

# Poverty and Extreme Poverty: Filming in the Most Depressing City on Earth — Jakarta.

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*It stinks, it is the most polluted city on earth, but that is not the most terrible thing about it.*

*You can drive for ten or even twenty kilometers through it, and see only ugliness, fences and broken pavements. But there are many miserable cities on this planet, and I have worked in almost all of them, in 160 countries.*

So why is 'Jakarta killing me', why am I overwhelmed by depression, whenever I decide to film here, or to write about the state in which its citizens are forced to live? Why, really, do I feel so desperate, so hopeless?

I am tough. I hardly succumb to depression even in such places like the war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq, or in the middle of the toughest slums of Africa.

So, what is it, really, about Jakarta?

Here, I often speak about 'immorality', but again, what do I mean by this term? I am not a moralist, far from it. I have no religion, and I very rarely pass 'moral judgements', unless something truly outrageous unveils in front of my eyes.

So why, as so many others, do I land in this city in good spirits, and leave one or two weeks sick, broken, literally shitting my pants, full of wrath, despair?

Why? The Western mass media and local servile sheets are constantly bombarding the world, describing Jakarta as a 'sprawling metropolis', or to use the terminology of the Australian National University, as a 'normal city'.

But it is not. In fact, it is the most 'immoral' place on earth that I know. It is one enormous monument to fascism, intellectual collapse, Western neo-colonialism and turbo-capitalism.

This time, right here, I will explain, briefly and determinately, why!

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You can actually avoid feeling this way, if you decide to land in Jakarta, work for a week or two surrounded by local 'elites' (usually shameless thugs), sail through life here with half-closed eyes. Or if you get paid well 'not to see'. You can also be a Western journo who lives in one of high-rise condominiums, gets himself local bimbo for a girlfriend, and collects his 'news' from official briefings and press conferences.

Such foreign 'visitors' are warmly welcomed in Jakarta, and they get incorporated into the

life of local tsars, of feudal 'cream', of bandits who double as businesspeople or politicians.



Double security to get into Gran Indonesia Mall

It is not so difficult! You land at that lavish Terminal 3 of Soekarno-Hatta International Airport (half of things do not work here, already, or 'yet', but the terminal does look lavish), you can take a luxury limo to one of so many 5-star hotels, have meetings at a steel-and-glass office tower, dine in a posh mall where nobody shops (a money laundering concept), but where those with unlimited budgets, often dine. After all this you can leave thinking that Jakarta is just cool - bit 'shallow', too loud and too vulgar - but a 'kind of cool' city.

And you can, if you choose to, never learn, that about 90% of its citizens are actually living in slums.



That is, if 'international standards' for what is a 'slum' and what is 'poverty' or extreme poverty, were to apply here.

You see, 'officially', according to the treasonous Indonesian regime, only 9.9% of Indonesians are 'poor'.

In Indonesia, you are not really 'poor', not necessarily, if you or your children are shitting into canal, and that canal is literally toxic from chemical, medical or other waste, and if, just a few meters 'down the stream', someone is washing clothes, or even brushing teeth, getting bit of your excrement. You are not 'poor' if you have no access to clean water, or to a decent electricity supply (almost nobody does in Jakarta, as the voltage fluctuates and destroys almost all electric appliances in no time). You are not poor if your children cannot afford to eat milk products and become physically or mentally ill from a lack of vitamins, minerals, or out rightly suffering from malnutrition. You are not poor if you are 'functionally illiterate', cannot compare and know close to nothing about the world.

In Indonesia, you are poor if your income is below Rp.400.000 per month (the definition applied since March, 2018). That is, as I write this essay, the equivalent of US\$26 per month. Even the most cynical 'absolute poverty' line stands at U\$1.25.

According to the UN declaration that resulted from the [World Summit on Social Development](#) in Copenhagen in 1995, absolute poverty is *"a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income, but also on access to services."*

If this definition were to be applied to Jakarta, at least, but probably more, than 90% of the population would have to be considered as 'absolutely poor'. And most likely, between 95 and 98 percent of people all over the entire archipelago.

But this whole country is wrapped in a duvet of lies and fabrications. Several years ago,

when I was writing my big book about Indonesia ([“Archipelago of Fear”](#), Pluto, UK), I spoke to several leading statisticians from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), which is based in Montreal, Canada. I was told, on the record, that Indonesia does not have 245 million people as was commonly reported, but more than 300 million. However, all international and local statisticians are strongly discouraged from disclosing the real numbers. Why? Because those 60, or probably, millions of more people simply ‘do not exist’.

If they ‘do not exist’, the state, the government, the regime, do not have to take care of them, to feed them, to even bother registering them. These are the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable individuals.

Almost everywhere in the world, poor countries are addressing their social problems publicly, because they want to raise awareness of the plight of their people. Some nations are then combating their problems themselves (like China or Venezuela), or they are asking the international community for help.

In Indonesia, the rulers are covering-up the true horrors of the Indonesian reality. Why?

Because they don’t give a damn about the poor. They couldn’t care less about the great majority that actually lives in destitution. They don’t need ‘help’, because the people do not matter. What matters is the profits of the few who are from the ‘elites’, as well as servitude and prostitution to the Western rulers. After all, it was the West that triggered the 1965 coup in which between 1-3 million intellectuals, ‘atheists’, Communists and unionists lost their lives. And so, the Indonesian treasonous business ‘heads’, the military generals, religious leaders as well as the servile scholars and media ‘stars’ are merrily prostituting themselves, eternally grateful to Washington, London and Riyadh, for saving them from the just and egalitarian society, which the great father of the nation Soekarno and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) were aiming at.

‘Positive statistics’, which are actually easily detectable lies, bring ‘more investment’ for their enterprises. Or so they believe. The Indonesian economy is almost exclusively based on the plunder of natural resources by foreign multi-nationals, as well as local companies. Profits end up in the pockets of very few. The business of the savage plundering of Kalimantan (Borneo), Sumatra and Papua has been monumental. The country has been almost fully stripped of its forests; it has leveled to the ground entire mountains and polluted mighty rivers. But the loot flows abroad, or it stays in the pockets of Jakarta’s chosen few, apart from ‘commodities’, Indonesia produces almost nothing of value. Its scientific research is basically nil, and its intellectual output minimal. Even judged by Western standards: the 4<sup>th</sup> most populous country on the planet, does not have one single Noble Prize laureate, and not one internationally recognizable thinker or a writer.

And so, there are those 5-star hotel towers, office buildings, and ridiculously overpriced malls and supermarkets (most of them designed and built by foreign companies), basically catering for those who steal, and never had to work for their money.

But in between, there are the so-called *kampungs* – ‘villages’ – where the great majority of Jakarta’s citizens live. A *Kampung* sounds romantic, but in reality, it is not – anywhere else on earth it would be called a *slum*. The slums of Jakarta and in fact of the entire Indonesia, are rat-infested, open sewage colossuses, with dark narrow alleys, toxic canals, and extremely limited access to drinking water (water in the capital was privatized by French and British companies, and as a result, the quality dropped and prices became



unrealistically steep for the majority of people).



In Indonesia – officially not poor

Except for just a few tiny dirty specks of green areas, and the most of the time closed small square in the center of the city called Monas, Jakarta has no public parks. Forget about public playgrounds for children, or public exercise machines! In fact, Jakarta has nothing 'public' left. Nothing 'belongs to people' – as everything was sold, corrupted, grabbed and privatized. A family of 4 has to pay around 7 USD to even enter Ancol, the only available beach area, despite the fact that Jakarta is theoretically a maritime city. But even in Ancol, despite the entrance fee, the tiny beach is littered with garbage, and a narrow promenade is broken and outrageously filthy. Otherwise – there is nothing!

In one enormous slum (sorry, *kampung*), I recently filmed hundreds of children playing in the middle of a cemetery, simply because they have no other places to go.



Cemetery – the only playground in this ‘middle class’ neighborhood

On the other hand, Jakarta has more mosques per square kilometer than any other city on earth that I know (and I have visited almost all Muslim countries). Mosques and small *mushollahs*, are literally growing on every street, often taking over land that should be intended for public use. But unlike in Malaysia or Turkey, these religious institutions do not provide playgrounds for children, or a ‘public space’.

The contrast between the tiny minority of extremely rich, and the destitute majority (I don’t believe that Jakarta has any substantial ‘middle class’, anymore), is so tremendous, that these two groups appear to be living on two absolutely different planets, while inhabiting the same city. The structure of Jakarta is such that the two realities often never even meet. And it is considered normal, by both the exploiters and the deprived masses.





Middle class living

Poor are used to being poor, obedient and 'entrusting their fate into God's hands', in the Indonesian language called *pasrah*. And the rich are secretly laughing at the poor, all the way to the bank. I know them, the rich of Indonesia, too. I worked, for decades, with Indonesians from across the spectrum - from the poorest of the poor, to the richest of the rich.

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So why do I feel as I do? Why do I want to throw up?

Haven't I worked in Mathare and the other tremendous slums of Nairobi, Kenya, or in Uganda, or India?

Yes, of course. I made films about the misery in Africa. But it is different there. In the entire

city of Nairobi, which is the so-called service center of East Africa (much of the money from Uganda, Rwanda and even DRC Congo is being washed there), there is only one truly huge luxury mall, of which Jakarta has dozens. Comparing the palaces (ugly, vulgar, but palaces) that the Indonesians are building from the blood and sweat of the poor and from the theft of the natural resources, with those in Africa, the African 'elites' at least have some shame left. They don't make contrasts so visible. They intuitively know that what they are doing is wrong, and often try to hide their wealth.

And in Africa, slums are called slums, and every slum dweller know that his or her life is shit.

In India, things are bad, almost as bad as in Indonesia, but at least there is some true resistance, and the Communist Parties are regularly in control of various Indian states. Left-wing guerillas are fighting a civil war all over the sub-continent, and the country has some true great thinkers and intellectuals, most of them from the left.

The Indonesian poor have no idea that they are poor, they 'thank God' for what they have, or, more precisely 'do not have'. And the super-rich looters are proud of their achievements. They are hiding nothing. On the contrary - they flash their wealth, knowing that they are above the law, or any moral principles. They drive their Mercedes limos right next to the slums, without fear. They are actually respected, not only feared. The more they steal, the more they are admired.

And if they are crossed, they kill.

They kill human rights activists, peasants who refuse to give up their land, or anyone who stands in their way.

Justice is totally corrupted. Actually, everything is. Only those who pay are protected.

To even just irritate the true owners of the city can lead to death. In ["Archipelago of Fear"](#) I wrote about the case of an owner of the former Hilton Hotel, who shot a waiter point-blank in his own establishment. Why? Because he had humbly dared to inform the owner's girlfriend that her credit card had been declined. For the murder he only got a few years, and he bribed himself out just a few months after being put behind bars.

Not long ago, they put into prison the former moderately left-wing governor of Jakarta, known as Ahok, for trying to improve the infrastructure, sanitation and public transportation. The official charge: "insulting Islam". A bad joke, really, as almost all Indonesian linguists agreed that there was no insult whatsoever. But again, it worked: to do something for the people, one risks being branded as a socialist, or a Communist (which here is illegal). To pay too much attention to the wellbeing of the common citizens may brand you as an atheist, which is also illegal. So, if you build a few new train lines, a few sidewalks, erect a couple of parks; you are risking ending up deep behind bars. Religions - be they Wahhabism or Pentecostal Christianity - have, for decades, been fully encouraged by the West, which is gaining greatly from destitution, ignorance and the obedience of the Indonesian masses.

Yes, I have seen a lot of horrors in this world, and faced indescribable cynicism. But Indonesia is truly 'unique', and so is its capital city.

It is like a huge, decaying carcass of a fish, inside which 12 million people breathe the most polluted air on earth, surrounded by indescribably ugliness, gloominess and pop-ridden meaninglessness.



And there is no fight, no true rebellion against this totally fascist arrangement of the city and the society.

The poor 'know their place'. They have obediently accepted their fate. They steal from each other, insult and oppress each other. They do not dare to take on the real usurpers and bandit rulers. Or more precisely: they do not find them to be the real reason of their plight. In Jakarta, there is so much tension and hatred, but it is not directed against those who brought the city and the nation to their knees.

All this, while the rich do not even bother to look down at the masses, they actually do not even notice that the masses even exist. They make sure of not counting the tens of millions of monstrously poor human beings.

And the West lies, its media lies, and so do its economists.

Read the US and European newspapers and you will be told that Jakarta is a 'sprawling metropolis', that Indonesia is the 'third biggest democracy' (my god, according to them, India is No. 1), and that the Indonesian religions are moderate and tolerant.

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Jakarta is a shameless fusion of fascism and feudalism. As the great Australian painter George Burchett (the son of the legendary left-wing journalist Wilfred Burchett) once told me: "Cities are usually built for the people. But the Indonesian cities, particularly Jakarta, are built against the people."

I have written many times about Jakarta's 'cultural offering'. With 12 million inhabitants, it has not one permanent concert hall. Its cinemas exclusively showing Hollywood junk, with some variations of Southeast Asian horrors and other garbage. The only art cinema at TIM has only around 30 seats and a very sporadic schedule. The few modern art museums are all privately owned, and avoid all social topics, or any criticism of capitalism and Western imperialism. But there are, of course, the paintings of Warhol and a few decadent Chinese artists mocking Communism, hanging on their walls. This way, the local elites can get even further indoctrinated, while taking their selfies.

Deeper thoughts are discouraged. Pop culture – its lowest grade – is literally everywhere. Intellectually, the city has been ruined since 1965.

Noise is everywhere, too. Loud, aggressive noise. Monstrous decibels that would be banned anywhere else in the world, beat people who are visiting malls. Mosques all over the city are, unlike their counterparts even in the Middle East or Malaysia, broadcasting entire sermons over the Orwellian-style loudspeakers, at least five hours a day, but sometimes much longer. Churches of extreme right-wing orientations preach 'Prosperity Gospel', periodically telling the worshipers that "God loves the rich and that is why they are rich, while hating the poor and that is the reason why they are poor." To escape religions is impossible. To escape noise is impossible. It often appears that the people of Jakarta are terrified of silence. Silence would make them think, and thinking could lead to some extremely frightening conclusions.

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And therefore, I film.

I film broken pavements – tiny narrow sidewalks made from unmatched tiles, polluting scooters and unhygienic eateries blocking the way of the few daring pedestrians. Why is all that happening? Because nothing public is respected or put together well. Everything that is not for a fee, is simply dreadful. And it is designed to remain that way.

I am filming slums. I am filming filth, such filth which these days hardly exists even on the Sub-Continent. I cannot believe my own eyes, and so I film. I always believe my lenses.

I know the arteries of the city, big and small. I know the corners, back alleys, clogged waterways. I know the humiliated, imprisoned waterways, surrounded by miserable dwellings.

I know the old city – *Kota Tua*, built by the Dutch and so badly restored, that UNESCO recently refused to put it on its prestigious World Heritage Sites list.

It is easy to accuse me of being anti-capitalist, or “anti-Indonesian regime” of thieves and of barefaced collaborators. But it is impossible to accuse me of not knowing the country and its capital city. I have literally been everywhere, covering every conflict here, for more than twenty years, witnessing the atrocities committed against the people, nature and the culture.

Wherever I go in this world, I speak about Indonesia and Jakarta. It is my warning to the world.

The Indonesian nightmarish scenario has already been implemented in many parts of the world, by Western imperialism, but, has often failed as it was too monstrous for other people to swallow. The West tried to replicate Jakarta in those countries that I deeply love and call home: they tried it in Pinochet’s Chile (“Watch out, comrades, Jakarta is coming”, Allende’s people were told), but Chile rose and both the regime and the fascist system were smashed. They tried it in Yeltsin’s Russia, and again, the people rejected this horrible extremist horror show.

Jakarta is not just a city – it is a concept. Perhaps it should one day become a verb – “to Jakarta”. That would mean, to sacrifice people to greed, corruption, business, religion and foreign interests.

But it is not omnipotent. It can be confronted and defeated. We fought against Jakarta in both Santiago de Chile and Moscow. And we won.

And we will win elsewhere, too. Maybe even in Jakarta itself, one day...

All this explains why I often come to both Borneo and Jakarta – to work on films, to define and document the horror, to warn the world what has already been done to the Indonesian nation.

I try to cut through lies. I try to explain that Dilma Rousseff, the former President of Brazil who was impeached (during a constitutional coup) because of the ‘massaging of statistics’ before the elections (something that is commonly done in many countries including those in the West) would have to be, theoretically, executed by a firing squad, or quartered by a mob, if she were to do proportionally what the government of Indonesia is doing without any scruples or second thought. In Jakarta, they do not ‘massage’ – they pervert, lie, and call black, white, and day, night. And they get away with everything. No one dares to challenge

them. And they get rewarded by the West – as long as they rob the country and its people of everything, and deliver huge part of the loot to the gates of Washington, Canberra, Paris and London.

I get exhausted. And ‘broke’ once in a while (because almost nobody wants to read about Indonesia, or watch films about it). And once in a while I get thoroughly depressed, temporarily losing faith in humanity. And I shit from the terrible food. And I get sick from the pollution. And I get exhausted from constant racist insults of the passers-by in this, one of the most racist countries on earth, which in just a bit over half a century has committed 3 monstrous genocides: in 1965, against the people of East Timor, and now against the Papuans. It is constant ‘*bule*’ (albino, or worse), but I am lucky, as my Chinese comrades suffer much worse insults, and of course my African comrades do as well, not to speak of my Papuan brothers!

Fascist Jakarta is a tough adversary. But I am tough, too. And so, I go, drive and crawl through the dirt, noise and insults. Because it is needed. Because here is buried the key to the countless other conflicts that the West has implanted all over the world.

*The Economist* once described Indonesia as the least documented large country on earth. Right. And there are many reasons for it. I often describe 1965 as a “Cultural Hiroshima”, because almost all the intellectuals were either, killed, imprisoned or muzzled – overnight, and on the direct suggestions and orders from the West.

This is the most intellectually and mentally damaged country on earth, which often feels like one huge mental asylum. It is the biggest untold story of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Too many people got killed here. Too many people had killed. Everybody fears everything. But nobody dares to speak or to define things.

Jakarta is a city where people ‘don’t know’, or they simply refuse to know that they are being robbed of everything, that they have been fooled, and that they had been thoroughly brainwashed.

Here, cheap pop culture, Western junk food and forced dependency on filthy scooters and private cars are called ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’. Watching European football is a ‘sign of progress’. Mobile phones and text messages double as culture, and so do video games. Nobody reads books.

You ask the poor about poverty, and what do you hear? Women ‘put their fate in the hands of God’. Men begin ‘analyzing’, speaking like the IMF, using business jargon: “exchange rates, global economic situation, support for small businesses...”

In reality, the majority of local families, according to my own survey, lives on US\$2-3 dollars a day (family of 4-5). Food in supermarkets costs 2-8 times more than in places like Germany. Therefore, the supermarkets are empty. The Majority of people shop at *pasars* – markets, where food is often full of cancerogenic chemicals, and filth is everywhere.

But most of people do not feel poor. They feel insulted when they are told that they live in misery. All without exception answer that they have nothing against capitalism. Most of them know nothing about the world; they have never been taught to compare.

Everybody ‘hates Communists”, as demanded by the West and by the local rulers. There are



entire anti-Communist museums here, and people going out to go there, even paying from their own pocket to get further indoctrinated. If you tell them that all they see is one huge lie, they get mad, angry, sometimes even violent. Their entire lives are based on myths. Their lives depend on them, psychologically. If myths were to be taken away, their entire lives would collapse, as they would lose meaning. That is why there is too much noise, and no substance. People are scared. But they don't know what frightens them.

Everybody thinks the same. There is hardly any variety. It is scary. Indonesia feels like North Korea, as it is presented by the West and its propaganda. But North Korea is actually totally different – there I found definitely much more intellectual diversity than in Jakarta!

Nobody wants to change things – at least not the system, the essence. People want “more money and better life”. Is their life bad now? “No!” Do they hold their elites responsible? “For what?” They don't understand – they don't know what I am talking about, or pretend they don't know, when I ask such questions.

And the rich? Their kids are in the US, Japan or Europe, studying how to screw their own population even more, after returning back. For them, the greatest pride is to work for some foreign company, or to be awarded with the Western diplomas, and to be given some reward from Europe or the United States.

And the city is choking on its own gasses, garbage and excrement. While the rich have their condos and villas in Australia, California, Singapore and Hong Kong. They can get out of Indonesia whenever they want, as they have already stolen millions, billions of dollars. When they come back to Indonesia, it is to rob even more.

I have to admit, it is all ‘a little bit tiring’. Fine, honestly: it is exhausting. Documenting all this is deadly. So now you know.

And I also have to admit, it is often lonely working here. No one in his or her sane mind would come here, to work. The expenses, both financial but also related to mental sanity and physical health, are tremendous. Rewards are near zero. The West does not allow the truth about Indonesia to reach the world, and therefore, no powerful criticism of the country can ever be aired by the mainstream media.

But it is my duty to speak. Therefore, I speak. And write. And film. And as my maternal Russian and Chinese grandparents did – I fight against fascism, regardless of the cost!

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