

# Book Review: Genre Publics: Popular Music, Technologies, and Class in Indonesia by Emma Baulch

*In Genre Publics: Popular Music, Technologies, and Class in Indonesia, Emma Baulch explores the interconnections between the Indonesian public sphere and popular music. This is a rich contribution to the theorisation of genre publics, examining the varied socio-cultural dynamics of popular music and its role in constituting the public sphere in Indonesia, writes Rituparna Patgiri.*

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**Genre Publics: Popular Music, Technologies, and Class in Indonesia. Emma Baulch. Wesleyan University Press. 2021.**

In recent years, a lot of social science scholarship has been devoted to understanding the soft power of [Hallyu – South Korea’s cultural wave](#). However, not much is known about cultural trends in other parts of Asia. Hence, Emma Baulch’s book, [Genre Publics: Popular Music, Technologies, and Class in Indonesia](#), published by Wesleyan University Press in 2020, is a timely intervention. It explores the interconnections between the Indonesian public sphere and popular music. Academic interest in popular music is historical, with one of the twentieth century’s most famous thinkers – Theodor Adorno – publishing an essay titled ‘[On Popular Music](#)’ in 1941. Baulch’s book is yet another attempt at exploring the varied socio-cultural dynamics of popular music and its role in constituting the public sphere in Indonesia.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part on technological paradigms explores the changes and continuities in the constitution and articulation of genre publics between 1965-2005. The second part looks at how middle-classness is built and understood in a globalised and deregulated world. The third and final section pursues patterns of organisational life that emerge in the context of the new technological paradigms. It is both theoretically and empirically rich, with all three sections containing case studies of different popular music bands and magazines and other forms of media.

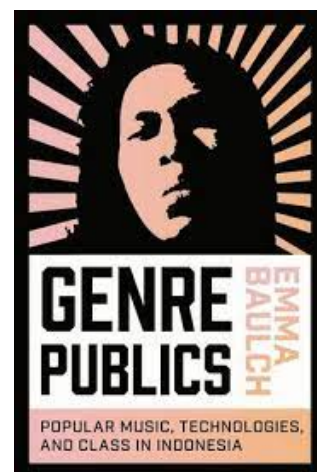




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With globalisation, new local centres have emerged in Indonesia, which have facilitated the growth of pop music. Baulch interrogates the way local pop music is produced in this global context. Claims of authenticity in music are raised, with pre-existing genres classified by their association with a village-metropolis (*kampungan/gedongan*) dichotomy (3). Genres that use 'Indian' elements are categorised as *kampungan/Melayu*, and those that use 'Western' elements are classified as *gedongan/Indonesian*. The music genre publics are thus classified and also subsequently ranked. The genres using 'Indian' elements are ranked lower than those using 'Western' ones. The role of the print media is particularly significant in how *gedongan* has been portrayed in opposition to *kampungan*. *Gedongan* has been seen as the more 'refined' genre of music.

As such, it becomes important to also understand who listens to which form of music. While the urban middle class prefers to listen to the *gedongan* genre, the rural public prefers *kampungan*. This clearly indicates how ideas of taste themselves are social location-based (class, caste, race, gender, ethnicity, etc), as French sociologist [Pierre Bourdieu](#) argued. Thus, genres of popular music become useful in highlighting the class relations that exist in Indonesian society.

The Indonesian middle classes have been heavily dependent on the state. But the pop music magazine *Aktuil*, through its content, made these classes feel that they were a part of the public sphere. By reading about rock music, they were made to feel like they belonged to the changing globalised world (46). *Aktuil* also addressed readers through glittering images and advertisements. A new kind of 'consumer citizenship' was created, which enabled the articulation of an 'ideal democratic personhood' (49) to its large readership. Thus, the story of popular music is also a story of changing class and democratic relations in Indonesia, as captured by these lines from the book: 'As well as providing a link to an imagined community of readers, *Aktuil* furnished youth with sartorial equipment that gave them a sense of power over public space' (47).

The book also explores another dimension of pop music and its relationship to the public sphere – the impact of technological advancements. Media deregulation and digitalisation have meant that the range of technologies that can mediate pop music has significantly advanced (7). Television in this context has emerged as a powerful form of media that has been able to increase the popularity of popular music. In fact, it became an alternate way in which *kampungan* was reinvented by the masses as a counter-public.

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There is also integration/intersection between forms of media. For instance, the fans of the popular provincial boy band Kangen initially came together through CDs that were informally circulated and then became mediated televisionally. The Kangen band was seen as representing poor people who played their own versions of pop music, often considered to be technically incorrect. Although it was ranked lower than *gedongan* in terms of genres, *kampung* offered the poor a chance to participate in the consumer economy.

Media plays a key role in shaping modes of social organisation and citizenship. New communicative practices were ushered in by changing digital technologies. There was a 'boom' of local musical forms that can be generally categorised as *kampung* spearheaded by the growth of private television and the recording industry. The media plays a critical role in decentralising and diversifying the existing public sphere. Baulch writes that: 'The valorisation of *kampung* evident in the pop Melayu case arises not from the political empowerment of the masses, but from a new technological landscape that visibilized the lower classes in new ways' (79).

This understanding of *kampung/gedongan* is thus also a study of genres. Genres have social and public meanings, as exemplified by this study of popular music in Indonesia. While I feel that the book could have been simpler language-wise, which would have increased its appeal, it is a rich contribution to the field of theorisations of genre publics. It is also an interesting exploration of the concept of the public sphere as the author has richly engaged with various theories of the public.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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