The Anthropology of Development and Globalization

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From Classical Political Economy to Contemporary Neoliberalism

Edited by
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Agricultural Involution Revisited

Clifford Geertz

1

When I began, more than thirty years ago, to study Indonesia, indigenous cultural traditions were thought by all but a handful of economists, and probably by most anthropologists, to be a simple obstacle to social change, and especially to that particularly wished-for sort of social change called 'development'. The traditional family, traditional religion, traditional patterns of prestige and deference, traditional political arrangements were all regarded as standing in the way of the growth of properly rational attitudes towards work, efficient organisation, and the acceptance of technological change. Breaking the cake of custom was seen as the pre-requisite to the escape from poverty and to the so-called 'takeoff' into sustained growth of *per capita* income, as well as to the blessings of modern life in general. For the economists, the thing to do with the past was abandon it; for the anthropologists, to study it before it was abandoned, and then perhaps to mourn it.

In the Indonesian case, this general attitude did not long survive direct encounter with the place. As Western economists began to flow into Jakarta, from the early 1950s, as advisors, researchers or teachers, the fact that traditional patterns were not only deeply rooted but extraordinarily various and would not yield easily to advanced notions was made brutally apparent to them. The advisers were ignored, the researchers could not find reliable numbers on anything, the teachers found their students seriously unprepared. And when, a bit later, Indonesians began to be trained abroad in modern economic theory, only to return to the proliferating tensions of the late Sukarno period, when virtually every cultural difference in the society was ideologically dramatised, the search for a view of the relation between established life ways and social transformation more adequate than 'the more you have of the one the less you have of the other' grew almost desperate.

The anthropologists (like the economists, predominantly American at that time), being the supposed 'experts' on traditional culture and about the only scholars, aside from a few Dutch philologists, operating outside Jakarta, were, naturally enough, looked to for help. But there were some serious problems.

In the first place, there were, in those early post-Independence days (the formal transfer of Sovereignty took place in the last week of 1949), very few of us – hardly more than a half dozen. Most of us, furthermore, were engaged in a single project centred on a town-village complex in eastern central Java. Worse, none of us was particularly concerned with 'development' as such. Dissertation-conscious graduate students that we all were, we were absorbed with the standard concerns of anthropology (or of anthropology professors): kinship, religion, village organisation, agricultural technique, language, exchange relations. Most of our methodological reflections, such as they were, were given over to the rather more immediate question, to us at least, of how to conduct ethnographic research in a complex civilisation with two millennia of recorded history, a highly differentiated social structure, an extraordinary level of artistic and intellectual accomplishment, and a vast population; a type of work then just getting under way in our still largely tribe and island oriented discipline. And finally, as none of us had much more than the normal college course in economics, we were rather unsure, to put it

mildly, how to go about trying to be of use in making Indonesia 'modern', even if we so desired – which, distrusting the growth ethos as ethnocentric at best, imperialist at worst, we were very far from sure that we did.

The most immediate result of this non-meeting of minds between development-oriented economists and ethnographically oriented anthropologists was a sort of inverse version of the culture-as-obstacle view. As anthropological studies began to appear, in various types of barely legible pre-publication versions, they were eagerly combed – not only by economists but by political scientists, sociologists, and those anthropologists who had been brought to see the necessity of change by their encounter with mass poverty – for beliefs and practices that might aid, or be somehow brought to aid, 'modernisation'. [. . .] People began to talk about 'The modernity of tradition', 'The advantage of backwardness', and 'The Muslim ethic and the spirit of capitalism'.

I go into all this [. . .] in order to convey a sense of the immediate setting in which the main lines of debate over the relationships between Indonesia's astonishingly variegated cultural inheritance and its even more astonishingly persistent directions of change, arose and crystallised. That debate cannot be understood without some knowledge of how it took form, what it was in response to, who took part in it, what *idées reçues* it was seeking to overcome, and how shamelessly *ad hoc* it was.

It was developed, not in the halls of academe by systematic theorists, divided into sects and questioning one another's methodological premisses, ideological commitments or human sympathies (that came later), but in the field, by active researchers primarily concerned with instant matters and grateful for any leads from any quarter which might aid them in comprehending in any way a society whose complexity and depth they found overwhelming. [. . .]

It soon became apparent to those of us who did begin to feel the necessity of thinking seriously about the question, 'Whither Indonesia?' (even if still not persuaded that the answer was, or ought to be, 'To where we are now') that neither the culture-as-obstacle nor the culture-as-stimulus view was going to do. Both these views saw local beliefs and values as external to the processes of institutional change, impalpable forces, psychological perhaps, slowing it down here, speeding it up there, distorting it in this regard, rationalising it in that. [. . .] Whatever the country was doing, it was changing; and apparently it had been, in about the same sort of way, for a very long time. Whatever it was changing to, it was but another version, perhaps one even less 'developmental', of what it was; and it looked to be doing so for a fairly long time to come.

As far as I was concerned, the massive social fact that seemed to render arguments about whether communal land tenure, the 'closed corporate village', ascetic mysticism, ascriptive hierarchy, higgling trade, or Quranic fatalism were or were not 'good for development' grandly beside the point was the enormous population density of the core areas of Indonesia and especially, of course, of the core of cores, central Java. [. . .] Any discussion of culture and change in Indonesia that did not have the past, present, and future of Javanese demography constantly before it would hardly be worth much. [. . .]

At the same time, I was hardly inclined to take a Malthusian view, within which the whole matter reduced to a question of Christian arithmetic: the abstinent prosper, the indulgent starve. What I felt was needed was the placing of Indonesian, especially rural Javanese, demographic history, in the context of the cultural forms which had surrounded it at the various stages of its course. Some of these forms, however altered, surrounded it still, and some, doubtless even further altered, seemed likely to go on surrounding it, at least for that developmentalist dream-time, the foreseeable future. Accordingly, I wrote, in the late fifties and early sixties, a short, rather schematic, rather argumentative book, *Agricultural involution: the processes of ecological change in Indonesia*, which, whatever its worth, certainly launched the sort of discussion I wished to see launched.[1] Praised and derided, used and misused, passionately dissected and aimlessly invoked, 'the involution thesis' has probably been the most extensively, if not always the most perceptively, debated theoretical idea in Indonesian studies since the second world war.[2] I had danced for rain; I got a flood.

2

The argument of *Agricultural involution* is structurally quite simple. But as this has not prevented a fair amount of the secondary presentation of it from getting important aspects of it seriously wrong, whether for tendentious reasons (White 1983) or out of mere incomprehension (Collier 1981; Knight 1982), let me restate its essentials in a breathless and unshaded, synoptic paragraph – a schema schematised.

Indonesia is not merely very heavily populated, but the internal distribution of the population is radically skewed, Java having about nine per cent of the land area and (1961) nearly two-thirds of the people; and this situation is of long duration and extended prospect. The capacity of terraced wet rice agriculture, concentrated mainly on Java, to absorb increasing labour inputs per hectare while keeping per capita output at constant or very slowly declining rates, a capacity lacking in the shifting cultivation, 'swidden' regimes of much of Sumatra, Borneo, The Celebes, and the eastern islands, has made this pattern possible. These rising levels of labour intensification were themselves enabled by the ecological characteristics of rice terraces, by a wide range of tenurial, technological, and work organisational developments, and by extensive reworkings of traditional peasant culture and social structure. The earliest stages of this process are impossible to trace circumstantially, but the systematic imposition by the Dutch of forced export crop cultivation (indigo, coffee, tobacco, and, most critically, sugar) from about 1830 powerfully accelerated it, as well as creating a (relatively) capital intensive enclave economy within the peasant economy, the connections between the two being generally symbiotic though hardly symmetrically beneficial. The ultimate result (ca. 1950) was, on the peasant side, 'involution'. This term was borrowed from the American anthropologist, Alexander Goldenweiser, who devised it to describe culture patterns which, like Gothic architecture or Maori carving, having reached a definitive form, continued nonetheless to develop by becoming internally more complicated. Javanese agriculture particularly, but Javanese social life more generally, maintained itself in the face of a steadily rising population and increasing colonial pressure by such an internal complexification, to the point that by the middle of this century a terrible impasse had come into being: an extremely large and still growing labour force, a weakening capacity to absorb it into traditional agriculture through involutional processes (even Maori carving runs out of space between the lines), and a small encapsulated, and job-poor industrial sector. On the one side, rural class polarisation of the sort found in many third world countries – even neighbouring ones such as the Philippines – was inhibited; but on the other, so was the steady reduction of the proportion of the labour force employed in agriculture that has been characteristic of development in Europe and North America. The book closed with some comparative remarks about Japan's rather different agrarian history (different, that is, from both European and Indonesian) that I still think enlightening but which hardly anyone else seems to have grasped the point of, some whistlings in the dark about the future, and a plea for carrying forward the diagnosis of the Indonesian malaise 'beyond the analysis of ecological and economic processes to an investigation into the nation's political, social and cultural dynamics'. (1963: 154)

There were, of course, a number of other matters touched on in the book: the incipient, but ill-fated moves toward smallholder export agriculture in some parts of the so-called 'Outer Islands' during the 1920s; an analysis of swidden and wet rice terracing in ecosystem terms; a critique of both environmental determinism and the evasive response to it called 'possibilism'; a discussion of the changing strategies of colonial exploitation – trade monopoly, forced cultivation, corporate farming – on Java. But these have not much entered into the debate, perhaps because it has been, left, right, and centre, so intensely economistic in its tenor; a point I will make a great deal of in what follows. Also, some of the questions on which the book has stimulated controversy – when involution really set in; the causes, indeed the reality, of the nineteenth century 'population explosion'; the precise nature of the interaction between Dutch and Javanese agricultural technologies – seem to me empirical issues of some moment, however one might want to phrase them, but not ones whose resolutions are likely to contribute all that much towards either weakening or strengthening its central thesis. In any case, they are matters for specialists, quarrels about quarrels, and cannot be entered into here.[3] What I do want to enter into is the degree to which the call to situate the general inquiry in its cultural context has been heeded, and with what effect.

The short and brutal answers to these questions are: 'not much' and 'very little'. My own main disappointment with most of the reactions to the book – with those that are 'for' as well as those that are 'against' – is that they interpret it independently of the rest of my Indonesian work on religion, stratification, politics, bazaar trading, village organisation, family structure, etc., rather than as a prolegomena to that work, which it was intended to be. [...] The book has come to be regarded as rather a sport; an unaccountable lapse from my general, supposedly dreamy, approach to things. [...] The bulk of the involution debate has taken precisely the sort of turn the book was written expressly to forestall: that is, toward 'economism'.

'Economism' is a useful, if unlovely, term of art whose diffusion to English-speaking anthropology from French we owe perhaps as much to Marshall Sahlins (1976) as to anyone. It is the view that the moving forces in individual behaviour (and thus in society, which is taken to be an aggregate of individual behaviours or some stratificational arrangement of them) are those of a need-driven utility seeker manoeuvring for advantage within the context of material possibilities and normative constraints: 'the home-bred economizing of the market place . . . transposed to the explication of human society' (1976: 86). Man (and, in her own place, Woman) the strategiser, manipulating 'means-ends relations [within] an eternal teleology of human satisfactions' (1976: 85), takes the centre and most of the rest of the social stage. Custom, convention, belief, and institution are but *mise-en-scène*, the particular setting within which the universal drama of boundless desires and scarce fulfilments or, in the Marxist version, productive forces and class interests, is played out.

So far as the involution debate is concerned, 'economism' has led to what one might call the re-externalisation of cultural (or socio-cultural) matters reminiscent of the culture-as-barrier *v.* culture-as-stimulus framework from which the discussion sought to escape in the first place. Now, however, the alternatives tend to be culture-as-mystifying-ideology (Alexander & Alexander 1982; Gerdin 1982; Lyon 1970) or culture-as-forceless-trapping (Collier 1981; Miles 1979; Robison 1981): collective illusion concealing (one is never quite sure from whom, although one can be sure it is not the analyst) the mechanics of power and exploitation, or collective poetry which makes nothing happen. Down deep, culture is shallow; society runs on the energies of want.

More concretely, there have been (simplifying madly a cluttered landscape of creed and theory) two main expressions of this general approach to the issues posed by Java's (and thus Indonesia's) resilient predicament: one centred around mode-of-production conceptions of one sort or another, stemming of course from Marxist perspectives transmogrified by structuralism; the other centred around rational action models, stemming from Neoclassical perspectives softened with populist sentiments.

3

The mode of production approach has concerned itself with the incorporation of Java into the world economy and, particularly, with the impact of the so-called 'Capitalist' on the so-called 'Asiatic' Mode of Production. (Or 'Tributary', or 'Mercantile', or 'Feudal': as is usual in Marxist polemic, whose form is a good deal more stable than that of either Marxist theory or Marxist praxis, types tend to multiply and distinctions to proliferate to the point where each participant ends up a party of one, at least as anxious to dispatch rival comrades as bourgeois enemies.[4]) Matters are cast on a resolutely grand and abstract scale, a dialectic of mega-concepts heavily annotated with opportune mini-facts, assembled from here, there and elsewhere, rather in the manner of a lawyer's brief – a tendency reinforced by the appearance of World Systems Theory with its cores, semiperipheries, dependencies, dominations, global divisions of labour, and other triumphant categories. [. . .]

The main problematic (as its adherents would be likely to call it) animating this way of addressing the issues raised by the involution thesis, is this. Has or has not Indonesian history, and again especially Javanese history, consisted, from quite early on – say, 1511, or 1602, or 1755, or 1830 (all resonant dates in Indonesian history) – of a progressive, step by irresistible step, encroachment of the logic of capitalism upon that of indigenous society such that that society has been fairly thoroughly transformed into a commoditised, class-polarised, 'dependent' system, a peripheral outlier of a formerly colonial, now neo-colonial hierarchical world economy whose apex is, in Geoffrey Hainsworth's (1982: 9) mocking phrase, 'most likely located in the New York Board Room of the Chase Manhattan Bank'? Most (Knight 1982; Elson 1978*a*, 1978*b*; White 1983; Aass 1980; Alexander & Alexander 1978; van Niel 1983), though with differing degrees of assurance and for somewhat differing reasons, rather think that it has. Some, also with varying confidence and for varying reasons (Tichelman 1980; Mortimer 1973; Fasseur 1975; Onghokham 1975; Slamet 1982; Robison 1982; Kahn n.d.), rather think that it has not. The difference of opinion is not, of course, whether such an impact has occurred and been extremely significant; no one, from any perspective, has ever denied that. It is whether the force of that impact has been such as to overwhelm Javanese rural society and 'reconstitute' its peasantry in Capitalist, Man and Master terms, or whether it has been insufficiently massive or too specifically focused to overcome the 'Asiatic' constraints proper to that society, the immanent logic of the 'Tributary' or the 'Mercantile' or the 'Feudal' Mode of Production.

According to this way of thinking, the characteristic mark of capitalism is a fundamental opposition between the owners of the means of production and wage labourers, alienated from such ownership, while the characteristic mark of the Asiatic Mode of Production is one between patrimonial or feudal tribute-takers and the kin- and community-bound primary producers from whom the tribute is taken. Historical and sociological arguments therefore focus on the degree to which, at any point and generally, the first of these exploitative conditions displaces the second.

In particular, one scans the history of rural Java for signs of the implantation of a monetised market economy conjoining privately managed property to formally free labour because, from the relative presence or absence of this, everything else in some sense follows. [. . .] The economism, the hegemony of 'larger forces', lingers on.

Those who believe that at least the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of Java [. . .] consists of the progressive class polarisation of the peasantry in rural capitalist/rural proletarian terms argue as follows. The incursion of Western forms of enterprise, especially plantation enterprise, and Western goods, especially consumption goods, individualised, or perhaps 'familised', the supposedly communal village economy to such an extent that those marginally better placed in that economy markedly increased their material position at the expense of those marginally less well placed, until a proper gulf appeared between them. A little more land, a little greater integration into regional trade networks, a little better placement in the village political hierarchy, and the passage to country-style *embourgeoisement* was launched, never after to be more than temporarily arrested. Or, to change the idiom, that necessary figure in the Marxist agrarian romance, The Kulak, was born.

Or invented. Some of the elements of this picture are reasonably easy to establish; but not, in my opinion and that of some others (Kahn n.d.; Mackie n.d.), the picture as a whole. [. . .]

The question that arises for this view is, of course, where, if this process of kulakisation has been gathering force for a century or more, all the kulaks are. If the members of the Javanese rural elite have been so exquisitely capitalistic, why aren't they rich? As we shall see, there are those who argue that such primitive accumulators, ruthlessly rationalising production, commoditising labour, and appropriating wealth, are at last, in the past decade or so, coming into being, providing, to quote Robison (1982, 57), 'a powerful landlord/kulak class which constitutes a significant strategic basis of political support for the [Suharto regime]'. But even if that is the case (and, as we shall see, it is possible to have reservations here also), it is extremely difficult to trace a continuous history of such a forming class over the colonial and early post-Independence periods.[5] Indeed, in so far as such a history can be traced at all, it seems quite discontinuous, a series of weak, incipient movements, local spasms soon swallowed up in the general immiseration, gradual, diffuse and unrelenting, of Javanese village society.

What evidence there is seems to indicate that the overall pattern of small, very gradually declining average farm size, with a comparatively narrow, markedly downwardly skewed distribution, maintained itself from at least the beginning of the last century to at least the middle of this. The Alexanders' (1982) summary of the situation, if not the interpretation ('structural realities' *v.* 'ideological dreams') they place upon it, seems to me as close to indefeasible as one can get in the shadow-facts and floating-numbers world of Javanese rural history: [. . .] "Although the average farm size at the time of Independence was [thus] very small, it does not appear to represent a significant decline from some higher level." [. . .]

Against this general background – the gradual miniaturisation of a farming system lilliputian to start with – farmers of a dimension and disposition sufficient to qualify as proper kulaks, to the degree that they appear at all, seem but bubbles in the stream, local, fragile and evanescent, soon engulfed by the central current. If one looks hard enough, especially along hospitable coasts (Knight 1982), around enterprising sugar mills (Elson 1978*b*), in late developed interior regions (van Doorn & Hendrix 1983) or migrant settled frontier ones (Geertz 1965), and during particular times (export booms, crop revolutions, administrative florescences), one finds a few proprietary heads beginning to appear above the subsistence mass, but when one looks back again, after the boom has receded, the crop pattern restabilised, or the regime re-routinised, they are gone.[6] Poverty lasts, and indeed proliferates; landlords don't.

The reasons for this 'non-reproduction of a landlord class' (Alexander & Alexander 1982: 603) – to stay in the idiom – given by capitalist-transformation theorists, when they recognise the fact at all, are largely *ad hoc*, strained, and thoroughly undeveloped, which is about the best one can do when cultural phenomena are neglected, or

pushed off into a mystifying ideology in favour of economistic analyses. [. . .]

The problem is again that the placing of cultural matters outside social process as but deceptive metaphors for changing economic relationships leaves one helpless to understand even those relationships, never mind the metaphors, to which no real attention is given anyway. The externalisation of Javanese (or Indonesian) moral, political, practical, religious and aesthetic ideas, the conceptual frame within which Javanese (or Indonesians) perceive what happens to them and respond to it, ends not with the discovery of the 'real', material determinants of change, nor with the restoration of the 'hegemony' of economics over society (Alexander & Alexander 1982: 615), but with a disjunction between them that neither the most desperate of speculations nor the most determined of dogmas can paper over. Whatever happened in pre-Independence Java – involution, class formation, or anything else – it did not consist in the progressive working out of 'the logic of capitalism', and it did not take place in a cultural vacuum.

4

This comes to a head and finds its practical point, of course, in assessments of the present situation. Whatever may or may not have happened around Pasuruan in the 1850s, Tulungagung in the 1920s, or Kediri in the 1950s, there has emerged a strong current of opinion that holds that something else is happening now – that the long awaited rural capitalist has, like some inverse Messiah, at last arrived, this time to stay, and involution, if it ever did exist, is over, as is perhaps the past in general. Here, it has been mostly agricultural economists (and their anthropological fellow travellers) with an essentially Neoclassical rather than a Marxist conception of how the rich get richer and the poor poorer who have been in the vanguard, though the contrast is far from absolute. [. . .] This is particularly so since the rise of Suharto's 'New Order' has induced a pervasive sense of moral dissatisfaction, mounting at times to outrage, among the overwhelming majority (myself included) of independent observers of Indonesia, whatever their political persuasions (for a useful sampling, see Anderson & Kahin 1982). Present injustices, unlike past ones, tend to drive people who would otherwise not much agree with one another into each other's arms.

The difference in the general atmosphere within which students of Indonesia, foreign or domestic, now prosecute their studies and the one within which those of us who worked in the fifties prosecuted ours is so great as to be difficult to overestimate. [. . .] I say [this] to draw attention again to the fact that the substance of, in this case, the involution debate – what is genuinely at issue after the appeals to methodological gods are stripped away – cannot be effectively grasped without some understanding of the contexts within which positions are formed, research conducted and polemics launched.

To write, even about rice growing, population pressure, or land tenure, just after a successful political revolution seems to have opened up a vast range of new possibilities is one thing; to write about them just after the ignominious collapse of a hyper-populist regime, a great popular massacre and the installation of an anti-populist Government seem to have closed them up again, is quite another. The question is whether the transformation in what I can again only call 'the general atmosphere' has led to a tendency to misinterpret what is now happening in rural Java: to see a continental shift where there is but a collection of marginal adjustments to a persisting, if accelerating, erosive process. The difference between my critics and myself (or at least *one* of the differences) is that I rather think that it has.

Those who see such a continental shift find its moving causes not in mode-of-production abstractions such as 'capitalism', but in particular technical innovations, and in novel employment practices directly induced by such technical innovations, which have, in good factors-of-production style, 'resulted in shifts in the relative "economic bargaining position" of landowners, near-landless, and landless groups' in favour of landowners (Sinaga & Collier 1975: 21). Everything, from the introduction of small Japanese-made rice hullers, increasing substitution of the sickle for the famous 'finger-knife' in reaping, and the spread of lease-out commercial harvesting, to the fertilisers, insecticides, and 'miracle seeds' of the Green Revolution, is working to strengthen the strong and weaken the weak in the intensified price bargaining over the distribution of Java's (and Indonesia's) agricultural product. The cold winds of the free market in commoditised land, labour, and capital are now blowing through the land-short, labour-bloated, capital-thin village economy, little hindered by established practice or moral constraint, certainly not by fellow-feeling. Growth (about 4 per cent. a year since the mid-sixties [Booth & McCawley 1981; *cf*. Pauuw 1983]) is being purchased at the expense of equity.

The two most persistent themes in this sort of analysis are large scale labour displacements and the radical rationalisation (or, perhaps better, deculturalisation) of economic relationships. The introduction of labour saving innovations, even if limited, into a rural economy in which landlessness or near-landlessness runs on the average around twenty percent (Montgomery & Sugito 1980) and in the worst cases to 75 per cent or more (Stoler 1977*a*; cf. White 1976*b*: 127; Penny & Singarimbun 1973), drastically reduces employment opportunities and enables those who do have workable farms, even if miniscule, to deal with agricultural workers in strenuously iron law terms.[7] The Ricardian paradise, swelling rents and subsistence wages, finds an Asian home.

The construction of this picture rests mainly on extensive, highly focused, spot-survey type observation, almost all of them quantitative, plus a great deal of notional arithmetic, rather than on long-term, intensive and systematic, 'multiplex', community studies directed toward uncovering how village life is holistically put together. That is, it rests on what I have elsewhere called 'divergent' as opposed to 'convergent' data:

> By convergent data I mean descriptions, measures, observations, what you will, which are at once diverse, even rather miscellaneous, both as to type and degree of precision and generality, unstandardized facts, opportunistically collected and variously portrayed, which yet turn out to shed light on one another for the simple reason that the individuals they are descriptions, measures, or observations of are directly involved in one another's lives; people, who in a marvellous phrase of Alfred Schutz's, 'grow old together'. As such they differ from the sort of [divergent] data one gets from polls, or surveys, or censuses, which yield facts about classes of individuals not otherwise related: all women who took degrees in economics in the 1960s; the number of papers published on Henry James by two-year periods since World War II. (Geertz 1983:156)[8]

There is, of course, no general argument favouring one of these sorts of data over the other. Both have their uses; for some purposes they complement one another; and it is possible to get things precisely or vaguely wrong, employing either of them. But the sharp turn towards the divergent data approach does raise serious questions about the adequacy of interpretations of the contemporary scene in rural Java which flow from such a 'what you count is what you get' sort of analysis. When you are dealing with, to quote myself again (1983: 157) 'communities of multiply connected individuals in which something you find out about A tells you something about B as well, because having known each other too long and too well, they are characters in one another's biographies', number crunching – tables, graphs, ICORs, and Gini Coefficients – may not be enough.

In any case, the estimating, categorising, counting, summing, 'percentifying', and row-and-column showing forth of things, the wild intensity of which cannot really be appreciated without looking at the studies themselves, has not resulted in much of a consensus about what is or isn't going on in rural Java so far as social change is concerned.[9]

Differences in estimates of the amount of labour displaced by mechanical hullers rise as high as an order of magnitude (Timmer 1973; Collier, Colter, *et al.* 1974; Timmer 1974), a small figure in astronomy, perhaps, but rather a large one in the social sciences. The percentage of the 'destitute' in rural Java (i.e. those consuming less than 180 kg of rice-equivalent a year) is claimed on the one hand to have markedly risen in recent years (Sajogyo; cited in Bose 1982) and on the other to have, about as markedly, fallen (Meesook; cited in Bose 1982). One calculator can argue that the technological innovations of the Green Revolution have radically 'widened the [income] gap between small peasants and . . . big farmers' (Hüsken 1982*b*: 8); a second that 'the majority of the Indonesian people have benefited, in terms of material living standards, from the economic growth of [recent] years, though no doubt in an unequal degree' (Arndt 1975: 83); a third that 'there is no persuasive evidence that Indonesia's relatively egalitarian income distribution has significantly changed since 1965' (Papanek 1980: 65); a fourth that, urban Java aside, between 1970 and 1976, 'a decline in absolute poverty occurred' and 'the poor were able to increase their real expenditure more rapidly than the rich' (Pauuw 1983: 249). [. . .]The pulverisation of village social structure into numbers and the setting aside of cultural factors altogether as something for Islamologists, mythographers, and shadow-play enthusiasts to deal with seems to lead not to increased precision but to ascending indeterminacy.

5

Only the recontextualisation of Javanese and Indonesian economic processes within Javanese and Indonesian life as concretely enacted, the de-externalisation of culture, can reduce this indeterminacy, however slightly, and deliver answers we can

have some faith in, however modest. It is not economic analysis itself that is the problem, any more than it is quantification. It is economism: the notion (to which, in fact, anthropologists, at least in Indonesia, seem rather more susceptible these days than do economists) that a determinate picture of social change can be obtained in the absence of an understanding of the passions and imaginings that provoke and inform it. Such understanding is inevitably limited. [...] But without it there is nothing but polemic, schematicism and endless measurements of amorphous magnitudes: history without temper, sociology without tone.

If the debates that have arisen around 'the involution thesis' are ever to be properly adjudicated and, at least, some reasonable determination made as to whether the present crisis in the Indonesian rural economy is one of incremental immiseration (as the returns from agriculture are distributed ever more thinly across the swelling rural population) or whether it is one of a classic, have and have-not confrontation (monopolisation of the means of production, dispossession of the working class), we shall have to know a great deal more about the concrete particulars of social life than we are likely to get from global categories, divergent data and, if I may say so, the processed sentiments of evangelical social theories. Nor is it only the particulars of peasant life, in the narrow sense, that need to be uncovered, but those of commerce and artisanry, of state-society relationships, of religious differentiation and aesthetic transformation, and much else as well.

This is not a counsel of perfection. It is not necessary to know everything to know anything. Nor is it a counsel of despair. There are other forms of dynamism than those Marxists and Liberals have already thought of, as well as other forms of disaster. It is merely a plea for us to begin again to look for answers to our questions where the answers might conceivably be. The shamelessly *ad hoc* grappling with the whole grand conglomeration of social practices, the willingness to take factual or analytical instruction from whatever direction it might come, and above all the determination to situate processes of change within local ways of going at life that marked the first phases of 'developmental theorizing' in Indonesia may have lacked a certain rigour and certainly lacked a sufficient precision. But, at least, they did not confine us to searching for lost coins only where the light was, and they did not imagine that it was advantage that made the world go round.

The case is particular, but the point is general. Whatever one may think of omega point models of social change, in which everyone ends up a class warrior or a utility maximiser (and I, obviously, think very little of them), there is no chance of analysing change effectively if one pushes aside as so much incidental music what it is that in fact is changing: the moral substance of a sort of existence. The Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Romantic Reaction made the modern world as much as trade, science, bureaucracy and the Industrial Revolution; and, indeed, vast changes of social mind, they made it together. Whatever happens in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – Rough Beasts or New Forms of Architecture – it will, you can count on it, involve comparable passages, comparably vast.

NOTES

1 Geertz (1963).

2 Among the discussions (book reviews aside), pro, con, or uncertain, of the involution thesis, see: Wertheim (1964); Penny (1966); Yengoyan (1966); Lyon (1970); Larkin (1971); Penny & Singarimbun (1972); Sajogyo (1972–73); Utrecht (1973); White (1973); Sievers (1974); Hinkson (1975); van den Muijzenberg (1975); Polak (1976); Sajogyo (1976); Temple (1976); White (1976*a*); 1976*b*; Collier, Hadikoesworo *et al*., (1977); Stoler (1977 *a*, 1977*b*); Alexander & Alexander (1978); Elson (1978*a*; 1978*b*); May (1978); Mubyarto (1978); Stoler (1978); Alexander & Alexander (1979); Hüsken (1979); Miles (1979); van Doorn (1980); Hüsken & van Schaik (1980); Kano (1980); Sherman (1980); Tichelman (1980); Zimmerman (1980); Collier (1981); Alexander & Alexander (1982); Gerdin (1982); Hüsken (1982*a*); Knight (1982); Mubyarto (1982); Alexander (1983), White (1983); van Niel (1983); Kahn (n.d.); Mackie (n.d.); Strout (n.d.) [...] The debate has also spilled beyond the border of Indonesia to southeast Asia more generally: see Scott (1976); Popkin (1979); cf. Brow (1976). [...]

3 In order to avoid the charge of evasion concerning these questions, and because White (1983), has seen fit to assemble polemicised versions of them in order to dismiss me as (exchangeable terms for him, apparently) a 'Parsonian', an 'infuriating' *littérateur*, and a peddler of 'imperialist software' – 'Geertz-bashing' as he winningly calls it – let me merely indicate, without argument, my present views on them. (And so as not to be misunderstood, I should remark that White's intellectual vulgarity is not generally characteristic of the involution debate, which has for the most part been conducted, from infra-red to ultraviolet, on a high and serious level; some of my most persistent critics (the Alexanders 1978, 1979, 1982,

for example) have been consistently fair, temperate and scholarly.)

1) As to whether the involution process got firmly under way during the pre-colonial period (Mubyarto 1982; May 1978), the *cultuurstelsel* ('Culture' or 'Cultivation System') period (Geertz 1963) or the 'Corporate Plantation/Ethical System' period (Tichelman 1980) I confess myself still partial to my original position. [. . .]
2) As for the causes of the population 'explosion', I find the arguments of White (1973) and Alexander (1983) for a 'labour demand theory of population', which sees the 'explosion' to be a result of Dutch pressures on the peasant labour force, in turn causal of altered reproductive practices, intriguing, speculative and unconvincing (cf. Geertz 1973). On the other hand, I would now be more inclined to doubt (with Widjojo 1970 and van der Walle 1973; cf. White 1976*b*: 60–1) a proper 'explosion' at all in contrast to a general, more or less steady rise, than I was in 1963. The history of Indonesian population dynamics, and most especially of their micro-dynamics, before 1930 remain obscure and will probably stay that way no matter how many just-so stories about lactation and post-partum sex taboos the 'labour demand' theorists can contrive to tell.
3) On the interaction of Dutch and Javanese production modes, especially in sugar, I find a number of the points made by recent historical research (Elson 1978*b*; Alexander & Alexander 1978; van Niel 1983) enlightening and usefully corrective; others (particularly ones which attribute to me positions I never held, such as that 'the ecological requirements of sugar cane are identical to those of wet rice' or that 'sugar cane technology was deliberately developed . . . by the capitalists to conform to the ecological requirements of irrigated paddy' (Sajogyo 1976)) much less so. The general 'adverse symbiotic' characterisation seems, in any case, to stand largely undamaged. Indeed, in some ways it seems to have been strengthened by exacter specification than I was able to give it.

   Finally, 4) one other supposed correction to the involution thesis – the importance of house-gardening in local agricultural production (Stoler 1978), was in fact mentioned in the original formulation (Geertz 1963: 96, n. 41), and indeed, as pointed out there, had been stressed and quite thoroughly investigated by the Dutch agricultural economists, well before the second world war (for a summary, see Terra 1946). Similar remarks can be made concerning my supposed neglect of dry field cultivation (Stoler 1978; cf. Geertz 1963: 91–4, 101, 106, 145).

4 For a critical discussion and an historically global application of 'mode of production' theory, see Wolf (1982), esp. pp. 73–100, 400–4.

5 Quantitative arguments here are extremely tricky to make – trickier than most of the class-polarisation theorists, who rely very heavily upon them, often seem to realise, though the usual caveats are entered and ignored. Not only are the numbers unreliable as such, many of them having been made up in some administrative office or other for purposes more rhetorical than analytic, but the great complexity of proprietary institutions within the historic Javanese [. . .] local community [. . .] makes the application of familiar measures of rural inequality based on a fee-simple view of ownership often quite misleading. [. . .]

6 As a number of people have pointed out in self-induced puzzlement (Alexander & Alexander 1982; Mackie n.d.; van Niel 1983; White 1983), I myself (Geertz 1965; 40–3, 49–51) discussed the appearance of a nascent, though soon undermined 'rural middle class of slightly larger landholders' (p. 42) during the sugar boom of the 1920s in the eastern Central Javanese Subdistrict (Pare) where I did most of the field research that gave rise to the involution idea. As in this case, it was the collapse of the sugar boom in the thirties depression that most instantly undercut this 'capitalist' development in village society, the tendency has been to regard its stultification as an ungeneralisable historical accident. But the point is (and the ungrasped point of my discussion was) that it is an ungeneralisable historical accident that keeps happening over and over again in diverse places. [. . .] A series of scattered sociological hiccoughs – small noises, soon dispersed – do not, however, an 'agrarian transition' (White 1983) make, much less, 'a pervasive growth of capitalist relations and purposes' (Knight 1982: 147). What they make, given a Java in the 1970's in which probably less than one per cent of the landholdings are more than five hectares (Booth & Sundrum 1981: 184), and virtually none are more than nine (Kahn, n.d.: 25), is a howling counterfactual question.

7 [. . .] Discussions of the effect of (and rationales for) alternative cut-off points – and indeed of the robustness of measures in general – are largely absent from this literature (for a partial exception, see Montgomery & Sugito 1980). [. . .]

8 Even in those few cases in which polarisation arguments are based on extended-residence village studies (White 1976b; Gerdin 1982), the studies involved consist less in an attempt to determine the overall order of social relationships and the cultural forms that sustain it, than the mobilisation of quantifiable fact into objectivised categories – wealth, income, employment, work hours, labour efficiency, household expenditure, calorie consumption. They are rather more in the nature of mini-surveys than they are community ethnographies: it is magnitudes that are wanted, not pictures; findings not portrayals. For an exception, yet somewhat in tension with my own views, see Hefner (1983).

9 For examples of runaway quantophrenia, calculating everything from 'fodder eaters per household' in six

southern hamlets to 'net mending costs per year' for small *v.* medium sized perahu operators in a north coast fishing village, see White (1976*b*); (Birowo, Collier *et al.* 1974). Aside from doubts as to the possibility of obtaining reliable estimates of matters such as these by means of point-blank questions to panel-sampled peasants by intrusive investigators, my objection to much – *not all* – of this sort of work is the seeming lack of recognition of the fact that, as probabilities do not add but multiply, the chance that an extended string of calculations connected together by estimated conversion ratios, *ceteris paribus* assumptions, and various other postulated magnitudes will culminate in an accurate conclusion is vanishingly small. It is not quantification that is the problem (for some careful, less thesis-driven, and technically more sophisticated studies that have at least heard of instrument effects and error estimates, see Montgomery & Sugito 1980; Strout n.d.), but the making of very soft data look very hard by casting it into numerical rhetoric.

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