
Confronting Consumerism as a New Imperialism: Students' Narratives in the Indonesian History Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents the result of a study focused on students' narratives and historical awareness on imperialism in Indonesian history learning. Historical awareness significantly needs to be developed in history learning considering economic and political changes in Indonesia since the last four decades. Due to Indonesia's policy on market economic system in the New Order and Reformation eras, the economy of Indonesia has increased dramatically. With the contribution of Indonesia in international trading organizations, it becomes a part of modern world system affected by neoliberalism. Consumerism among Indonesian society indicates economic growth on one side, and exploitation on the other. By referring to postcolonial theory, consumerism is considered as a new form of imperialism indicating power relation between capitalists and consumers. This research was focused on analyzing complex relation between consumerism as either economic exploitation or cultural hegemony. In this research, Indonesian history learning generated students' ability to narrate historical awareness on the significance of `research addressed a number of critical questions, including: 1) how far does consumerism influence historical awareness of individuals, group members, and members of a nation state? 2) how do students narrate their historical experience as critical, autonomous, and powerful consumers in dealing with the hegemony of new imperialism?

Keywords: New Imperialism, Consumerism, Postcolonial Theory, Teaching Indonesian History

Background

The phenomenon of consumer society arising among industrial countries in

the northern hemisphere around the 19th and 20th centuries (Buckler, Mc.K.H, 1988: 1210-1211) is similar to what has been taking place in Indonesia since the last three decades. Consumer society is the consequence of industrialization, technology transfer, foreign and domestic investment, foreign loan, and trading under global market economic system. Industrialization not only improves the economy, but also creates consumer society. The data released by *McKinsey Asia Consumer Insight Center* (Razdan, *at al.* 2013) in a report entitled *The Evolving Indonesian Consumers* shows that the trend of goods consumptions increases annually. In 2013, there were 70 million people belonging to urban consumer society on record. Each year, the number increases by five million of urban consuming class, equal to the number of Singapore residents. From that number, 10 percent of them usually do online shopping, and most people in big cities in Indonesia are among the most active Twitter users in cities in Asia. In addition, it was reported that 53 percent of urban residents contributes 74 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Another data from Indonesian government via Statistical Bureau (Biro Pusat Statistik) shows that since the government of the president of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), the rate of average economic growth is about 6-7 percent. World Bank Data 2013 indicates that the development of Indonesian economy was mainly supported by high consumption and demographic bonus. Those data suggest that most Indonesian citizens have become consumer society - by adopting Baudrillard (1998) term related to the growth of middle-class (Ansori, 2009).

The data of Indonesian economy growth among Asian countries – a little lower than the growth of Chinese economy (Jacques, 2012) – may be examined using two historical perspectives; conventional history and critical history. In the perspective of conventional history, such data can support the materials for national history subject. The materials may develop students' nationality that this country was great not only during Sriwijaya and Majapahit era in the 11th-15th centuries, as the pioneer of national movement in the beginning of the 20th century, and as an inspiring contributor for the independence of Asia and Africa through Asian-African Conference in 1955 and for Non-Alignment countries, but also has a significance during the Reformation Era. In this perspective, history teacher will explain that Indonesia has developed to be remarkable among Asia Pacific countries, respectable in ASEAN, accountable in APEC and G-20 Forum and in other International forums. In conventional history, students can be supplied with empirical data of the number of export and import, foreign investment with annual improvement, and the larger number of middle-class (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2013).

Historical facts about the affiliation of Indonesia in international

organizations and its roles in their forums are a conventional part of contemporary National History. Those facts glorify not only the past, but also the present to grow nationality spirit. In critical history perspective, those empirical data have to be comprehended critically, and also supported by other data related to the quality of ideological growth and changes behind economic and political policies selected. Data frequently used to enrich the materials of history subject are macro-economic data referring to international institutions and Statistical Bureau of Indonesia.

The founding fathers, such as Soekarno and Hatta, asserted that socialism a comparable ideology to capitalism relevant for diverse agrarian citizens of Indonesia. During the Old Order, President Soekarno realized that dependent state on foreign financial capital could intrude the sovereignty of Indonesian economy (Ricklefs, 2008). In Soeharto Regime of the New Order Era, the ideology of Indonesian economy was neither socialism nor capitalism. However, capitalism was, in fact, implemented in Indonesia. Positively, the economy improved rapidly. On the other hand, the accumulation of capital was negatively centered to a particular groups associated to the ruling regime and there was a wide social gap between the wealthy and the deprived groups (Dahana, 2015). This condition was not different during the Reformation Era in Indonesia. The development of economy was supported by consumption rate on numerous local and global products. Indonesian consumer society spent as many and varied products as other Asian societies did. They have become a global consumer society. In Trentmann's analysis (2009: 197-203), the global expansion of consumption took place in the context of empire. Consumer society, including that in Indonesia, is controlled by global capitalism empire.

As Indonesian history lesson puts an emphasis on independence and sovereignty, critical questions may arise. Those are on two aspects; does the Indonesian State have strong position in dealing with international corporations? Do Indonesian consumers have sovereignty in selecting products and the ability to go out of the control of the producers, *i.e.* multinational corporations? The first question can be useful for the development of Historical Curriculum to build the sense of nationality. Indonesian political sovereignty and economy dealing with global corporation and free market economy may improve students' national loyalty. The second question is related to students' competence as smart consumers, environment-friendly consumers, and anti-consumerism consumers. Thus, this research was intended to empower students in confronting consumerism by narrating their historical experience.

Confronting Consumerism in the Postcolonial Era

Critical questions above can be developed in critical history teaching and learning process using postcolonial theory. This theory addresses the issue of power relation among countries in colonial era and it is still applied in cultural, political, and economic practices as those colonized countries have proclaimed their independence. According to this theory, imperialism are not ended until a country proclaims its independence (Ratna, N. K., 2008, Said, 1978). Today, imperialism has just turned into an invisible form co-opting not only a post colonized country, but also its society. That ideology is capitalism and it has formed consumerism currently performed by some groups (Harvey, 2003). According to Robinson (2004), capitalism is always imperialistic in nature and imperialism is perennially associated with capitalism. In Hamelink's view (2007), capitalism is a homogenizing cultural force and that global spread of consumerism constitutes a form of domination. The domination is retained by some particular groups; firstly, countries centralizing International Corporation toward countries receiving capital, such as, foreign investment; secondly, global capitalists as producers by free trade economic mechanism towards consumers; and thirdly, consumer society themselves that over-exhaust goods and treat them in unfriendly manner for the environment.

In the ideology, power relation is evident on the hegemony of producers or International Corporation over consumers. The hegemony may also be resulted from global corporation over a country receiving the flows of capital, services, and technology within foreign investment (Fuchs C., 2010: 215-247). In environmental perspective (Kahn, 2010; Gadotti, 2010), hegemony is created by consumer society over the environment and natural resources. Therefore, domination goes from powerful groups towards those powerless. Referring to Anderson (2000), some critical questions can be proposed; can Indonesia as a sovereign country have power and bargaining equal position to *Exxon Mobile* as the power of that oil corporation exceeds of Gross Domestic Product of Indonesia?; do Indonesian consumers have authority to accept or refuse various products of *Unilever* – centered in Netherland – that dominate Indonesian market?; and why Indonesian consumers have to pay the water they consume – rather than receiving it as a free good – as the consequence of water privatization by multinational corporation, like *Danone and Nestle*?

Consumers' loyalty for a particular product is a pattern of relation intentionally created by producers retained by global capitalists. By means of information technology in marketing processed products, consumers frequently become the object of hegemony from technology, information, producers, and dominant ideology behind industrialization (Barber, 2008, Ritzer, 2001: 373-

375). Indonesian history subject loaded with values to build the character of the nation needs to be able to address the issue of consumerism as an ideology filled with the hegemony of capitalists over the consumers.

In history subject, the great number of Indonesian consumers must become the power to deal with the hegemony of global corporation. In this global era, the massive flow of goods, capital, and services from one country to another is intentionally established by corporation to maintain significant relation between producers and consumers. By comprehending media and information technology, capitalists may construct consumers' images to be loyal for various products offered. According to Meyer (2008: 116-117), consumerism is part of cultural imperialism. Consumerism is an ideology intentionally created by free trade economic system controlled by capitalism. Consumers are controlled by capital, technology, image, and market. To Eriksson (2012), consumerism is a substitute for capitalism.

In the era of ICT development, Indonesia students can access various consumers' products from tens of Indonesian TV channels, hundreds of foreign TV channels, online media, and catalog and displays at the shopping centers in big cities in Indonesia. The offers from media are not always necessary for students. Several products, such as skin whitening product, hair coloring product, soda, fast food, cigarette, accessories, branded clothes, and some others are not among students' basic needs. Through continuous advertisement, students consumed various products, not due to their needs, but their desires. They are co-opted by capitalism covered by technology.

The transformation in the consumer society can be derived from critical theory proposed by Herbert Marcuse (1964). As one of supporters of critical theory of *Frankfurt School*, Marcuse describes consumer society as a society without opposition, or a society without autonomy and power to cope with consumerism. In *One-Dimensional Man* book (1964, see also Saeng, 2012: 243-251), Marcuse identifies consumer society as a society incapable to refuse offers of various products that may mislead them in particular conditions. He asserted:

“.....the system we live in may claim to be democratic, but it is actually authoritarian in that a few individuals dictate our perception of freedom by only allowing us choices to buy for happiness. In the state of “unfreedom” consumers act irrationally by working more than they are required to in order to fulfill actual basic needs, by ignoring the psychologically destructive effects, by ignoring the waste and environmental damage it causes, and by searching for social connection through material items”.

To Marcuse, modern industrial society are under control of hegemony holders, such as producers, media owner, and information holder, so that their consumption may only fulfill their *false needs*, which they do not necessarily require. Moreover, Marcuse affirmed:

“It is more rational in the sense that the creation of new products, calling for the disposal of old products, fuels the economy and encourages the need to work more and to buy more. An individual loses his or her humanity and become a tool in the industrial machine and a cog in the consumer machine. Additionally, advertising sustains consumerism, which disintegrates societal demeanor, delivered in bulk and informing the masses that happiness can be bought, an idea that is psychologically damaging”.

In the context of critical history learning, the discontinuity of consumerism and environmental damage in Indonesia demands for pedagogical movements. In this case, history learning may embrace ecopaedagogical approach as anti-consumerism movement intended to interfere or reduce consumption desire. Consumption reduction may positively decrease the exploitation of natural resource and emission or waste that contaminates the environment. Marcuse stated that there are other alternatives to counter such life style. Anti-consumerism is a lifestyle that demotes any unnecessary consumption, as well as unnecessary work, waste, etc.”.

Certainly, Indonesian history lesson does not consider global corporation similar to VOC or East Indian Company existing during Netherland Indies in the colonial era. Therefore, confronting consumerism in history learning does not refer either to anti-global corporation or anti-foreign investments. Confronting consumerism here is dealing with confronting consumptive behavior on excessive and environmentally-harmful needs. According to Goleman (2009), most environmental damages in the world are resulted from high consumption. Similar condition also occurs in Indonesia. Over exploitation on land and sea natural resources and forest conversion for farming and agriculture is intended to meet consumer society’s needs. To reduce the hegemony of Indonesian consumers on the environment, pedagogical movement becomes essential. Ecopaedagogy aims to construct smart, rational, and sovereign consumers, called as green consumers or sustainable consumers. Hence, in the aspect of history learning, confronting consumerism means confronting “high level of consumption” (Swagler, 1994) or confronting “the selfish and frivolous collecting products or economic materialism” (Barber, 2008) and implemented them in daily practices.

Research Methodology

To provide students with the competence in confronting consumerism through contemporary Indonesian history learning, there were several stages conducted; at first, designing history learning curriculum; then, developing critical history learning approach focused on students as the actors of the era; and finally, developing ecopedagogy. Those stages were carried out through emancipatory action research collaboratively conducted by the researcher and a history teacher in one high school (SMA Negeri) in Bandung, Indonesia.

In designing the curriculum, we still referred to the National Curriculum 2013 (or History Curriculum Standard - Standar Kurikulum Sejarah - 2013) using history textbook written by the researcher himself (Supriatna, 2013). In line with the curriculum manual, we are given the autonomy to revise and develop it further by inserting contemporary issues. Some issues, such as consumerism, consumptive behavior, solidarity between wealthy and deprived groups, and the impact of consumption on natural resource exploitation and environmental damages, were included into the materials of contemporary Indonesian history learning. Materials on nationalism were critically examined by attaching postcolonial theory to identify the correlation between imperialism during colonial period and modern imperialism today. Consumerism was taken into account as a part of modern imperialism. Historical materials on anti-consumerism movement were not intended to establish anti-global corporation, foreign investment, and stock exchange movement, but to support the reconstruction of students' consumptive behavior. Likewise, the concept of solidarity examined in the materials of the history of Asian-African Conference 1955 in Bandung was developed into solidarity concept from high consumer society to economically-low society in Indonesia today. Therefore, historical learning could be more contextual and relevant to students' reality.

Since consumerism has influenced students' historical awareness and consumptive behavior has negatively resulted in environmental damages, historical learning applied in this study employed ecopedagogy. This approach focused on the issue of human behavior's impact on their historical experience towards the environment. For instance, the impact of consumer society on the exploitation of natural resource examined in conventional history of Industrial Revolution in England was attracted to industrialization period in Indonesia (The New Order Regime 1965 – 1998) that created consumer society desirous for natural resource. Such historical materials were designed to enable students to narrate their critical historical experience in dealing with the significance of combating consumptive behavior, becoming critical, autonomous, and green consumers, and expressing solidarity against poor consumers. To reach the

goals, the researcher assessed students' competence to narrate their historical experience and awareness in handling consumptive behavior by utilizing critical questions, including two mentioned in the abstract above.

Students' Narrative in Confronting Consumerism

Most students in researched classes on history learning asserted that capitalism ideology has been assimilated to their daily life. They were unable to deal with the outbreak of a range of local or global consumption products. After studying contemporary Indonesian history learning that examined capitalism ideology, they realized that their consumption manner has been controlled by internal and external power. The external power comes through media (advertisements) encouraging them to purchase more. The internal power is their inability to refuse such offers. The consequence of updating information on new consumptive goods, such as gadget, music, film, accessories, and clothes drew them as a part of consumer society. Some students' narratives on consumerism are cited below.

Student 1: "it is realized that history lesson has opened my eyes to see that all this time, I was not different from my forefathers in the colonial era; we live under imperialism. The difference is that in colonial era, our nation was ruled by *Netherland Indies*, but I am now colonized by invisible power, *i.e.* consumerism. As a student demanding for trendy life and adjustment with world development, I need to use goods similar to my friends'. With that, I feel to come into my existence. However, such existence is lavishly fulfilled with money from my parents. I am not independent yet, and I do not deserve asking many things from my parents."

Student 2: "the flow of consumerism attacking developing countries like Indonesia leads to extravagant ways of life. Therefore, it is the right time to arouse war against consumerism. The war means critical attitude over consumptive practices and commitment to live economically, to set priority scale, to filter advertisement, and improve productivity. We must not let this nation to be as depicted by the literary scholar Pramudia Ananta Toer, as a rich begging country. A beggar with extravagant life is an irony."

Student 3: "we are proud of this nation with its enforcement on independence by defeating colonial rule in 1945. We are also proud that this nation's economy developed rapidly and equal to other Asian countries. However, the dignity of the nation is now forfeited with the deficient existence and identity. The establishment of shopping center, bank loan and credit card offer, and the ease for shopping various items from all over the world turn the nation into consumptive society. They forgot that all of it is simply the strategy

of the capitalists to control the world through globalization”.

In their narratives, most of them described their experience in consuming products supported by historical facts of the nation and their own as family members. The narratives present not only historical facts, but also tell what the past is about (Immerwahr, 2008: 2) and the narrative on their historical experience (Sjamsuddin, 2006). They realized that they live in an era different from the colonial era. Therefore, imperialism today cannot be confronted as it was in the past. A method to handle modern imperialism is by controlling themselves and countering consumptive behavior. Historical context on resistance is used in developing historical materials and become a resistance towards students' weakness as consumer. Some narratives are cited below.

Student 4: “learning from the history, industrialization has resulted in environmental damages due to over exploitation on natural resource. Indonesia should have learned from the difficulties of countries leading industrial revolution in Western Europe, that capitalism has exploited labors in the production process. Nowadays, capitalism has exploited consumers. If we do not learn from our historical experience, we as consumers will only become the objects of Global Corporations. To carry on globalization should not let us fall into consumptive culture”.

Student 5: “government campaign to its citizens to appreciate local products is not effective if it is not complemented with cheap and quality products. In fact, Made-in-China products are cheaper than Indonesian products. For nationalism, do we have to purchase local products that are expensive and low in quality? Historical experience of some figures to be green consumers is more relevant to be implemented today, by selecting and consuming environmentally friendly products only, even if they are imported”.

Student 6: “handling consumerism as new imperialism is practical. Anti-consumerism movement is less significant than local-product consumption movement. Consuming food produced by local farmers makes not only makes people and environment healthy, but also empowers local farmers whose life is threatened by globalization. Nationalism today is not for anti-global product movement, but to appreciate environmentally-friendly local product from local producers”.

“Student 7: “do we need to shop Singapore and enrich it, while items sold are originated from Indonesia? We need to remind Indonesian government to protect local producers from global corporation threat”.

Student 8: “in Asian African Conference 1955, Indonesia expressed and supported solidarity for colonized Asian African nations, and now we need

to expand it for local producers by purchasing their products. Additionally, we have to do the same for those economically unfortunate by limiting out consumption”.

Some citations of students' historical narratives above suggest that their critical thinking skill after taking history lesson correlated to consumerism issues in contemporary Indonesian society. The unanswered questions in this research is can their knowledge in confronting consumerism by becoming smart, environmentally-friendly, and local consumers be implemented in daily life? Students involved in this research were born from parents involved in consumer society as Indonesia's recent economy becomes strong and equivalent to newly industrial countries in Asia.

Conclusion

In this research, students learning contemporary Indonesian history were able to narrate their historical experience about movement against consumerism as ideology of a new imperialism. Their historical narratives were based on facts of Indonesian history, the development of Neoliberalism, Capitalism, and Consumerism ideologies, and its impacts on students' consumptive behavior. Based on emancipatory action research in historical learning, students were able to narrate anti-consumerism movement by tackling their consumptive behavior. In their narratives, anti-consumerism movement was not considered as anti-global corporation, but as a resistance over environmentally-unfriendly products, and lifestyle products as not a part of basic need. Anti-consumerism was conducted by empowering students through historical learning to make them smart, rational, and autonomous consumers caring with less consumer society, and able to distinguish their wants and needs. Indonesian history materials on nationalism correlated to consumer society issues will be more meaningful through students' positive narratives in identifying consumptive behavior problem as national problem. Students' narratives on confronting consumerism could depict their knowledge on contemporary history materials. Further research on confronting consumerism will be significant in dealing with students' daily life.

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