

Enlightenment and the Revolutionary Press in Colonial Indonesia

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In the historiography of Indonesian nationalism and the press, much has been made of the vernacular press and its role in the emergence of national consciousness. However, this work has not typically distinguished between the vernacular press and the self-identified “revolutionary press,” which emerged during the early communist movement of 1920–1926. This article recovers the tradition of the revolutionary press and situates it in the history of Indonesian national struggles by examining the production and development of the revolutionary newspaper *Sinar Hindia*. An investigation of the paper’s content, production, and distribution practices reveals how *Sinar Hindia* not only embodied the anticolonial national struggle but also became a voice for a project of enlightenment in the colony. By uncovering this “revolutionary” paper’s own discourses of enlightenment and revolutionary struggle, this study sheds light on the role of the press in the production of enlightenment ideas and practices in colonial Indonesia.

Keywords: revolutionary press, enlightenment project, Indonesia, communism, social movements, communication history

The growth of the native vernacular press and political organizations in the first two decades of the 20th century provided the conditions for an important period in Indonesian press history that saw the rise and fall of the “revolutionary press.” This self-identified revolutionary press (or *pers revolutionair*) was an outgrowth of the earlier vernacular press, which itself, along with political parties and unions, had become a voice of the colonized people throughout the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). From 1920 to 1926, under the banner of the early communist movement in the Indies, the struggle against colonialism gained popularity among the lower-class population. *Pers revolutionair* became one of their main weapons of struggle. Despite its abrupt end following the 1926–7 communist revolt, this movement had a direct influence on later developments leading to the national revolution of 1945–9, when exiled leaders were returning to Java and younger revolutionaries who had grown up during the 1920s were now in positions of power and influence. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the role of the revolutionary press in a broader project of enlightenment in the colony.

During this period, the explicit goals of the early communist movement were not limited to ridding the Indies of colonial capitalism; they also included elevating a new intellectual movement. On

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January 2, 1922, an article in *Sinar Hindia* newspaper captured the passion for “the new way of thinking” quite vividly:

For most people here in the Indies, it has been difficult to embrace new wetenschap [Dutch: knowledge], mostly because they do not possess *the new way of thinking* [emphasis in the original]. Their geest [Dutch: spirit] is still old-fashioned, and belief in superstition still plays an important part in their way of thinking. Remnants of a more religious era, an ancient time, still reign in the minds of the people in the Indies. . . . To promote the movement and the new wetenschap, we have to try as hard as we can to pry them away from their misguided thinking by promoting our propaganda through brochures. (Soekin, 1922, n.pag.)

The image of the new was a preoccupation of the movement writ large. As seen in the quote, “new knowledge” and “the new way of thinking,” expressed in a seamless juxtaposition of Dutch and Malay, were considered key to freeing the people’s spirit from the misguidance of religious dogmas, mysticism, and superstition.

The interest in enlightenment ideas had been expressed in the Indies years before the period of the early communist movement. One well-known example is found in a collection of letters by Kartini—the famous daughter of a Javanese nobleman—published as *Door Duisternis tot Licht (Out of Darkness to Light)* in 1911. The letters, addressed to her Dutch pen pals, depict Kartini’s self-education in European ideas of women’s emancipation, freedom, and equality by reading books and Dutch newspapers. Kartini represented a generation of Indonesians who were preoccupied with a project of enlightenment. Later, the first native political party, Boedi Oetomo, was founded to promote Western-style education for Javanese commoners, and the Taman Siswa school was created by Soewardi Soerjaningrat for a similar purpose. Likewise, Tirta Adhi Surjo produced the first native vernacular newspapers with the expressed purpose of struggling for equal rights and social justice (Toer, 1985).

While the focus on education and literacy and the demands for rights and social justice resonate with what we now understand as enlightenment ideas and practices, the history of Kartini, Boedi Oetomo, Taman Siswa, and Tirta Adhi Surjo has often been framed under the narrative of a nationalist project (Anderson, 1990, 1991; Ricklefs, 2001; Toer, 1985). Indeed, the desire for the new was manifested in the idea of the nation as a form of collective community. Since the rise of modern political parties founded in 1908, the idea of an independent Indonesian nation emerged as the uniting idea among the colonized subjects (Adam, 1995; Elson, 2008). As Anderson (1991) famously argued, the nation became “an imagined community,” in which the colonized organized themselves and created a sense of belonging that reached beyond their regional, physical, ethnic, and linguistic differences. This imagining was possible because of the press and other commodities of print capitalism that then facilitated the creation of nations (Anderson, 1991). In the history of modern Indonesia, scholars have recognized that the production of the vernacular press played an important role in building national consciousness (Adam, 1995; Anderson, 1991; Hagen, 1997; Toer, 1985) and aided the rise of parties as modern forms of political associations (Blumberger, 1935; Korver, 1982; McVey, 1965; Shiraishi, 1990; Tichelman, 1985) indispensable to the birth of the new period of *pergerakan*—“an age in motion” (Shiraishi, 1990) or “World-in-Motion”

(Anderson, 1996, p. 35)—that is the focus of this article. As such, enlightenment among these early Indonesian intellectuals was an end in itself, separate from, though closely tied to, the struggle for national independence.

Hence, framing these enlightenment practices as primarily for a part of national struggles subsumes the former as a mere parochial project of the latter. Investigating how enlightenment practices developed in the Indies can help us understand how those cultural practices, while unique, were at the same time produced through the transnational contact of ideas facilitated through books, newspapers, and magazines. Most important, in the case of the early communist movement in the Indies, enlightenment practices were born out of political struggles against colonialism.

Studies on the revolutionary press in Turkey, the United States, France, and Iran have highlighted the role of the press in enabling public opinion, public discussion, and public criticism as well as organizing collective actions, often leading to the overthrow of a monarch, regime, or colonial rule (Behn, 1980; Brummett, 2000; Cutler, 1975; Daley, 2009; Edelstein, 1971; Popkin, 1999)—characteristics of enlightenment practices. Borrowing from Sebastian Conrad, I understand enlightenment here as the “material production of the public sphere,” produced through political struggles rather than mere “lofty philosophical debates” (Conrad, 2012, p. 1003; also see Habermas, 1992). This article contributes to an ongoing conversation regarding the origins of enlightenment and efforts to deconstruct the view that the history of enlightenment was homogeneous, monolithic, and primarily the provenance of 18th-century Europe (Carey & Festa, 2015; Chakrabarty, 2008; Houssaini, 2013; Israel, 2001). Conrad (2012), for instance, proposes that we rethink the nonlinear “spatiality and temporality of the global Enlightenment” (p. 1026), arguing that the enlightenment project was not simply a moment of the past or bound to a specific geographical space. Rather, it is a continuous “process of global circulation, translation, and transnational co-production . . . of many different actors” (p. 1027). Therefore, the task of this article is not so much to fit the communist movement’s agenda within a particular definition of enlightenment, but rather to understand how enlightenment was perceived and produced.

As a contribution to the debate, this article investigates the production of enlightenment ideas and practices in late-colonial Indonesia (1920–6). The aim of this article is twofold. First, it rescues the tradition of the “revolutionary press” by examining the production and development of the revolutionary newspaper *Sinar Hindia* (later *Api*, henceforth *SH/Api*) from its conception in May 1918 until its closure in April 1926 as an exemplary case of the revolutionary press. This article demonstrates that a different model of the press—that is, the revolutionary press—emerged out of the tradition of the vernacular press. Second, through an investigation of the paper’s content, production, and distribution practices, this article reveals how *Sinar Hindia* embodied not only the anticolonial national struggle, but became one voice for a project of enlightenment in the colony, highlighting how an enlightenment project was produced as a project of struggle.

The Evolution of *Sinar Hindia*: A Brief History

When the newspaper *Sinar Hindia* (literally, “light of the Indies”) was first published in 1918, the push for enlightenment had already begun. This is apparent in the names of many newspapers circulating

in the first two decades of the 20th century that included words such as *sinar* (light), *suara* (voice), and *bergerak* (in motion), demonstrating the relationship between the struggle for enlightenment and the desire to resist colonial rule.

The development of the vernacular press in the Indies began on January 25, 1855, when the Javanese language weekly *Bromartani* was published. It continued to grow with the involvement of the Eurasians and the Chinese in the industry, many of whom trained Indonesian natives to become printers and editors. As such, by the end of the 19th century, native readership had grown at least among the few educated literate people. When the native vernacular press was finally established, it functioned not like its predecessors, which were committed to supporting commerce; instead, it was explicitly committed to supporting political struggles. This commitment of the press had been inspired by the movement in Chinese communities in the Indies to turn the vernacular newspapers into political organs to create a common identity of Chinese nationalism in support of the Chinese revolution (Adam, 1995). As such, it was in the hands of journalists that between 1903 and 1913 the native vernacular press and political organizations developed in tandem. Tirta Adhi Soerjo created Sarekat Prijaji and its organ, the *Medan Prijaji*, in 1906–7; Dr. Wahidin Soedirohoesodo, the editor of the periodical *Retnadhoemilah*, created Boedi Oetomo party in 1908; a Eurasian journalist E.F.E. Douwes Dekker was in charge of *De Expres* when he founded Indische Partij in 1912; and Tjokroaminoto was the editor in chief of *Oetoesan Hindia* when he began leading Sarekat Islam in 1913 (Adam, 1995; Ricklefs, 2001; Shiraishi, 1990). However, many of these political parties were only able to attract the educated elites of the population, many of them coming from the *priyayi* (aristocratic) class.

It was with the foundation of two political parties, Sarekat Islam (SI; Islamic Union) and Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging (ISDV; Indies Social-Democratic Association), that native political parties and press took a more radical turn. Tirtoadisurjo, a *priyayi* who had left government service to become a journalist, founded Sarekat Dagang Islamiyah (SDI; Islamic Commercial Union) in Batavia in 1909 and in Buitenzorg (Bogor) in 1910. This organization was designed to support Indonesian traders, so the use of the term *Islam* in the name of the organization served to unite the majority Muslim Indonesian traders under the banner of religion. Branches in other regions were soon established. The Surabaya branch was founded by H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, who would soon take over the leadership of SDI as a whole and changed the organization's name to Sarekat Islam. Under the leadership of Tjokroaminoto, the Islamic and commercial origins of the organization were replaced by resentful antigovernment voices, giving the organization a reputation as the savior of the lower-class people and Tjokroaminoto as the *ratu adil* (just king), a messianic character in Javanese legend. From 1912 onward, as the organization spread throughout the villages, the membership of SI rapidly swelled, with many lower-class members joining the organization (McVey, 1965; Ricklefs, 2001; Shiraishi, 1990).

In the midst of SI's expansion, Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging was founded by a young Dutch labor leader, H.J.F.M. Sneevliet, in 1914 in Semarang, a city on the north central coast of Java. The city was an expanding urban port and center of European commerce, and also the base of radical activities, including the Indonesian railroad workers' union (VSTP). As a socialist organization, ISDV easily gained support from VSTP's most talented activists. Together with the Dutch leaders Sneevliet and A. Baars (the editor of ISDV's organ *Het Vrije Woord*), Semaun—a 15-year-old VSTP leader—and other

Indonesian members attended and addressed SI gatherings and kept close relations with its leaders. As a result, SI became even more radical in demanding the end of Dutch colonial rule in the Indies. When in 1918 Sneevliet was sent into exile, ISDV already had a generation of Indonesian leaders who would continue its program and develop the party into the first communist party in Asia outside of Russia (McVey, 1965). Together with SI and its massive followings, ISDV (later Partai Komunis Indonesia [PKI; Indonesian Communist Party]) would become the basis of the first nationally and globally connected popular anticolonial movement in the Indies. Thus, it is important to understand the early communist movement in the Indies as a loose network of SI, PKI, VSTP, and several other parties and unions.

The newspaper *Sinar Hindia* was produced by the activists belonging to both Semarang-based SI and PKI. The name changes in the history of *Sinar Hindia* reflect an increased focus on enlightenment in the movement's development of a revolutionary press. When several Indonesian communist leaders had begun joining SI and founded its more radical Semarang branch in 1918, they bought *Sinar Djawa* (light of Java) and changed the name to *Sinar Hindia* (light of the Indies). The name change was important because the new editors, Semaoen, Mas Marco Kartodikromo, and Darsono, no longer imagined the newspaper as the organ of the people of "Java" only, but rather of the "Indies." Its masthead, "the newspaper for *kromo* people in the Indies," clearly imagined its readership to have expanded beyond the *kromo* of Java. *Kromo* is a Javanese term, often contrasted with *priyayi*. The word *priyayi* is a term for the Javanese aristocratic class, which, since the 18th century, had been recruited into Dutch service holding key positions, such as *bupati* (regional heads), within the colonial hierarchy. Access to these positions was not on the basis of education, but on the basis of descent; however, because of their key roles in administration, the colonial authorities encouraged them to get Western education provided by the government. *Kromo*, on the other hand, referred to a status having a loose sense of lower class and usually provoked the imagination of the larger population of landless peasants. Very few *kromo* could enjoy education at the time. During the movement, the word *kromo* was used especially when talking about the oppressed and the colonized. In 1924, the newspaper changed its name again, this time to *Api*, and created a new masthead: "the voice of the proletariats of all nationalities and religions." *Api*, meaning "fire," still conveyed a sense of light/enlightenment, but it was also more aggressive, signaling the further radicalization of the movement.

The shift in the newspaper's masthead from the "newspaper for *kromo*" to a paper for "proletariats of all nationalities and religions" was more than a mere terminological change. It reflected a deeper split in the organization behind the paper, SI. The organizational split into a "white wing" and a "red wing" occurred due to a disagreement about whether Islamism and communism were mutually compatible ideologies. Eventually, the white wing of SI refused to stand together with the communist members, afraid that they would betray their belief in Islam in favor of communism. The red wing of SI responded to this by claiming not only that Islam and communism were compatible, but that it was in the interests of the Muslims that the communist struggles against Dutch imperialism should succeed. To fight Dutch rule, however, they suggested that the anticolonial communist movement should not use a religious banner—given that there were people of other nationalities and religions in the Indies who fought against colonialism—and instead should use nonreligious symbols as a way to unite the diverse anticolonial contingents.

The use of the term *proletariat* to replace the Javanese term *kromo* also represented a reframing of the party's membership, which was largely peasant, since the term *proletariat* is often understood as referring to industrial workers. It is important to note that the majority of people in the Indies at this time remained in rural areas (Cribb, 2000). As such, while the movement gained support from urban workers in port cities such as Semarang, Batavia, and Surabaya, it also mobilized the rural lower classes (Shiraishi, 1990). But why did SI think of its membership as proletariat? Its use of the term can be read in two ways: (1) It affirmed the organization's affiliation with the existing international communist movement and (2) it unified the diverse membership under a new proletarian identity. As the social movement with the largest following in 1924 (Shiraishi, 1990), the latter fact points to the inclusive nature of the movement, accommodating people of other nationalities—not just the natives—who supported their anticolonial cause as a part of the movement. The use of *proletariat* as a common, everyday word resonates with Anderson's idea of "World-in-Motion universalism" (Anderson, 1996, p. 35) from which new representational imaginings of revolutionary movements in the Dutch East Indies and abroad were born. During this period of the movement, new political terms such as *vergadering* (meeting), *kongres* (congress), *mogok* (strike), *klassenstrijd* (class struggle), and *revolutie* (revolution) appeared and began to be used and interpreted not as "autochthonous," but rather "universal" categories (pp. 35–36), enabling the people to imagine themselves as a part of a new global universe—"Workers of the world, unite!"

Following the internal split within SI, the red wing of SI changed its name to Sarekat Rajat (SR; People's Union) to distance itself from Islam. Between 1924 and 1926, Red SI, SR, and PKI were essentially operated by the same people—that is, those who fell under the banner of communism. The change of name to *Api* and *Sarekat Rajat* symbolized a revolutionary point in the history of native political associations in the Indies in that they were able to spread the movement across diverse constituents and move toward a more inclusive democratic community.

Understanding the Claim "Revolutionary"

It was the publishers, editors, and journalists behind the *SH/Api* newspapers who self-identified as "the revolutionary press" (*pers revolutionair*) with the expressed purpose of representing the voices and interests of the *kromo* people. A close read of their understanding of the revolutionary press, however, uncovers a more important development in the vernacular press. Namely, in making the case for the revolutionary press, they also effectively revolutionized the press by developing journalistic practices that embodied enlightenment ideals.

In an April 9, 1924, article titled "The Freedom of Press, Sowing the Seeds of Hatred?" Synthema—the pen name of Soemantri, who took over as editor of *Sinar Hindia* when Semaoen was banished from the Indies in 1923—defined the goal of "the revolutionary press of Indonesia" as "the effort to seek an improvement for a better fortune and liberation for the *Kromo* class" (n.pag.). Soemantri wrote this in response to the accusation made by D. A. Rinkes, an adviser for native affairs in the Indies who would later found Balai Pustaka to promote the publication of reading materials and the foundations of libraries for the indigenous population (Drewes, 1961). To Rinkes, the revolutionary press spread the "seeds of hatred" between classes. Using the language of the colonial *haatzaai artikelen* (hatred-sowing articles; Wiratraman, 2014), Rinkes suggested that the government release a new regulation requiring all

newspaper publishers to pay insurance in the amount of 5,000 *roepijah*.² According to Soemantri, as Rinkes threatened,

If that press has a revolutionary direction and does not listen to the warning of the head of the government up to three times, then the money will not be returned and the newspaper will be banned from being published. (n.pag.)

This conflict reflected a broader power struggle between the government and the movement in assigning different meanings to the revolutionary press. Whereas Rinkes saw the revolutionary press, especially the one associated with SI, as troublesome (Toer, 1985), Soemantri instead saw it as necessary to realize an accountable government. In the same article, Soemantri asked, "How could stealing the government's money [corruption] that has put people at a disservice happen?" and he answered, "It is because we do not have the right to control and criticize. And if we dare to express criticism to keep watch over crimes not to happen, these writings were considered *sowing hatred* [emphasis in the original]" (Synthema, 1924, n.pag.). Even at this time, the revolutionary journalists had seen their role as a controlling and criticizing mechanism toward the activities of the government. Therefore, Soemantri's article is revealing in two ways. First, he saw the need for a newspaper to represent the voices of the kromo people, which was clearly absent in the mainstream papers. Second, in his demand to create an alternative space for the kromo, Soemantri offered a new concept of the role of the press as a means of keeping the government in check through control and criticism facilitated by the newspapers. While he sought to make a case for the revolutionary press, Soemantri offered revolutionizing ideas about the press in general, making the case for newspapers' function for "critical publicity" (Habermas, 1992, p. 440).

A Struggle Through Pens and Words

In fact, the agenda to turn *SH/Api* into a revolutionary newspaper was a conscious one, intended to differentiate it from mainstream newspapers. In discussing the role and job of a journalist, Darsono, under the pen name D.A.S. (1925), wrote an article arguing for a differentiation between "journalists of rice/bread" ("journalis roti of nasi") and "journalists as defenders" ("journalis pembela"). This distinction was triggered by an article by a *peranakan* Chinese journalist with the pen name Koetoe Bolspik (Bolshevik flea), who, while observing the mushrooming of new young journalists, also lamented their qualities. He called them "tjingtjau." The word *tjingtjau* here is used metaphorically to refer to "mushrooms [growing wild] in the rainy season" (Bolspik, 1925, n.pag.). The word was used to describe the mushrooming of journalists who took the job for money and who produced writings that "lowered their status" (Bolspik, 1925, n.pag.) as journalists.

In the article, Darsono made a comparison between journalists of rice/bread and journalists as defenders. He wrote:

² With the price of a single copy of the newspaper at 0.10 roepijah, the proposed fine was heavy. Roepijah and gulden were both the circulating units of currency bearing the same value (e.g., 1 roepiah = 1 gulden; Lane 2008, pp. 382–384). *Guilders* was another term used interchangeably with them.

Indeed, in the world of journalism there are two categories, i.e., journalists of bread or rice and journalists of “the defenders.”

Of course the destiny of these two journalists is different. Journalists of bread, if they happen to find themselves in trouble because of their writings, it is just an accidental matter. This is because they already take side with the people or the class who have power over bread (bread here means living necessities), so everything for them is better and more liberating than it is for the journalists of the defenders.

The journalists of the defenders in general consist of two groups: the defenders of the workers and peasants, and the defenders of our land and nation [nationalist]. These two groups of journalists—their mind and action—are not interested in money, but are interested in their knowledge and their belief. But, the nations who have power over the world, the oppressors, they really hate these revolutionary journalists, who defend those who are oppressed and humiliated. Not only do they hate them, but they also create a law to protect themselves so they do not lose their power. . . .

In our group there are many who have become the victims of their writings. But, our enemies’ purpose to oppress our journalists has not succeeded. Instead it leads the proletariats to think that if the front row gets oppressed, the back row will replace them by rolling up their sleeves and sharpening their pens. One [writer] down . . . one [writer] up! (D.A.S., 1925, n.pag.)

The contrast is clearly made between journalists who did not actively involve themselves in the movement, seeing the badge of journalism as simply a profession, and those who actively took risks and launched active defense for the people. The contrast is also made between the revolutionary and the “reactionary,” “capitalist,” “white” press. The former were journalists who appealed to knowledge. They engaged in risky work, because they were always at risk of arrest, and were seen by the government and police as troublemakers who sowed the seeds of hatred. The latter were journalists by profession who worked simply for the money (for the bread/rice). These journalists, instead of joining the movement, “slept at home and then wrote all of [their] dreams in their newspapers” (“Journalistiek Indonesia,” 1925, n.pag.). Respectful journalists instead “will not sensationalize an event, the news of which will not be shortened or added. They will just take the essence, so people understand because newspapers should be educative, propagandistic, defensive, and helping for our class” (“Journalistiek Indonesia,” 1925, n.pag.).

The contrast that Darsono highlights points to a larger problem of press in the Indies. Colonial capitalism seemed to have led to the creation of journalism as a career, leaving behind its political potential as bearer of reason and truth. By questioning the integrity, duty, and responsibility of the journalists of his time, Darsono demonstrated that being revolutionary journalists meant more than just defending the kromo class; in their reporting, journalists also had to seek truth and reason, disdaining sensationalism.

In addition, Darsono’s likening the duty of journalists with that of soldiers “rolling up their

sleeves” points to how the revolutionary press recruited writers and editors from the ranks of the proletariat, inviting them to join the struggle by “sharpening their pens” to write. As on the battlefield, Darsono wrote, “one writer down, one writer up” (D.A.S., 1925, n.pag.). However, this militaristic metaphor also resonates with what Atkinson (2010) calls the “decentralization” process allowing for “multiple people to play important roles simultaneously . . . so that as circumstances develop different people can step up and fill in any voids” (p. 18). This is an important mechanism in light of the persecution of *SH*’s writers and editors. In any case, Darsono’s writing strikingly demonstrates the adoption of reading and writing as weapons of struggle. This shift in the movement reflected its broader commitment to the promotion of a project of enlightenment.

Equally telling was the fact that Darsono was at the forefront in the call for a more accountable journalism with integrity and dedication to reason and truth. Darsono was an editor for *SH/Api* and made his way to journalism via the movement, another key characteristic distinguishing *SH/Api* from the vernacular press. Whereas the previous generation of *pergerakan* newspapers was produced by “journalists-turned-professional” leaders (Shiraishi, 1990, pp. 48, 59), *SH/Api* was led by propagandists-turned-journalists.³ This postwar generation of propagandists such as Semaoen (b. 1899; Yuliati, 2000) and Darsono (b. 1897; Ricklefs, 2001) were also younger than the previous *pergerakan* leaders, Mas Marco (b. 1890) and Tjokroaminoto (b. 1882; Shiraishi, 1990). Since they grew up during the time when the language of resistance and anticolonial consciousness had already become part of everyday life, unlike the writing of earlier *pergerakan* journalists, the writings of Semaoen’s generation were more direct, fierce, and strong—similar to the language in their speeches, rallies, and strikes.

Indeed, journalists of this period played dual roles as both writers and movement leaders. Semaoen and Darsono, like other editorial members, were leaders in the communist movement. The correspondents of the newspapers, who were also members or sympathizers of the movement, came from all over Java, West Sumatra, and several outer islands,⁴ the regions with the most followers of Red SI, SR, and PKI. *SH/Api* for the next eight years would produce revolutionary journalists recruited from rank-and-file membership of these parties and unions to produce and write in the newspaper. This included its first woman editor, Djoeinah, who was the leader of the women’s branch of SR in Salatiga. Together, these people wrote in the newspapers and led strikes and public meetings.⁵

³ In the contemporary context in which the word *propagandist* carries a negative meaning, it is probably more fitting to call them instead “activists-turned-journalists.”

⁴ Recent research reveals that the early communist movement also reached Aceh, Timor and Alor (Farram, 2004), Kalimantan (Klinken, 2001), and West Sumatra (Kahin, 1999), besides Java.

⁵ *SH* is by no means the only newspaper that saw the revolutionary mission as a part of a larger project of enlightenment by the movement. Other revolutionary/radical press included *Neratja* (Batavia), *Oetoesan Hindia* (Surabaya), *Sri Djojobojo* (Kediri), *Benih-Mardeka* (Medan), *Hindia-Sepakat* (Sibolga), *Heroe-Tjokro* (Kediri), *Matahari* (Bandung), *Padjadjaran* (Bandung), *Soeara-Ra’jat* (Semarang), *Tjokrowolo* (Kediri), *Ma’loemat* (Fort de Kok), *Ra’jat Bergerak* (Solo), *Hallintar* (Pontianak), *Panggoegah* (Yogyakarta), *Soeropati* (Sukabumi), *Djago-Djago* (West Sumatra), *Proletar* (Batavia), *Soeara Tambang* (West Sumatra), *Pemandangan Islam* (West Sumatra), *Njala* (Batavia), *Doenia Achirat* (West Sumatra), and *Pandoe Merah* (The Netherlands) (also noted in Zwemer, 1923).

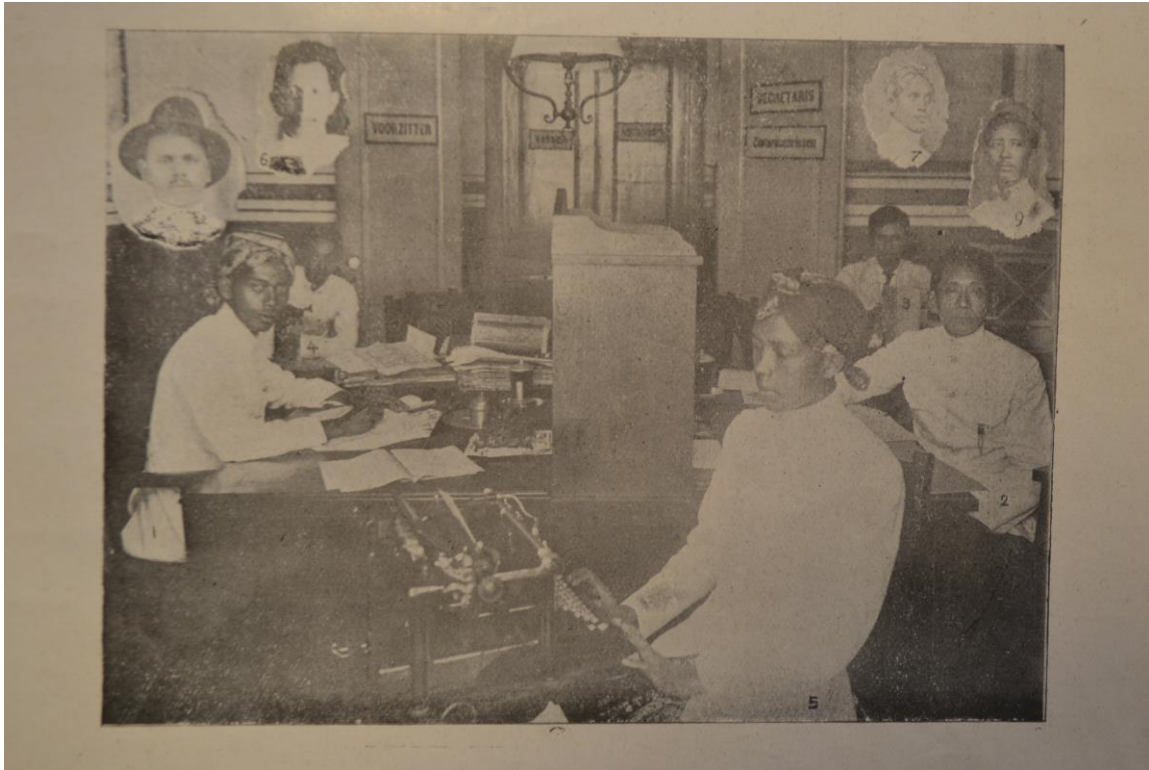


Figure 1. SH/Api Editors.

The same editors who produced SH/Api also produced the organs of VSTP, Si Tetap and De Volharding. This is the room of the VSTP board of directors. Sitting down, from left to right: Semaoen (1), Soedibio (editor in chief of Si Tetap) (4), Abdoelrachman (propagandist) (5), Soegono (editor in chief of De Volharding) (3), and Kadarisman (secretary) (2). Attached photos left to right: Zainoedin (committee from Aceh), F. A. Zeijdel (treasurer) (6), Mohamad Ali (treasurer) (7), and Abdoelwahab (committee from Padang) (9).

Source: Hoofdbestuur, *Poesaka V.S.T.P.* (Semarang: Drukkerij V.S.T.P. Semarang, 1923), Collectie Documentatiebureau voor Overzees Recht (2.20.61, Folder: 144), National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, The Netherlands.

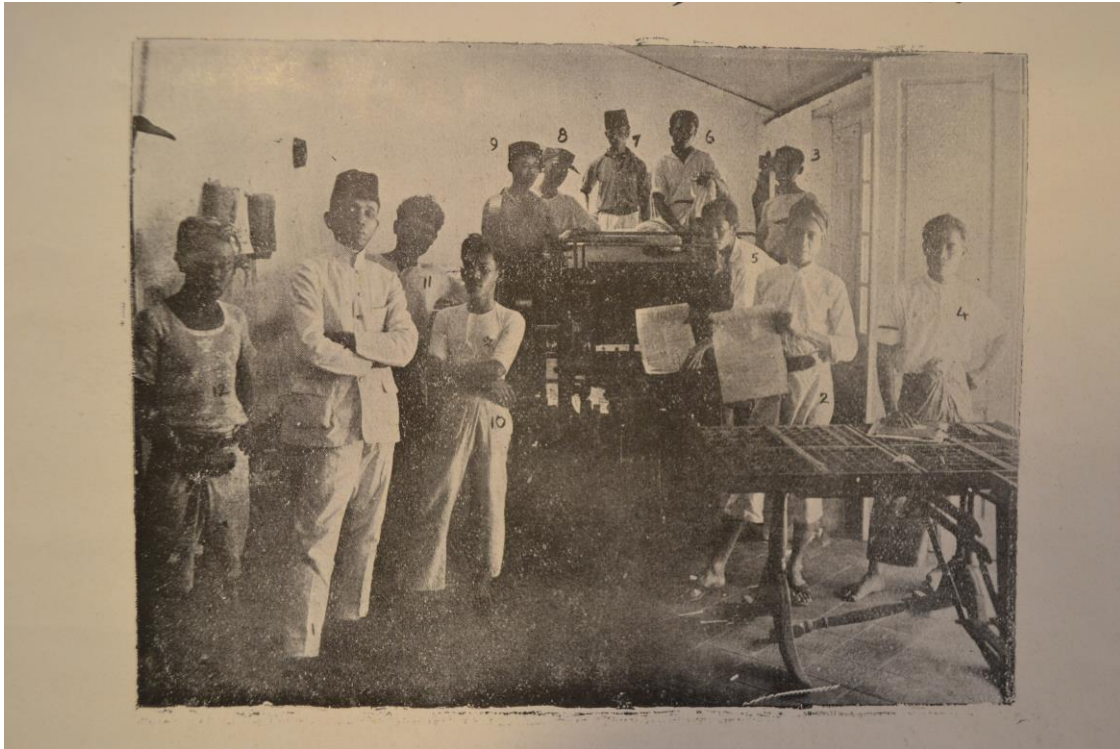


Figure 2. SH/Api printing staff.

SH/Api and VSTP printing staff in the printing office, left to right: Oesin (12), Partondo (head of printing and administration) (1), Bibit (11), Doeldjalil (10), Markimin (9), Djaspan (8), No-ong (7), Koming (6), Satiman (5), Drachman (head of printing) (3), Kasman (head of typesetter) (2), Kaslan (4). (Partondo was the first person to translate Marx's Communist Manifesto into Malay [advertised in Sinar Hindia on July 2, 1923.]

Source: Hoofdbestuur, *Poesaka V.S.T.P.* (Semarang: Drukkerij V.S.T.P. Semarang, 1923), Collectie Documentatiebureau voor Overzees Recht (2.20.61, Folder: 144), National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, The Netherlands.

The idea of "revolutionary" carried a specific meaning in this movement. It criticized the way knowledge and journalistic products were produced within colonial capitalism, and it practiced an alternative form of knowledge production—one that was tied directly to the larger project of anticolonial struggle. This enlightenment project during the movement, so to speak, was vibrant and came from below. This contrasts with the notion of "revolutionary" decades later, when the word became entangled with the national revolution against the Dutch that ended in 1949. Since then, Soekarno—the first president of Indonesia—used it to motivate a nation-building project. The bottom-up, emergent, creative, and vibrant energy that the idea of "revolutionary" carried in the early communist period was replaced with the top-down language of bureaucracy and formal party politics during Soekarno's time. After the putsch in 1965, the word *revolutionary* was given a bad reputation under the Soeharto regime and would be replaced with the spirit of "nationalism" (see also Hill, 1994, pp. 14, 29).

To speak of the press during this movement as “vernacular press,” “party media,” “political press” (Adam, 1995, pp. 173–176), and “party organs” (Sullivan, 1967, p. 100), therefore, implies that there was no room for objectivity and public interests in a way that the *pers revolutionair* has demonstrated. In fact, the tradition of the revolutionary press not only appealed to the interests of the public but also in the process became an institution that produced enlightenment ideas and practices.

A Culture of Criticism and Debate

On February 28, 1922, a slogan at the bottom page of that day’s issue read “Sinar Hindia akan memberi *penerangan* [emphasis added] oentoek memboeka pikiran baroe” (“Sinar Hindia will give *enlightenment* to begin a new thought”),⁶ which illustrated one of *SH/Api*’s projects as a revolutionary newspaper: to build a new system of enlightened thinking. *SH/Api*’s conscious characterization of itself as an institution producing new lines of thought seems to rightly perceive “media as epistemology,” institutions that produce knowledge and meaning, as Neil Postman (2006) suggests. Viewing the need to produce new knowledge through what Mas Marco (1921) called “a struggle with pens and words” (n.pag.) as a part of an anticolonial struggle is telling, especially in light of the prevalence of violent resistance for two centuries prior. As an epistemological institution, *SH/Api* sought to revolutionize through enlightenment. However, enlightenment voices were not unified; instead, they were a cacophony of contrasts, debates, and conflicts, and the newspaper saw criticism and debate necessary to allow such conflicts to be voiced and witnessed by the general public. These were expressed through not just analyses and news reports, but feuilleton, caricatures, poems, innuendos, and public gossip such as in the case of Darsono versus Tjokroaminoto.

In 1912–3, when the Sarekat Islam party was first founded, its leader, Tjokroaminoto, was so popular and well respected by the ordinary mass that he was seen as a messiah. This myth was deconstructed a few years later in 1920, when Darsono, a young radical leader from SI Semarang branch, criticized Tjokroaminoto on a possible corruption case. The article in which Darsono explained his criticism was published in three parts. The first part was a lengthy justification for why a “criticism” was needed for the movement and the collective organization:

We have to express this criticism because we believe that with a criticism all mistakes and fraudulence can be fixed and then prevented [so as] not to affect our movement and association. . . . A criticism, as we perceive it, is like a soap that can clean all dirt. . . . A criticism is an effective medicine that can cure all diseases that can lure the association and other order. (Darsono, 1920, n.pag.)

The argument expressed by Darsono highlighted the need for a culture of criticism on the internal workings of the leaders. This culture of criticism, or rather self-criticism for the movement, was deemed important for the collective good. Like “soap” or “medicine,” criticism could fix, clean, and cure problems.

⁶ The meaning of *penerangan* (root: *terang*, “clear, bright”) has evolved over time. Compare Suharto’s (1966–98) ministry of *penerangan* (information), the regime’s propaganda arm. I translate it as “enlightenment” for the period 1920–6, which better reflects the practices of the revolutionary press.

Only then, in the second part of his article, did Darsono explain in detail the accusations against Tjokroaminoto (Tjokro) over the case of a fraudulent use of party money. Darsono's profane treatment of Tjokro's image, demanding clarification of the case as a part of his duty as a leader and pointing out that it was the people's collective rights to know the truth, was foreign even for the *pergerakan*; however, it expressed a pursuit for openness and publicity disavowing seclusion and secrecy.

In line with the hierarchical nature of Javanese culture, Darsono's criticism did not just create a controversy; it also divided the people. People wrote letters and opinion articles accusing Darsono for making gossip and saying that it was very un-Javanese to criticize the leader Tjokro, who was believed to be immune from sins and mistakes. Some welcomed this criticism as a healthy tradition for the movement. Tjokro himself wrote a response article in *Neratja*, later reprinted in *Sinar Hindia*, brushing off all the accusations as not true and refusing to address them (Tjokroaminoto, 1920). Heated debates followed, with articles such as "Darsono ngamok" ("Darsono runs amok"), "Kritiknja kommunist Darsono pada pimpinan C.S.I. berekor" ("Communist Darsono's criticism against long-tailed C.S.I. leaders"), and "Kritik Darsono!" ("Darsono's criticism!"). Soon enough, the words *menjokro* (to tjokro) and *tjokroisme* (tjokroism) alluding to Tjokro's unresolved case were used to describe an act of "corruption" whenever corruption cases were reported. The criticism against Tjokro expressed in a possible act of slander and gossip demonstrates how, to be effective, public debates and dialogues did not always have to come in a form of "sober, clearly argued debate" (Downing, 2001, p. 28). In fact, this altercation represented a more serious turn for the movement.

The divide in the movement following this altercation was exacerbated by the news of Lenin's statement on the national and colonial questions that were uncompromising on pan-Islamism, expressed in the Comintern's (Communist International) second congress (July–August 1920). In the congress, Lenin said:

It is necessary to struggle against the pan-Islamism and the pan-Asian movement and similar currents of opinion which attempt to combine the struggle for liberation from European and American imperialism with a strengthening of Turkish and Japanese imperialism and of the nobility, the large landowners, the clergy, etc. (McVey, 1965, p. 61; also see Fowkes & Gökay, 2011)

The news of Lenin's hostile position vis-à-vis Islam shook the *pergerakan* in the Indies. Progovernment newspapers took this opportunity to attack the communists, saying that they were just passively following imported communist ideas. On February 12, 1921, PKI released a statement to clarify the relation between Islam and communism, but this was not enough to avoid the split that followed. Articles such as "Kommunisma dan Islamisma" ("Communism and Islamism") and "Kommunisme dan Igama" ("Communism and Religion") appeared in the subsequent months, beginning a long debate on the compatibility of communism and Islam. At this point, SI followers were divided between those who saw communism with suspicion and those who believed that communism strengthened the Muslim cause for anticolonial liberation. In light of Darsono's attack on Tjokroaminoto, anticommunist SI members saw communism as creating trouble for the unity and strength of the SI party. Not long after, the debate on communism and religion turned into a discussion on *partijdiscipline* (party discipline), suggesting that SI

should separate from the communist-leaning members and leaders. Though the actual break between Red SI and White SI did not happen until 1923, the intense sentiments against and for communism were first triggered by the young Communist Darsono's attack on the SI leader Tjokroaminoto, and aggravated by Comintern's policy on pan-Islamism. Despite that, an effort to build a new system of thinking had been started by *SH/Api* editors by introducing a new culture of criticism and debate.

Public Reading as Political Participation

Although *Sinar Hindia* was initiated by an educated segment of both priyayi and kromo classes, it was by no means only distributed among the educated Indonesians. Given that by 1920 only between 4% and 12% of indigenous men and between 0.1% and 1.8% of indigenous women in Java could read and write (Cribb, 2000), how did *SH/Api* manage to play an important role in a popular movement? The key was in the practices of public reading. *SH/Api* was not primarily consumed in private, but rather in public events such as *openbare vergaderingen* (public meetings). Public reading, however, was not the invention of the early communist movement, but rather a common practice at the time.



Figure 3. Public reading.

This photo, taken from Balai Pustaka's propaganda book, shows a schoolboy reading to his parents and neighbors.

Source: Bureau voor de Volkslectuur, 1929, p. 26.

However, it was during the time of the early communist movement that public reading developed into a form of political participation, integrated with political meetings (*vergaderingen*) held by the parties

and communist-affiliated unions. It was not uncommon for a meeting to require its attendees to bring a particular issue of a newspaper. The meeting's agenda would be to discuss an article in the paper deemed relevant for the attendees.

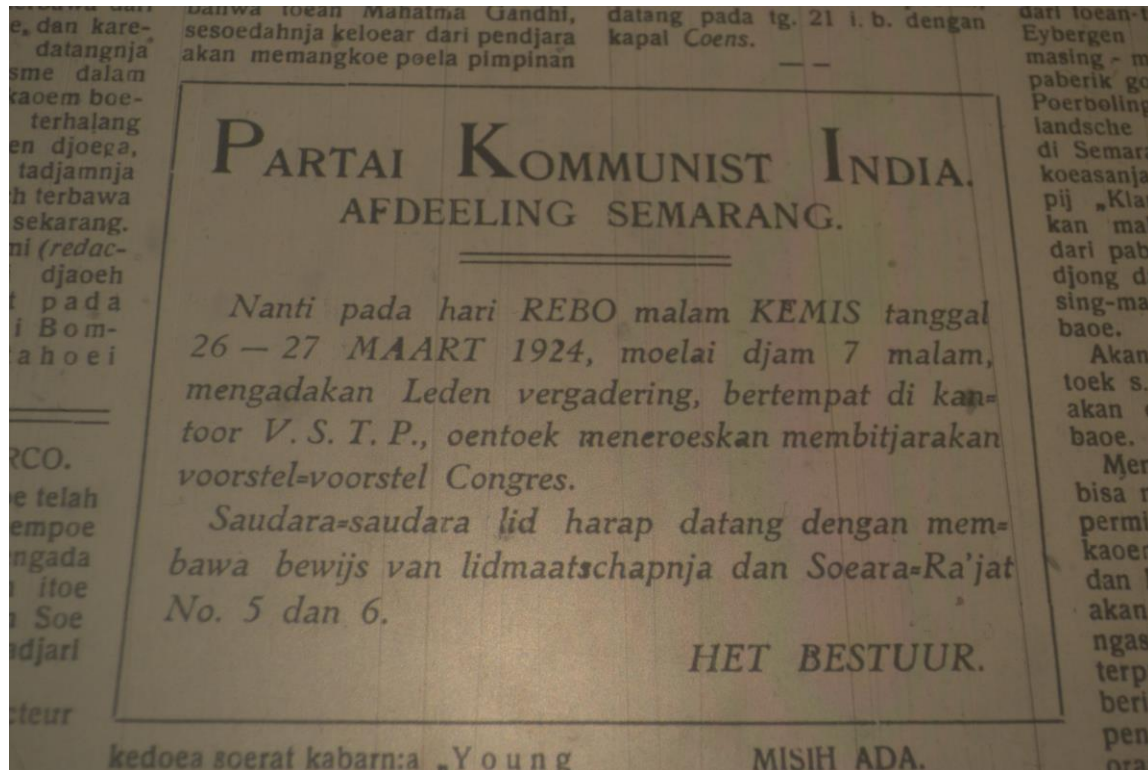


Figure 4. A sample invitation to a meeting.

"On Wednesday March, 26–27 1924, starting at 7 PM, a leden vergadering [member gathering] will be held in V.S.T.P. office to discuss recent Congress motions. All members should bring their membership card and Soeara-Ra'jat newspaper number 5 and 6."

Source: *Sinar Hindia*, March 24, 1924, n.pag.

The synergy between verbal and written cultures explains the relation between the movement's media and nonmedia communicative networks. In this case, newspapers supplied information to be discussed in the vergaderingen—nonmedia communicative networks—and in return, these interpersonal communication networks supplied new material to be reported and debated in the newspapers, making both the media and interpersonal communications constitutive and indispensable parts of the movement.

Indeed, openbare vergaderingen were one of the central communicative means of the movement, both political and educational. In these meetings, newspapers were usually read aloud to the attendees. News was reported, opinion articles were discussed and debated, and political actions such as strikes, donations, and protests were organized. Toer (1985) argues that the early native vernacular newspapers played a role in shaping political opinions. In this period, instead, newspapers took the role of

organizing the people and facilitating them for collective actions, achieved partly through the public reading.

One might expect that the public reading led to the homogenization of interpretation among the followers of the movement. However, with the culture of debate integrated to the tradition of public reading and public meetings, this tradition offered new possibilities for political participation and democratization of ideas.

The New From the Old

When the newspaper *Sinar Djawa* was founded at the end of 1913 (before it was changed to *Sinar Hindia* in 1918), it was purchased from a Chinese firm, Hoang Thaij and Co. At the time, the prime objectives of *Sinar Djawa* were still for commerce and trade (Adam, 1995); thus, aside from subscriptions, advertisements were still the main source of revenue for its operation. When *Sinar Djawa* became *Sinar Hindia*, however, the editors sought to change the production system by changing its financial sources.⁷

SH/Api was among the first newspapers in the Indies to strongly criticize capitalist encroachment in newspaper production, which it claimed compromised the quality of reporting ("Journalistiek Indonesia," 1925). In an article on the cost of subscription, the editors explained that they were against the support of big capitalists who "sucked the sweat and the energy of the workers in the Indies" (Administrasi dagblad Api Semarang, 1925, n.pag.). As "a weapon of workers who are weak and oppressed" (Administrasi dagblad Api Semarang, 1925, n.pag.), instead, they invited the kromo people to advertise their business in *SH/Api*. Accordingly, they asked the readers to support these advertisers by buying goods and services from those merchants who advertised in *SH/Api*. "By so doing, *Ra'jat* [lower-class people] could strengthen their business and organ!" (Administrasi dagblad Api Semarang, 1925, n.pag.). *SH/Api*'s attitude against capitalist commerce and trade consolidated when, on May 16, 1924, Sarekat Rajat (People's Union) of Semarang bought off the printing company N.V. Sinar Djawa at 3,200 guilders² (Directie Api, 1925). The production of *SH/Api* was then solely in the hands of this radical party. The criticism against capitalist newspapers uncovered a new concept among the producers: that it was important to continue the support for the businesses of lower-class people while fighting the domination of the colonial government and more powerful capitalist industries.

However, because advertising from lower-class business could not generate much income, *SH/Api* relied on subscriptions not only as its main source of income but also to expand its readership. There was no complete annual report on the exact number of subscribers over the years, but at the end of 1924, *Api* reported that it earned a total of 36,999 guilders, of which 26,438 guilders came from subscriptions and 5,004.93 guilders from advertisements. Based on that year's subscription yield divided by the price of a single copy at 0.10 guilders and a monthly subscription cost at 1.70 guilders (Directie Api, 1925), there were about 1,101 to 1,295 subscribers that year. This shows an increase in subscribers from 720 people in 1918 to 1,126 people a year later (Redactie, 1919). Toer (1985) notes that normally a

⁷ Although both used the word *light* in their names, the practices of the enlightenment project were purposefully adopted only during the time of *SH/Api*.

newspaper during the period would be considered popular if it reached 2,000 subscriptions; however, despite the seemingly lower subscription, newspapers that were tied to "The Sarikat-Islam . . . are the best known" (Zwemer, 1923, p. 41). How? *SH/Api*'s large readership can be detected not from the number of subscriptions, but from the distribution mechanism that helped spread the newspapers. As the paper repeatedly announced, there were five duties of *SH/Api* subscribers ("5 Kewadajiban bagi abonne Api," 1926):

1. After reading, pass API on to those who could not afford subscriptions.
2. Send articles on events based on facts to the editorial staff.
3. Help find new subscribers.
4. Help find new advertising clients.
5. Pay subscription cost ON TIME!

The first "duty" itself ensured that the number of actual readers was much higher than the number of subscribers. Further, the number of people familiar with the newspaper and its content would increase even more as the newspapers were often read aloud to groups in public meetings. In addition, just like the propagandists in the movement, the subscribers were also responsible for helping find new subscribers and new advertising clients, so the expansion of the readership would eventually expand the movement itself.

Enlightenment as a Practice of Contention

The revolutionary press, emerging out of the tradition of the vernacular press, took a different role in the anticolonial struggle in the Dutch East Indies. Instead of merely creating "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991), the revolutionary newspapers became the handmaiden of "organized communities," alternative kromo public spheres that constituted countercultures whose voices otherwise remained absent in colonial Indonesia. The revolutionary energy exemplified through the activities of revolutionary press, however, was not limited to national struggles against colonialism. More important, it was dedicated to producing enlightenment practices and ideas. As a part of the movement, journalistic roles were redefined, ethical journalistic practices and cultures of criticism and debate were promoted, and public reading was adopted as a form of political participation. Likewise, public debate, conversation, and criticism took place within the movement, placing openness and publicity on the agenda as important features for which to struggle. Literacy in turn became an area of struggle through which political solidarity was diffused. The movement's vision of a future society free from colonial rule was embodied within these practices. This vibrant, spontaneous, and voluntary energy resulted in bottom-up, inclusive, and democratic networks of political parties and unions that constituted the "age in motion."

To think of an enlightenment project as a project of anticolonial struggle carries with it at least two important implications. First, it promotes the idea of literacy, education, and the public sphere as themselves forms of "popular contention" (Tilly, 1995). This is different than if they were to be held by official institutions of democracy, such as the state, which often placed them within national interests. Second, by understanding it within the context of the movement's anticolonial struggle against Dutch rule, the project of enlightenment mobilized within and by the movement cannot be read as merely a product of

the West; rather, it is the product of a complex amalgamation of tactics and inspirations coming from other movements across the globe. This is apparent, for example, in the communist language the movement adopted, the print technology it used, and the global political discourses within which it situated its own struggle. In other words, enlightenment itself is a product of struggle.

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