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Leonardus Aditya Krishadi and Andrean Ferry Wijanarko

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Epistemicide in The Indonesian Food Estate Project in a Critical Approach of Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Leonardus Aditya Krisnadi^{1,*}, and Andrean Ferry Wijanarko²

¹ Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, 16424

² Faculty of Philosophy, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Sleman, 55281

*e-mail: leonardusbonavent@gmail.com

Abstract

Food is one of the basic human needs that must be met. Historically, food security has become a dominant topic in the public policies of various countries. Food security is defined as the availability of food and the ability of individuals to afford adequate foodstuffs. To achieve food security, it is necessary to develop a modern food production system, hence, the Indonesian government started a food estate program to achieve national food security. The food estate project is projected to convert potential land into agricultural land which will create food availability for the community. However, the food estate project has not been able to fulfil the promised yields. The food estate project ignores the participation of the local community which has long had a traditional food production system. The development of a food estate project that ignores the role of the community ultimately displaces local wisdom and replaces it with a modern food production system. The development of food estate projects that trigger deforestation and rely on monoculture farming also hurts land fertility; this approach is contrary to local wisdom which prioritises sustainability principles. This condition can result in epistemicide, the systematic murder of local knowledge which will have an impact on local community livelihood. This situation will result in the food estate project perpetuating a food production system dominated by Western knowledge and eliminating the local community's sustainable food production system. Thus, epistemicide in a food estate project will create a situation where food availability and food affordability cannot be achieved. This research describes how epistemicide appears in Indonesian food estate projects. This research is philosophical research on actual problems that aims to present criticism of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' epistemicide theory for Indonesian food estate projects.

Keywords

food security, food estate, sustainability, epistemicide

1 Introduction

Food is a basic human need that must be met to ensure survival. Any disruption to meeting food needs can threaten the life of a nation. Thus, efforts to ensure the stability of food production and management systems must be a priority in government policy. The Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as being supported by several pillars, namely: food availability, adequate community access to food, optimal use of food, stability of the food system, good food management capabilities, and implementation of sustainability principles in the food system (FAO, 2021, p. 190). This definition is a benchmark for achieving food security in a country. This challenge is not only faced by Indonesia, but by all nations. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is now struggling to achieve food security amidst the Russia-Ukraine war which is disrupting global food and energy production (FAO, 2023, p. 5). This presents a serious challenge for fulfilling food security today.

To fulfill national food security, the Indonesian Government uses the definition of food self-sufficiency as a political commitment (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 345). The concept of food self-sufficiency is realised in policy efforts that encourage Indonesians to achieve food self-sufficiency. However, challenges arise when the concept of self-sufficiency is faced with efforts to increase agricultural production to meet market demand (MacRae & Reuter, Lumbung Nation, 2020, p. 341). The contradictions faced in the food self-sufficiency narrative justify the implementation of the food estate policy, where the Indonesian Government seeks to increase food production to meet national food needs and meet market demand.

Increasing food production is seen as the right solution and brings benefits to national food conditions (Otsuka, 2021, p. 324). In the application of food estate, rice is still the *prima donna* commodity. The Indonesian nation's dependence on rice has given rise to a populist narrative that believes that an agrarian nation should not depend on rice imports (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 238). Dependence on rice commodities is a problem that shows Indonesia's food vulnerability (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 344).

In the *La Via Campesina* declaration, food is a basic human right that must be fulfilled (Via Campesina, 1996). This declaration focuses on human rights and farmers' rights (Via Campesina, 1996). Fulfilling the right-to-food concept is not appropriate if it is realised through a large-scale food production approach that displaces local food production systems (Siborutorop, 2023, p. 93). In Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theory of epistemicide, epistemicide is interpreted as the killing of knowledge (Santos, 2016, p. 92). The killing of knowledge is carried out by dominant epistemology which views only one approach and eliminates other alternative epistemologies. Epistemicide arises in the name of progress that erases the knowledge of weak groups (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 11). The application of food estates that ignore food diversity and the wealth of local knowledge is a form of modern epistemicide. This research aims to dissect the problem of epistemicide contained in the Indonesian food estate project.

2 Food Estate Project in Indonesia

2.1 Rationale for Food Estate

The challenge facing Indonesia is that there are still around 22.9 million people who are unable to meet their nutritional needs (World Food Programme, 2023). The Indonesian government, under the leadership of President Joko Widodo, developed a project called Food Estate in an effort to achieve food security. The initial urgent situation at that time was the Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted the stability of national food security (Basundoro & Sulaeman, 2020, p. 29). The argument for food security during the pandemic is the driving force that encourages the government to immediately develop food estates in various places (Basundoro & Sulaeman, 2020, p. 33). Food estates are projected to encourage food security and increase economic growth at the local and national levels (Basundoro & Sulaeman, 2020, p. 37). A similar project was carried out during the leadership of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, namely the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate project. This project is expected to encourage food security and boost the economy (Ito, Rachman, & Savitri, 2014, p. 37). Various government efforts across periods have shown efforts to secure national food security. Government officials often use narratives of food self-sufficiency, food sovereignty, and food security as an effort to support large-scale agricultural programs (Otsuka, 2021, p. 324).

Food estates are seen as an effort to escape the dependence on rice imports that have been carried out so far. There is an assumption that the Indonesian nation is considered to have failed as an agricultural nation if it still depends on rice imports. Dependence on rice imports is proof of the vulnerability of Indonesia's food security (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 344). This vulnerability will be further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Rozaki, 2020, p. 248). Large-scale social restriction policies disrupt the national food system chain, this will result in the danger of national food insecurity (FAO, 2021, p. 57). Food security, food self-sufficiency, and food sovereignty are concepts that dominate government food policy (Nugraha, Hestiawan, & Supyandi, 2016, p. 185). The influence of the New Order policy which prioritised self-sufficiency as a pillar of national development, triggered the emergence of a paradigm of the importance of a supply oriented approach as an effort to achieve national food stability (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 237). A supply oriented approach demands the development of the agricultural industry so that national demand can be met; therefore, the development of a large-scale agricultural industry is necessary (Otsuka, 2021, p. 328).

The issue of food security and self-sufficiency has also become a populist issue that has an impact on the country's prestige (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 344). Importing food is seen as insulting to the Indonesian people, who are an 'agrarian nation' (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 238). To make food affordable and achieve national prestige, the policies implemented by the government are focused on large-scale initiatives such as the food estate program (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 345). The food estate program is seen as ineffective as a solution due to the limited workforce which is exacerbated by the decline in farmer regeneration in Indonesia (Otsuka, 2021, p. 329). Another criticism of food estates is that this policy only empowers a few industry actors who have a certain agenda (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 352).

Another argument supports the existence of policies that prioritise the production and promotion of superior products, rather than food estate policies (Otsuka, 2021, p. 329). Further development in the production and promotion of superior products is also influenced by the growing involvement of farmers as suppliers of agricultural products in the retail industry (Toiba, Nugroho, Retnoningsih, & Rahman, 2020, p. 16). One of the superior products that is considered worthy of development to improve the economic capacity of farmers is oil palm (Otsuka, 2021, p. 333). This approach has been criticised because it encourages land conversion from rice fields to palm oil plantations, which triggers a decline in rice production (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 240).

Criticism of government policies centres on the absence of policies that are pro-weak economic communities (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 351). This is characterised by weak enforcement of regulations related to agricultural land transfer (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 240). Criticism of this government policy shows that there are internal problems that cause the emergence of conflicting policies (Vel, McCarthy, & Zen, 2016, p. 245). The approach taken by the government still prioritises a supply oriented approach; this approach was the object of criticism in the Via Campesiana Declaration which demanded policy reform towards food sovereignty that still pays attention to the principles of sustainability and justice (Via Campesina, 1996).

Indonesia's dependence on rice commodities has encouraged an increase in rice production which requires increasingly large resources (Caruso, Petrarca, & Ricciuti, 2016, p. 69-70). This problem triggered the implementation of the Green Revolution which brought packages of superior seeds, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides to encourage increased crop production in a short time (MacRae, 2011, p. 72). The technology brought about in the Green Revolution achieved food self-sufficiency in the 1980s, but this changed after 1990 when the ecological impacts of the Green Revolution began to be felt for farmers (MacRae, 2011, p. 72-73). Ecological impacts due to human activities ultimately reduce the quality of life of local communities (Rudianto & Bintoro, 2019, p. 1).

Efforts to implement political policies that prioritise supply encourage large-scale environmental transformations in food estate programs. This approach causes food estates to be justified by the government as the right solution. In implementing food estates, the government encourages the use of peatlands in Central Kalimantan which are considered to have potential (Marwanto & Pangestu, 2021, p. 9). Nevertheless, the development of peatlands as food estates has a history of failure that cannot be ignored (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 352). In its report, Greenpeace emphasised that food estates are not the right medicine for Indonesia's food problems. The tendency to use large-scale industry as a solution is considered to trigger more serious problems (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 18).

2.2 Food Estate Impact on Local Community

The Indonesian government has shown good intentions when trying to address the issue of food insecurity in Indonesia, but the food estate policy has the potential to exacerbate the issue of food insecurity (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 26). This is demonstrated by the dangers arising from deforestation and large-scale land conversion. The difficulty faced by food estate projects is the lack of proper understanding regarding the cultural characteristics of the local community. There are several reasons why food estates in Indonesia have failed during various periods of leadership, namely (Rasman, Theresia, & Aginda, 2023, p. 55-56):

- a. The problem of food distribution not running well means the food industry is not running effectively
- b. The high price of healthy food causes access to healthy food to be limited
- c. Deforestation of forests and peatlands which causes large-scale carbon releases
- d. The leading commodities in the food estate are dominated by Java-centric foods such as rice, corn, and tubers
- e. Lack of technology that can accurately predict climate
- f. There is no special institution to empower farmers
- g. Food estate funding sources that use the APBN.

The failure experienced by the food estate project shows that the government is choosing to ignore the lessons learned from previous failures (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 27). This failure was repeated by ignoring the local wisdom of the people who were close to their land. In the case of Papua, local communities experienced a crisis when they could no longer depend on forests due to the impact of deforestation (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 38). The case in Papua caused local people to finally be forced to switch to rice and instant food to meet their nutritional needs. This food transition triggered public health problems (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 38). Papuan people experience gastrocolonialism which forces them to turn to food

sources that are foreign to them (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 39). This condition shows that food estates do not empower local communities and instead create unhealthy dependency.

Efforts to modernize agriculture based on development ideology create farmers' dependence on technology which destroys nature and displaces traditional agricultural patterns (MacRae, 2011, p. 72). Even though the Green Revolution in Indonesia failed to develop agriculture according to targets (MacRae, 2011, p. 73), there is still a view of development ideology in support for developing agriculture by building large-scale (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 345) food estates as an effort to increase national agricultural production. The condition of peatlands in Indonesia, which has experienced degradation since the New Order era food estate project, has had an impact on the Dayak community (Izzati, Gustiawati, & Saputra, 2023, p. 72). Efforts to develop the modern agricultural industry through the construction of food estates are facing the Dayak community who are affected by the expansion of food estates in Kalimantan (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 346). The development of a food estate that prioritises modernisation and a monoculture agricultural system (McCarthy & Obidzinski, 2017, p. 345-346) is the antithesis of sustainable agriculture, which has been supported by the Dayak community for a long time (Murhaini & Achmadi, 2021, p. 6).

The community around the food estate project feels the economic, health, and social impacts. The food estate project, which was intended to create food security, exacerbated food insecurity for the affected local communities. Lack of proper planning and failure to understand the root causes of the national food situation are the reasons why food estates cannot be a miracle cure. The food estate project ignores the participation of local communities who have local wisdom in sustainable food management (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 98). By ignoring local communities, food estates endanger the future of the community and the future of the environment. Imprudent management triggers a food crisis that endangers food security (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 98). This encourages critical reflection efforts to reconsider food estates as an approach to fulfilling national resilience.

3 Boaventura de Sousa Santos' Epistemicide Approach

3.1 Murder of Knowledge

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theory of epistemicide is aimed at criticizing the hegemony of Western epistemology over non-Western epistemology. Epistemicide is realised from the understanding of the superiority of Western epistemology which devalues non-Western epistemology (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 8). Santos uses the term Global North to refer to Western epistemologies and Global South to non-Western epistemologies (Santos, 2016, p. 19). This dichotomy is intended to show that epistemological hegemony is the result of colonialism and imperialism. To realise hegemony, killing Global South knowledge is an unavoidable necessity. The process of killing the epistemology of the Global South will result in the death of the knowledge of subordinate groups and will further result in the death of subordinate communities (Santos, 2016, p. 92). Santos states that epistemicide is a prerequisite for genocide (Santos, 2016, p. 92). With the death of Global South knowledge, there is only one superior epistemology that cannot be competed with, namely the Global North epistemology. This condition paved the way for the dominance of modernisation theory in the third world.

Epistemicide cannot be separated from modernisation theory because modernisation theory relies on an evolutionary view that is gradually leading to a world order dominated by capitalism (Abdoellah & Mulyanto, 2019, p. 22). Modernisation, which is embodied in development ideology, requires people to abandon traditional culture. Global South epistemology which is considered obsolete, must be killed to open space for the entry of Global North epistemology which brings modernity. The mindset of traditional society must be changed to become a modern society (Abdoellah & Mulyanto, 2019, p. 23). In the name of progress, local wisdom must be eradicated so that society can become more civilised (Abdoellah & Mulyanto, 2019, p. 25). The approach to community economic development offered by Walt Whitman Rostow is a form of epistemicide approach which reduces the wealth of local community wisdom to limited to primitive economic patterns (Abdoellah & Mulyanto, 2019, p. 41).

Epistemicide becomes a form of oppression and epistemic injustice (Patin, Sebastian, Yeon, Bertolini, & Grimm, 2021, p. 2). The killing of knowledge carried out in epistemicide will create the hegemony of Global North epistemology as the sole truth. Santos calls this condition a form of epistemological privilege (Santos, 2016, p. 152). The epistemological privilege possessed by Global North epistemology must be maintained by destroying alternative knowledge that has the potential to question the superiority of Global North

epistemology (Santos, 2016, p. 153). This position shows that epistemicide is used as an attempt to kill knowledge which silences the potential for new knowledge. In the end, epistemicide kills Global North epistemology because it closes itself to new perspectives and places Global North epistemology in an ivory tower. Santos views the failure of Global North epistemology because of unequal power relations resulting from colonialism and imperialism (Santos, 2016, p. 19). As a result of epistemicide, the epistemological hegemony of the Global North remains unchallenged and still dominates various aspects of life.

Although the epistemological hegemony of the Global North has been criticised, there is still no alternative strong enough to overcome this dominance (Santos, 2016, p. 20). Even in an era where there were no direct practices of colonialism and imperialism, traces of the hegemonic epistemology of the Global North are still felt strongly today (Santos, 2016, p. 21). These traces are visible in the reductionist logic that reduces the wealth of local wisdom to limited traditional beliefs that inhibit it. Efforts to devalue and rewrite local wisdom by Global North epistemologies mean that third-world people no longer have authority over their own experiences (Patin, Sebastian, Yeon, Bertolini, & Grimm, 2021, p. 2). Epistemicide will uproot people from culture and ultimately destroy their lives (Patin, Sebastian, Yeon, Bertolini, & Grimm, 2021, p. 6-7). The dominance of the Global North epistemology results in a gap between theory and practice. This gap arises from the lack of efforts by Global North academics to comprehensively explore the Global South (Santos, 2016, p. 34). Failure of theory results in failure to understand practice, and practice that is not explained by theory becomes practice that is not recognised. This shows a gap in understanding due to epistemicide (Santos, 2016, p. 40). The epistemological privilege possessed by the Global North has silenced the epistemology of subordinate groups (Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2008, p. xix). So, the presence of alternative epistemologies is an urgent need to be able to display the richness and diversity of non-Western epistemologies (Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2008, p. xx). Only by encouraging respect for the diversity of Global South epistemologies will the dichotomy of West and non-West finally be replaced by the emergence of a truly whole and just epistemology (Santos, 2018, p. 2).

3.2 Epistemicide in The Indonesian Food Estate Project

Food sovereignty is the right of every nation to manage and develop food production capacity by paying attention to diversity and respect for culture (Via Campesina, 1996). The Via Campesina Declaration is an argument supporting the development of local wisdom as an alternative approach to address the problem of food security. The diversity of local wisdom in Indonesia demonstrates a policy approach that prioritises localities. Nationally, Indonesia has the concept of the granary as a local wisdom that prioritises food stability; the granary is a metaphor for food security (MacRae & Reuter, 2020, p. 345). Lumbung in its development depends on the availability of nine basic commodities: rice, sugar, vegetables and fruit, animal protein, cooking oil, eggs, kerosene, and salt. The availability of nine basic commodities is a central topic of national food security (MacRae & Reuter, 2020, p. 345-346).

The barn concept is a concept that cannot be separated from the view of national food security, where food security is achieved through food availability and distribution of harvest surpluses (MacRae & Reuter, 2020, p. 347). The barn concept emphasises the importance of a good storage system to maintain food stability, especially during pandemics and disasters (MacRae & Reuter, 2020, p. 347). Lumbung is a representation of hopes for national food security that is fulfilled by the principles of sustainability. The barn concept is different from a food estate which prioritises meeting resilience through a large-scale agricultural industry. From the start, food estates were not designed to consider small farmers, so local wisdom was also not considered in food estates (Siborutorop, 2023, p. 99). The Indonesian government does not seem to agree on the definition of food sovereignty raised by Via Campesina, this can be seen through the food estate policy.

In food estate projects, a supply oriented approach encourages the creation of large-scale agricultural industries that require deforestation. Even in the case of Papua, it also demands a shift in food sources for local communities (Greenpeace, 2022, p. 39). By using Boaventura de Sousa Santos' epistemicide theory approach, traces of epistemicide can be found in food estate projects in Indonesia. The dominance of the supply-oriented approach shows the influence of a development ideology that reduces and exploits nature in the name of progress. The projected profits promised in food estates are considered sufficient to justify deforestation in various regions of Indonesia. This projection seems to overlook the impact on the environment.

Ignoring local wisdom in food estate projects is a form of eviction and killing of local knowledge. Local wisdom that uses sustainability principles is devalued and considered outdated knowledge that hinders progress over time. The sacredness of the forest, which is embodied in the principle of conservation, is

reduced to the mysticism of society. Food estates that prioritise modern agricultural science have displaced the knowledge of local communities that have relied on agricultural products for hundreds of years. In the end, when the food estate project fails, local communities suffer because they can no longer depend on damaged forests. The tendency of food estate projects to repeat the same mistakes results in people slowly abandoning local wisdom and being forced to live by modern knowledge that is foreign to them. This condition results in the destruction of people's lives and the death of their local wisdom.

4 Conclusion

In summary, food estate policy in Indonesia has an epistemicide spirit that has proven successful in destroying local community wisdom. In the name of development, food estate projects are displacing people's cultural identity. In the name of progress, food estate projects have destroyed local knowledge and replaced it with modern knowledge. Food estate projects strip local communities of cultural identity and throw them into the trap of modernity. Food estate projects ultimately kill communities when the project fails, and communities that have lost their land and identity are left to survive without their local wisdom. This shows that food estates are not successful in realising food security but put indigenous communities at risk of food insecurity. The epistemicide in the food estate project resulted in the killing of indigenous people who had lost their knowledge.

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