an obstacle to fulfilling their expectations; access to education continues to be related to social class (Jones 2009; p. 119). Ahmad (Male/23) from Yogyakarta explained how he wanted to continue to higher education but his father, who works as a casual labour did not have enough money to support him,

_Actually I wanted to continue to higher education, but my father could not support me. I was afraid that we could not afford to pay for the rest of the university semester_ (Interview 2012)

As a result, Ahmad had to work as a labourer in a small shop in order to support himself and his family. His monthly family income, which is only around 100 AUD/month, structurally forces him to support his family. Similar conditions are experienced by Bekti (Female/22), her family could not give her support to continue to higher education because her father works as a casual labourer and earns only around 100 AUD/month. As a result, Bekti had to work as a labourer in a small textile factory in Yogyakarta,

_I wanted to enrol to university but I did not want to become a burden for my parents. So I had to work to support myself and my family in everyday life_ (Interview 2012).

Even though both of them were already employed, their status were only that of a contract labour with no job security. Their future conditions are still insecure because of the flexibility logic of the job markets. On the other hand, their lower class background (lack of money, access) also limited their chance to continue to higher education and also forced them to become labourers, similar to their parent’s occupation. This shows the phenomenon of class reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Both Ahmad and Bekti can be categorized as social conservatives because they are looking forward to marrying and having children (Parker and Nilan 2013). However, insecure job conditions forced them to postpone marriage. For males, symbolically achieving full adult citizen status used to mean a full time permanent job, stable marriage to a financially dependent wife, then children and home ownership (Nilan, Julian & Germov 2007). Those expectations seem far out of reach for Ahmad, now he cannot even imagine marrying his girlfriend, whom he loves, or buying a house. He still struggles to find a stable job as well as to support himself and his parents. On the other hand, Bekti is also still in the stage where she has to subsidize both herself and her parents. Long hours of work limit her opportunity to meet a bread winner husband in the community. However, she expects to marry as soon as possible and is ready to quit her job to be a full time housewife. As explained by Nilan et.al (2007), for females, symbolically achieving full adults status used to mean stable marriage to a solid breadwinner husband, a strong focus on family, motherhood and shared home ownership.

For lower class youth, postponing entry into marriage means that they experience extended dependency to their parents because they still live in the parental home. Although Parker and Nilan (2013) explained that it is common for Indonesian youth to live with parents even when they are already married, I prefer to analyse this phenomenon as a reflection of lack of state support as well as lack of sensitivity from policy makers related to class differences. As explained by Jones,

_Working class families are now expected by policy makers to function according to middle class norms of extended support, despite differences in their economic and cultural resources_ (Jones 2009; p. 143).
EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE CLASS

Similar to the majority of informants from the lower class, young people from the middle class also have expectations to continue to higher education, to find a stable job and to form a nuclear family. Their background as part of a middle class gave them an opportunity to continue to higher education, especially through family support. Their family were able to invest money to support cost of education and everyday expenses. For some informants who studied in a different city, their parents even had to pay extra for monthly living in a boarding house, for everyday meals and also for transportation. For some informants, support from family also includes English and music courses.

Despite higher education being commoditized and having become very expensive as a result of neoliberal domination, for a member of a middle class family to have a university degree and other skills that represent the class habitus have become part of investment strategies to accumulate cultural capital and to maintain their class position in the future. All informants through suggestion from family chose favourite, on-demand subjects of studies for job markets such as management, accounting, engineering and international relations. Following Bourdieu (1998), it shows the mechanism of middle class reproduction because after having finished university they may have more chance of employment similar to that of their parents (as a manager, professional and para-professional). In the macro context, the rise of participation in higher education reflects the emergence of the middle class as one of the impacts of neoliberal economy, education is the most significant and recognizable indicators of middle class (Leeuween 2011; p. 16)

Based on interviews, although all middle class informants could obtain a university degree, in the process of job searching they still experienced many layers of obstacles as one of the impacts of neoliberal domination such as obligations to do job training, internship and later job status as outsourced workers. The application of flexibility logic in the job market means insecurity in the future. The application of flexibility logic also happened in public institutions, for example in the case of Rini (Female/24). She had to become a contract worker in one of the public universities and there was no guarantee that she will be a civil servant in the future, as she explained:

*I never know when I will get a chance to become a civil servant, now I am just a contract worker. I just wait and hope for the best because I want to be a civil servant. It is safer for me* (Interview 2012)

Besides that, as new workers they also experienced exploitation in terms of salary, as explained by Putra (Male/24):

*My salary is far from proper. It is less than the regional standard where I live. Just imagine, now the price of basic needs, for example foods, are raising and my salary is below standard, how can I survive? And do not forget that I have a degree from one of the best universities in Indonesia* (Interview 2012)

Putra’s experience of exploitation as an outsourced worker shows the paradox reality of the job market. A middle class background only gave him privilege during his transition into higher education. Also when he entered the transition into work, he had to deal with structural obstacles created by the neoliberal regime. In the job market, he had to compete regardless of which social class he came from. In addition, it is common that educational achievements become devalued as more people gain qualifications (Jones 2009; p. 119). Putra's middle class background could not guarantee him a well-paid and a stable job.

Similar to experiences of lower class youth, all middle class informants also had to postpone marriage. They still struggle to find a stable and well paid job so that they can save money for the future. As part of the middle class, their family are able to support them until adulthood.
This reflects the view of Jones (2009; p. 142) who explained that in the past, middle class families provided economic support for their children until well into adulthood. However, all the male informants explained that they did not want to become burdens for their parents anymore, for example in receiving financial support for marriage. They want to show that they are independent and being mampu to form a family in the future. This perspective is shared by Parker and Nilan (2013) who explained that in order to continue transition into marriage, young people have to be able to provide for the family and demonstrate competent status in the public sphere or being mampu. However, now they are in dependent conditions because they are still living with their parents. Structurally, it represents lack of state support as an impact of neoliberal domination.

CONCLUSION

The transition experiences of Indonesian youth in the neoliberal era are different from previous generations. The contemporary generation has to experience reduction of the state role both as a provider of education services and of stable jobs. Public higher education was commoditised and the majority of companies started practising the concept of flexibility in the job markets. For lower class youth, they have had to bury their dream of continuing higher education, had to enter badly paid work and support their parents. In contrast, middle class youth enjoyed privilege to continue higher education through support from family; they have not had to work earlier and support their parents. Social class is still a vital matter in this stage of transition.

In the stage of transition to work, both youth from lower and middle class had to face the logic of flexibility in the job market. They had to deal with training, internship, outsourcing and low rate of salary, in other words youth from both classes who are in the process of transition have to experience insecurity and uncertainty of the future. Social class is less relevant in this stage of transition. Additionally, youth from both classes also had to postpone marriage and still living with their parents. As a conclusion, the transition process of contemporary Indonesian youth generation in the neoliberal era is insecure and uncertain.

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