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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Critical Scholars as Professional Managerial Class: A Structural and Personal Reflection from Indonesia and Beyond

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Abstract

Critical scholars and intellectuals are often viewed as vanguards of intellectual rigor, moral integrity, and left-leaning/left-liberal politics. In particular, their trajectories tend to be examined from a sympathetic lens: as supporters of lower-class social movements. Unfortunately, this approach overlooks the varied agency of these critical scholars and their complex relationship with the very movements that they often claim to represent. It obscures their potentially unequal socioeconomic status and cultural gap with the movements they engage with. This is not to dismiss their contribution or deny the reality of state repression against some of them, but a more grounded, sober approach to studying these cognitive workers is needed.

This study investigates the value-appropriating, politically-moderating, status-seeking tendency in some parts of critical knowledge production and activism. It advances several claims. First, the increasing neoliberalisation of the research sector exacerbates the process of class differentiation among critical scholars and intellectuals. The majority join the swelling rank of precarious cognitariat, whereas a selected stratum becomes part of the professional managerial class. Second, the latter stratum contains new intellectual actors who enjoy economic, cultural, and, political benefits from their advantaged position at the expense of precarious scholar-activists and marginalised communities, as exemplified in their public celebrity status or appointment into policymaking decisions. Lastly, as an illustration, and a form of self-criticism, I interrogate my position as an early-career researcher of Indonesian politics, show my own role and complicity in the neoliberal research industrial complex, and reflect on possible ways out of this politico-intellectual impasse.

Keywords: class differentiation; critical scholars; professional-managerial class; self-criticism; value appropriation

Introduction

'Speaking truth to power' perhaps has been *the* major feature associated with critical scholars and intellectuals. These social critics, consisting of figures such as academics, researchers, writers, journalists, activists, and artists, are often seen as proponents of critical thinking, progressive values, and left-leaning/left-liberal politics. In Indonesia, they can be found in various political struggles, from opposition against Suharto's authoritarianism and various rights-based advocacy since the regime's collapse in 1998.

While such assessment remains largely accurate, it obscures the contradictory ways critical scholars and intellectuals interact with powerful authorities and lower-class social forces and movements. In particular, such a rose-tinted view underestimates socioeconomic inequality and the cultural gap

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between the intellectuals and the very movements that they engage with. Furthermore, it might overlook the predatory behaviour of scholars in general in knowledge production and social advocacy activities such as careerism and status- and rent-seeking activities. A more sober assessment of their role is therefore needed.

This argument is by no means new. Petras's (1999) classic analysis on the complicity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the imperialist and neoliberal power structures in the Global South has shown the socioeconomic gap between the leadership and higher echelon of NGO professionals and intellectuals and the grassroots communities that they purportedly represent, an argument echoed and reworked for Southeast Asian context by Ungpakorn (2004) and affirmed more recently by the economist Branko Milanović (2023). Building upon and expanding this foundational analysis, this article's goal is threefold: 1) to discuss the process of class differentiation among critical scholars and intellectuals in post-authoritarian Indonesia, 2) to examine the value-appropriating and status- and rent-seeking tendency of the upper stratum of these critical knowledge workers who benefit from such class differentiation and their political moderation, and 3) to interrogate my own complicity in the neoliberal research industrial complex and reflect on possible ways to overcome this politico-intellectual impasse.

In doing so, this article intervenes in the literature on the relationship between intellectuals and society in Indonesia. It qualifies the contribution of critical scholars to progressive politics by highlighting their contradictory roles as both facilitators and inhibitors of social transformation. Furthermore, it locates the source of this contradiction in the process of capitalist development in Indonesia. Predatory behaviour of critical scholars is not merely a manifestation of, to use Julien Benda's ([1928] 2014) famous phrase, "the treason of intellectuals" in the face of political chaos driven by the elites. Predatory behaviour is a consequence of class differentiation within critical scholars themselves. The "winners" of this precariatisation of academia become part of the professional managerial class (PMC), a group of elite workers – in this case, scholars and intellectuals – who are prone to practise vulgar postmodernism, performative politics, virtue signalling, and policy incrementalism to the detriment of the working class (Graeber 2014: 80; Liu 2021). PMC scholars and intellectuals, who can also be described as elites within civil society (Johansson and Uhlin 2020), are the ones who engage in value capture and status seeking activities in the name and at the expense of progressive mass politics. By examining the origins and impacts of such behaviour, this article adds to and goes beyond the literature on intellectuals and power in Indonesia, which tends to focus on the relationship between the intellectuals at large vis-à-vis the state (Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005) and local politics (Kusman 2019).

The term "critical scholars and intellectuals" used here refers to knowledge producers and transmitters with critical attitudes toward political, economic, social, and cultural establishments (Gu and Goldman 2004: 2-3; Karabel 1996: 208). Unlike traditional proletariat, such as factory workers, they have relative autonomy in their labour process. Politically, they have diverse political leanings, but their political outlook can be broadly described as reformist and progressive, with a penchant for rights-based discourses and a close connection with progressive agendas and movements. While the term covers a wide range of actors, including journalists and poets, I limit my analysis to those working in the research-based sector. Concretely, I study university academics and lecturers, those working at research institutes and research-based NGOs, and public intellectuals. Here, I exclude critical journalists and poets because of the different nature of the media and literary industry compared to the research sector.

Methodswise, this article utilises my past fieldwork in multiple cities and districts in Indonesia; on Java Island, Bengkulu, East Kalimantan, and South Sulawesi (September 2015-July 2017, October 2018-July 2019, and December 2019), phone interviews in June 2020 and September 2024, personal observation of Indonesia's intellectual culture since 2015, and autoethnography of my own career as an academic since 2012. In my fieldwork, I interacted with and interviewed numerous activists, intellectuals, grassroots communities, and, to some extent, policymakers. Complementing this, I

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use my own personal observation and reflection of Indonesia's intellectual and activist culture. This approach follows Petray's (2012) call to analytically reflect on one's own emotions and political work as an activist-researcher. Lastly, I use autoethnography to examine my complicity as a PMC scholar and ponder possible solutions to this conundrum. Autoethnography allows me to use my personal experience to understand the studied social phenomenon (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Such reflexive strategy has been implemented by a senior Indonesian scholar-activist (Sangadji 2017) and is commonly used in leftist movements in the form of self-criticism (Dean 2019a: 58; Dean 2019).[1]

This article is presented in three parts. The first section reviews debates on the class location of intellectuals and their role in progressive politics, with specific reference to Indonesia. The second section presents the theoretical lens employed. The final section analyses three cases of interest: neoliberal[2] academia and class differentiation in Indonesia, examples of PMC predatory behaviour, and self-criticism of my complicity through autoethnography.

The Social Role of Critical Scholars and Neoliberalisation of Academia

Popular explanations on the contradictory role of scholars and intellectuals tend to recycle Benda's ([1928] 2014) argument on the complicity of the intellectuals in antidemocratic currents and hyper-partisan politics amidst political and economic malaise. These popular explanations are sometimes tinged with a naïve liberal view of politics. Going beyond such moralistic accounts, some key studies have identified the roots of intellectuals' ambivalent attitude towards progressive politics in their relations with the state and other social forces (Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005; Kusman 2019). In this regard, Kusman's (2019) in-depth study of critical and pro-establishment intellectuals in East Java accurately explains the intellectuals' divergent political allegiance in terms of their connection with competing social forces – the lower classes and progressive social movements for the former and state and business elites for the latter. However, though this categorisation is not static, his study tends to locate the primary source of predatory behaviour in the pro-establishment intellectuals' camp. It, therefore, misses a more critical assessment of the critical scholars' supposedly "natural" links with social movements and progressive politics.

Other studies follow up and expand Kusman's analysis. Echoing Kusman, Savirani's (2019, 128) exploration of middle-class politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia acknowledges the ideological fragmentation of middle-class actors such as activists and intellectuals. However, the term "middle-class" in this study remains underspecified, thereby lacking a proper explanation of class differentiation among such middle-class actors. A more recent study goes a step further by showing how the middle-class characters of Indonesian critical scholars and activists in anti-corruption advocacy trap them in knee-jerk reformism and preclude them from embracing the more radical advocacy methods (Mudhoffir 2023), but it too takes the designation "middle-class" as given.[3]

A growing body of research has pointed out the neoliberal commercialisation and precariatisation of academia and the resultant socioeconomic, if not class division among university-based academics as a major source of predatory behaviour in Indonesian academia. This includes, for example, insular academic practices that perpetuate market-oriented technocratic social science research (Rakhmani and Siregar 2016; Rakhmani 2021) and the reproduction of social inequalities in the higher education

[1]Of course, authoritarian, vigilantist, or extremist forms of self-criticism can degenerate into political sectarianism, polarisation, or worse, massive political violence, as exemplified in various episodes of national liberation struggles, mass uprisings, or wars. In Asia, the Khmer Rouge's deplorable despotism in Cambodia and opportunistic actors in the Cultural Revolution in China showed the extreme misuse of this concept. Among Western New Left and Maoist groups, self-criticism sometimes turned into laughable political splits among leftist groupuscules. My argument here is to endorse a democratic, though militant, conception of self-criticism as a form of scholarly and political evaluation and advance progressive class politics in Indonesia.

[2]Neoliberalism is a paradigm-cum-policy prescription that centres untamed free market and individual responsibility as the reigning principle of life through privatisation, financialisation, deregulation, and restructuring of the state (Harvey 2007; Springer 2017).

[3]Heryanto's (1996) study on the middle-class opposition in the 1990s also treats the adjective "middle-class" as given.

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sector in terms of access to internationalisation initiatives and research infrastructure and capacity (Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024a). Here, "knowledge elites" play a role in enforcing market norms and logic among academic workers in Indonesia through control over funding and policy implementation (Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024b: 3).

A parallel trend can also be found in research sectors outside academia. Indonesian civil society, such as NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes, has played a key role in producing critical social science knowledge (Ganie-Rochman and Achwan 2005; Pane, et al. 2018). But funding, especially from international donors, has declined considerably for these entities as a result of Indonesia's reputation as a consolidated democracy since 2004 (Davis 2020). This makes the local research landscape more market-like and increasingly competitive. In this research environment, experienced players with legacy funding and a long reputation tend to dominate. For example, in the field of village governance, the Institute of Research and Empowerment, a national rural development think tank, has been active as a policy entrepreneur in village legislations and anti-poverty policies since 1999 (Fatonie 2022).[4] This is a privilege that most civil society entities hardly possess.

Taking cues from these four lines of inquiry, this article contributes to the conversations by looking at class dynamics of critical knowledge production particularly how the upper layer of critical scholars has become a type of what Rakhmani and Sakhiyya (2024b: 3) call "knowledge elites" – in other words, PMC intellectuals – and exacerbated existing inequalities in the research sector and broader civil society.

In a way, this article learns from and expands Fakih's (1995: 25; 115-123; 170-203) pioneering argument on tensions among critical intellectuals and activists in the NGO sector and the inequalities between them and the working people in Indonesia from the 1970s to 1990s. However, while Fakih anchors his analysis in a rather eclectic and anti-essentialist New Left tradition, this article instead demonstrates the utility of a more orthodox, labour-centred materialist reading of the studied phenomenon.

Defining Professional Managerial Class Scholars and Intellectuals

This article employs a multi-strand critical political economy framework to understand the class locations and relations of critical scholars and intellectuals in contemporary Indonesia. The class nature of scholars and intellectuals is a long-running debate subject for Marxist social scientists. Essentially, the debate revolves around two questions: 1) How should we locate this social group in the context of class conflict between capitalists and workers? 2) What is their role in progressive, if not revolutionary, social transformation? Contrary to popular misconceptions, early Marxists have acknowledged that class differentiation is not a simple bi-polarisation process (Lenin 1964; Marx and Engels 1969). During the process of class formation in modern capitalist societies, there exists a middle stratum that, at first sight, is located between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Contemporary Marxists offer four possible conceptualisations of this middle stratum. First, this stratum can be classified as labour aristocracy, that is, a group of privileged workers who benefit from the value extracted by the imperialist circuit. However, the operationalisation of this term remains debated among Marxists (Kerswell 2019; Koslowski 2023), making its analytical application in research challenging.

Second, Nicos Poulantzas (1978: 204-208) categorises the middle class as part of two types of the petty bourgeoisie: the traditional one (small-scale producers and owners) and the new one (non-productive wage-earners, such as white-collar workers). This categorisation includes scholars and intellectuals as part of the new petty bourgeoisie. Anticipating a major finding by political scientists

[4]Other major think tanks and research-oriented NGOs include the Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education, and Information (LP3ES), the Indonesian Society for Social Transformation (INSIST), the SMERU Research Institute, and a number of organisations working on labour rights, agrarian studies, anti-corruption, human rights, and electoral reforms, among others.

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Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) on the fluctuating democratic commitment of the middle class, Poulantzas admits the ambivalent political orientation of the petty bourgeoisie. While this article agrees with Poulantzas's assessment, it finds that the qualifier "petty-bourgeois" for white-collar workers can be misleading because, in terms of their labour relations, they still work as wage earners, despite their respected social status.

Addressing this possible confusion, Erik Olin Wright coined the term "contradictory locations within class relations" (CLCR). He writes that "some positions occupy objectively contradictory locations between classes" (Wright 1978: 31). The middle class is located in these contradictory locations. It simultaneously has bourgeois and proletarian class characters (Wright 1985: 37-43). However, this does not necessarily mean that CLCR is a class of its own. Different occupations within CLCR should be understood in terms of their positions within the bipolar class conflict. Semi-autonomous employees such as engineers, lawyers, scholars, and intellectuals are located between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie, while small-scale employers and managers are closer to the capitalists (47-48). This conceptualisation acknowledges relations of domination in the workplace and social institutions, a common experience for those working in CLCR occupations, while still grounding this multi-layered class structure in relations of class exploitation (56-57)[5]. While innovative and operationalisable, Wright's account is a general theoretical intervention rather than an analytical framework tailored to specific cases.

The fourth reading emerged out of the specific case of postwar American capitalism: the Professional Managerial Class (PMC) thesis. There are two versions of the PMC thesis. The first one was advanced by the Ehrenreichs (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979). They define the PMC as "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labour may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations" (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979: 12). The emergence of PMC was made possible by the consolidation of monopoly capitalism in the United States and its limited redistribution of surplus expropriated from the workers. Therefore, their relationship with the working class is inherently antagonistic despite their occasional skirmishes with the ruling class (12-25). While accurate in its analysis of the tensions between PMC and the working class, Ehrenreichs' appraisal conflates managers with nonmanagerial professional knowledge workers, arguably among the fastest growing section of the contemporary labour force who experience deteriorating working conditions and rising class consciousness (Livingstone 2024; Zuoyi23 2022).

The second, current version of the PMC thesis starts out as a polemical treatise-cum-*mea culpa* by cultural theorist Catherine Liu (2021), herself a dissident member of the PMC. Liu modifies the earlier PMC thesis and applies it to a specific context: the American higher education, publishing, media, and creative industries from the Clinton era until today. Implicitly, she locates PMC scholars and intellectuals as elite workers who labour "in a world of floating signifiers, statistics, analytics, projections, predictions and identity performativity, virtue signaling, and affectual production" (Liu 2021: 73). While appreciative of the progressive past of the early 20th century PMC, she is highly critical of the overly performative and self-serving politics of today's PMC corps. Particularly valuable is her accurate breakdown of the process of value appropriation by PMC scholars and intellectuals, which occurs in the realm of knowledge economy.[6]

In this light, the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber's (2014) intervention in the debates on PMC is substantial. Like Liu, Graeber situates the rise of PMC academics in the context of class

[5]In his later work, Wright found it difficult to account for the CLCR phenomenon and comprehend class structure in contemporary societies solely in terms of relations of exploitation alone. In the end, he settled for a bit of eclecticism, a Weberian-tinged Marxist explanation of class that uses both relational and gradational concepts of class and takes into account social relations and career trajectories in contemporary wage labour relations (Wright 1994: 90, 252).

[6]In a way, there are some overlapping points between Liu's understanding of value and Bourdieusian notions of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). This is a topic for another discussion, but in my view, if we take the Ehrenreichs' PMC thesis as a starting point, we can argue that the process of value extraction by PMC can be fully understood in Marxist terms.

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dealignment, the neoliberalisation of the university, and the professionalisation of academia. Of particular usefulness is his idea of "vulgar Foucauldianism" that elevates "particular class experiences" of the PMC "as universal truths…a world of networks and networking, where games of power create social reality itself," full of administrative and normative control techniques and, consequently, performance posing as resistance (Graeber 2014: 80).

This article reworks insights from Wright, the Ehrenreichs, Liu, and Graeber and applies them to the Indonesian case. Its starting point is Liu's account of PMC as elite knowledge workers, but it is cognisant of cases where PMC scholars and intellectuals have transitioned into CLCR. While agreeing with the Ehrenreichs' appraisal that some PMC factions can have conflicting interests with the masses, it does not see PMC as its own distinct, separate class. Inspired by Graeber, it highlights the theoretical predilection of sections of PMC scholars and intellectuals towards vulgar Foucauldianism. Additionally, this article borrows some inspiration from the labour aristocracy thesis. But, instead of linking the elite stratum of knowledge workers with imperialist dynamics, it looks at how they benefit from the domestic knowledge economy.

This multi-strand theoretical framework allows this article to analyse class differentiation among critical scholars and intellectuals in Indonesia. This article's conceptualisation of PMC scholars and intellectuals is also consonant with the notion of civil society elites (Johansson and Uhlin 2020), which has been applied in Indonesian and Cambodian case studies (Norén-Nilsson, Savirani and Uhlin 2023).

Neoliberal Knowledge Economy and Class Differentiation in Indonesia

Applying the aforementioned framework, this article now shifts into the dynamics of class differentiation in the neoliberal knowledge economy in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Under the New Order dictatorship (1966-1998), the development of social sciences was closely linked to the regime's political-economic interests and Cold War geopolitics, which spurred the tensions between bourgeois-technocratic and critical social sciences (Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005). The transition to electoral democracy reformed not only Indonesia's political system, but also its economic, educational, and research institutions. Three features can mark the transformation of Indonesia's knowledge economy since democratisation in 1998: 1) increasing commercialisation and commodification of universities along neoliberal lines, 2) paradoxically, increasing bureaucratisation of university administration, and 3) declining funding for non-university research-based think tanks, institutes, and NGOs (Davis 2020; Nugroho 2005; Rakhmani 2021). Effectively, these drive class differentiation among critical scholars and intellectuals in post-authoritarian Indonesia. I would also add that *differential access* to domestic and international resources and networks and *different intensities* of cognitive labour process are two other drivers of such class differentiation.

In the post-authoritarian period, Indonesian higher education institutions (HEIs), especially research-oriented universities, underwent a transition to a more neoliberal management model while inheriting the old corporatist bureaucratic structure. Until 2000, public universities were predominantly state-funded. Still, the push for more autonomous university management coupled with the government's interest in slashing funding for HEIs led to a more neoliberal management model where universities have to earn their own revenues in the name of increasing autonomy (Rakhmani 2021: 65-70).[7] This "reform" faced resistance until 2015 from both civil society forces critical of university corporatisation and old predatory interests in the political class, bureaucracy, military, and corporate world benefitting from the old corporatist university model under authoritarianism (Rosser 2016), but since then the neoliberal model has become the dominant principle of university governance. In this model, university researchers, lecturers, and staffs – its knowledge workers – have

[7] This shift was initially implemented at five research universities: University of Indonesia, Bandung Institute of Technology, Gadjah Mada University, Bogor Institute of Technology, and University of North Sumatra, followed by two other universities, Indonesia University of Education and Airlangga University (Rakhmani 2021: 68).

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to partake in commodifying and commercialising research and publication activities with "increasingly burdensome administrative controls" resulting in low-quality publications (Rakhmani 2021: 75). This brought a host of problems. A study of 12 leading public universities in Indonesian major islands shows that such a model perpetuates academic insularity, lower research productivity, and a gap between universities in Java and outside Java, not to mention that it increases administrative and performance burdens for university researchers (Rakhmani and Siregar 2016). Besides university workers, students bear the brunt of this neoliberal shift, since stricter curricula, shorter study completion periods, and rising tuition fees "make the university less accessible to non-elite youth" (Sastramidjaja 2019: 252).

In civil society and non-university research sectors, declining funding combined with a competitive and saturated market for NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes contributes to the increasing precariousness of many critical intellectuals working in these organisations. The early years of democratisation brought a boom in these sectors, as the central government and regional governments across Indonesia needed new expertise based on in-depth research and community advocacy experience to tackle new tasks for democratic governance such as democratic accountability, socioeconomic rights, inclusive citizenship, and environmental justice (Antlöv, Brinkerhoff and Rapp 2010; Haryanto, et al. 2023: 87-90; Suryomenggolo 2019). But Indonesia's increasingly stabilised electoral politics and international reputation as a consolidated democracy led to a decline in funding for this civil society industry (Davis 2020). Moreover, there has been a shift by the central state and local governments from contestation to more conciliatory approaches towards civil society and community organisations and initiatives since 2005, effectively creating a landscape where civil society entities have to compete with each other in establishing cooperation links with national and local government authorities.[8] These two factors led to increasing market competition among research-oriented civil society actors.

How does this multi-sectoral neoliberalisation and, subsequently, class differentiation of knowledge workers unfold on the ground? Some recent observation and vignettes show the dynamics of such processes. For instance, Indonesian universities have to compete with each other in promoting "internationalisation" of their academic activities. In an ideal world, internationalisation entails collaborative research activities with partners from Global North *and* South institutions, leading to multiple fruitful outcomes such as joint publications, student and faculty exchange, and frank conversations mitigating the impacts of the dominance of Global North institutions. Alas, internationalisation has become more mundane, bureaucratic, and taxing, especially for the lower strata of university-based knowledge workers.

My observation as an invited speaker for talks at universities in South Sulawesi and Java confirms this. Socially engaged lecturers at major public and private universities in Makassar, a major city in Eastern Indonesia, complained about the double-edged sword of public scholarship and internationalisation.[9] In addition, they also pointed out the challenge of producing quality scholarship while tackling the heavy teaching burden and activist responsibilities. Indeed, these interlocutors are young lecturers well-versed in left-leaning social sciences, with research and activist work on popular education, alternative culture, and environmental and agrarian issues, among others.[10] They have to handle these responsibilities while supporting their livelihood and navigating their respective universities' old academic and bureaucratic culture at their respective universities. At my talk on heterodox qualitative methods for political science research and their political implications, a mid-career international studies lecturer remarked, "topics like this are still rarely discussed in our department…our

[8]Focus group discussion with local activists in Bengkulu Province, Bengkulu City, 15 May 2017. The recent illiberal turn in Indonesian politics (2019–present) significantly counteracts this development.

[9]Interview and personal conversation with lecturers at public and private universities, Makassar, 2 May–1 June 2016.

[10]In several instances in May 2016, I witnessed how an international relations lecturer specialising in development studies and transnational agrarian activism maintained comradeship with a local peasant union in Bulukumba District and joined the union organisers in their field visits to farmer communities in the district.

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senior colleagues still mostly refer to and teach mainstream methodological approaches," suggesting the limited space for methodologically-creative critical scholarship at his department.[11] It also indicates, in my view, the powerful role of "knowledge elites" (Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024b: 3) at his university especially in entrenching mainstream disciplinary approaches and institutional designs concerning research and teaching.

In Yogyakarta, a hub of higher education in Java, public and private universities also compete for engagement with academic donors. In September 2016, I was invited to give a series of talks on agrarian studies, political Islam, and fieldwork methods at three religious HEIs in the city by the US-funded American Institute for Indonesian Studies (AIFIS).[12] While this academic exchange was fruitful, one also had to be cognisant of increasing commodification of academic talks featuring invited speakers and its implications for critical scholars working at universities.[13]

First, inviting outside speakers, including myself, for talks neither magically transforms academic culture nor mitigates existing inequalities among these HEIs, in terms of budget, quality of research and teaching, and access to institutions and figures of prestige such as AIFIS and foreign and *Indonesian* PhD candidates and scholars working abroad. These HEIs also differ in their ability to accumulate cultural capital from such talks. Two of these HEIs are research-oriented Islamic and Christian universities, while the other is a much smaller teaching-oriented Islamic college. Their unequal capacity in accruing cultural surplus value was reflected in their respective set-ups for my talks: at the first two institutions, I had a sizeable number of graduate students, activists, and fellow academics and researchers attending my talks, whereas at the Islamic college, my talk primarily targeted undergraduates of the college. Research-oriented universities utilised this academic exchange as a way to improve their institutional profile, while teaching-oriented colleges used it to address the pedagogical needs of their students.[14]

Secondly, the actual tasks of *organising* this kind of talk often fall onto two types of university knowledge workers: the maverick and young ones. At the Christian university, the main organiser and discussant for my talk was a well-known critical scholar working in the humanities and the colleague who liaised with and assisted me was a master's student working under the scholar's supervision.[15] This phenomenon is not exclusive to these three HEIs. Critically-minded young faculty members whom I interacted with at other universities in Jakarta and Semarang typically take the lead in organising these academic exchange initiatives.[16]

On the one hand, these initiatives provide an opportunity for them to discuss with like-minded scholars and colleagues. But on the other hand, this also means an increasing burden on these young faculty members. The extent to which these critical scholars can make use of these opportunities is still shaped by their respective workplace cultures and hierarchies. At a private university in the Greater Jakarta Area, a young lecturer explained to me that junior faculty members do not have the same access to quality speakers visiting his university – some who are closer to the higher-ups of the university administration often have more advantage in interacting with these speakers.[17]

In civil society and social movements, class differentiation among critical intellectuals and activists is even more visible. Uneven distribution of the declining foreign and domestic donor funding and job opportunities for civil society workers exacerbate existing inequalities between civil society workers

[11] Personal conversation with lecturer M, Makassar, 27 May 2016.

[12] AIFIS is a member of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC), a nonprofit federation of area studies research centres funded by the US government, private foundations, and individuals and supported by over 500 American universities, colleges, and museums.

[13] Personal observation of academic talks and other university events at three universities, Yogyakarta, 19–21 September 2016.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Observation of academic interactions at a Christian university, Yogyakarta, 21 September 2016.

[16] Interview with a faculty member at a major Islamic university in Jakarta, 4 July 2016. Phone interview and personal conversation with a faculty member at a major public university in Semarang, 16 and 22–26 June 2020.

[17] Phone interview with lecturer CE, 14 September 2024.

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in major urban centres and peripheral areas. Consider this statement from the director of a local environmental rights NGO in rural South Sulawesi:

> "I started out as a community literacy activist…Later I realised that I needed some funding to expand my activities. Initially I was hesitant (to apply for funding) and (later) became the director (of the NGO), but I found out that my local activist friends who work at the NGO are now able to make a living. Most of them have little education and credit the NGO as a venue for their (political and intellectual) education."[18]

This snippet suggests how critical intellectuals and activists in rural civil society have to make use of their limited funding to support their activism *and* their own livelihood. Variations of this experience can be found in other peripheral regions.[19]

Contrast this with the experience of their counterparts working in the more urbanised areas. They too suffer from the declining funding for civil society and the more competitive job market for civil society workers. Still, their proximity to major funding and the trickling-down "spoils" of the urban capitalist economy, including networks, project opportunities, small paid tasks, and cultural capital, provides some cushion and, in some cases, paves the way for their rise to the PMC rank. Culturally, they embrace and breathe the liberal urban milieu.[20] Despite the different trajectories of American and Indonesian capitalism, they share similar ideological, professional, and cultural features with Liu's and Graeber's PMC intellectuals. They might have, at a personal level, a sincere commitment to progressive or even class-based politics, but the *structural* nature of the civil society sector as an industry sustained by neoliberal entrepreneurialism[21] and the inoculation of PMC or even petty-bourgeois values in their social milieu shifts their *collective* attention and energy away from class struggle to incrementalist, performative, and knee-jerk alarmist politics. This is proven by their obsession with activism within existing state institutions (Haryanto, Samadhi, et al. 2023) instead of the dual-pronged strategy of combining institutional activism with popular mobilisation. Further, they prefer liberal/reformist identity and rights-based politics to alignment of different forms of struggles against multiple forms of oppression under broad democratic class struggle (Pontoh 2020). They also overestimate the usefulness of social media activism. This trend remains prevalent in Indonesian civil society.[22]

PMC among Critical Scholars and Intellectuals

The emergence of PMC workers among critical scholars and intellectuals in post-reform Indonesia results from the stated process of class differentiation in the knowledge economy. Recall that critical scholars and intellectuals are a broad category that includes various knowledge producers and transmitters with a progressive and/or anti-establishment streak (Gu and Goldman 2004: 2-3; Karabel 1996: 208). The rise of PMC actors among this rank, therefore, is a general phenomenon that cuts across ideological tendencies and political persuasions. Applying the PMC thesis, let us look at the rise of PMC workers in three illustrative examples, where it has brought demoralising political impacts: liberal Muslim intellectuals, social movement intellectuals and activists in diverse academic and civil society sectors, and the newer generation of younger intellectuals and activists. In my analysis, inspired by Camille Paglia's provocation to name names as a way to break away from the sterile,

[18]Interview with Director K, Bantaeng, 16–17 December 2019.

[19]Personal observation of agrarian activists in Bulukumba, May–June 2016, and in North Bengkulu and Bengkulu City, May–June 2017.

[20]There are too many examples to mention here. This is the result of my personal observation, as a researcher-cum-participant of Indonesian social movements, of these urbanised actors since 2015.

[21]I owe this point to a colleague who made this apt observation.

[22]I witnessed this firsthand as a participant in Indonesian social movements and the online activities of their many actors.

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overly intellectualised style of criticism and offer a more effective and punchy institutional criticism (Rodden 2001: 174), I take no prisoners.

Liberal Muslim intellectuals came to Indonesia's intellectual and political scene amidst concerns over religious intolerance, Islamic fundamentalism, and communal conflicts during the democratic transition period.[23] The most significant group of this tendency is the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal,* JIL), a loose network of (then) young liberal Muslim intellectuals trained in traditional Islamic sciences, critical social sciences, and humanities. Emerging from and influenced by reformist currents advocating the reconciliation between Islam and liberal democracy by Indonesian and global Muslim thinkers such as Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Fazlur Rahman (Harjanto 2003: 105), JIL intellectuals sought to counter the influence of conservative and fundamentalist Muslim groups and propagate their version of "democratic Islam" through mass media, public debates, civil society and university networks, Islamic institutions, and academic scholarship (Ali 2005; Nurdin 2005), which they did intensively until 2009.

However, JIL intellectuals' success was limited due to a number of factors.[24] First, their rise was substantially propped up by foreign donors. Organisations such as the Ford Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Asia Foundation channelled an estimate of "tens of millions of dollars between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s" for liberal Muslim networks and organisations including JIL (Fealy 2019: 123). Second, their aggressive, elitist approach to promoting liberal Islam in theological and jurisprudence matters backfired. Liberal tendencies have been increasingly rejected by mainstream Muslim organisations and even born-again Muslim celebrities (Ardhianto 2018; Van Bruinessen 2013: 2-10). Among progressive NGOs, JIL attained a notorious reputation because grassroots activists found it hard to enter Islamic schools and implement community programs due to their perceived association with JIL or liberal Islam (Fealy 2019: 130). Third, their defense for Islamicised liberalism and religious freedom did not take into account the broader genealogy of such notions and the political-economic interests behind them. As Hurd (2014a; 2014b) points out, promoting religious freedom and tolerance is often used as a vessel to advance elements of US geopolitical/imperialist interests.

Post-2009 activities of JIL exponents indicate their downward intellectual trajectory and upward social mobility.[25] Passing an impasse in their liberal activism, JIL intellectuals attempted to join electoral politics through, ironically, mainstream bourgeois parties, political consulting, and state institutions, among other venues, a move which is not surprising for the Ehrenreichs and Liu. Guntur Romli, a Cairo-trained JIL activist, joined the faux-liberal Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia, PSI) in 2016 and later left PSI to join the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDI-P) in 2023 after he was disillusioned by PSI's overture towards the controversial presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto (*CNN Indonesia* 2023; Riyadh 2023). Saidiman Ahmad and Luthfi Assyaukanie, JIL intellectuals with degrees from Australian universities, are now active as a pollsters at the lucrative Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) and as expert staff for deputy speakers of the People's Consultative Assembly, respectively.[26] They are also known for their controversial statements, which parrot the Hasbara party line, on Israel's occupation of Palestine, such as demonising Palestinian liberation struggles

[23]There is a significant split between liberal and progressive (left-leaning) Muslim activists and intellectuals. For more on this split, see Al-Fayyadl (2015).

[24]To be clear, this critical assessment of JIL intellectuals does not deny the fact that JIL and its broader epistemic partners, such as Komunitas Utan Kayu, once received physical threats such as a bombing incident at Komunitas Utan Kayu office in East Jakarta in 2011 (Sherlita 2011).

[25]Prior to this, JIL's reputation, in my view, was also tainted by the participation of some of its members in the Freedom Institute (not to be confused with a New York-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre with the same name), a market-liberal think tank funded by Aburizal Bakrie, an oligarch whose company was responsible for a large-scale mud volcano incident affecting the residents of Sidoarjo in 2006 (Bourchier and Jusuf 2023: 80).

[26]Information about their employment status can be found here https://saifulmujani.com/peneliti/ and https://maduranetwork.com/pemilu-2024-dalam-pusaran-polarisasi/.

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and downplaying Israel's land grabs and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians (Driya 2023; Nugraha 2024). Lastly, the US-educated Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, arguably the leading JIL intellectual, has been undergoing a political zigzag, first by joining the Democratic Party (Sherlita 2011), then by becoming an online preacher promoting Sufism (Akmaliah and Saat 2022), and recently by endorsing the move by Nahdlatul Ulama – Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation where he serves as an executive board member – to receive coal mining concessions from the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) government (Hamid and Hermawan 2024).

The supposedly more progressive social movement landscape suffers from the same problem. After 2005, there was a shift among social movement activists and intellectuals to enter the political arena, such as the state and political parties, a practice that has become the "new normal" (Samadhi and Abhiseka 2023: 71-73). Moreover, development-oriented civil society jobs remain to be seen as promising careers despite declining donor funding for the industry.[27] Different "sectors" of this industry also have different characteristics. Some sectors with deeper links with the traditional proletariat, such as labour and agrarian NGOs and research institutes, have a more populist orientation and presumably less gap between critical scholars and intellectuals and their constituencies. But other sectors, such as human rights and anti-corruption sectors, have a more elitist origin, with New Order-linked professionals, politicians, academics, lawyers, and even military officers and government officials as their backers and founders coupled with support from big foreign funders such as Transparency International and USAID (Santoso and Wardhani 2023: 139-144). Critical academics at universities and research institutes found new opportunities to influence local and national election outcomes by serving as advisors or consultants for political candidates (Hermawan 2024; Kusman 2019: 150-153; Trihartono 2014).

As the amount of foreign funding and university budget declines and the prospect of career advancement at universities, government research institutes, and civil society stalls, critical intellectuals have branched out beyond their traditional arenas and moved up their career ladder financially and politically. Figures such as Andi Arief (former pro-democracy activist) and Pratikno (political scientist) have served as high-ranking officials and thought leaders in the administrations of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jokowi, a move which generated controversies.[28] Other figures, such as Teten Masduki (labour and anti-corruption activist) and Hilmar Farid (cultural activist and historian), despite their long contribution to progressive social movements and continued support for fellow activists even after their appointments as state officials, made a problematic move by continuing to serve under the second-rate pseudo-democrat Jokowi.[29] Senior scholar-activists across social movement fields, ranging from anti-corruption to agrarian justice, have become "boundary crossers," trading the accumulated (cultural) capital of their civil society experience for careers as politicians or high-ranking government officials (Anugrah 2024: 226-228; Haryanto, Juru and Norén-Nilsson 2023: 209-216). Many of them justify their rise into the PMC rank to induce change from within the system, but others put forth a more pragmatic intention. When asked about his personal motivation for working in election organising and monitoring for the government, a field with relatively good payment and social prestige, one former student activist-turned-regional election commissioner remarked, "I applied for this position simply because I needed a job."[30]

Perhaps the most obvious case of PMCification of left-leaning activists and intellectuals is the current politics of former members of the left-leaning People's Democratic Party (Partai Rakyat Demokratik, PRD), then a major symbol of anti-Suharto resistance in the late New Order period and the early years of democratisation. Leading PRD members such as Andi Arief, Dita Indah Sari,

[27] Interview with a civil society worker, Jakarta, 7 December 2018.

[28] For critical assessments of Andi Arief and Pratikno's political volte-face, see A'yun and Mudhoffir (2024) and Thohirin (2023).

[29] For some examples of criticisms of Teten Masduki and Hilmar Farid from fellow activists and intellectuals, see Aji (2020) and Literasi.co (2017).

[30] Interview with Activist X, Samarinda, 26 March 2019.

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and Budiman Sudjatmiko became political "ronins" after the party's internal split in the early 2000s and quickly worked for New Order-linked political elites. Arief, as mentioned above, worked as a special staff during Yudhoyono's presidency, Dita Indah Sari currently works as a special staff for the Minister of Manpower and espouses a neoliberal view, and Budiman Sudjatmiko made a political pivot by supporting the presidential candidacy of PRD's former political rival, Prabowo Subianto, who allegedly ordered the abduction of anti-Suharto activists including PRD members (Dirgantara and Carina 2024; Musahadah 2021; Thohirin 2023). This manouvre paid off. After Prabowo's victory in the 2024 presidential election, he appointed the PRD members to his cabinet for several posts: Sudjatmiko (Head of the Poverty Alleviation Acceleration Agency), Nezar Patria (Deputy Minister of Communication and Digital Affairs), Faisol Riza (Deputy Minister of Industry), and Mugiyanto Sipin (Deputy Minister of Human Rights) (Sutanto and Negoro 2024). This case is a clear, turbocharged example of how, following the Ehrenreichs and Liu, PMC intellectual-activists trade their cultural capital for personal political positions and influences.

Lastly, the PMC tendency in the form of hoarding cultural capital is also present in the younger generation of critical scholars and intellectuals working on a range of progressive causes, such as human and labour rights, environmentalism, critical knowledge, social equality, pluralism, and moderate Islam.[31] Like their American brethren (Liu 2021: 12), Indonesian PMC scholars and intellectuals (try to) gatekeep the means of knowledge production. They receive frequent invitations as speakers at universities, research institutes, and civil society forums. Their voice, thanks to their activist experience and academic degrees, is seen as authoritative. However, they might lack extensive political combat experience in popular struggles compared to many organic grassroots intellectuals and activists. While grassroots intellectuals and activists come from and work closely with mass bases in rural, peripheral, industrial, and (sub)urban areas and remain largely outside of the circle of major universities and scholarly hubs, present-day PMC scholars and intellectuals, regardless of their geographical origins, are highly urbanised and well connected with the national and global funding-NGO-research industrial complex. This legitimised the latter as members of the credentialed elite workers.

These PMC scholars and intellectuals achieved some success in promoting a recycled, applied version of postmodern social science and humanities with an excessive emphasis on liberal identity/rights-based politics, self-serfing reflexivity, political correctness, and vague social justice goals as its praxis, something akin to what Graeber (2014: 80) calls as vulgar Foucauldianism.[32] Simultaneously, they tend to label orthodox yet non-dogmatic leftist critiques of capitalism, especially those that foreground political economy analysis and its political prescription as too "class deterministic."[33]

Chronically online, they can be more concerned with social media battles, online decorum, and virtue signalling rather than managing the difficulties of balancing critical knowledge production, distributing such knowledge to social movements and working-class bases, and day-to-day community organising and political struggles.[34] For instance, they have been quick to call out some trenchant self-criticisms and analyses of the Papuan solidarity movement (Pontoh 2020) and the 2024 pro-democracy protests against the Jokowi government (A'yun and Mudhoffir 2024) as outdated, vanguardist, and unsympathetic analyses. Ironically, the authors of these analyses are comrades with

[31]This section is largely based on my own reflection since 2015 as a participant in Indonesian social movements.

[32]On this now-passing fad in social science and humanities fields, see Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020: 14-15). Lindsay has outrageously become a far-right figure, but the arguments presented in his co-authored book still hold.

[33]For a leftist critique of this shallow postmodernism, see Finkelstein (2023). Unfortunately, some who embrace an orthodox critique of capitalism are also guilty of prioritising their own (private) intellectual work and advancement (and sometimes acting like self-appointed High Priests of leftism and culture) over the need to strike a balance between cognitive and collective political work.

[34]For a study on highly-performative tendency in the online culture of Indonesian civil society, see Polimpung and Luvita (2015).

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proven integrity and track record. Instead, members of the PMC corps resorted to online condemnations of these comrades and, worse, mischaracterisations of their analyses. They have created what the late Mark Fisher (2013) would call "the Vampire Castle," a situation where leftists cancel each other and create mini versions of unjust "struggle sessions" from an unfounded sense of self-righteousness.

Naturally, they are also invested in the personalisation of politics, turning politics, as shown in major representatives of this tendency,[35] *primarily* as a matter of a heterodox reorganisation of personal and family life based on the principle of social and cultural liberalism at the expense of other key dimensions of progressive politics, such as political organisation, economic planning, and alternative policing.

As PMC progressives, they tend to adopt misplaced priorities, such as incrementalist politics and an excessive amount language policing.[36] This is achieved to the detriment of the need for comradely yet intense analytical debates on political directions, respect for some elements of social conservatism practised by the Indonesian working class, patience to educate members of the working class on issues such as gender equality and religious tolerance, and the inevitable fierceness of on-the-ground class politics, such as possible clashes with the police force and backroom negotiation with powerholders.[37]

Many of them are university-educated, and some are the beneficiaries of graduate scholarships from the Indonesian state, foreign governments and universities, and funders. While in terms of Wright's class map, they can be classified as cognitive workers or individuals of CLCR, they have experienced significant social mobility and embraced cultural liberalism, which increases the gap between them and the traditional proletariat. It is difficult, in my view, to see their experience of capitalist exploitation and alienation as similar to that of urban and rural workers *or* poorer critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists. There is a significant difference between the demand for a fun workplace culture for intellectual and civil society activities, leisure time, psychological wellbeing, and career promotion – hallmarks of PMC aspirations (Graeber 2014: 80-84; Liu 2021: 17-33) – and the need for a relatively stable stream of income that many of my proletarian intellectual friends dream of – those who have to work part-time as underpaid school teachers and university lecturers, motorcycle taxi drivers, iced drink sellers, online shop workers, or small-scale farmers during their personal economic downturn while writing and organising.[38] The burdens of PMC professionals and the intense material, *somatic* experience of poorer critical intellectuals are not the same.[39]

Ideally, the fight for psychological wellbeing at the workplace for workers in the white-collar sectors and the broader struggle for fair work conditions for workers in general should go hand in hand. Alas, the demand by the PMC progressives sometimes trumps the pressing needs of their more proletarian comrades. Rectifying the gaps between these two sectors is a pressing task.

The rise of these civil society elites is problematic for several reasons. First, it is difficult to exercise democratic accountability on them. It is not clear to which constituencies or social movement organisations they belong, let alone recall them from their positions of power or mandate them to limit their personal marketing activities and counterproductive political ambitions.[40] Second, their political and personal somersault has created unnecessary political tensions and weakened the overall capacity of critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists to advance the pro-democracy struggle. In particular, what JIL intellectuals and PRD activists did is a clear example of political capitulation

[35]To avoid unproductive polarisation, I will not give specific examples here. Readers are advised to observe the offline and online activities of the PMC progressives to learn how this tendency is mainstreamed.

[36]For some representative examples of essays defending incrementalism and obsession with safe spaces, see Artha (2017) and Mariani (2024). Needless to say, safe spaces are important – it is the *misuse* of safe spaces to stifle much-needed free speech and political debates in social movements in the name of "maintaining civility" that I am concerned with.

[37]On how the Indonesian working class embraces some elements of social conservatism and religiosity, see Syaifullah (2022) and Yasih and Hadiz (2023: 93-96).

[38]This is the experience of some of my university-educated comrades.

[39]This point is eloquently elaborated by an anarchist comrade (Negri 2025).

[40]This sentiment, for instance, is frequently expressed in my informal conversations with non-elite critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists.

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to elite/oligarchic interests. Third, the aspirations of these PMC intellectuals ultimately are divorced from and sometimes come into conflict with the interests of the masses that they are supposed to represent, whether it is the Muslim *ummah,* the working class, or the popular bases of progressive social movements. Part of their works and trajectories are tantamount to rent-seeking activities, if not outright appropriation of surplus value. In the words of an activist-researcher working on electoral and political reforms, "these people, essentially, are brokers of misery (of the working people)."[41]

Mea Culpa: An Autoethnography of a Reluctant PMC

Having presented an analysis of the emergence of PMC critical scholars and intellectuals in contemporary Indonesia, it is only fair and necessary to critically examine my own role and complicity in the neoliberal research/civil society-industrial complex. Let me start my self-criticism by citing a passage from Liu's work:

> "…you are probably, like me, an ambivalent member of the PMC…but I do not like what I see of my class, and I am determined to fight to socialize the things that the PMC wants to hoard: virtue, grit, persistence, erudition, specialized knowledge, prestige, and pleasure, along with cultural and actual capital" (Liu 2021: 12).

This political self-criticism examines several aspects of my trajectory: early life, educational experience, fieldwork and activist work, and academic career to date.

I was born in 1991 in Jakarta and grew up as a city kid in what can be described as a precarious middle-class household. My late parents were bureaucrats with postings at several local and national government agencies. They were, to use Poulantzas's (1978: 204-208) term, part of the new petty bourgeoisie, working in the public, white-collar sector as civil servants. We had our fair share of financial hardship, but my family managed to send me to selective schools in South Jakarta for secondary education. My time in middle school (2003-2005) was a formative experience: while attending an Islamic private school with students from upper-middle-class and bourgeois backgrounds, I joined a student movement called the Indonesian Muslim Students' Association (*Pelajar Islam Indonesia,* PII). At PII, I received my first serious political education on Islamic and dissident literature, anti-imperialism, student activism, and movement organising. Dividing my time between middle school and PII allowed me to observe the contrast between students from different social classes: the (petty) bourgeois ones at my school and the proletarian ones at PII, with me in the middle. I then continued to one of the most so-called prestigious public high schools. To my chagrin, I was an average student among my academically high-performing (yet somewhat politically less-conscious) schoolmates. I barely enjoyed my school lessons, and found solace in critical books published by independent publishers in Yogyakarta.

After high school, I spent my entire higher education experience overseas. This experience, obviously, is a privilege that very few critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists in Indonesia have. I went to a Japanese university where I finished my undergraduate and first master's and received training in social sciences and Asian Studies from progressive – some are, in fact, radical – professors. I then moved to the United States to pursue a second master's in political science, followed immediately by a PhD in the same field, which I finished in 2018. I completed my training without any career breaks or interruptions, a privilege very few possess. Throughout my training experience, I was always supported by what I considered to be generous scholarships covering my tuition fee and living expenses (though I also had to work part-time as a classroom cleaner and then as a university canteen worker to cover my living expenses during my stay in Japan in 2007-2011).

[41] Phone interview with KMK, 14 September 2024. In this interview, this interlocutor bluntly used the Indonesian term *broker kesengsaraan* to describe this rent-seeking tendency.

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From 2015-2017, I returned to Indonesia to conduct my dissertation research on agrarian politics, followed by an additional post-dissertation research from 2018-2019. During this period, my family experienced economic hardship, and as the eldest son, I had to support them financially and accumulate some debt while juggling between dissertation research, activist work, grant applications, (paid) speaking engagements, and commisioned writings. Still, I considered myself more privileged financially, especially compared to my interlocutors and comrades, such as community organisers in labour, agrarian, urban poor, and indigenous people's struggles and young critical intellectuals in student activist, progressive Islam, and alternative development scenes, many of whom faced far harder financial difficulties and political challenges than I did. For instance, local intellectual-activists and peasant intellectuals involved in fierce agrarian struggles in Bulukumba have to hustle several jobs/income streams (from NGO works to selling bread and farming) while fighting for land rights *and* their livelihood, while I can comfortably research their experience and be seen as "progressive."[42]

After my PhD, I have remained in academia. Despite the competitive academic job market, I somehow managed to land multiple postdoctoral appointments at research-oriented universities in the Global North until today. Simultaneously, I maintain connections and working relations with Indonesian social movements and knowledge economy. This includes participation in a solidarity event during the Covid-19 pandemic, a research project on social movement resistance and initiatives during the pandemic and Indonesia's authoritarian turn, and online conferences and public discussions with Indonesian universities and student groups, among others.

It is clear, in my view, that despite my relatively non-elite background (I would not have been able to attend university and graduate school without scholarships, for example, not to mention that my family and I have experienced occasional crippling financial debt and household and medical expenses and slashed our expenses to remain afloat until today), I have become a member of the PMC, especially by Indonesian standard. I was highly privileged to learn about funding opportunities for my academic training and continue working in academia. Even my ability to resist the cultivation of bourgeois meritocratic culture at my middle and high schools, in my view, is a privilege. How many white-collar *workers* at Jakarta-based companies have to stick to their corporate jobs with mediocre benefits and working conditions simply because they were told it is the best available option for them during their time at schools and universities? Moreover, on many occasions, I am seen as an authoritative figure whose opinions matter despite my inadequate actual political combat and community organising experience. Most obviously, I have accumulated much surplus value from the experience of the working people and social movements in Indonesia, which enabled me to write my dissertation, produce academic and popular publications, and have a paid career while still being seen as part of the movement. Meanwhile, many critical intellectuals and activists who do actual organising, political analysis, and policy advocacy work remain nameless, faceless, and unseen.

Inadvertently, I have accumulated cultural capital too. I have attended academic conferences in the Global North and strategic meetings with senior activists and intellectual figures in Indonesia because of my academic credentials.[43] I have been interviewed by Indonesian and foreign media outlets to give my "expert opinions" on Indonesian politics and development. I have made connections and befriended senior scholars in different countries. In daily life, this translates into my participation in the PMC leisure culture and professional social events. For example, I had lunches with senior academics who hosted my postdoctoral projects at Kyoto and Leiden Universities. During my stay in Kyoto, I joined multiple dinners with my senior colleagues at places with pricey meals (at least by Indonesian household standards), and on these occasions, I was always the most junior and the

[42]Interviews with local activists and peasant leaders and observation of agrarian advocacy activities, Bulukumba, May–June 2016. I borrowed the term "peasant intellectuals" from Feierman (1990) to describe politically-conscious, intellectually-eager peasant union leaders who became my interlocutors.

[43]One example of my attendance in strategic activist meetings is recorded and transcribed by Wibowo (2017).

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youngest one.[44] The fact that I was not married yet at that time also gave me the flexibility to join these events. This mundane yet telling example of food culture, itself a constitutive element of life and labour, tells us something about my cultivation, nay, class formation process as a critical PMC scholar in global academia, which separates me from the experience of the vast majority of organic grassroots intellectuals and activists in Indonesia and the Global South.

Years of socialisation in the Global North academic habitus, including speaking manners and body language, allow me to comfortably pass as a confident member of "global" academia while maintaining my Global South credentials.[45] How many academics and other colleagues, especially those with parental obligations or who are based in Indonesia, get to join events like this, receive professional attention from other critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists, including those at Global North institutions, and be seen as "progressive"? One can speculate whether my reputation will be different if I do not possess the PMC credentials.

Even after my eventual return to Indonesia, I will still occupy the class position of a PMC – or maybe even an individual of CLCR. Clearly, I have accumulated and enjoyed many surplus values, whether directly or indirectly, from the labour of many others and the privileged social milieu and networks that I am embedded in. Even after my retreat from social media (I deleted my Twitter account and deactivated my Facebook account), I still get public recognition for my works, although I am pretty sure they do not have *direct* political benefits for the democratic class struggle in Indonesia. I indeed am one of the many precarious postdoctoral researchers in global academia (Herschberg, Benschop and van den Brink 2018; van der Weijden and Teelken 2023), but compared to the labour process, *intense* precariousness, and economic hardships that my much more precarious comrades and many other organic, lower-class critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists have to endure, I am much more privileged, as can be seen in my wage, leisure time, and continuous ability to keep myself financially afloat and productive in research outputs.[46] The combination of my family's economic downturn, my duty as a breadwinner, and my exposure to and study of progressive/radical literature led me to politically side with the working class, but one hard fact remains: I have become part of the problem and a member of the PMC, albeit a reluctant one. Only time, fellow intellectuals, activists, and the masses will tell whether I can redeem myself.

Conclusion and Implications for Praxis

Using a multi-strand materialist framework, this article establishes a working definition of PMC, its position in class relations under capitalist societies, and its empirical application in the context of knowledge production and labour processes in critical scholarship and activism in Indonesia. Reworking elaborations by Ehrenreichs, Wright, Liu, and Graeber, it stipulates and specifies PMC as elite knowledge workers who occupy a privileged position among the increasingly precarious, marginalised, and politically threatened critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists in contemporary Indonesia. Similar to their counterparts in the corporate sector and managerial positions, PMC intellectual-activists ultimately have a direct interest in accruing surplus value from their knowledge production and advocacy activities, sometimes (but obviously not always) at the expense of the very social bases that they are supposed to represent.

This does not mean that PMC scholars are structurally doomed, nor are they eternally corrupt. Making such statements not only perpetuates the right-wing populist stereotype of critical scholars

[44]Sometimes, these dinners only invited faculty members (tenured, tenure-track, and postdoctoral faculties) and not MA/PhD students, which solidified my position in the academic hierarchy.

[45]On the notion of habitus, see (Bourdieu [1979] 1996: 101-114; 310-315; 372-379).

[46]An obvious indicator is my monthly stipend for my two-year postdoctoral fellowship starting in 2025, which is above the average postdoc salary in Europe. For detailed information about this research budget and salary, see Desole (2021) and https://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/wp-content/uploads/ESITI-PIANETA_TRAPEZIO-Linea2-2024-1.pdf.

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and intellectuals as rootless paternalising elites but also distorts the fact that the majority of critical scholars, intellectuals, and activists, PMC or otherwise, play a positive role in the democratic class struggle. Rather, this assesment is a reminder of the tumultous terrain on which these progressive cognitive workers operate, the many forms of enticement and opportunism they face in knowledge production and political activities, and the capitulation of some sections of these progressive actors to self-serving or even worse, elite interests. Structural forces matter, but so does the agency of progressive actors.

Their rise to the intellectual and political scene is inextricably linked to the development of the knowledge economy and its habitus in the context of Indonesia's peripheral capitalism, where the neoliberalisation of research and civil society activities led to the process of class differentiation among critical scholars and intellectuals working for universities and progressive civil society. A market-oriented industry of research and civil society activities is an outcome of this process, facilitating the consolidation of PMC scholars and intellectuals, solidifying their class position, and fostering their popularity. A worrying consequence of this trend is the degradation of progressive politics as the dramas of political betrayal, competition, careerism, and emotionally-charged personal expressions masquerading as "the personal is political," at the cost of democratic deepening and working-class emancipation.

As I have shown in my brief autoethnography, I am also guilty of perpetuating this neoliberal research-industrial complex and benefiting from the marketisation and commodification of progressive causes for research and social activism. Albeit reluctantly, I have reaped *direct benefits* from my accumulation of cultural and knowledge capital, turning me into an elite knowledge worker or, to use this term loosely, a labour aristocrat.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to Indonesia. Critical PMC corps or civil society elites have emerged in the agrarian sector in Cambodia (Unattributed 2023) and resource-rich NGOs across Europe (Lee and Scaramuzzino 2023). Across Western democracies, we witness the growth of the "Brahmin Left" – higher-educated voters voting for parties of the left (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2022). Even in post-conflict Nepal (Robins 2012), we see how a select stratum of elite activists and their discourses are prioritised in implementing transitional justice. Future studies should also investigate sociological profiles of critical scholars and intellectuals within and outside academia, including in the media and literary world, in other Southeast Asian countries and contextualise the somatic experience of these critical actors, an important element in scholar-activism (Picq 2025), in a firmly materialist framework.

Chto delat? What is to be done, then? At the collective level, this necessitates the execution of *democratic control and socialisation* over the resources that PMC knowledge workers try to hoard, ranging from donor funding, salaries from employment as high-ranking state officials, access to and distribution of grants and employment opportunities at research, educational, and civil society institutions in the Global North, and personal popularity and celebrity status. This can take the form of forceful expropriation of portions of state salaries, socially- and legally-binding recall mechanisms for poorly-performing PMC scholar-activists working as state officials, limitations of excessive social media usage and public engagement, and a more selective recruitment, training, and sanction mechanism in the critical knowledge production and advocacy sectors to curb PMC tendency.[47]

Another useful remedy is prefigurative politics. Graeber (2014, 84-86) lists its main features: working together with social movements, embracing and practising one's democratic sensibilities, rejecting managerialist elitism and hyperprofessionalisation, and finding joy in critical intellectual life – and I must add, in street culture and language and working-class social life. In other words, realising defiant utopianism.

[47]This is not controversial. It has been a common organisational procedure and tradition in leftist/working-class political parties to discipline or sometimes expel their unruly members/factions. See Nilson (1981) for a reference.

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Finally, several proposals to address the PMCification of critical scholarship and activism can be considered. First, there should be closer working relations, communication, and political activities between critical scholars, intellectuals, lower-class communities, and social movements. This ensures that critical scholarship, whether it is about the movements themselves or many other topics, ranging from researching elite actors to more abstract topics such as art history, religion, and theories of capitalist development, always has a political edge. Such a comradely collaborative endeavour guarantees *democratic control* over critical research activities and their personnel. Past examples of such best practises are galore, including the Historians' Group in the Communist Party of Great Britain (Shohat 2016), progressive Indonesian historians (Nursam 2008), agrarian studies scholars (Luthfi 2011), Muslim intellectuals (Millie and Hosen 2024), and the martyred Thai scholar-activist Boonsanong Punyodyana (Trocki 1977). In this regard and in light of global assaults on free thought and inquiry, recent attempts to unionise academics and university workers and organise collectively for academic freedom, whether in the form of a union for university lecturers and staff or a caucus for academic freedom, should be welcomed and maintained.[48]

The second proposal is my personal duty. I attempt to confront my petty-bourgeois baggage, tame my PMC tendency, and practice the ethics of self-renunciation. Practically, this means the following. In terms of research topics, I have now stopped working on rural social movements for my personal research projects and explored other topics. This might sound counterintuitive, but I chose this step because I realised that I have accumulated enough surplus value from my dissertation research on agrarian politics and social movements. I did my best, as humanly possible, to use my dissertation research to advance knowledge, progressive politics, and the interests of the working class, which was also my intention since the beginning of my dissertation. Nevertheless, I have concluded that it is time to stop researching these movements, start working *with* and *for* them, study other topics, and exploit my own privileges for collective democratic goals.

Politically, I will continue maintaining close communication and working relations with precarious critical scholars and intellectuals, working class communities and organisations, and other progressive social movements. Relatedly, I will continue my no social media policy since I see no use in promoting myself or my works virtually.[49] Putting myself in the social media landscape risks increasing my petty-bourgeois, status-seeking, and careerist tendencies and exacerbates the PMC internet culture.

Finally, I see my current career as an academic working in the Global North merely as a transitional phase of my life, one that is needed to pay off my debt from my past financial duties. I am not fixated on being a professional, long-term academic residing abroad since my end goal is to participate directly in critical knowledge production and political activities for the democratic class struggle in Indonesia. Being an academic is an accidental profession and a transitory phase that I should not forget. I deeply respect the many critical, honest academics and scholars in Indonesia who have contributed so much to critical scholarship, democratic politics, local communities, and education for eager students and young minds across many universities, NGOs, social movement collectives, and communities in Indonesia. My indifference towards the importance of a university position – a form of privilege – is my personal choice. To subject myself to lifelong self-criticism is the first step to rectifying the many political mistakes that PMC elite workers, including myself, have created in critical scholarship and social movement landscape.

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[48]These new organisations are the Campus Workers Union (Serikat Pekerja Kampus, SPK) and the Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom (Kaukus Indonesia untuk Kebebasan Akademik, KIKA). Their websites are https://spk.or.id/ and https://kika.or.id/, respectively.

[49]There are two exceptions: I keep using LinkedIn and maintaining my personal website since they are mostly used for job search activities and formal research dissemination.

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improve the quality of this article. Suggestions from Gabriel Facal and Catherine Scheer, Denis Ruysschaert, and participants of the FSDR 2025 Development Days conference especially its Working Group 12 greatly sharpen this article. Conversations with Rachma Lutfiny Putri, Bariş Eser, ZT, and Kolektif KOBE stimulated and challenged my thinking. Field research for this article was funded by Transparency for Development (T4D) Predoctoral Fellowship, ENITAS Scholarship, and American Institute for Indonesian Studies and hosted by LP3ES. Initial ideas for this article were presented at the 2022 ALTERSEA Conference. Finally, the writing and revision of this article was supported by the International Institute for Asian Studies and Global Forum for Democracy and Development Fellowship at CEU Democracy Institute.

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