PART ONE

CLASS

BETTING ON THE MIDDLE? MIDDLETOWN, MOJOKUTO AND 'MIDDLE INDONESIA'

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Intermediate Towns and Intermediate Classes

As explained in the introduction, the various chapters in this book are based on a research project that set out to study 'intermediate classes' in Indonesia's 'intermediate towns'. The project's name 'Middle Indonesia' echoes the decision of Clifford Geertz and his colleagues in the MIT Indonesia research project, almost 60 years ago, to call the middle-sized town in and around which their research was located 'Mojokuto', which means in Javanese literally 'middle town'. This in turn was a clear reference to the well-known studies in the 1920s and 1930s by Robert and Helen Lynd and their research team of Muncie, Indiana, a middle-sized town in the United States that they called 'Middletown'. These 'middle town' studies attracted much attention and generated much debate. The second key aspect of our research project – 'intermediate classes' in these 'middle towns' – has its roots in a pioneering essay by the Polish economist Michał Kalecki (Kalecki 1972b) on intermediate classes and intermediate regimes, originally written in the 1960s and based on his observations in the 1950s in India, Egypt and particularly Indonesia, and a more recent debate on the significance, survival and developmental role of intermediate classes in India (Harriss-White 2003).

This short chapter reflects on some of the antecedents and implications of this focus on the 'intermediate'. What are the implications of this attention to the economic, social and political 'middle'? What do we in fact study when we study intermediate towns? Do we think that we can find in them a microcosm of the larger society? Should we be (and have we been) studying these towns, or have we rather been studying other things *in* these towns – in other words, is 'middle Indonesia' the object, or the locus of our study? And what are the implications of a focus on the 'intermediate' social classes in these 'middle' towns, rather than their elites, their working classes or the destitute? These questions are in fact part of a broader debate in the social sciences on the advantages and

disadvantages of a focus on the 'middle' rather than the upper and lower 'extremes' of societies.

In the social sciences there is a long-standing tension between two traditions of studying social processes and social change. One sees the 'soul' of a society or community, and the source of its dynamics, in its intermediate, modal or 'middle' components, while the other locates these more in the extreme 'upper' and 'lower' economic or social groups or classes (wealthy/poor, elite/mass) and especially the dynamics of their relationships with each other. The first is associated with the North American sociological tradition, functionalism and neo-populism, while the latter is more associated with political economy, class analysis and Marxism.

The next three sections will further explore this broader tension by looking at two key areas of debate. First, we will touch briefly on the debates between two main traditions in the study of agrarian change, originating in continental Europe but also reflected in Indonesian agrarian studies. Then we focus in greater detail on the conceptual divide between two landmark studies of 'middle town' society in the United States, the 'Middletown' and 'Yankee City' studies. We then turn to Indonesia and the 'Mojokuto' studies of the early 1950s, returning finally to some reflections on our own 'middle Indonesia' studies.

Marxists and Neo-Populists

In rural studies the tensions mentioned above are manifested most clearly in the debates between the Leninist and Chayanovian traditions of research on agrarian change in the Russian and northern European countryside. These have continued in studies of Asian, African and Latin American peasantries in process of 'modernization'. What was this all about? Lenin wrote from exile in Siberia in 1896–1899, using statistical data sent from Moscow by his wife. Chayanov was professor of agricultural economics in the more comfortable surroundings of the Timiryazev Academy in Moscow, and wrote mainly in the 1920s. Both based their work on similar sets of pre-Bolshevik local-government (*zemstvo*) statistics on farm size and organization. But they produced diametrically opposing visions of Russian peasant society.

Lenin recognized the existence of a 'middle' group of peasant family farms (which he estimated at about 40% of all farms), but focused his analysis on the two groups on either side of them. These were the capitalist-farmer minority ('probably less than one-fifth' of all households, but

together representing a large part of the rural economy) and their relationship with the landless and near-landless (the 'lower 50%') who provided them with wage labour. He saw the dynamic of change in the relationship between these two extremes. The 'cumulation of advantages and disadvantages' resulted in the emergence of these two groups and produced the 'differentiation of the peasantry'. It was these groups, rather than the 'labour farms' in the middle, which provided the rural home-market for both the agricultural and the industrial products of emerging Russian capitalism. Their relationship was therefore an essential building block in his larger argument that capitalism was already developing in Russia. In Lenin's model of class differentiation, the penetration of a commodity economy 'develops the extreme groups at the expense of the middle peasantry'. This process of 'depeasantization' creates 'new types of rural inhabitants', the well-to-do, labour-hiring farmers at one extreme and the landless (or, more often, near-landless) rural proletariat at the other:

Numerically, the peasant bourgeoisie constitute a small minority of the peasantry, probably not more than one-fifth of the total number of households....But as to their weight in the sum-total of peasant farming, in the total quantity of means of production belonging to the peasantry, in the total amount of produce raised by the peasantry, the peasant bourgeoisie are undoubtedly predominant. They are the masters of the contemporary countryside.

The most typical representative [of the rural proletariat]...is the allotment-holding farm labourer, day labourer, unskilled labourer, building worker or other allotment-holding worker. Insignificant farming on a patch of land, with the farm in a state of utter ruin... inability to exist without the sale of labour power...and extremely low standard of living – such are the distinguishing features of this type. One must assign not less than half of the total peasant households...to membership of the rural proletariat. (Lenin 1960 [1899]:177–8.)

Chayanov, in contrast, focused on the 80% of all households that *were* 'family farms', because he was concerned to show that family farming could be an efficient and viable part of a 'modern' agrarian commodity economy. He acknowledged the existence of emerging capitalist farming on the 'wage labour farms' (which he estimated at around 10% of all farms) and also of the emerging landless proletariat, but ignored them for his purpose, which was to develop a model of the 'labour farm', the peasant family farm:

Simple, everyday observation of life in the countryside shows us elements of 'capitalist exploitation'. We suppose that, on the one hand,

proletarianization of the countryside and, on the other, a certain development of capitalist production forms undoubtedly take place there...[however], as we are concerned with the labour farm the themes we have touched on, despite their exceptionally intense and topical general economic interest, are quite to one side. (Chayanov 1966 [1925]:256–7.)

In Indonesian studies, from the late colonial period to the present, there has been a similar tension between two opposing visions of Indonesian rural society. One, dominant among policy makers, academics and urban elites, has promoted the image of rural society – especially, but not only, in Java – as being made up of egalitarian and homogeneous and classless communities of ‘peasants’ or small farmers, practicing some ill-defined form of ‘subsistence farming’ and to greater or lesser degree insulated from the cash economy. The other underlines the dependence of most rural Indonesians on the cash economy, at least from the early twentieth century, and the importance of processes of social differentiation, pointing to the emergence of agrarian classes, based primarily on access to land, including a substantial landless class in many regions (Hüsken and White 1989:237–47).

An example of the first approach during the late colonial and early independence period is Sukarno’s *marhaenisme*. It was inspired by Sukarno’s chance meeting on a stroll near Cigelereng with Marhaen, the Sundanese ‘chicken-flea peasant’ (*tani sieur*) who owned and operated a small farm but did not employ workers and was poor, but not a member of the proletariat (Soekarno 1975 [1930]:96–7). Another well-known example is Geertz’s influential ideas on ‘agricultural involution’ and ‘shared poverty’ in rural Java, perhaps the only lasting theoretical contribution to Indonesian agrarian studies made by a foreign scholar in this period (Geertz 1963a). The second approach is reflected in the studies on land concentration, tenancy relations and the chronic indebtedness of small peasants, tenants and landless workers in West Java by Anwas Adiwilaga (1954a, 1954b) and Ten Dam (1966), and the Indonesian Peasant Front’s studies of numerous villages in different parts of Indonesia (Slamet-Velsink 1988). Studies of Indonesia’s ‘green revolution’ and its impact on rural societies in the 1970s and 1980s (summarized in B. White 2005) show a similar tension between the two approaches.

The ‘Middletown’ Studies

In urban studies we can see a parallel kind of discussion in the debates on urban class and classlessness in the first half of the twentieth century, this

time originating in small-town studies conducted in the United States; in particular, we are concerned with Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown studies of the 1920s and 1930s in Muncie, Indiana (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 1937) and, some years after that, Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt's 'Yankee City' studies (Warner and Lunt 1941). As already mentioned, the decision of Geertz and his colleagues in the MIT Indonesia project to call their research base 'Mojokuto' is a nod to the Lynds.

Robert and Helen Lynd had no training in the social sciences when they went to Muncie in 1924. In fact, they had been assigned the task of studying the 'spiritual life' of this small Midwestern town for their employers, the Institute of Social and Religious Research, funded by the prominent Baptist John D. Rockefeller Jr. (Gilkesen Jr. 1995). Just like Geertz, whose task in the Mojokuto team was to study Javanese religion, but who ended up writing about all kinds of other topics, the Lynds also deviated from their terms of reference. They wrote only marginally on religion, and mainly about class cleavages in 'Middletown', and indeed, when the focus of their work became clear, they almost could not get their first book published. This is especially interesting because they had gone to Muncie in the sure expectation of finding cultural and social homogeneity, but were converted to a class analysis perspective by what they found there.

In fact, the Lynds' original study was a catalogue of methodological omissions in the search for cultural homogeneity. The town itself was chosen because of its ethnically relatively homogeneous population, although they knew that 'such a population is unusual in an American industrial city' (Lynd and Lynd 1929:9). It had 'a small Negro and foreign-born population'; in the 1920s about 6% of Muncie's population were black, but they were purposely excluded from the survey and only rarely appear in the book. In their second book the Lynds admitted that the racial line dividing Muncie's black minority from its majority white population was in fact 'the deepest and most blindly followed line of division in the community....They are the most marginal population in Middletown' (Lynd and Lynd 1937:463, 465; see also Bahr, Pearson and Elder 2007). Similarly, the town's small Jewish minority appear only three times in 512 pages of the two Middletown books, even though one of these references mentions casually that the Jews 'had come to dominate the retail life of the city' (Lynd and Lynd 1929:484) and another that the Ku Klux Klan, coming into Middletown 'like a tornado' a few years previously, had chosen the town's Catholics, blacks and Jews as its targets (Lynd and Lynd 1929:482–3).

Finally, Muncie's four richest families – the four Ball brothers, who dominated the entire economy and social, cultural and political life of

Muncie – were also purposely excluded from the survey. It was only after the second study of Muncie in 1935 that the authors included a whole chapter on what they called ‘the X family: a pattern of business-class control’. Some of their informants showed their awareness of the dominance of this family in no uncertain terms, as in this man’s comment (in which ‘X’ refers to the Ball family):

If I–m out of work I go to the X plant; if I need money I go to the X bank, and if they don’t like me I don’t get it; my children go to the X college; when I get sick I go to the X hospital; I buy a building lot or a house in an X subdivision; my wife goes downtown to buy clothes at the X department store; if my dog strays away he is put in the X pound; I buy X milk; I drink X beer, vote for X political parties, and get help from X charities; my boy goes to the X YMCA and my girl to their YWCA; I listen to the word of God in X-subsidised churches; if I–m a Mason I go to the X Masonic temple; I read the news from the X morning newspaper; and, if I am rich enough, I travel via the X airport. (Lynd and Lynd 1937:74.)

Surprisingly, then, the Lynds, although having set out to look for ‘the middle’ and, as we have seen, omitting from their study significant minorities at either extreme of the class divide, emerged from their study to promote a strident critique of class stratification in the United States. They argued in both the Middletown books and other publications for the next 30 years that American society was based on unacceptable class divisions.

In their first book they had begun with a simplistic two-class model, declaring that the ‘division into working class and business class’ constituted the ‘outstanding cleavage’ in Muncie (and, by extension, the rest of urban industrial America) (Gilkesen Jr. 1995:334). This division was essentially between the 71% of the workforce who ‘address their activities in getting their living primarily to *things*, utilizing material tools in the making of things and the performance of services’, and the remaining 29% who ‘address their activities predominantly to *people* in the selling or promotion of things, services, and ideas’ (Lynd and Lynd 1929:22–24). This simple distinction (basically between ‘producers’ and ‘non-producers’), as later critics noted, failed to allow for the existence of either a ‘middle class’ (whether defined as professionals or white-collar workers) or an ‘upper class’. Instead, the Lynds lumped together salaried employees, the self-employed, corner grocers and glass manufacturers in the business class (Gilkesen Jr. 1995:334).

The Lynds’ first book, *Middletown: A study in contemporary American culture*, became an unexpected best-seller, going through six printings in its first year. This was one reason behind their decision to go back to

Muncie with a new team in 1935, as Muncie emerged from the Great Depression. In their new study, *Middletown in transition: A study in cultural conflicts*, the Lynds elaborated their class model into what they called a 'nascent class system' consisting of six classes. This book played an important part in giving class analysis more popular currency in the United States. Basically, the old 'business-class' and 'working-class' categories were each divided into three discrete strata. These were:

1. 'a small, self-conscious upper class'
2. the business class: 'established smaller manufacturers, merchants, and professional folk' and better-paid salaried employees
3. 'small white-collar folk' (less economically secure)
4. a small 'aristocracy of local labour'
5. the 'masses of semiskilled and unskilled workers', and
6. irregularly employed 'poor whites' recently migrated from Appalachia (Lynd and Lynd 1937:458–60).

In 1937, in response to the popularity of the Middletown studies, the photographer Margaret Bourke-White was commissioned by *Life* magazine to produce a picture essay on Muncie entitled 'Muncie Ind. is the great U.S. "Middletown"'.¹ To the surprise of many, she followed the Lynds' perspective and produced images that starkly reflected class cleavage:

One showed Muncie's 'most exclusive set' dressed in pink coats riding to hounds at William Ball's farm, while another showed a former Ball steel and iron worker who had been forced to go on the dole after exhausting his indemnity from an industrial accident in which he lost a leg. Two other photos contrasted William Ball's opulent living room with the one-room clapboard shack in 'Shedtown' in which a desperately poor couple from Kentucky raised chickens 'fer eatin'. (Gilkesen Jr. 1995:336.)

Residents of Muncie also read the book and the *Life* magazine article, and did not like either of them. As one said of Bourke-White's photos: 'They show the upper crust and the lower (soaked) crust, but left out the middle filling, which is the most important part of any community' (cited in Gilkesen Jr. 1995:344, note 32).

To some, then, Bourke-White's photos and the Lynds' analysis that had inspired them seemed to have been flawed by their highlighting of Middletown's extremes of wealth and poverty, to the exclusion of its 'middle'.

¹ 'Muncie Ind. is the great U.S. "Middletown"', *Life* 2 (May 1937):15–26.

Lloyd Warner's 'Yankee City'

The Middletown studies were more widely read, but had less influence in shaping conceptions of urban social structure in the United States than W. Lloyd Warner's research in Newbury, Massachusetts between 1930 and 1934. Warner's research, published in the four 'Yankee City' volumes between 1941 and 1947, put forward a completely different picture.

The Yankee City studies were conducted by Harvard University's Committee of Industrial Psychology. Warner and his team had, like the Lynds, looked for an 'intermediate town' to meet their requirements, this time with the following criteria: a population of less than 20,000; a community 'sufficiently autonomous to have a separate life of its own, not a mere satellite of the metropolitan area of a large city'; with on the one hand a population 'predominantly old American' and with an 'uninterrupted tradition back of it', but on the other hand a number of 'old ethnic groups like the Irish and Jews and newer ones like the Greeks and Italians'; and 'near enough to Cambridge so that the research men could go back and forth without difficulty or loss of time' (Warner and Lunt 1941:38–9). 'Old American' here means not 'native' American, but those 'Yankees' who gave the city its pseudonym: 'the stock which is usually thought of as the core of modern America – the group which normally assimilates the other ethnic groups' (Warner and Lunt 1941: 38–9).

Newburyport was a harbour town at the mouth of a large river. Dating from the early seventeenth century, it had a population of 17,000 and about one quarter of its labour force worked in the town's various shoe factories. It was also an important silverware manufacturing centre. It therefore had, like Middletown, a substantial working class. When surveyed in 1933, 46% of the workforce were 'semi-skilled' (mainly factory) workers, and 19% were unemployed (Warner and Lunt 1941:77–8).

Warner and his team of 'fieldmen' (sometimes as many as fifteen) used aerial photography to map the city's neighbourhoods, conducted hundreds of interviews, and constructed a 'social personality card' for almost all of Newburyport's 17,000 inhabitants, excluding only infants (Warner and Lunt 1941:70). Out of these materials Warner claimed to have worked out empirically the existence of six 'stratified social classes' in Newburyport. The notion of economic class was abandoned, and class defined rather vaguely as 'orders of people who are believed to be, and are accordingly ranked by the members of the community, in socially superior and socially inferior positions' (Warner and Lunt 1941:82). No more detailed definition of the concept than this was given in the chapters on concepts and

methods. Critics complained about the vagueness of the procedures followed to arrive at this stratification, and the criteria for distinguishing the 'upper upper', 'lower upper', 'upper middle', 'lower middle', 'upper lower' and 'lower lower' classes are indeed rather unclear. Later they were systematized and published as the methods of 'Evaluated Participation' and the 'Index of Status Characteristics' (Gilkesen Jr. 1995:340).

According to Warner this social class system, however unclearly defined, determined 'the allocation of pleasant and unpleasant tasks among its members as well as the division of spoils' (Warner and Lunt 1941:24). This interpretation represented a shift away from more 'economic' to more 'social' conceptions of class, which 'deflected interest from production, what one did for a living and how much one earned, to social interaction and consumption, whom one associated with and how one spent one's money'. This notion of stratification played down the divisive connotations of social inequality, viewing it in functionalist terms as both an inevitable by-product of a complex division of labour and as a source of integration rather than division and conflict (Gilkesen Jr. 1995:339).

C. Wright Mills, in a devastating critique of the Yankee City project's first volume, argued that Warner had jumbled up the three notions of (economic) class, (social) status and power, 'absorbing these three analytically separable dimensions into the one sponge word "class"', also failing to distinguish 'class' and 'class-awareness', and relying mainly on observations of 'status-awareness': 'It is a double confusion: first, of class with status; and second, of class with status-awareness' (Mills 1942:264–5). Most of the empirical chapters, he claimed, contained 'a maximum of flat, tallying busywork with a minimum of sociological imagination... embarrassingly naked as far as theoretical understanding and explanation are concerned' (Mills 1942:271). Not surprisingly, Mills came down firmly on the side of the Lynds:

Operating with a far less elaborate theory (and no doubt without the 17,000 cards, the dictaphones, and the airplane used by Warner) the Lynds succeeded in presenting a far superior picture of the composition and mechanics of a modern community. The *Middletown* books can't be dodged. (Mills 1942:269.)

Warner's ideas, however, resonated better with the American-educated public's belief that their society was composed of social rather than economic classes, and were much more influential than those of the Lynds among the post-war generation of social scientists.

Mojokuto: Dodging Class

A few years later, Geertz's writings on Mojokuto (then spelled Modjokuto) reflected a model of social grouping much more akin to Lloyd Warner's Yankee City than to the Lynds' Middletown. Geertz and his colleagues in the MIT Indonesia project were originally to do their research together with young staff of Yogyakarta's Gadjah Mada University in the hill town of Wonosobo. But for reasons that are still not entirely clear they abandoned this idea, left their Indonesian counterparts behind in Yogyakarta and settled on the East Javanese market and sub-district town of Pare as their research base. Accounts of this breakdown are divergent. Geertz laid the blame for the breakdown on the Indonesian professors, who apparently insisted that the American and Indonesian students' fieldwork be conducted from the comfort of an old Dutch resort hotel; local officials would summon people from the surrounding countryside to the hotel to be interviewed in groups, in an 'extraordinary reincarnation of the pith-helmet procedures of colonial ethnology' (Geertz 1995:105). But he also recalls that at the time, 'an armed gang of leftist rebels controlled much of the countryside' around Wonosobo (Geertz 1995:106), which helps to explain the Gadjah Mada professors' reluctance to let their young American guests loose there.

The Middletown studies were certainly one of the influences leading Clifford Geertz and his colleagues to call Pare 'Mojokuto' ('middle town') in their publications. It would be interesting to know whose idea this was, and precisely when it was agreed upon by the team, but that would require some work in the Mojokuto project archives. Geertz in later life suggested both that this had not been his idea, and that he did not much like it: "Mojokuto" means "Middletown", a conceit I was dubious of then and have grown no fonder of since' (Geertz 2000:14).

Geertz's work on both urban and rural Indonesia, in the various books that emerged from the Mojokuto project in the 1960s, shows a pronounced tendency to avoid discussion of major social divides by focusing on the middle and on non-class distinctions. There has been extended critique of this aspect of his work on rural Java, with just about all the main arguments in *Agricultural involution* having been proved wrong by subsequent empirical research. Geertz's chronic blindness to class relations and divisions in Javanese society is a good example of what Wertheim in his later years called the 'sociologists' blind spots', or the 'sociology of ignorance' (Wertheim 1984). As Wertheim remarked, Geertz's vision of rural Javanese society mirrored the blindness of colonial and post-colonial elites, whose idea of the harmonious and homogeneous village community was

derived from, and promoted by, the village elite themselves (Wertheim 1975:177–214). There is certainly a striking lack of fit between Geertz's accounts of Javanese homogeneous rural and small-town culture and the many violent, class-based political conflicts in the region both before and after his fieldwork. His general claims in *Agricultural involution* – a book based not on fieldwork but on secondary data – that Javanese society consisted not of 'haves' and 'have nots' but only of *cukupans* and *kekurangans* ('just enoughs' and 'not quite enoughs'; see Geertz 1963a:97), certainly jars oddly with the evidence in his own field study of Mojokuto, which notes landlord households owning up to 20 hectares of irrigated rice fields, about 40 times the average holding (Geertz 1965:21).

There has been less critique of Geertz's work on urban Mojokuto, the place where most of his own field research was concentrated. In the less widely read books *Peddlers and princes* (1963b) and *The social history of an Indonesian town* (1965) one can find many bold statements about the formless, confused state of Mojokuto's social organization, which Geertz (1965:121) describes as 'a social jumble': [Mojokuto's social organization is] 'a social composite, an only partially organized coincidence of separate social structures, the most important of which are the government bureaucracy, the market network, and a somewhat revised version of the village system' (Geertz 1965:27).

Geertz does not talk of social classes at all. Instead, he claimed to have identified the 'ten concrete groups which, in seeming disarray, compose it'. Geertz aligns these groups along a number of 'second order distinctions': 'Javanist (*priyayi*, *abangan*) vs. Islamic (*santri*)'; 'politically responsive (*insaf*) vs. politically unresponsive (*masa bodoa* [sic])'; 'modern (*modèren*) vs. traditional (*kuna* or *kolot*)'; and 'elite (*pemimpin*) vs. mass (*rakyat*)' (Geertz 1965:129–33). This latter distinction 'between the movers and shakers and the moved and shaken on the sub-district level' was 'neither absolute nor absolutely systematic: but it was quite clear' (Geertz 1965:132). Mojokuto's Chinese business and trading minority (like the Jews in the Lynds' Middletown) are left out of this framework.

None of these social distinctions, of course, are necessarily incompatible with distinctions based on economic class, but Geertz, like Lloyd Warner, seems not to have made any attempt to look for these. In all societies, class distinctions intersect with other axes of distinction and identity, but this does not mean we can ignore their existence. You don't find classes unless you look for them, asking such basic questions as 'who owns what, who does what, who gets what, what do they do with it, and what do they do to each other?'.

Where concrete information is given on these down-to-earth matters, the signs of some clear economic distinctions and relationships are quite evident. For example, in the kampung residential pattern 'the whole block is owned by one or two people', usually living in the stone houses facing the street. Behind them are crowded bamboo houses, often owned by their occupants but sometimes rented. Only 11% of Mojokuto residents owned both house and land, 49% owned their house but rented the land it was built on, and 40% owned neither house nor land (Geertz 1965:129–33).

What causes sociological blindness? Here we should look not only to the author's personal politics, but also to the limitations of their analytical framework. In general, Geertz had avoided the trend in the 1970s to place issues of class, power and history more centrally in anthropology, and had stuck to a vision of cultures as systems of locally shared symbols (and associated practices). This blinded him to questions of social differentiation, social conflict, and contestations (B. White 2007:1201).

'Middle Indonesia'

'The to-ing and fro-ing of the class discourse in Indonesia exemplifies the close connection between the social sciences and power' (Farid 2005:189).

What, then, about our approach to the study of 'Middle Indonesia'? First, it should be clear that we have not been studying 'Middle Indonesian' towns as microcosms of anything. Here, unusually, I agree with Geertz:

The notion that one can find the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever summed up and simplified in so-called 'typical' small towns and villages, is palpable nonsense. What one finds in small towns and villages is (alas) small-town or village life. (Geertz 1973:22–3.)

What we have been doing, actually, is to study certain issues and social processes *in* intermediate towns. Geertz again: 'The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods...); they study *in* villages' (Geertz 1973:22–3).

The various studies on 'intermediate classes' referred to above have often been quite unclear and contradictory about what exactly they mean by 'intermediate classes'. Kalecki referred to 'the lower-middle class and rich peasantry' (Kalecki 1972b:162), distinguishing them from 'rural and urban paupers' on the one hand and from 'the upper-middle classes allied with foreign capital and the feudal landowners' (Kalecki 1972b:164–5) on the other. But he also equated the intermediate classes with 'petty bourgeois' (Kalecki 1972b:167), as others have done in later debates on India's

intermediate classes. This term bundles together a loose coalition of the small-scale capitalist class, agrarian and local agribusiness elites, and local state officials, who exercise considerable power at local and regional levels (Harriss-White 2003).

When defined in this way, such classes may be 'intermediate' in the broader national structure, but when seen from below or at the local level, they look more like rural and small-town elites. This raises the question: Are we focusing on the upper crust of the middle (town), or on its 'middle'?

We can of course define intermediate classes in any way we like, depending on our interests and what kind of analytical power we hope to achieve with our definitions. The important thing, however, is that no matter how we define a class, it is impossible to study it in isolation without exploring its relation to other classes. To study a class in isolation, or even in terms of its differences with other classes, is a contradiction in terms. Class, like capital, is a relationship, not a 'thing' (Thompson 1963). Classes therefore can only be understood in terms of their relationship with other classes: what they do with and to each other.

If we are to avoid the tunnel-vision problems of Warner's *Yankee City* and Geertz's *Mojokuto*, we should not focus exclusively on the modal or 'intermediate' groups to the exclusion of the extremes on either side of them. Neither, like the Lynds, should we focus exclusively on the relationships between and among 'elite' and 'mass', leaving out the middle. Just as in the study of rural communities, in urban studies a simplistic (or dogmatic) adherence to a focus on either the social-economic-political 'middle', or the relationships and conflict between 'elite' and 'mass' to the exclusion of the middle, are likely to produce 'blind spots' resulting in a distorted representation of urban societies and their dynamics.

The 'intermediate class' debate is actually about the future shape of rural and urban societies. In many parts of rural Indonesia we need increasingly to ask 'Who is going to own the countryside?' as corporate capital (domestic or foreign) gains access to large tracts of land for commercial cultivation of food or fuel, dispossessing peasant cultivators and leaving them the choice of a life as wage worker or impoverished contract farmer, or leaving for the city. In urban Indonesia we need to ask 'Who is going to own the city?' as informal economy yields to malls, supermarkets, global brands, franchise food chains, et cetera. Intermediate classes may be highly resilient, but the question that Kalecki raised more than forty years ago, that the possible outcome might be 'the final submission of the lower middle class to the interests of big business' (Kalecki 1972b:163), is still a valid question for today.