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The sociology of South-East Asia; A critical review of some concepts and issues


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In the field of South-East Asian Studies, as in other area studies programmes, we usually examine the realities of the region under study from our different disciplinary perspectives, though, wherever possible, we use interdisciplinary approaches as well. The study of South-East Asia has generated some quite remarkable scholarly contributions in certain

* I wish to acknowledge the helpful comments of the two anonymous referees of this paper. I have duly followed some of their constructive criticisms and made revisions as well as included additional information and discussion. I hope that I have responded to their main observation; this turned on the issue of which authors and literature should be covered in a review of this kind. In any review in article form it is difficult to be comprehensive and it has been impossible to consider the substantial literature in applied sociology and the sociology of rural development. This must be the subject of a separate paper on which I am presently engaged. It was also felt that my initial paper gave too much emphasis to English-language publications written by Western observers to the neglect of publications in other European languages and more especially writings by South-East Asians in both English and local languages. As I have stated in the text of the paper, my review is a personal one, and I have tried to cover literature which, in my view, has had theoretical significance within and without the region and generated much scholarly debate. I shall be happy to engage in further discussion about the issue of Western versus indigenous sociologies and of the relative merits of the concepts developed by Western observers as against local South-East Asian perspectives. But to date it appears that local scholars have mainly been reacting to and criticizing the concepts formulated by outsiders rather than creating their own.

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disciplinary fields, especially in social and cultural anthropology, and Dutch scholarship, for example, in the structural analyses of South-East Asian societies and cultures has established for itself a distinguished position. However, for reasons which will become apparent in this paper, the closely related discipline of sociology, with some important exceptions, has been a relatively poor cousin. Nevertheless, even here Dutch academics, working within what is referred to in the Netherlands as 'Non-Western sociology', have again made a contribution. In my view, after a promising start, the sociological study of South-East Asia was then eclipsed by theoretically more exciting work which emerged principally from the examination of social change and development in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and India. It is only very recently that sociological research on South-East Asia has again begun to show some signs of life. Therefore, at this juncture, I think it is valuable to examine this sociological literature, take stock of what has been done and indicate in which future directions academic studies appear to be moving.

A critical review of sociological work on South-East Asia during the last half century presents a major problem which is by no means peculiar to the theories and practices of this discipline in relation to one particular part of Asia. There is the general difficulty of distinguishing sociology from cognate disciplines and fields of study such as social anthropology, social and economic history, political economy and development studies. This is hardly surprising in a discipline which is concerned with the description, analysis and understanding of social relations and processes. We are therefore only able to arrive at rough-and-ready discriminations between sociology and related subject areas, and it is probably more satisfactory to think in terms of a ‘sociological perspective’ – a perspective which addresses the social dimensions of such crucial issues as poverty, power and authority, urbanization and industrialization, and of significant relationships which arise from such factors as ethnic difference, class and patronage. The inspiration for the sociological approach to the understanding of the human condition comes from three main European social theorists – Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim – and their several influences are plain to see in my following discussion.

Thus, in my consideration of the sociology of South-East Asia, I shall also be drawing attention to the work of some writers who are to be found in such other related academic disciplines as anthropology, politics, economics and history, but who are concerned to understand the organization and transformations of human societies. Even given this broader sociological perspective, I am forced to conclude that, in general and in comparison with studies of other regions of the world, the sociological literature on South-East Asia is not particularly extensive or distinguished. In a recent survey of British-based research on South-East Asia, I noted that...
'British sociological interest in South-East Asia has been minimal' (King 1989:17). Just over a decade ago the German sociologist, Professor Hans-Dieter Evers, also remarked, in the introduction to the valuable volume Sociology of South-East Asia; Readings on Social Change and Development, that 'relatively little progress has been made in furthering the understanding of changing South-East Asian societies' (Evers 1980a:ix). In an appreciative review article of Evers' book, I too observed that

'Up to now any lecturer faced with the task of teaching South-East Asian sociology cannot fail to have noted the piecemeal and often "localized" nature (in content, relevance and orientation) of the sociological literature. With a few notable exceptions, [...] South-East Asian sociology has not really distinguished itself.' (King 1981:391.)

A few years before this, Evers had also edited a less well-known book, in cooperation with the Singapore sociologist, Peter S.J. Chen, entitled Studies in ASEAN Sociology; Urban Society and Social Change. The editors stated then that 'One common problem faced by all sociology lecturers in Southeast Asia is the lack of local teaching materials' (Evers and Chen 1978:xiii). Clearly, during his tenure as Professor of Sociology in the University of Singapore in the 1970s, Evers had set himself the task of beginning to fill some of the gaps in the sociology literature on the South-East Asian region, and subsequently he has continued these efforts at the University of Bielefeld.

The depressing situation of over a decade ago has improved recently, but the sociological materials are still patchy and we have not seen the emergence of many strong and distinctive schools of study or important internationally recognized academic programmes in particular universities or institutions. Certain new developments, which I shall refer to later, show some signs of promise, and Anderson (1984) and Doner (1991) point to some of them; but one is still commonly compelled to look outside South-East Asia for theoretical insights into such processes as socio-economic change rather than to indigenous or locally generated sociologies. Again, this situation was one which Evers and Chen had begun to address in the late 1970s when they pointed out that in the discipline of sociology in Singapore

'Nearly all university text-books are imported from Britain and the United States. Theoretical frameworks, empirical examples and conceptual illustrations, which may be familiar to most academics who were trained in these countries but in most cases are strange to the students, are taught in the classes and transmitted to the students' (Evers and Chen 1978:xiii).

A more recent text on South-East Asia in the Macmillan 'Sociology of
“Developing Societies” series, edited by John Taylor and Andrew Turton, also reveals the persistence of some of the same problems which were highlighted a decade before. However, the editors of this volume phrase this in terms of a paradox. Taylor and Turton demonstrate that, from any perspective, the South-East Asian region is crucially important and socially complex. ‘Yet the degree and quality of much of the research on the region often does not enable one to address the most important aspects of its current and future development’ (Taylor and Turton 1988:1). In this regard the authors contrast sociological research on South-East Asia with the work of Latin American and other scholars on dependency and world systems, East African studies on ‘the role of the state and its relation to indigenous classes’, and the analyses of capitalist relations of production in agriculture and the processes of agrarian differentiation in South Asia. Taylor and Turton bemoan the fact that South-East Asian academics, in particular, have adopted ideas from outside the area ‘rather than generating indigenous explanations of the region and its place in the world economy’ (Taylor and Turton 1988:1). Prior to Taylor’s and Turton’s text, Clark Neher had already contrasted the ‘innovative perspectives’ of the Latin-American-oriented writers with the poor performance of students of South-East Asian societies (Neher 1984:130), and very recently Doner has examined the ‘relative weakness’ of political economy studies on South-East Asia (Doner 1991:819).

Comments along very similar lines have also been made by Peter Preston in his Rethinking Development; Essays on Development and Southeast Asia (Preston 1987). In particular, Preston criticizes the writings of the European observers, J.H. Boeke and J.S. Furnivall, of South-East Asian conditions. He attempts especially to counter the claims of Evers, who reproduces key extracts from the work of Boeke and Furnivall in his ‘reader’, that these two colonial writers represent at least the beginnings of a distinctively South-East Asian contribution to sociology. Preston maintains, on the contrary, that it is an extraordinary claim of Evers that the work of colonial administrator-scholars can have made a contribution to an independent South-East Asian sociological perspective; this is for the simple reason that their analyses have been shaped by colonial interests. Instead, Preston argues that any ‘indigenous’ South-East Asian sociology ‘will only be discovered (if it’s there) in the work of local scholars, commentators and activists’ (Preston 1987:99). He is also particularly critical of the contribution of local sociologists such as Peter Chen, and by extension other sociologists in Singapore, who are concerned principally with development policy and planning issues (e.g., Chen 1983). Preston’s view is that this stream of local sociology, characterized as policy science, provides a convenient defence of government development strategies and acts to maintain the political status quo.

Preston’s criticisms take me a little way from my main concerns in this
paper, but the theme of Western versus indigenous or local perspectives is one to which I shall return briefly later. At this point, however, I have to take issue with Preston’s attack on earlier European observers and on the applied or policy-oriented nature of some sociological studies by South-East Asian writers. In my view there is some value in this work, and, in my attempt to identify what has been theoretically useful in the sociology of South-East Asia, I shall want to consider the contributions of Boeke, Furnivall and others, as Evers sensibly does. Although I too am critical of the relatively poor performance of sociologists, both foreign and local, who have been engaged in studies of South-East Asia, we should not be blind to what has been accomplished and to the institutional constraints and historical circumstances of sociological enquiry in the region (Neher 1984:131).

There are two comments which should be made contra Preston’s position now, before considering some of the reasons for the generally unsatisfactory condition of South-East Asian sociology. First, Boeke’s and Furnivall’s insights have had greater intellectual value than Preston is prepared to allow. They have stimulated much debate and generated further wide-ranging studies of South-East Asian societies; moreover, it is by no means the case that distinctive and novel responses to the social and cultural specificities and processes of change in South-East Asia should necessarily be the preserve of indigenous scholars, although the latter should obviously form an important part of this scholarly endeavour. Second, there should be a greater recognition of the value of applied social science in South-East Asia. The practical involvement of local academics in attempts at addressing or helping solve the immediate social issues of poverty and underdevelopment have been an important recent element in South-East Asian sociology. What is more, in my view, Preston fails to give due regard to the context within which local sociologists and other academics work and write in such countries as Singapore, and to practical social priorities in the region, as against the often radical neo-Marxist perspectives espoused by some Western social scientists.

My review will concentrate on theoretical contributions to South-East Asian sociology, and what are, in my view, significant landmarks in the development of the subject. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to consider applied sociology in South-East Asia, which will require separate treatment in a future paper. What is more, I cannot give proper attention to all sociological writings of note; instead, I shall examine what I consider to be influential contributions which have commanded relatively wide attention both within and outside the region. Obviously, there is also therefore a bias towards studies written in the English language (cf. Anderson 1984).

Let us now return to the theme of the relatively poor performance of South-East Asian sociology, and begin to examine the reasons for it. A group of Australian-based political economists have provided us with some
clues. In an important book entitled *Southeast Asia; The Political Economy of Structural Change*, the editors, Richard Higgott and Richard Robison (1985), argue that scholarship has not responded to the dramatic changes which have been taking place in the region since the mid-1970s. These transformations include 'rapid industrialisation, the emergence of powerful, centralised authoritarian regimes and complex bureaucratic structures together with the accelerated spread of new class relationships in both the town and the countryside' (Higgott and Robison 1985:3). Working in a radical political economy tradition, Higgott and Robison and their colleagues are especially critical of what they perceive to be the generally conservative, empirical writings in South-East Asian social science. They argue that this situation is 'largely the consequence [...] of the extraordinary influence of positivist and empiricist traditions [...] which [...] have been constituted by an amalgam of orientalist history, behaviouralism and structural-functional social science'. For Higgott and Robison, scholars of South-East Asian Studies have tended to focus on such matters as culture; historically important personages and events; political skills, factions, institutionalization and regime maintenance; technical aspects of change, and growth economics; and the passage from tradition to modernity.

Yet, even Higgott and Robison still do not really explain in detail why we have these emphases. I think the reasons are relatively simple. First, various parts of the South-East Asian region in the post-war period were effectively closed to most kinds of academic field research (Neher 1984:131-2). Much of mainland South-East Asia was embroiled in war and conflict, and after the Communist victories in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the mid-1970s, access to data and permission to undertake field work locally were virtually impossible to get. Academic studies of Indochina have usually concentrated on the fields of politics, history and economics; there has been very little sociological or anthropological research worth mentioning on Indochina during the past 30 years, and not much in the radical tradition, either. Part of the reason for this is also located in the 'divisiveness of the Vietnam War in the U.S. academic community' (Doner 1991:821), and the fact that many activists and radical scholars 'either never secured any academic position, voluntarily left, or were forced out of Asian studies' (Allen 1989:117, in Doner 1991:822). On the other hand, various American academics 'of a particular value persuasion' were linked closely to the U.S. government during its active involvement in mainland South-East Asia. Marr notes that 'the typical American dissertation', most of them written in the 1960s, 'deals with the people of the area [Indochina] as objects of the post-World War II political policies of France and, later, the United States' (Marr 1973:97).

What is more, Burma (Myanmar) had essentially severed its ties with the outside world from the early 1960s, and has excluded most foreign scholars
since then. Again, we have had studies in the politics and history of Burma, which can be undertaken from a distance. But in sociology we have been forced to survive largely with the materials collected prior to 1962, mainly by American cultural anthropologists. As one might expect, these latter used simple paradigms taken from the American anthropology of the time, including such concepts as ‘culture’, and, as in the case of Manning Nash’s *The Golden Road to Modernity* (1965), ‘modernization’ and the movement from traditional to modern modes of life. Although Nash’s analysis is subtle and detailed, his concern to examine the interrelationship of tradition and modernity is plain to see.

In this regard it is instructive that, although the title of Higgott’s and Robison’s book of critical articles suggests a broad coverage of the region, it is really only concerned with the ASEAN countries. The sociological neglect of the mainland South-East Asian countries is then partly a consequence quite simply of the difficulty of gaining access to field sites and data. Yet it is also noticeable that, in general, the radical literature on development and change in South-East Asia, perhaps because of theoretical and ideological emphases and the fact that capitalism is the object of enquiry and criticism, has paid little attention to the socialist countries, either as components of a world system and interlinked, in various ways, with the capitalist economies, or as forms of political-economic system which might provide contrasting or alternative modes of responding to, managing and generating change (both theoretically and practically) from the Western-oriented, capitalist-dominated economies of the ASEAN countries (King 1986). There are few references to these kinds of issues in Higgott’s and Robison’s compendium, but interestingly, in a footnote, Carol Warren, a contributor to the book, remarks that a ‘really thorough comparative analysis of the impact of contrasting approaches to development awaits parallel research on the economic and social transformation of the socialist nations of Southeast Asia – Kampuchea, Laos and Vietnam – as well as Burma which has been least committed to developmentalism in its policies to date’ (Warren 1985:145).

Secondly, with reference to the ASEAN countries, Higgott and Robison are right that these have been virtually excluded by the pre-eminent position of structural-functionalist and modernization approaches. Some examples of these perspectives can be seen in the early volume *Modernization in South-East Asia* (Evers 1973), despite the fact that the volume is presented as a rethinking and re-evaluation of the modernization approach. Other writings in this tradition include Tham Seong Chee’s *Malays and Modernization* (1977). The importance of evolutionist assumptions about change and the concern to identify those social elements which either facilitate or retard ‘progress’ towards modern social institutions are also exemplified, in part at least, in some of the early work of Clifford Geertz, such as his *Peddlers and*
Princes; Social Development and Economic Change in Two Indonesian Towns (Geertz 1963a).

In my view, the origins of much of this writing can be traced to the important political, economic and academic connections between the U.S.A. and the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia in the post-war period. The dominance of American conservative scholarship in major parts of South-East Asia during the 1950s and 1960s is exemplified in the overwhelming importance of the Cornell studies of Thailand dating from 1948 under the direction of Lauriston Sharp (Skinner and Kirsch 1975; Bell 1982), and the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, research programme in Java from 1952, out of which the substantial writings of Clifford Geertz and his colleagues, such as Alice Dewey and Robert Jay, emerged (Higgins 1963; Koentjaraningrat 1975:198-207). Nowhere is the American academic presence so obvious than in its former colony, the Philippines. What is more, American modernization perspectives and structural-functional analyses are seen not only in the work of the main American exponents, but also in the writings of many Thai, Indonesian and Filipino scholars trained in the United States.

In comparison with other parts of South-East Asia, the Philippines has enjoyed a long history of teaching and research in sociology. Sociology teaching was introduced into the University of the Philippines some 80 years ago; in contrast, Indonesia only appointed its first Indonesian Professor of Sociology, T.S.G. Moelia, in 1950, at the University of Indonesia. In 1938 a Filipino scholar, Sarafin E. Macaraig, published an Introduction to Sociology. In 1953 The Philippine Sociological Society was founded, and the journal The Philippine Sociological Review created. In the same year the very well-known teaching text Sociology in the Philippine Setting was published. It was written by Chester L. Hunt, along with two other American scholars, and two Filipino collaborators. It came out in a second edition in 1963, and was revised and published again in 1976 as Sociology in the New Philippine Setting. This has been a tremendously influential text in Philippine sociology, and it demonstrates the pervasive influence that American sociology and U.S. funding for research had in the Philippines during the formative years of the discipline there. In addition to such American Professors of Sociology as Chester Hunt, there was also the important presence of Frank Lynch at the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila (Yengoyan and Makil 1984). Although Lynch was by training an anthropologist, he played a significant role in the development of Philippine sociology. The influence of conservative Parsonian American scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s is obvious. The main paradigm, which can, in part, be traced back to such writers as Durkheim, was behaviourist, positivist and structural-functionalist; there was an interest in norms, social roles and role expectations; processes and mechanisms of social integration
and institutionalization, cultural patterns, personality and values.

Studies of class in the Philippines generally employed integrationist social stratification models, rather than concepts of social conflict (Turner 1978). Importantly, social inequality was translated into analyses of personalistic networks of patrons and clients (Hollnsteiner 1963). Analyses of social change relied very much on modernization paradigms (Carroll 1968). Hunt and Dizon, in an overview of Philippine sociology (1978), attempt to provide an explanation for the importance of functionalism, and the 'pragmatic and relatively conservative' stance (p. 107) of scholarship. They argue that at the time it was important to understand 'local customs' and to address practical social problems and policy issues.

On the other hand, in a critical rejoinder to Hunt's and Dizon's survey of Philippine sociology, George Weightman argues that Philippine sociology has been dominated by a handful of senior American scholars who were well-connected to U.S.-based funding agencies and dictated the research agenda (Weightman 1978:178-9; see also Weightman 1975:43-58). He adds that 'Philippine sociology still finds itself trying to escape from the intellectual strait jacket which sees an idealized American modern urban society as the sole model toward which the Philippines is perceived as approaching, departing, or deviating' (Weightman 1978:179). Even though Hunt and Dizon put up a robust defence of the American position, they too had to admit that since the Second World War 'the general trend of the discipline can best be explained as a delayed response to developments in the United States' (Hunt and Dizon 1978:100).

The same can be said for Indonesia. From the 1950s many young Indonesian scholars were trained in America, particularly at Cornell University. There was a heavy concentration on community studies, religion and identity, and problems of agricultural development and national integration, such as in the work of Sunardi Sudarmadi, Tan Giok-Lan (Mely G. Tan), Umar Khayam and Harsja W. Bachtiar (Koentjaraningrat 1975:225-6). As one might expect, there was a need for basic data collection and therefore a focus on empirical investigation and regional socio-economic surveys. There are also many examples of modernization theory at work in Indonesia, one of the most well-known being Selosoemardjan's *Social Changes in Jogjakarta* (1962). For example, one of his main findings is that 'change from a closed to an open class system tends to turn people's orientation away from tradition and makes them more receptive to other changes', in particular, 'the desire for progress has replaced the security of tradition' (Selosoemardjan 1962:411, 412).

In Thailand, too, American academic influence, particularly up to the early 1970s, has been significant; there was an American emphasis on culture and personality studies, the harmony- and stability-inducing influence of Buddhism, the interpersonal relations of patron-client dyads, the
social networks and clusters focused on hierarchy and status, and the
preoccupation with the ‘looseness’ and informality of Thai society. The
roots and processes of tension, contradiction, conflict, struggle, exploitation
and change played almost no part in this early literature (Phillips 1973;
Namsirichai and Vichit-Vadakan 1973).

Finally, there are the remaining areas of South-East Asia: the former
British possessions of Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo, Brunei and Singa-
pore. In contrast to the Philippines and Indonesia, which were granted
political independence in the early post-war period – of course, Thailand was
no one’s colony – the scatter of British-dominated territories around the
South China Sea achieved independence later: Malaya in 1957, Singapore,
Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) in 1963, and Brunei in 1984. Political
autonomy came relatively peacefully, and there was a marked continuity in
colonial conservative scholarly perspectives in the early post-colonial era,
dominated by colonial historians, linguists, scholars of literature and
functionalist anthropologists. We might note in passing that there is no
sociology of Brunei, with the partial exception of Brown’s historical and
sociological/anthropological study of the Brunei Sultanate (1970). The
formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and the establishment of a
separate Republic of Singapore in 1965 were followed by major attempts to
promote economic growth, while their governments were also preoccupied
with the maintenance of political stability, particularly in the ethnically
plural society of Malaysia. There was little room for any substantial critical
sociology in this environment, and it is therefore not surprising that
sociologists, where they existed, should be concerned with basic data col-
lection and descriptive studies, and with practical issues of development.

These concerns are seen very clearly in Evers’ and Chen’s volume on
sociology to which I have already referred. Apart from some general articles,
the book is mainly concerned with Singapore, and to a lesser extent with
Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. There is considerable attention to the
characteristics and roles of élites, especially in the context of modernization,
development and nation-building. There are empirical studies of different
ethnic groups, inter-ethnic relations and ethnically based institutions; and
there are chapters on the consequences of urbanization, especially high-rise
living, in Singapore. The research on Singapore is obviously closely
associated with the need for the government to collect data on and form
conclusions about its public housing policies (Tai 1988). In Malaysia, there
has been much empirical descriptive and analytical work on the relatively

This, then, is the environment in which we must consider the sociolo-
gical enterprise in South-East Asia. Let us now examine in rather more
detail some of the major sociological studies and certain important
conceptual contributions to the understanding of South-East Asian societies,
drawing attention to matters of context when necessary. In my opinion, it is best to start from Evers’ reader *Sociology of South-East Asia* (1980a) and use this as a springboard for our review.

Evers chooses four concepts which have been developed specifically in relation to South-East Asian societies: J.H. Boeke’s concept of the ‘dual economy/society’, J.S. Furnivall’s ‘plural society/economy’ concept, Clifford Geertz’s notion of ‘involution’, and J.F. Embree’s concept, with reference to Thailand, of a ‘loosely structured social system’. As I stated in 1981, Embree’s work (in Evers 1980a) has been inflated out of all proportion to its importance and, though there have been some interesting and mainly Thailand-specific debates on ‘loose structure’ (e.g., Evers 1969), it is the theoretical and empirical yield of the concepts of dualism, pluralism and involution which has been substantial, and should be given proper consideration (King 1981). Doner, too, points to the importance of the works of Boeke, Furnivall and Geertz in demonstrating the ‘mutual influence of politics and economics’ (Doner 1991:819).

A theme in Evers’ reader is that of the problems generated by reliance on theories and concepts ‘imported from abroad’, particularly from the industrialized societies, to analyse the ‘highly complex, fast changing, underdeveloped societies of South-East Asia’ (Evers 1980a:iix). In this connection Evers argues that the concepts which he chooses to highlight were developed to understand sets of social and economic circumstances created in the context of the penetration of European colonialism in South-East Asia. These conditions were considered to be novel and incapable of satisfactory analysis in terms of the then existing tools of social science. In my view these creative efforts alone, with the exception of Embree’s work, qualify them for special attention.

All three authors – Boeke, Furnivall and Geertz – stress the destructive effects of capitalism. For example, Boeke states with special reference to Java that ‘The mass product of the new Western industries was thrown upon the Eastern market, sweeping away Native handicrafts, Native trade, and the Native system of distribution’ (in Evers 1980a:28). Furnivall characterizes the plural society as one which is ‘broken up into groups of isolated individuals, and the disintegration of social will is reflected in a corresponding disorganization of social demand’. He notes depressingly that ‘in a plural society men are decivilized’ (Furnivall 1948:31). Like Boeke, he points to the damaging effects of cheap imported Western commodities, which ‘smashed the native economic system and straitened the sphere of native arts’, so that there was ‘an inevitable degradation of native culture’ (in Evers 1980a:92). Geertz, too, in tracing the process of involution, concludes that ‘Most of Java is crowded with post-traditional wet-rice peasant villages: large, dense, vague, dispirited communities – the raw material of a rural, nonindustrialized mass society’ (Geertz 1963b:129).
These contact situations were seen to require new concepts, expressed very clearly in Boeke’s call for a new economic theory – ‘dualistic economics’ – to understand the Oriental condition characterized by a ‘sharp, deep, broad cleavage dividing the society into two segments’: a Western, modern, capitalist segment and an Eastern, traditional, non-capitalist sector (in Evers 1980a:27; Boeke 1953). Boeke argues that the traditional sector is unresponsive to economic stimuli, particularly that emanating from modern entrepreneurial activity; traditional communities possess only limited economic needs; they are averse to risk-taking and capital accumulation and continuous profit-seeking, and lack discipline and organizational abilities. It is difficult to determine in Boeke’s thesis the weight which he assigns to the effects of Western capitalism in rendering the non-capitalist Oriental sector passive and risk-averse. Overall, it would seem that he does not give sufficient emphasis to structural and historical factors in accounting for the persistence of tradition, but, in anticipation of modernization theory, seems rather to rely on explanations in terms of ‘Oriental mentality’, an ‘Eastern spirit’ and the ‘force of tradition’. He states that the ‘entire life of the [Javanese] village is dominated by religion and semi-religious customs and traditions’ (in Evers 1980a:35), although he does not appear to hold to a view that ‘the characteristics of the “Oriental mentality” [...] are innate to that mentality’ (Koentjaraningrat 1975:75). The reliance on the concepts of ‘traditional culture’ and ‘personality’ and the distinction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ also appear in the models used by modernization theorists. However, Boeke argues, using an evolutionary framework, that dual societies have not moved from a traditional to a modern state. Instead, both social conditions exist simultaneously side by side in a given society.

Boeke’s thesis has given rise to a whole series of debates, culminating in a collection of papers edited by James Fox et al. (1980). However, the concept of dualism continues to exert a powerful hold on academic and other analyses. It is still used by some economists, for example, in their work on such developing societies as Malaysia. Indeed, Malaysian planning documents still assume the existence of modern and traditional sectors (King 1988).

The criticisms of the model are numerous, but they can be roughly categorized into two kinds: the empirical-substantive and the theoretical (Wertheim et al. 1966; Koentjaraningrat 1975:73-85). On the basis of social and economic ‘facts’ it has been argued that Boeke’s depiction of Eastern society under colonialism is misleading: the economic needs of villagers were not limited; in various circumstances rural dwellers were not passive and unresponsive; and their activities did show evidence of organizational abilities. Theoretically it has been proposed that Boeke has a too narrow, old-fashioned and formal conception of Western economic theories and principles and that Eastern communities are not as different from Western
ones as Boeke maintains. What is more, Boeke's stress on a sharp cleavage or distinction between two different but homogeneous social types is not sufficiently sensitive to the interconnections between different economic sectors, communities and groups, to the variations and differences within sectors and communities, and to the dynamic processes of change and response.

Moving on to Furnivall's concept of the plural society, it is clearly more satisfactory than Boeke's concept of dualism. For Furnivall, like Boeke, the understanding of 'tropical' societies required new perspectives; these communities were also considered to be divided by sharp internal cleavages, in contrast to the assumed homogeneity of Western societies. However, unlike Boeke, Furnivall inserts another analytical element to assist us in our understanding of the East, and that is the ethnic division of labour, or, as Furnivall calls them, 'distinct economic castes'. This, in turn, entails an examination of 'alien' Asian, especially Chinese and Indian groups and activities, wedged between European capitalist enterprises on the one hand, and the small-scale, largely agrarian, subsistence-oriented native communities on the other. Furnivall defines a plural society as one which comprises 'two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit' (in Evers 1980a:86; Furnivall 1939; 1948).

Influenced by the Burmese rather than the Javanese experience, Furnivall views the Burmese peasantry as economically motivated and notes that Dutch writers, including Boeke, tended to understate the economic values and motivations of Javanese peasants. Indeed, it is a central part of Furnivall's plural society thesis that while 'there is no social demand common to all the several elements', people from all sections of the plural society 'have in common, in greater or less degree, the economic motive, the desire for profit; and they all join, more or less consciously, in forwarding the economic process, the natural law of the survival of the fittest in the economic world, by which the cheaper product tends to supplant the dearer' (in Evers 1980a:87).

Members of the different segments, defined in terms of religion, language, ways of life and position in the economy, 'meet only in the market-place, in buying and selling'. Most significantly, Furnivall notes that 'the conflict between rival economic interests tends to be exacerbated by racial diversity' (in Evers 1980a:88).

Furnivall has drawn attention to the vital principle of ethnic identity and difference in the social organization of South-East Asia. However, one of the most consistent criticisms of Furnivall is that he has a too simple view of the relations between ethnic and economic divisions in the region. The plural society concept assumes a coincidence between ethnicity and social class, in the notion of 'economic castes'. But relations of class, as well as
those of status and power, interconnect with those of ethnicity in most complex ways. For example, it is often not the coincidence of economic and cultural cleavage which explains social tensions and conflicts, but rather the breakdown of the monopoly of particular economic positions by given ethnic groups and the consequent economic competition between such groups. What is more, ethnic groups themselves are usually divided along class and status lines; members of different ethnic groups commonly occupy the same class positions, and there are often all kinds of relations between different ethnic groups expressed in such processes as cultural borrowing, assimilation and intermarriage (Lee 1986:vi). Furnivall’s concept is too static to enable analysis of changing inter-group relations, and he assumes, like Boeke, that colonial societies are deeply divided in contrast to Western societies, which are perceived to be relatively homogeneous.

In subsequent debates on pluralism it has been the position of such writers as Wertheim (1964a) and Evers that, although we should address issues of ethnicity in South-East Asia, we should place greater stress on social hierarchy. It is Evers’ view, for example, that ‘the plural social structure’ in urban South-East Asia is being transformed into one based on ‘segregation by social class’ (Evers 1980b:122). Wertheim, too, has noted that the breakdown of residential-occupational-ethnic cleavages through time leads to conflicts between people from different ethnic groups (Wertheim 1964a).

In their analyses of class structures in South-East Asia, Evers and Wertheim refer back to the classical sociological tradition of Weber and Marx. What is more, Evers formulates the new concept of ‘strategic groups’ to assist us in our understanding of changing South-East Asian social structures. Evers identifies three stages in the crystallization of class. First, the ‘incumbents of new positions had probably very little in common’; instead, identifications such as ethnicity cross-cut organizational forms based on occupational position and wealth. Evers refers to these partially formed entities as ‘quasi-groups’. These are then transformed into ‘strategic groups’ as common identity grows, because of such processes as an increase in membership of a quasi-group; which, in turn, results in crisis, conflict and competition. These new social units forged in situations of conflict ‘now become of strategic importance as groups for political development’. Examples of such groups are civil servants, the military, teachers, professionals and Chinese businessmen, which presumably for Evers are defined in terms of occupation or economic function. These groups comprise ‘a recruiting field for political leadership and a political pressure group at the same time’ (Evers 1980c:250). Finally, classes are seen to come about through coalitions between strategic groups, and the increasing restriction or control of mobility into new strata (Evers 1980c:251). Examples are the coalitions between the military-bureaucratic élite and Chinese businessmen...
in Thailand, and between the Malay political élite and Chinese entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

Of course, Evers’ formulation is not exactly new. It would seem that his concept of ‘strategic groups’ is similar to the notion of ‘class fractions’ as used by neo-Marxist writers. In addition, there are problems in defining and isolating certain ‘strategic groups’, and, in any case, groups such as ‘the military’ are themselves complex segments internally differentiated. Nevertheless, Evers’ framework does provide a useful starting-point for examining social processes of group formation and conflict, in the context of wider international systems of development and dependency.

To add another dimension to the work of Evers, we should also briefly consider Judith Nagata’s important studies of ethnicity and class in Malaysia. Like Evers, Nagata argues that an analysis of Malaysian society reveals the development of ‘a form of class stratification cross-cutting ethnic boundaries’. However, interestingly she argues that Malaysians tend not to perceive their own society in class terms, but that instead ‘an ethnic idiom is more common’ (in Evers 1980a:127). Nagata, therefore, demonstrates that ‘Malaysian society is subjectively more plural than objective reality might warrant’ (in Evers 1980a:127). She also notes that members of different ethnic groupings commonly have different perceptions of the overall Malaysian social structure.

Nagata’s views are supported in a valuable collection of essays on Ethnicity, Class and Development; Malaysia (1984), edited by Syed Husin Ali. HusinAli points out that ‘class conflicts have not occurred between the rich and the poor, although these classes are becoming more discernible now [...] ethnic ideology and consciousness are still dominant and act as constraining factors to the development of class ideology and consciousness’ (Husin Ali 1984:10).

Malaysia then, according to Husin Ali, is divided horizontally by class and vertically by ethnicity; but, although the factor of ethnicity is still strong, ethnic issues and tensions may be generated from politico-economic or class relations (see also Lim Mah Hui 1980). Husin Ali’s analysis of the interrelations between ethnicity and class lead him to conclude that class issues and interests will increase, but at present the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia requires him to rely on the concept of a multi-ethnic ‘élite’ and the multi-ethnic ‘masses’ to demonstrate that class structures are in formation and not yet mature (Husin Ali 1984:13-31).

An interesting analytical development of mainly ethnically grounded perceptions of society in Malaysia is Shamsul A.B.’s use of the concepts of ‘imagined communities’ and ‘nation of intent’ to explore different ethnic agendas (Shamsul 1992). Shamsul says, ‘Amongst the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, the Kadazans, the Dayaks, and between them exists a plethora of “nations of intent” often articulated openly in election
manifestos or in debates concerning culture, language, literature and religion' (Shamsul 1992:13).

The distinction between objective and subjective dimensions of social structures is a useful one, and Malaysian pluralism provides a most appropriate case for exploring these distinctions. But Nagata's, Husin Ali's and Shamsul's work also shows that considerations of ethnicity do not merely operate at the subjective level. Nagata notes, for example, that the groupings of businessmen, professionals and civil servants are still socially divided by ethnicity. In other words, in Evers' terms these groupings are not yet 'strategic groups'.

Clearly, ethnic identity still plays an important organizational role in Malaysia, and it would seem that it is not merely subjective or ideological, but also operates, along with economic relations, at the level of action (Lee 1986:viii). Elsewhere in the region, such as in Thailand, the principle of ethnic identity and division appears not to be so socially significant, although this does not therefore imply that there are no problems of ethnic tension and conflict in such countries.

We shall return to issues of social class and inequality later. Let us now turn to the important concept of 'involution', which is also discussed in Evers' compilation. Geertz's very influential study *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (1963b) must be read in the context of Boeke's work on dualism, since it is an ecological and historical analysis of the emergence and development of dualism in Java, or more especially 'inner Indonesia' (parts of Java, Bali and Lombok), and its contrast with transformations in the Outer Islands under Dutch colonialism. Geertz's study also has an important bearing on theories of underdevelopment and dependency, although Evers remarks that Geertz's concept 'was somewhat hampered by the Latin American theory of international dependence and dependent reproduction that addressed itself to similar problems' (Evers 1980a:5).

As Van Schaik says, '“Agricultural involution” can be considered as the description of a process of adaptation of a socio-economic system to externally induced influences’ (Van Schaik 1986:15). Although Geertz's study certainly shares some elements in common with analyses elsewhere of underdevelopment, it has particular features of its own. First, it does not attempt to provide a general theory of socio-economic change in contrast to the work on Latin America of such writers as Andre Gunder Frank, but examines a case study in some detail. Secondly, the neo-Marxist concepts and terms employed in much of the underdevelopment literature are replaced in Geertz's study by the concept of cultural ecology. Geertz examines some of the detailed connections between certain Javanese social and cultural forms, economic organization and the natural environment, and the ways in which these relations change and develop through time and in the context of
a wider set of economic and political relationships. Finally, although Geertz's thesis has affinities with the underdevelopment school, it is also underpinned by certain evolutionary ideas reminiscent of modernization theory. Certainly, if one examines Geertz's study along with his other major contributions, such as Peddlers and Princes, then one sees clear signs of a concern with the passage from tradition to modernity, and the need to identify various facilitators of economic take-off or particular points or elements of growth. Indeed, the notion of involution assumes that the process of evolution is also possible.

Geertz argues that Dutch colonialism integrated Javanese peasant rice agriculture into a system which produced cash crops for the Dutch and also confined the cultivators within the subsistence sector while using some of their land and labour for profit. In effect, the Javanese reproduced their labour power in the subsistence sector which, in turn, supported the cultivation of sugar and coffee on behalf of the Dutch. This reproduction was enabled by the properties of the irrigated wet rice system, which, according to Geertz, could support ever-increasing population densities, and the intensification of agriculture. Population increased as a result of the Pax Neerlandica, the expansion of the infrastructure, and modern medicines. Geertz argues that improved irrigation facilities for sugar-growing also had a spin-off for rice cultivation on adjacent land, and therefore rice production increased. However, given the population growth, the yield per hectare increased, but not production per capita. Thus, in order to give everyone an economic niche in a situation of increasing numbers, limited resources and restricted alternatives, the Javanese divided up land, work and production so that the result was a high level of socio-economic homogeneity. Rural Java became characterized by 'shared poverty'; it did not develop 'progressively'; it did not 'take off' economically; and instead, traditional social arrangements were 'ossified'.

This overall process Geertz termed 'involution', which he defined as 'the overdriving of an established form in such a way that it becomes rigid through an inward overelaboration of detail' (Geertz 1963b:82). Such a closely argued and compelling thesis, eloquently expressed and structured, has had a profound influence on Indonesian studies, and has made some impact on general sociological literature (Wertheim 1974) as well as on analyses of rural social structures in other countries such as the Philippines (Van den Muijzenberg 1975).

As one might expect, the concept of involution has engendered much debate, and the main critical issues are addressed by the Alexanders (1978, 1979, 1982) and White (1983a, 1983b), and then by Geertz in a reply to his critics and in his partial reinterpretation of his own thesis (Geertz 1984). As Van Schaik notes, White is surprised that Geertz's thesis became so popular on the basis of 'so little evidence' (Van Schaik 1986:20). There has been
subsequently much attention paid to the evidence, and several points need addressing briefly. First, Geertz’s views on social homogeneity and shared poverty have been especially criticized, since the evidence suggests, on the contrary, that the Javanese village was and is characterized by marked inequalities (Elson 1978; Hüsken 1979). Secondly, it would seem that rice production gradually stagnated and did not absorb ever-increasing amounts of labour; instead, sugar cultivation placed tremendous demands upon local labour. Thirdly, various scholars have demonstrated considerable variations in the relations between population density, rice cultivation, cash crops and Dutch influence across Java, in contrast to Geertz’s general thesis of involution (e.g., Elson 1984; Lyon 1970; Stoler 1977). Finally, it has been demonstrated that the wet-rice ecosystem does not remain basically unchanged or stable and able to sustain increasing intensification. Following his detailed study of Dutch archives, Van Schaik concludes that ‘the natural environment was changed, [...] less labour and land were available, and [...] the water resources of the holding decreased or were limited unpropor-
tionately [sic] in respect to the total quantity available within the irrigation systems’ (Van Schaik 1986:28).

Therefore, overall, Geertz’s postulated link between high levels of sugar cultivation and wet rice agriculture, as well as high rice yields and population densities, is not borne out generally by the evidence from archival material on east and central Java.

Van Schaik concludes that, ‘Like the work of the social evolutionists, “Agricultural Involution” is organized around the comparative method. The suggested change of the social evolutionists however, is not change at all, but variation’ (Van Schaik 1986:36).

This is not to say that Geertz’s study is not of importance. It plainly is. Geertz draws attention to the need to take into account the context of colonialism. But he assumes a tightly interrelated ecosystem in parts of rural Java, focused on the properties of wet-rice agriculture. Instead, it has been demonstrated by later writers that the impact of Dutch policies was more varied; that there were colonial activities other than sugar cultivation which affected Javanese peasant households; and that the Dutch also restricted the resource base and limited the peasants’ incentives to produce both rice and cash crops. Koentjaraningrat, in a balanced review of Geertz’s work, also draws attention to Geertz’s method of social analysis, in which he constructs ‘ideal types of social categories’ such as the wet-rice and dry-rice ecosystems, and compares and contrasts them ‘on the basis of a fixed number of characteristics’ (Koentjaraningrat 1975:199-200). This tends to sacrifice empirical detail and complexity in favour of conceptual clarity and theoretical ingenuity.

Although Geertz paid little attention to changing systems of social stratification in his study of involution in rural Java (cf. Utrecht 1973), the
subject appears in a more substantial way in *Peddlers and Princes* (Geertz 1963a) and *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Geertz 1965). Both these studies relate to problems of social change, and the latter especially can, in part, be seen as the urban companion volume to *Agricultural Involution*. It focuses on the transformation from a colonial social structure comprising a loosely organized set of estate-like and 'self-contained status communities' into post-independent 'strategic groups' and larger 'second-order groups' (*aliran*) of a religio-political kind (see below) (Geertz 1965:4). Geertz sees this contemporary system as still 'incomplete', 'vague' and 'ill-defined', which echoes his conclusions in *Agricultural Involution*. This theme of 'permanent transition' also surfaces in *Peddlers and Princes*, in which again the problems in Indonesia of achieving 'take-off' into sustained economic growth and development and the associated institutional arrangements are confronted. The concern with the parallels between Western and Oriental experiences emerges in Geertz's examination of the economic potential of pious Javanese Muslim 'peddlers', which, as Wertheim notes, bears similarities to the Weberian focus on ascetic Calvinist 'burgesses' in Western Europe (Wertheim 1964b:307-11).

Although it has had less impact on subsequent work, Geertz's analysis of the *aliran* concept has also had some influence on the ways in which Indonesian society has been perceived by social scientists. According to Geertz, these *aliran* (lit: stream or current) were a primary focus of political allegiance; they organized different communities into vertically arranged groupings on the basis of such distinguishing criteria as religion and political orientations (Geertz 1965:127 ff.). Thus, for example, Geertz demonstrates that important political distinctions were created between Muslims and non-Muslims in Indonesia, which cross-cut social class alignments. These observations, of course, are reminiscent of the analyses of the relations between class and ethnicity in the context of debates about the concept of pluralism in Malaysia, but again Geertz has been taken to task for his ideal typical characterization of the vertical 'streams' and, related to this perspective, for his misleading depiction of Javanese religion in terms of three categories, *santri*, *abangan*, and *prijaji* (e.g., Bachtiar 1973; Koentjaraningrat 1963; Utrecht 1973).

As Hefner has remarked (1990), overall Geertz has also been subsequently criticized by others for his neglect of class (Anderson 1982), his concentration on ideology and culture at the expense of economic relations and modes of production (Kahn 1982), and his lack of attention to the importance of patron-client linkages in mobilizing political groupings (Wertheim 1969). But, as Hefner also suggests, and rightly so, some of these criticisms must themselves be subject to scrutiny, and the important issue is that Geertz has provided us with a set of studies of social change which have explored, to a greater or lesser extent, the significance of culture
with regard to patterns of social behaviour, inter-group alliance and conflict, and social action.

As we have seen, in his study of involution, Geertz has certain connections with underdevelopment and dependency theorists. Yet, overall his work would appear to come closer to mainstream American social science of the 1950s and 1960s in its concern with the possibilities of and obstacles to modernization, and the importance of culture in understanding human motivations, action and behaviour. That having been said, it is clear that Geertz was hardly an orthodox modernization theorist. Some of Geertz’s work has foreshadowed interesting recent developments in sociological analyses of South-East Asia. There have been recent calls for incorporating the concept of culture into the formal, structural analysis of situations of development, dependency and socio-economic change (e.g., Worsley 1984), or for moving away from concerns with world systems analysis and macrosociological studies to local-level and regional social, economic, political and cultural studies (e.g., Hefner 1990).

Let us now turn for a moment to other sociological work on South-East Asia. Geertz’s earlier concerns were to be eclipsed by the increasing influence of neo-Marxist writings in the 1970s and 1980s. Even then, in the context of South-East Asia, structural analyses of underdevelopment and dependency were not as popular as they had become in studies of the rest of the developing world. Nevertheless, one sociologist in particular, who drew on the Asian experience for his empirical data, and who provided a direct bridge between neo-Marxist concerns and the interests of social evolutionists, as well as of Weberian-inspired sociologists, is Professor W.F. Wertheim. Of all contributors to the sociology of South-East Asia, Wertheim stands head and shoulders above others. Wertheim has been a central figure in Dutch Non-Western sociology, which has been crucial in combining both historical and sociological perspectives. He has provided us with both theoretical debates in sociology, and analyses of social transformations in Indonesia in particular (Van den Muijzenberg and Wolters 1988); Wertheim’s legacy has been maintained in the University of Amsterdam through the work of Otto van den Muijzenberg and his colleagues, especially in their studies of the Philippines (e.g., Wolters 1984). Wertheim also stimulated important local research in Indonesia during the late 1950s, when he was guest professor at the University of Indonesia; among others, Kampto Utomo’s (Sajogyo’s) work on transmigration in Lampung (1957) emerged from this period.

I have already argued elsewhere that Wertheim should have been included more centrally in Evers’ reader (King 1981), and I wish that he had been featured in Taylor’s and Turton’s compendium. Furthermore, Higgott and Robison only refer to Wertheim in passing, suggesting instead that his socio-historical approach, along with the work of other Dutch scholars such
as B. Schrieke (1955-57) and J.C. van Leur (1955), which ‘sought to integrate political, social and economic approaches’, had been overtaken by other Western writings influenced by ‘Orientalist’ and ‘empiricist’ preoccupations (Higgott and Robison 1985:5). I cannot fully agree with this conclusion, and I also think it a pity that the sociologists D.H. Burger (1948-49) and Justus van der Kroef (e.g., 1954) and their work on Indonesia receive no mention at all. Reference could also have been made to Locher’s important contribution to the study of social change (e.g., 1978), although I accept that his main studies have been in the field of cultural anthropology.

Among Wertheim’s extensive corpus, there are three books which deserve special mention. His Indonesian Society in Transition; A Study of Social Change (1959) provides an early study of the factors underlying Indonesian social change, a discussion of the problems of periodizing and systematizing history, an attempt to indicate probable future developments, and an analysis of the relevance of Weberian and Marxian concepts for the study of process in Indonesian history (see also Wertheim 1962; Locher 1961). Secondly, Wertheim’s collection of essays East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia (1964a) addresses one of the main themes which preoccupies later writers, including Evers, and that is the appropriateness of Western sociological concepts and historical experiences in the study of Eastern societies. In this book Wertheim ranges over a diverse set of issues, including ethnicity, class, corruption, and bureaucracy, using concepts taken from Western sociological traditions but setting them in the particularities of the Asian context.

Finally, there is Wertheim’s magnum opus, Evolution and Revolution; The Rising Waves of Emancipation (1974), which has been debated substantially in Dutch sociological circles, but which has not commanded the attention it deserves, either in Western social science in general, or in the Asian academic community in particular. It brings together, and in some cases qualifies and elaborates the main strands of his thinking on Asian societies into a grand theory of social change. He had already expounded his views about the nature of social structures and the dynamics of change in the 1960s, in his concept of society ‘as a composite of conflicting value systems’ (Wertheim 1964a, see also 1973), and this perspective was provided in an earlier form in his analysis of Indonesian social change. In his later work he links this notion of conflict and contradiction in society, which he sees as a central dynamic, to an elaborated and complex version of evolutionary theory. He argues that a clear principle discernible in human history is that of ‘emancipation’ – emancipation from the ‘forces of nature’ and from ‘human domination’. One can see in this formulation the influence of earlier evolutionary theory, and, in his concerns with dialectical processes and social conflict and inequality, a clear intellectual debt to Marx. But in his stress on value systems and the importance of ideas in human history, he
also seems to come closer to some of the work of Weber, and also to Georg Hegel. In my view, there are obvious problems in Wertheim’s focus on the conflict between different ‘mentalities’ and his overly idealist perception of social structure. Nevertheless, one is presented with a forceful example of the ways in which analyses of the Asian experience can feed into important sociological debates and which link back to the founding fathers of the discipline.

In this connection we should also note briefly that much important work on South-East Asia has been undertaken on Marx’s and Weber’s views of the Orient, especially with regard to Marx’s concept of the ‘ Asiatic mode of production’ and ‘ Oriental despotism’ and Weber’s concept of ‘ patrimonial bureaucracy’ and his writings on Islam and the religions of India and China (e.g., Wiegersma 1982). One of the main aims of these two major social theorists, which, as we have seen, link in with the broad concerns of Boeke, Furnivall, Evers, Geertz, and Wertheim, was to examine the differences between the West and Asia, and the ways in which each can be conceptually brought into relationship with the other (King 1981). More especially Marx and Weber wished to explain why industrial capitalism and a bourgeois class had not apparently emerged in Asia prior to Western intervention. Importantly, the various Marxist concepts of social formation, mode of production and class have been the subject of vigorous debate among, for example, Thai socialists, especially with regard to the appropriateness of schemes of evolution and the categories ‘ feudal ’ and ‘ Asiatic ’ in the Thai case. Reynolds and Hong Lysa emphasize the importance of such writers as Udom Sisuwan, Jit Poumisak, Chattip Nartsupha, Chai-anan Samudavanija, Somchai Suwannasi and Nidhi Aeusrivongse, among others, in this dialogue (Reynolds and Hong Lysa 1983; see also Reynolds 1987). Turning briefly to Weber, his search for explanations in religion has, in turn, resulted in a series of debates about the relations between religious belief and practice in Islam and Buddhism on the one hand and economic activity and change on the other. These arguments are well summarized by Von der Mehden (1986). Unfortunately, some of these discussions have been distorted by a reliance on overly simple versions of modernization theory, but Alatas (1972) gives us an informed, subtle and historically grounded set of critiques of the issues and explores aspects of Weber’s sociology of religion.

As I have already noted, although various strands of functionalism, Orientalism and evolutionary theory continued to find expression in studies of South-East Asia in the 1970s, a gradual shift took place towards a more critical and radical position, influenced by the work of such writers as Gunder Frank on Latin America. Higgott and Robison point to a most important figure in this shift – Rex Mortimer. The volume Showcase State (Mortimer 1973a), which uses Indonesia as a case study, provided a critique of the prevailing economic and political orthodoxy embodied in...
modernization theory. Mortimer was especially critical of the 'technological
determinism' and 'political conformism' of the economist Heinz Arndt in
his recommendations for promoting Indonesia's economic growth (Mortimer
1973b). In contrast to the eclecticism of Wertheim, Mortimer used neo-
Marxist underdevelopment and dependency perspectives to lay bare the con-
sequences of the activities of transnational corporations, military leaders and
compradors in Indonesia. A collection of Mortimer's essays, which explores
various themes of social inequality, class, patronage and conflict, was later
published posthumously under the title Stubborn Survivors (Mortimer
1984).

The influence of radical literature was further consolidated in the launch-
ing of the Journal of Contemporary Asia in 1970, which published both
theoretical debates and case studies with reference to Asia in the Marxist and
neo-Marxist traditions, on such matters as class formation and conflict, the
nature and role of the state, relations of dependency, authoritarian regimes,
and transnational corporations. Among others, articles by Resnick on the
Philippines (1973), Gordon on Java (1979), Bell (1978) and Elliott (1978a;
see also 1978b) on Thailand, and Bell's and Resnick's (1970) and Catley's
(1976) general papers on South-East Asia have been especially important.
The equivalent radical publication in the United States is the Bulletin of
Concerned Asian Scholars, launched in 1968. Although not extensive, other
examples of neo-Marxist analyses can be found in the work of Jonathan Fast
and Jim Richardson (1979) on the Philippines; Joel Kahn (1980), Fritjof
Tichelman (1980) and Alfons van der Kraan on Indonesia (1980); Shamsul
A.B. (1979) and Mohamed Amin and Malcolm Caldwell (1977) on
Malaysia; and Grit Permtanijit (1982) on Thailand.

Since the early 1980s this radical literature has taken new directions, and
several interesting developments have recently taken place which deserve
note in any sociological survey. Increasingly, neo-Marxist-inspired writers
became dissatisfied with the overly general and abstract analyses of
underdevelopment and dependency, and wished to locate concepts of class and
processes of exploitation in local-level studies and case material. However,
there are still differences in emphasis with regard to the level of analysis
employed and the factors and processes identified. Let me take three
examples. First comes the work of Higgott and Robison and their
colleagues in Australia. This group of political economists has still been
mainly concerned with various international processes of change, but, in the
volume edited by them which has already been mentioned (Higgott and
Robison 1985) and in a later companion volume, Southeast Asia in the
1980s (Robison, Hewison and Higgott 1987), they tend to focus their
attention at the national level (see also Robison 1989). Higgott and
Robison are quite clear about their enterprise. In large part, it attempts to
carry on the radical tradition but re-evaluates previous work and draws
attention to 'some of the theoretical difficulties to be overcome in developing a sustained radical analysis of the transformations in the Southeast Asian region in the 1980s' (Higgott and Robison 1985:5).

Most of the articles in the book and those in the sequel examine recent changes in the international economy, specifically the emergence of a 'New International Division of Labour' and the shift towards export-oriented industrialization (EOI) strategies. The essential feature of this process is 'the internationalization of production, [...] including the relocation of entire industries' and 'specific aspects of industrial production [...] from industrialized to developing countries' (Higgott and Robison 1985:45). Given this context, many of the contributors to the book concentrate on class formation and inter-class relations, the nature and role of the state in capital accumulation, especially with regard to debates about political authoritarianism, and the varieties of 'peripheral' capitalist development within particular South-East Asian nation-states. Despite the continued emphasis on macro-level analyses, the contributors have moved away from general theoretical discourses on dependency and underdevelopment towards analyses of the specific historical conditions and consequences of capitalist penetration; it is very much a 'postimperialist' literature (Doner 1991:829). They argue for the importance of 'a much more complex analysis of the structure of capital' (Higgott and Robison 1985:51) and the need to recognize that 'national bourgeoisies' are 'in an ambiguous relationship, exhibiting both confrontation and alliance with foreign/international capital' (Higgott and Robison 1985:49). Robison has himself explored these complexities in excellent studies on Indonesian political economy and class (1981, 1986, 1988), and Jomo Sundaram (1988) and Lim Mah Hui (1981, 1985) have done the same for Malaysia. In his general review of political-economic studies of South-East Asia, Doner also argues that in future 'studies should also be cautious in drawing too sharp a contrast between dependency and self-reliance. Most less developed countries (LDCs) are best understood not as one or the other, but as somewhere on a continuum between the two' (Doner 1991:823).

Despite this concern with the particularities of capitalist development in South-East Asia, one still detects a number of loose ends in the analyses of class and class relations. One reason for this difficulty is that most contributors are still operating at the level of the state, rather than at a local or regional level. Yet, their concern to examine specific cases does lead to a more realistic appraisal of the economic opportunities and constraints of particular countries in South-East Asia. Richard Leaver, for example, argues that integration with capital and reformist strategies of economic development can have 'decided advantages' in peripheral states (Leaver 1985:162). Garry Rodan, in his analysis of Singapore, concludes that 'there is no preordained role for a country in the international division of labour',
because, 'within certain constraints, governments can set about to shape and influence this integration' (Rodan 1985:188). Kevin Hewison demonstrates that the Thai state has supported the development of domestic capital, and that therefore the Thai bourgeoisie is not 'merely a comprador bourgeoisie' (Hewison 1985:287; see also Hewison 1989). On the other hand, Wayne Robinson, in his study of Japanese-Indonesian relations, argues that Indonesia's leaders 'proved less able to regulate Japan's economic priorities' (Robinson 1985:197), and that, 'while the national bureaucratic forces increased their dependence on Japan, Japan decreased its dependence upon them' (Robinson 1985:220).

A second strand in recent sociological re-evaluations of radical theory is expressed in the work of such writers as Gillian Hart, Joel Kahn, Andrew Turton and Benjamin White (although Joel Kahn had already been pursuing this line of analysis in the late 1970s (1980, 1982)). This approach is exemplified in the important book by Hart et al., *Agrarian Transformations; Local Processes and the State in Southeast Asia* (1989). It is here that we see the emphasis on understanding local-level processes in the context of 'larger political and economic forces' (Hart et al. 1989:1) and the concern with 'the conceptual and methodological problems of linking local-level institutional arrangements with larger political-economic systems' (Hart et al. 1989:xiv). These studies bring together the expertise of rural sociologists, anthropologists and agricultural economists. What is more, in focusing on what is increasingly referred to as 'agrarian differentiation', these writers are especially concerned 'to take explicit account of the power structures within which technological change and commercialization occur' (Hart et al. 1989:2). Therefore, they are involved in studies of the relations between the state and its representatives and local-level class relations, power blocs and coalitions. As Turton demonstrates in his work on local power structures and agrarian differentiation in Thailand, there is also an increasing body of indigenous Thai scholarship relevant to his concerns (Turton 1989:71).

The spirit and tone of these recent developments in understanding socio-economic change in South-East Asia are revealed in a particularly apposite statement by White, viz.:

'Flexibility and openness in investigations of concrete situations, in contrast with the abstract rigor of theoretical formulations, seems a natural and healthy consequence of the recognition that economic and social changes occur in actual societies with their own configurations of political forces at local and higher levels, with all kinds of complex and sometimes conflicting processes at work both within and beyond the village, whose interaction with general "tendencies" results in specific patterns of differentiation.' (Benjamin White 1989:18-19.)
A detailed local-level study which demonstrated this dictum is Hart's own monograph, which focuses on political power, access to labour and its allocation and the securing of a livelihood in rural Java, and 'the ways in which local processes are both shaped by and act on wider political-economic forces' (Hart 1986:xv).

Elements of this concern to explore complexity are also seen in the volume *Southeast Asia* edited by Taylor and Turton (1988). This compilation moves from chapters on the more general issues of the role of the state, and the relations of capital and labour, which are provided predictably by such writers as Robison and Hewison, to local-level studies of 'rural transformation and agrarian differentiation', exemplified in the chapters by Stoler on Java (1988:111-22), Christine White on Vietnam (1988:165-76), and Anan Ganjanapan on Thailand (1988:123-32). Other significant studies in the volume focus on the realm of culture and ideology and the ethnic identities and social and historical consciousness of minority groups in South-East Asia. Sadly, the literature on gender in South-East Asia is not substantial; much of it has been produced by anthropologists in local-level studies. But a good example of work on gender, which shares, in some respects, the concerns of Turton and others, is that of Noeleen Heyzer (1986). Its premise is that 'the forms and bases of women's subordination are influenced by larger systems that produce inequalities and are embedded in the social positions and the social relationships developed through the interaction of economic processes and dominant socio-cultural systems' (Heyzer 1986:ix).

The various subjects highlighted by Taylor and Turton lead us finally to another recent development in the sociology of South-East Asia. Turton has been working in both these areas, namely rural differentiation and class formation; and culture and ideology. But one of the best examples of this latter concern is provided by Robert Hefner's studies of the Tenggerese of East Java (1983a, 1983b, 1990). Informed 'by the weighty legacy of Clifford Geertz's work' (Hefner 1990:xx), he adopts a hermeneutic, or 'meaning-centred', approach to the understanding of social life, which, in turn, can be traced back to the seminal writings of Max Weber and his emphasis on meaningful action. Hefner's study draws on empirical data at the local and regional level, and, like Turton, he locates both the particularities and patterns of local social life in a historical context and in the context of broader political and economic structures and forces. However, Hefner's emphasis is much more on the social experiences, perceptions, understandings and interpretations of the Tenggerese, as well as on 'the circumstances involved in their sustenance and change'. Aside from laying bare 'a Southeast Asian peasantry's experience of politics and economic change from precolonial times to today', Hefner also wishes 'to account for the practical circumstances that have constrained that peasantry's economic
actions and conditioned its awareness’ (Hefner 1990:xii).

One can also point to another example of this kind of analysis, although in the field of gender studies. In a thought-provoking analysis of young Malay female factory workers who have moved from a village environment, Aihwa Ong (1987) examines the effects on these young women of capitalist discipline. She explores the links between economic organization, power and cultural attitudes and practices. Ong is concerned with the cultural construction of gender and the contradictory images of sexuality which are generated in the transformation of female villagers to wage-workers. In particular, she shows how these workers respond to, resist and retaliate in cultural ways the hierarchies and controls of the factory.

This increasing concern with the details of rural social life also requires us to make brief mention of a substantial literature on South-East Asia, some of which has relevance to sociological analysis, but which has mainly been written by political scientists, political economists, social and economic historians and anthropologists. I am referring to the body of work on peasantry and their responses to change (cf. King 1978). The main contributions have come from Michael Adas (1974), Sartono Kartodirdjo (1973), Ben Kerkvliet (1977), Samuel Popkin (1979), James Scott (1976, 1985), David Sturtevant (1976) and Reynaldo Ileto (1979), as well as Shamsul A.B. (1986) and Lim Teck Ghee (1977). However, the key figure in this work must be James Scott. His book, The Moral Economy of the Peasant; Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (1976), in which he located peasant perceptions and evaluations of behaviour and action in the context of the constraints and requirements of subsistence economies, provoked much subsequent debate and critical comment from such commentators as Popkin (1979). Scott’s later work, some of it in collaboration with Kerkvliet, has continued to explore various of the dimensions of local-level peasant action, behaviour and motivation in the face of social, economic and political transformations generated by technological change, capitalist penetration and the commercialization of agriculture. He has been especially concerned with what he has termed ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986) and the ways in which small-scale rural producers and wage labourers counter, survive and rationalize the processes, events and personalities which are seen to be undermining their very existence. In short, he examines in detail the ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985). It is worth noting that Anderson, in a provocative paper on South-East Asian politics, argued that in the decade 1974-1984 ‘only three genuinely distinguished books have been published in North America by specialists’ in this field; these comprise Scott’s Moral Economy (1976) and Kerkvliet’s The Huk Rebellion (1977), in addition to John Girling’s text Thailand (1981) (Anderson 1984:41-2).

A further interesting dimension of this literature on peasant social
movements is the scope it provides for writing 'history from below'; in my view (and Anderson's), Ileto's excellent examination of the Philippine peasantry's experience of Holy Week and the meaning of the 'pasyon' (Ileto 1979) gives us local perspectives and details on peasant protest. In addition, I still admire Sartono Kartodirdjo's studies of peasant protest in Java (e.g., 1966, 1973); he has also provided a vital contribution to the attempts to construct a 'domestic history' of South-East Asia.

Overall, these various strands of analysis, which link the details of social life as it is experienced and acted out at the local level with the larger processes and forces at the national and international levels, are providing most significant ways forward in understanding social change in South-East Asia. Emphases may vary between different studies, whether it be concern with local power structures, the details of socio-economic differentiation, or the culture and ideology of rural groups and communities. But these studies do point to promising developments in sociological work on the region.

In my view, the earlier concerns with concepts such as involution, dualism and pluralism, and their applicability to South-East Asian social realities, are all but past, although they have been important in the development of sociological thinking about the region. There are now hopeful signs that sociological analyses of South-East Asia, concentrating on national-level issues of the state, capitalist development and class, and on power structures, socio-economic differentiation, gender, culture, and ideology at the regional and local levels promise to achieve international recognition and contribute to wider debates in sociology about the processes of change in developing countries. In their concern with understanding local social experiences in the context of wider forces of change, they also show themselves to be sensitive to the need to combine Western-derived concepts such as 'class' with the particularities of Oriental social forms, values, cultures and ideologies. This does not, however, provide evidence of the development of a distinctive indigenous sociology. To be sure, there are local sociologists working in this field of study, although much of the writing has been produced by scholars from outside the region. There are, of course, exceptions to this, and one can identify various texts by local scholars, often in local languages, which provide depth and subtlety to our understanding of South-East Asian cultures and the dynamics of social change. In 1984 Anderson noted 'the rise of indigenous studies, typically in the local vernaculars' (Anderson 1984:50), and assessed this process as a 'healthy' development. Indeed, it is, and the indigenization of scholarship on South-East Asia continues apace. Yet, I am still forced to conclude that in sociology at least local studies have not, in general, provided much in the way of theoretical developments of regional scope. Anderson rightly praises country-specific studies in local vernaculars, but if an analysis of Thai society is not accessible to a Malaysian, or a treatise on Indonesian culture
is remote from a Vietnamese, then we still face formidable problems. Nor, as we have seen, does Western scholarship in sociology fare much better, though, I have maintained, there are promising signs of recent innovation.

Perhaps what I am asking for overall is a coming together, a collaboration of local and foreign scholars to push forward our understanding of South-East Asian societies and the dramatic transformations which they are now experiencing. In this I join in Emmerson's hope that the continued development of locally based scholarship ‘should permit “Western” and “Eastern” scholars [...] to enrich the perceptions, or at least to add to the variety of preconceptions, on both sides of an increasingly obsolete dichotomy’ (Emmerson 1984:57). But I have to come back to a point which I have only been able to touch on briefly in this paper: in my view, a vital contribution and preoccupation of local sociologists has been to do with everyday practical problems of development. South-East Asian sociologists are still very much involved in monitoring and describing social change and its consequences for local people, and in working on behalf of governments; a very few have also worked against them. But isn't this what we would expect and, indeed, would wish to support? If local sociology cannot make a contribution to solving the local problems of poverty, backwardness and development, then it is not fulfilling one of its important potential functions. Of course, we are all aware of the dangers of practical involvement. Sociologists from outside the region can, if they wish, more easily indulge themselves in theoretical speculation of a radical or critical kind. Many of those from within South-East Asia can hardly expect such a luxury for the time being, although there are notable exceptions. A future topic which therefore requires separate and detailed examination is the relationship between sociological analysis and its application to development problems, especially in the work of local South-East Asian scholars and practitioners.

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