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Durham & London, Duke University Press, 1998, XIV + 144 p.

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James T. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta. Counter-Revolution Today*

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- 1 THE TOPIC of this long essay is the 1983-1984 massacres¹ of so-called criminals that occurred in Indonesia. These murders took place at night, needless to say without any subsequent trial, and were perpetrated by the state's military apparatus as the smiling general Soeharto openly acknowledged. These petty criminals, many of whom had been in the employ of the government's party Golkar during the preceding elections, were very much part of the people, the little people. The author's claim is that in the Indonesian mind, an idea of death existed which was associated with the acts of these supposed "criminals". However, since the murders were committed by the state (Soeharto's dictatorship, 1966-1998), in Siegel's words, the massacres were an attempt to "nationalise" this notion of death. By this he means that a semantic association of the notion of murdering criminals with the development of Indonesian nationalism was created. This was possible, *dixit* Siegel, because after 1966 the word "people" (*rakyat* in Indonesian is something closer to dependants or populace) disappeared and was replaced by that of the nation. The populace became an illegitimate category, just like criminals, in the vocabulary of the blood-thirsty anti-communism of General Soeharto's New Order regime. Criminals then became semantically and then physically a type of the people... and disappeared.
- 2 The culture of codified state law in Indonesia has always been weak and the role of customary law of great importance. What happens then when the family is explicitly relegated to the realm of custom, and the nation state, through a massive ideological advance, tries to take over the affect, the emotional role of the family and to derive its legitimacy from that variable local institution? In an archipelago like Indonesia there are as many types of family as there are ethno-linguistic groups. The translocal state tried to move the emotional authority it coveted from the family towards the nation state. By so doing, the government attempted to become the authority of a family outside itself. Clearly Siegel believes that for the Indonesian nation, the ability to

substitute state for family is the guarantee of patrimonial morality, and even better, legitimacy. Put more crudely by leaving corpses in public places, each with its own characteristic tattoos, all over the archipelago, the “uncurtailed” power of the state is proclaimed, through a reconstruction of death as the national domain. Even the marginal power of petty criminals could be transformed into a declaration of the supremacy of the New Order. In Soekarno’s populist’s speeches, the people lost its voice to its mouthpiece, the demagogic president. With the arrival of General Soeharto and the horrendous “anti-communist” massacres of 1956-1966 (some 300,000 killed) the people were deprived of their voice. Their disappearance is nonetheless indicated by their “shadow”, that lingering menace, the criminal, a potential guerrilla or gossipier who the Pancasila state believed continue to threaten it. This is not yet ethno-psychiatry, but we are not far from it.

- 3 Given James Siegel’s long experience as an anthropologist working in Java and Sumatra, one is ready to give him the benefit of the doubt and see how convincing a demonstration he can make of this position. He certainly deserves credit for posing difficult and important questions, and trying to come to grips with the ambiguities that surround them. Nonetheless sometimes his “associations” between displaced semantic fields are awkwardly defended. This is partly due to the level of generality at which the argument takes place. What the mentality of the people is supposed to be doing when confronted by the state’s police apparatus, etc., is necessarily fraught with ambiguities. Reading the footnotes of the volume often helps, and certainly Siegel’s earlier book, *Fetish, Recognition and Revolution*², prepares us for analyses of fetishising appearance and public recognition in a political context.
- 4 Part of the difficulty is due to Siegel’s decision to base the treatment of the 1983-1984 massacres of petty criminals on the basis of *Pos Kota* newspaper articles³. Fundamentally what we have here is a narrative analysis of texts and photographs, but not of Indonesians talking to one another (pp. 116-119). The author claims that in the Indonesian language certain associations like accountability and revenge have gone missing. The question posed here has occurred to many social science researchers in Indonesia. Despite a need for revenge (Indonesian *dendam*), the survivors of the successive New Order killings can’t preserve a narrative of their version of the “facts”. So quite logically Siegel goes looking for a narrative structure of psychological repression and, unsurprisingly, finds it in the hands of the police state. The case of Melayu (Indonesian language between the two wars) was addressed in Siegel’s 1997 book covering an earlier period, before independence (1945). An examination of the social conventions of power in Javanese language narratives is to be found in Laine Berman’s *Speaking though Silence*⁴ which justifies such questionings through a properly socio-linguistic study.
- 5 This essay comes at the right time, since the question of state violence has hardly diminished in importance since the fall of General Soeharto, as the carefully-planned massacres in East Timor have recently shown. Certainly the culture and social morphology of violence have always been at the centre of anthropological concerns, but increasingly they will need to be done at the level of the circulation or obstruction of values between the state questing for legitimacy and/or dictatorial exploitation of its population, and the citizens attempting to construct their own biographies under a supposed rule of law. Their narratives provide the raw material for this research. The social construction of confidence in Indonesia, as this volume shows, has been all but

impossible. The state, if it is a state, is struggling with its own inability to forge durable contracts with its populace, hence the need for monuments made of cadavers.

NOTES

1. Baptised in Indonesian Petrus Misterius.
 2. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997.
 3. This is a tabloid specialising in crime reporting, read by the lower classes.
 4. New York & London, Oxford University Press, 1998 ("Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics" 19).
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