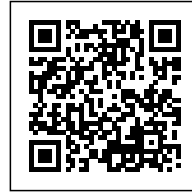


Conspiracy Theory
and the City
Prima Abdullah

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND THE CITY

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In 2008, 23 public schools were about to be closed by D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty, whose political agenda included aggressive educational reform, claiming that public education in the US, particularly in troubled urban neighbourhoods, had been broken for a long time. At the beginning of his term, public schools in DC were considered the lowest performing in the US. Collapsed infrastructure, non-merit-based teacher salaries, and bloated central office bureaucracy were said to be the main causes of low performing students. He had defined the problem and aimed to fix it.

One of his working examples was Sousa Middle school, where fewer than 16% of students could read and do math at grade level at the beginning of his term. Within a year, the school had improved enough to meet federal benchmarks for progress the first time in its history, while other schools that could not meet those standards were closed.

However, not everyone was pleased with this vision. John Burrough Elementary School was one of the 23 schools that was closed down. One of the parents claimed that the reasoning for closing the school down was unfounded. The school was 15th in reading out of 81. It was in the top 20% in math. The parents worked well, the PTA body was active, and the community loved the school.

The community came up with an explanation: it must be a land grab. The school is located on a beautiful long block, and there is a large green field that was available for the children to play on. Everyone in the community seemed to think that developers had converged upon DC and were targeting the properties they wanted. Another school building had been closed and replaced with million-dollar condos.

The Plan

The Plan is a conspiracy theory in Washington D.C. that has been around at least since 1968. The believers of this theory are sure that a plan was hatched to remove the black population from D.C., to be replaced by white residents through calculated gentrification and urban renewal.

Their modus operandi goes as follows: real estate developers conspire with homebuilders to neglect and tear down affordable housing in poorer neighbourhoods and replace it with expensive lofts and condos, with high-end shops and hip restaurants to follow. Legislators who defend the disenfranchised are ousted thanks to trumped-up scandals. Government cronies kick in tax breaks and friendly zoning laws and, soon enough, less wealthy African American families are pushed out

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and replaced by richer young whites.

The Plan itself has not manifested anywhere on paper – like many conspiracy theories – and therefore has no historical records to support it. However, the African Americans who are marginalized believe the theory to be true, although they don't think there are any codified laws, but more of a nebulous and ever-changing concept, manipulated by unseen forces.

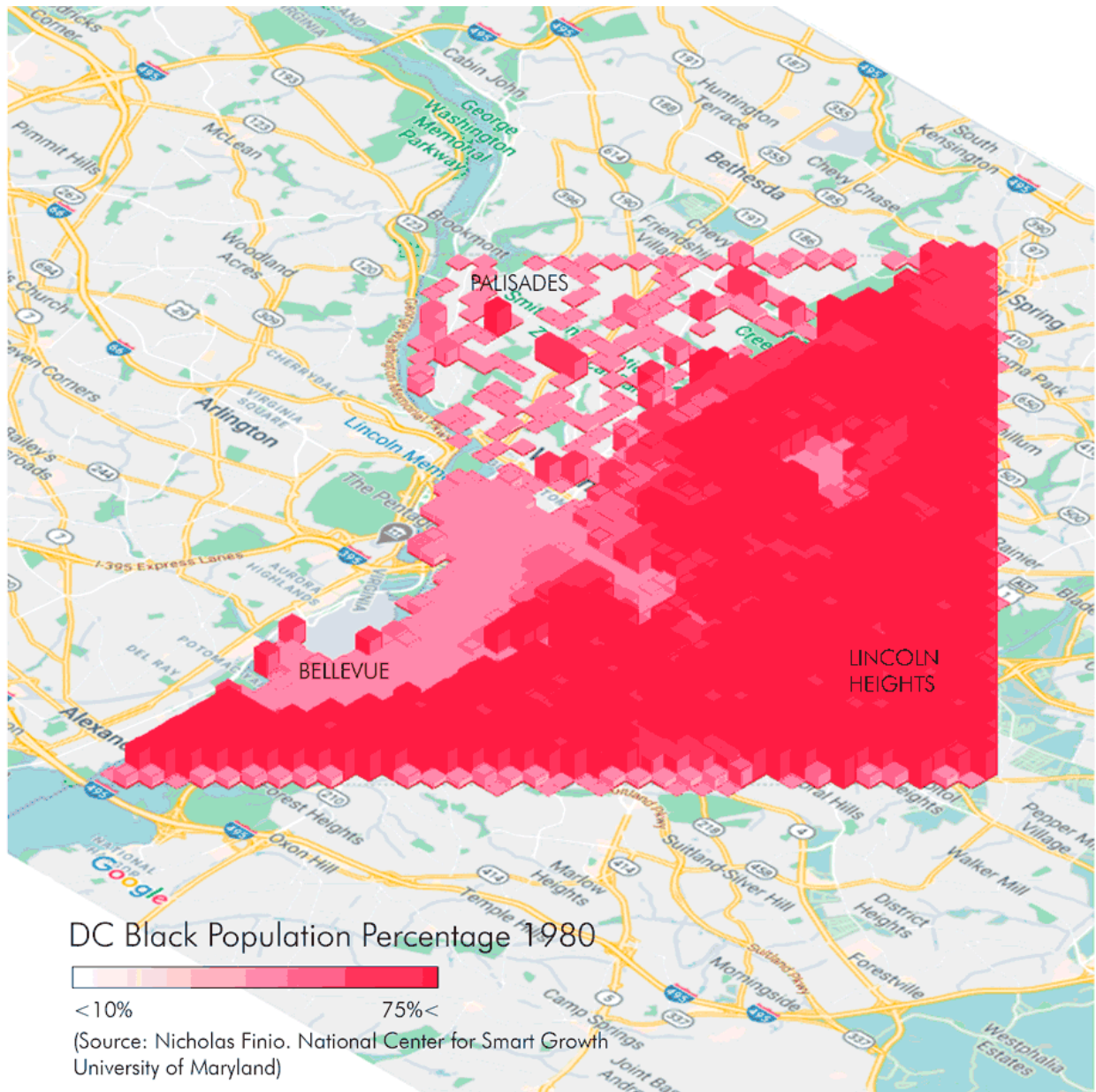
Implausible as this may seem, Washington D.C. has been experiencing demographic changes since the 1960s. Once a majority Black city, immortalized in George Clinton's 1975 "Chocolate City", Washington has been a special place for Black Americans. Historically, D.C. was in a slaveholding state, but Lincoln freed the slaves there nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation, which prompted Black people from surrounding regions to flock there.

Today, however, the Black population is dropping. From 2000 to 2010, the district lost about 39,000 Black residents, while 50,000 white residents moved in. According to statistics from 2011, the Black population had declined by 11%, while the white population had increased by 31.4%. by 2011 statistic. The Black population reached its peak in 1970 at 71%. Today, Black people make up just 49%, compared to 49% whites. Adding salt to the wound, the median Black household income is \$42,161, while for whites it is \$132,698. The Chocolate City is facing an uphill battle to avoid becoming the Vanilla Village.

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The unseen forces in the conspiracy theory may not be true, but the effect seems real to the disenfranchised. American cities have gone through a massive wave of gentrification in the last few decades. To a lot of people, that process does not represent the natural ebb and flow of the real estate market, but something more sinister, more orchestrated. It is a plot, and they are its targets.

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The Giant Wall

On the other side of the world, there is also a battle for a wall in Jakarta. On one of his campaign visits, Anies Baswedan – the current governor of Jakarta – promised to contest the state's plan to construct a reclamation project north of Jakarta, claiming that a land reclamation project was a sign of the hubris of manmade structures against the natural will of God. The rhetoric used a coded language that hinted at an old divide that can be traced back to the colonial age. Clothed in religious verbiage, his speech was aimed at the religious and racial minorities.

At the time, he was campaigning against a popular incumbent, Basuki Purnama or Ahok, who was not of the majority religion and of Chinese minority descent. His public approval level had reached 67%. The campaign was harshly divided, and he was caught in a blasphemy case. Hate speech and misinformation snowballed on social media and in private messaging groups. In the end, Baswedan won, and the Jakarta reclamation project was suspended.

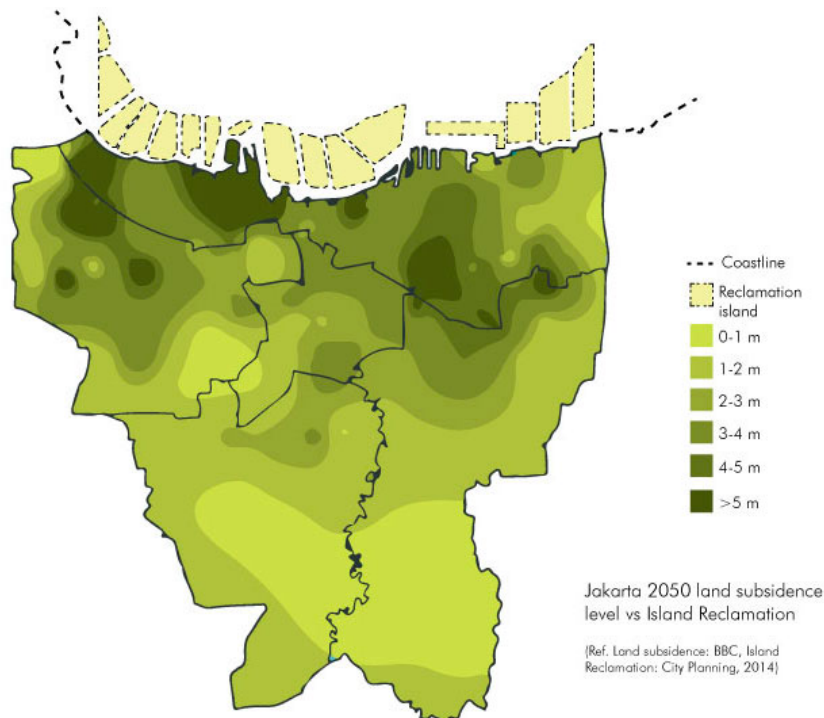
However, Jakarta is one of the fastest sinking cities in the world due to groundwater extraction for ever-growing water supply needs caused by rapid urbanization and population growth. Millions of residents, uncovered by the city's plumbing system, have tapped into shallow underground aquifers. One-third of that number corresponds to business and industry uses. Missing its structural integrity, the layer of rock and sediments slowly collapse onto itself.

Climate change is also causing the rise sea levels by as much as 3 mm per year. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts a rise of 3-10 mm per year until 2100. Jakarta has sunk by 4 meters in the last 30 years. Another study concludes that by 2050 about 95% of North Jakarta will be submerged.

To counter that, Jakarta is building The Great Sea Wall, with an area half the size of Manhattan, which will function as a sea barrier as well as a dam that collects water from the rivers and canals that can function as a sustainable source of drinking water.

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Fortunately, Baswedan's opposition to the reclamation project is slowly changing. He has awarded building permits for some of the reclamation project. The same sentiment was not shared, however, among his voters. What seems to be a simple solution cannot be executed without a political turf war. There are plenty of other issues that Jakarta is facing, but this exact issue is what some of his vocal followers cite as the only reason he was elected, because of what it symbolizes.

On the other hand, there are valid concerns regarding the reclamation projects. There are fishermen whose livelihoods would be disturbed, and some environmental groups argue for the need to conserve the mangrove forests in the north of Jakarta.

Talk of how a nebulous conglomerate of Chinese descent is funding the giant sea wall has overshadowed a more tangible issue. The discussion is not going anywhere, and there are still no solutions to prevent Jakarta from sinking. Instead of a giant sea wall, there is only a giant wall that divides the people.

Cambridge Analytica

A great divide also happened in the 2016 UK European Union Membership Referendum. "Leave.EU" – a political campaign group that supported withdrawal from the EU, hired a political consulting firm called Cambridge Analytica (CA). The firm collected data from Facebook users and managed to construct profiles on millions of users. These profiles were used to determine which impressionable users might be susceptible to false information. Those users were then targeted with ads that pushed them to vote in favour of Brexit. The ads themselves were not accountable and because of the effectiveness of the algorithm, the ads were only delivered to those who fit the profile.

The ads also did not target users who held a differing opinion, creating no measure of checks and balances in the form of discussions. This isolation formed an echo chamber that reinforced their beliefs in a black and white worldview – with their view being righteous, and others' views wrong. Policy-making, however, is never black and white.

In one of her TED talks, Carole Cadwalladr explains how one resident of Ebbw Vale, the town with the highest leave vote, argues that staying in the EU would mean the UK would be invaded by immigrants, although the town itself has one of the lowest rates of immigration. Another argument was how the EU had never done anything for the town, even though several urban development projects have been funded by the EU, from schools to a sports centre and a railway station. After the referendum, investment started to leave the town.

Fingers were pointed at CA for causing the referendum to end in the UK's withdrawal from the EU, famously called Brexit. But CA was only using targeted ad tools provided by big tech companies like Facebook and Google. During the Myanmar conflicts, thousands of local Islamic citizens, threatened by genocide, were forced out of their homes. The confrontation was exacerbated by social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp – all coincidentally owned by the same company. Now CA has declared bankruptcy, yet the spread of misinformation still happened.

Misinformation is not exclusively a digital phenomenon. In the middle ages, the Jewish community suffered persecution because they were blamed for the Black Plague. False information is no different from propaganda in any authoritarian regime. The difference is that, in the past, false narratives were always enforced. Today, social media users wilfully listen and become divided.

There are neurological explanations as to why conspiracy theories and misinformation are growing, while the willingness to follow the rational logic discussions is declining. To work efficiently, human brains need to simplify and find patterns in the universe. Conspiracy theory is a way to uncover

patterns in a set of naturally complex, random, and unrelated data. Growing conspiracy theories about plots against the disenfranchised are a symptom, not the illness. There are many ways to define the illness that we are facing, and there are also many treatments that have been proposed. The first step, however, is to raise awareness about our susceptibility.

With a similar tone in one of his interviews, Slavoj Žižek mentions that fake news has always happened: during the Cold War by the East and the West, or in the past decade. Sometimes fake news is not entirely fake; it is constructed by selecting facts that actually happened and ignoring other facts that might disprove the arguments being built. The difference is that, now, it is not institutionalized. And what is interesting, although he insisted that facts – things that actually happened – do exist, he also considers fake news as a continuation of the post-modern view of no objective truth. From the interview, one tends to conclude that Žižek seems to encourage society to learn how to live with fake news.

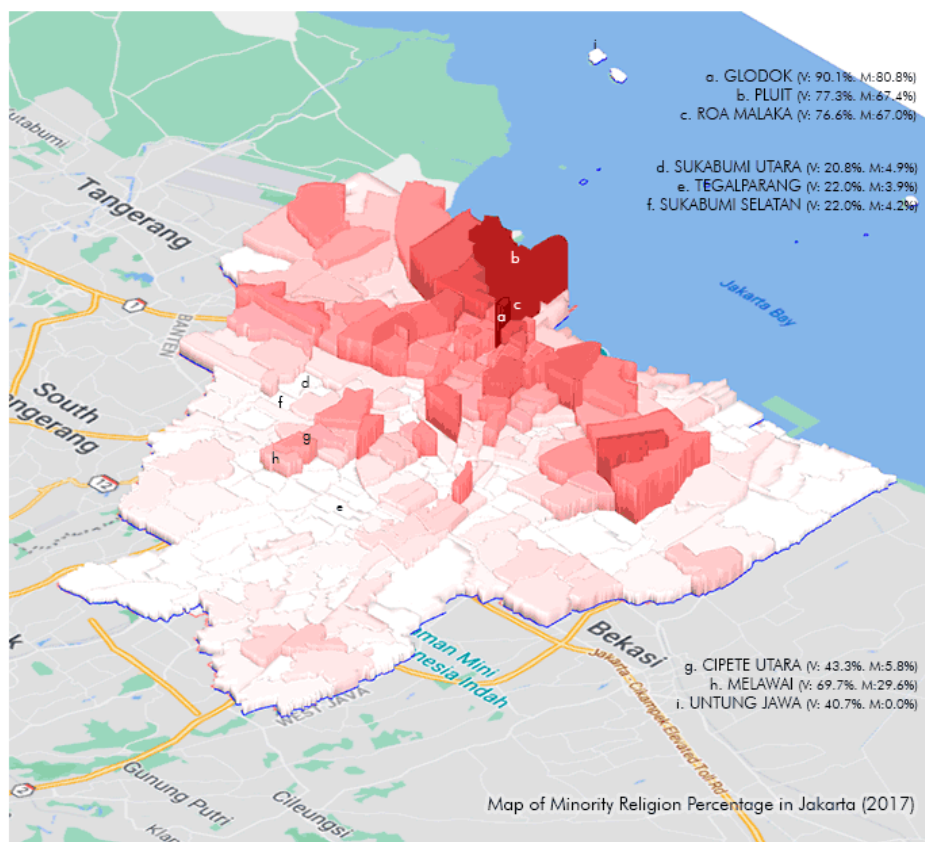
Unfortunately, Žižek seemed to avoid the significance of the fact that fake news that may look like it is coming from a grassroots initiative can sometimes come from a well-funded institution that is aiming to misinform the public. Sadly, there is no cure for fake news, and there is no way to differentiate between a benign superstition and malign misinformation. The best that we can do is engage in a discussion and come to an understanding.

Suspicion against race, religion, and nationality is only a signifier of further underlying problems. The racial distrust in Washington has its counterpart with political polarization in the Midwest, which takes shape in the white replacement conspiracy theory. In Jakarta, anti-Ahok Islamist discourse has drawn explicitly and implicitly on old narratives about the dominance of an ethnic Chinese capitalist class, of whom Ahok was considered the champion. A racialised, sectarian campaign against Ahok was a way for many people to channel their frustrations with what they saw as the injustice of that supposedly Chinese-dominated economy.

This is also visible in the election map of Jakarta. By superimposing data from the 2017 Jakarta election with identity (i.e., religion) demography, we see more than what we may already know: that there are positive correlations between religion and voting behaviour. The highest percentage of votes for Ahok come from Glodok (90.1% voted for Ahok) and Pluit (77.3%), where 80.8% and 67.4% of the population, respectively, are non-Muslim. In contrast the lowest percentage of votes came from Sukabumi Utara (20.8%) and Tegalparang (22.0%) with just 4.9% and 3.9% non-Muslim population, respectively.

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However, there are also other areas where religion and voting show the opposite correlation. In areas such as Cipete Utara (43% of votes) and Melawai (69% of votes), the non-Muslim population is 5.8% and 29.6%, respectively. In Untung Jawa, where the Muslim population is nearly 100%, there were still results of 40.7% for Ahok. However, analysing data on its own can only give us an incomplete perspective. To round it out with more context: while Glodok and Pluit have a high Chinese minority population, Cipete Utara and Melawai have some of the most expensive land prices in Jakarta. No doubt, there are further underlying considerations.



When vote map for Ahok--the minority governor (shown with the district height) superimposed with religion map (red color) there is a visible correlation between religion and the vote. (source: General Election Committee, 2017 and Bureau Statistic Center, 2017)

Similar notes were voiced by Prof Michael Sandel in his book *The Tyranny of Merit*. The problem of false information is not one of a lack of education, but of a failed distribution of wealth. Left-wing individualists like Obama, Clinton, and Blair think that to solve globalization and inequality one must work hard and play by the rules, and this will reward one with a rise as far as their efforts and talents

will take them. Sandel coined this 'rhetoric of rising', and it became an article of faith. However, the playing field is never level. Those who were born within a higher social class will most likely get a better education, and consequently a better life, whereas Americans born to poor parents tend to stay poor as adults. The populist backlash of recent years has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit as it has been experienced by those who feel humiliated by meritocracy and by its entire political project. However, Sandel was a well-known leftist. To cite the law of instrument (a hammer treats every problem like a nail), a Marxist sees every problem as class warfare. He does mention that his prescription is not the only option, but it is a starting point.

The City

In prehistoric times, communities consisted of just thousands. In the past 200 hundred years, we have seen an increase in community populations in the millions. And as we enter the digital age –with all its imperfections – the possibility of interacting has increased to the billions. Technology has allowed us to stretch our abilities and test the seams of the fabric of society. Perhaps we are not evolutionarily equipped with the ability to create a community at such magnitudes, but humanity needs to adapt to the vices of its own creation.

Can the city offer a refuge to oceans of misinformation and its effect on us? There are two ways to analyse the spread of misinformation. First: cognitive bias – and its derivative, false narrative – as part of an identity. Since Žižek implied that we need to learn how to live with false narrative and that there is no objective truth, the best that we can do is create a dialogue that can serve as a Hegelian dialectic. Rather than trying to dispute the beliefs – which will not change anything because a false narrative can sometimes be a part of someone's identity – we should try finding a middle ground, acknowledging that there is truth in every argument. In the end, there will be no objective truth, but there would be an agreeable truth.

The second analysis is to see that conspiracy theory is a tool to understand a world that is working against the disenfranchised and now the middle class. The will to consume false narratives has come from the need to survive amidst inequalities that keep increasing. Empowering the middle class and involving them in policy making can provide a sense of agency in the day-to-day happenings of society. However, this can only materialize in communities at the city or a district level. With grassroots-based policy making, the general public can benefit by bettering the lives of the disenfranchised while disrupting the fertile ground for misinformation.

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