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From the Sociology of the 'Social' to the Sociology of the 'Cultural' in Conceptions of Southeast Asia: A 'State-of-the-Art' Essay

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Abstract

This paper provides a re-evaluation of the first general sole-authored text on the sociology of Southeast Asia and the wider field of Southeast Asian Studies (*The Sociology of South-East Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region* (King 2008a). Other region-wide volumes have been usually edited or co-edited projects and compilations of reprinted readings. The introductory book was published just under two decades ago and obviously much has changed in our thinking about Southeast Asia since then*. Although the volume was subsequently reprinted (2011) and digitised (2016) and the possibility of a revised edition contemplated, this has not happened. If it had been revised, what would the edition look like, based on subsequent research? After a contextual introduction, there is an examination of some of the most significant general work in the sociology of Southeast Asia during the past two decades with attention to ways in which we might think about the current state-of-play. One possible pathway is the movement towards the related and, in sociology, relatively neglected concepts of culture and identity and the sociology of everyday lives in the context of globalisation and transnationalism. It is also necessary to take up some of the ideas of Professor Aihwa Ong in regard to concepts, methods and the definition of region.

Keywords: Sociology; Anthropology; Southeast Asia; social-structuralism; political economy; culture; identity; discipline and area; methodology; concepts

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Introduction*

Context

There is a problem in distinguishing sociology from other disciplines. Some sociologists employ methods and ideas from anthropology; others move closer to political economy (politics and economics). Sociology also jostles with social and economic history, and various multidisciplinary fields: development studies, legal studies, gender studies, international studies, media studies, environmental studies, and ethnic studies, among others. In my academic career, I have moved between sociology and anthropology, and, at times, I find it difficult to label myself as either a sociologist or an anthropologist.

Let me first consider the sociology of Southeast Asia. In a state-of-the-art review some three decades ago, I proposed that we are only able to arrive at rough-and-ready discriminations between sociology and cognate disciplines and fields of study and perhaps 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' (King 1994: 172; and 2008a: 20-36). In other words, the concern is to comprehend the organisation and transformation of human societies. Some

* The transcription of terms for the region have varied. Here they are rendered as either 'South-East Asia', 'South East Asia' or 'Southeast Asia'. This paper emerged from an IAS Distinguished Professor Seminar delivered at UBD in Ruang Bicara Minda, Main Library entitled 'From the Sociology of the "Social" to the Sociology of the "Cultural": East-West Parallels and the Southeast Asian Context' (20 November 2024). As always, the author is solely responsible for any errors or shortcomings which may appear.

sociologists, like anthropologists, undertake 'on-the-ground' research, but they also tend towards arriving at a wider understanding, at a national, regional or global level, of the human condition. This may be somewhat unfair to anthropologists, but later in the paper I hope to rebalance my assessment by considering the work on globalisation and transnationalism of the anthropologist, Aihwa Ong. Nevertheless, among the social theorists to whom I have referred in that review were obvious ones, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, among several others, and we do not need to remind ourselves that both sociologists and anthropologists have drawn on the ideas of Durkheim, and his founding of the *Année Sociologique* in Paris in 1898.

The Underdevelopment of Southeast Asian Sociology

Up until the early 2000s there were virtually no available texts which addressed the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia as a whole. In the 1970s up to around 1980 one of the most well-known edited volumes in sociology was Hans-Dieter Evers's *Modernization in South-East Asia* (1973a; see King 1978a), followed by his compilation *Sociology of South-East Asia. Readings on Social Change and Development* (1980; and see King 1981a). He had also co-edited, with the Singapore sociologist, Peter S. J. Chen, *Studies in ASEAN Sociology: Urban Society and Social Change* (1978). These three publications only provided partial coverage of the region. At that time Evers was Professor of Sociology in the University of Singapore and the Department of Sociology there; he also enjoyed a close association with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore founded in 1968 (renamed the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in 2015). The Department and Institute have continued to exercise considerable influence over the development of the sociology, and the social sciences more generally, of Southeast Asia. Depending on one's viewpoint, it might be seen, within the region, as an example of regional academic imperialism.; they have certainly provided a Singapore-centred perspective on the region.

In 1978 Chen and Evers remarked then that 'One common problem faced by all sociology lecturers in Southeast Asia is the lack of local teaching materials' (ibid.: xiii). There was also a view that the field was dominated by foreign researchers. Even in the early 1980s I commented that 'South-East Asian sociology has not really distinguished itself' (1981: 391). Evers also proposed that, although sociologists had been engaged in gathering empirical data, 'relatively little progress has been made in furthering the understanding of changing South-East Asian societies' (1980: ix). In the 1970s Evers focused mainly on rethinking American

modernisation theory, though not abandoning it, in the context of the changing world economy and its consequences for Southeast Asia.

A decade later John G. Taylor and Andrew Turton compiled a set of readings in the sociology of Southeast Asian development, suggesting that the region is of the utmost political and economic importance, 'Yet the degree and quality of much of the research…. does not enable one to address the most important aspects of its current and future development'. They contrast this research with the work undertaken in Latin America on dependency, underdevelopment and world systems; in East Africa, on the role of the state and its relationship to indigenous classes; and in South Asia, capitalist relations of production and agrarian differentiation (1988: 1; and see King 1989). As with Evers, they refer to a reliance on external ideas and models 'rather than generating indigenous explanations of the region and its place in the world economy' (ibid.).

A further decade on, Johannes Schmidt and his colleagues, in their edited book on social change in Southeast Asia and their adoption of a political economy approach, also pressed the case for the importance of understanding 'emerging structures of economic and social inequality' in the region (Schmidt et al. 1997 [1998]: 1). As we shall see Richard Robison and his influential political economy school at Murdoch University, Western Australia, began to make a substantial contribution to our understanding of changing Southeast Asia from the 1980s. Interestingly, and for obvious reasons of difficulties of access to field-sites and data, Robison and his colleagues only provided a partial picture of Southeast Asia in their country case-studies. They focused, as did those before them, on the founding members of ASEAN, and a little later they ventured, into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; Negara Brunei Darussalam also made an appearance. Schmidt, Hersch and Folds as do Chen and Evers, follow the same path, with their attention to the Republic of Indonesia, the Federation of Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Republic of Singapore, including one chapter on Vietnam. The Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic do not feature to any extent.

In the 1980s and 1990s these criticisms of the lack of innovation in locally-based social science research, and the dependence of Southeast Asian researchers on perspectives, approaches and concepts, derived primarily from Western scholarship, appeared in a number of publications (see, for example, Doner 1991; Neher 1984). The additional consideration was the constraints on research imposed by authoritarian governments in the region which exercised

significant control over higher education and research institutions and their funding, and directed social science activity into work on planning, policy and pragmatic development issues (Preston 1987: 99; Schulte Nordholt and Visser 1995; King 2008a: 22-24). A wide range of local scholars across Southeast Asia (in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, among others) have pointed to the difficulties of undertaking independent research, free from the demands of the state (see, for example, Ong et al. 1997; Heryanto 2005; Samuel 1999; Hadiz and Dhakidae 2005; Shamsul 1995; Bautista 1994; Carino 1980; and see Reynolds and Hong on Thailand 1983).

The Captive Mind

Professor Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007), early on, drew attention to what he referred to as 'the captive mind' in the context of 'intellectual imperialism' which emerged during the colonial period and, following decolonisation, had operated increasingly in indirect ways, though its effects have diminished during the past 40 to 50 years (2000; and see Syed Farid Alatas 2001, 2006; Farid Alatas and Sinha 2001). Hussein Alatas also refers to the captive mind 'as the psychological dimension of academic dependency'; it is an 'uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective' (1974: 692). The source is the dominance of Western social science and humanities. At the time he was formulating his ideas, having undertaken postgraduate studies at the University of Amsterdam and coming under the influence of the school of Non-Western Sociology headed by Professor W. F. [Willem Frederik] Wertheim (1907-1998), sociological research in Southeast Asia was indeed dominated by what Ruth McVey referred to as 'the regnant paradigm' which was American 'modernisation theory' (1995). This was evident in both the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, and in modified form even in the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Nevertheless, though critical of 'intellectual imperialism' and its consequences in local dependent scholarship, Hussein Alatas seemed to waver between the search for alternative, locally based concepts and approaches and those that he had taken from European social thinking. In his studies of modernisation and social change, he did not stray too far from Wertheim and Weber (see, for example, 1972). However, in preceding Edward Said's thesis on 'Orientalism' (1978, 1993), and in one of his most acclaimed works, he critically addressed

European colonial images of Javanese, Filipinos and Malays in the construction of 'the myth of the lazy native' (1977).

One major reason for academic dependency was that Southeast Asian students from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand in particular went to the USA for their postgraduate studies in Cornell, Yale, Chicago, Berkeley, California and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), among others, or, in the American colony of the Philippines, were supervised by senior resident American scholars who had significant access to research funds provided by the USA and could therefore set the research agenda (see King 1994: 177-180; 2008a: 24-32-37-55). One of the prominent examples of this academic dominance is the text by Chester L. Hunt (1912-1994), as the lead author, of the introductory textbook *Sociology in the Philippine Setting*, first published in 1954 when he was Chair of the Department of Sociology and Social Welfare at the University of the Philippines. Referred to as 'The Father of Philippine Sociology' he put an indelible stamp on the concepts, methods and direction of early sociological research in the Philippines. His text went through numerous reprints and revisions (see, for example, 1963, 1965), and further revisions came later (1976), and then a modular approach (1987). Another significant figure was Father Frank Xavier Lynch (1921-1978), a Jesuit priest at the other major university in Metro Manila, the Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, where he established the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in 1960. Although he was by training an anthropologist, he played a most important role in the development of Philippine sociology and social science more generally (May 1998). He also had a significant presence in the Institute of Philippine Culture at the Ateneo de Manila and was one time editor of the *Philippine Sociological Review*. He wrote influential studies of Philippine society and culture (see, for example, 1959; Yengoyan and Makil 1984).

American Dominance and Modernisation Theory

The main paradigm followed, and influenced by Talcott Parsons (1937 [1949, 1967], 1951 [1952, 1964, 1991, 2012]; and see Bellah 1979) and Émile Durkheim (see, for example 1972), and to a more limited degree Max Weber (1947 [1920]) was behaviourist, positivist, and structural-functionalist. The focus was on processes of social integration, institutionalisation, cultural patterns, personality and values. In the study of social class, for example in Lynch's work, the emphasis is on social stratification and integration rather than on social conflict; social inequality was translated into the analysis of personal networks and patron-client

relations (Turner 1978). Weightman, in a critical commentary, states 'Philippines 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' (1978; and see 1975). Hunt and Dizon, in their chapter in Donn Hart's collection, attempt an explanation for the adoption of a functionalist perspective and the 'pragmatic and relatively conservative stance' in that it was important to understand local customs and to engage with practical social problems and policy issues (1978: 107). They suggest that since Philippine independence 'the general trend of the discipline [sociology] can best be explained as a delayed response to developments in the United States' (ibid.: 100). Policy and practice were also seen as embracing a neoliberalist approach.

Without going into detail, the same can be said for early sociology in Indonesia and Thailand and the influence of Cornell and California, Berkeley. In Indonesia the focus was on community and ethnographic studies, socio-economic surveys, religion and identity, urban change and economic growth, rural development and national integration, using concepts and models taken from the West (see for a summary Koentjaraningrat 1975: 225-226; Utrecht 1973). Selosoemardjan (1915-2003), one of the founding fathers of Indonesian sociology at the University of Indonesia concludes, in his study of social change in Yogyakarta (Jogjakarta) that 'the desire for progress has replaced the security of tradition' (1962: 412).

In Thailand too, early American and Thai research there was concerned with culture and personality studies, the importance for stability and integration in the context of Theravada Buddhism, patron-clientship, social networks and clusters based on hierarchy and status, and loosely-structured, informal relationships. Issues of conflict, contradiction, exploitation, struggle and radical politics tended to be downplayed (see, for example, Fischer 1973). The early focus of research was directed by Cornell anthropologists, particularly Professor Lauriston Sharp (1907-1993) and Lucien M. [Mason] Hanks (1910-1988), in the Cornell-Thailand project focused on the village of Bang Chan on the then outskirts of Bangkok (see, for example Kirsch 1994; Skinner and Kirsch 1975).

Hans-Dieter Evers and Locally-generated Concepts?

Evers, in his compilation of readings, selects the 'dual economy/society' concept of J.H [Julius Herman] Boeke, a Dutch lawyer and economist (1884-1956) (1953; and see Wertheim 1966 [1961]) and the 'plural society/economy' concept of J.S. [John Sydenham] Furnivall, a British

colonial scholar-administrator in Burma (1878-1960) (1939, 1956, 1957) as deserving particular attention in that they stimulated wider discussion both within and outside Southeast Asia. In spite of their colonial background, they attempted to deconstruct Southeast Asian societies/economies (focusing on the Netherlands East Indies [Indonesia] and Furnivall also examined British Burma [Myanmar]) into sectors and structured groupings). Boeke divided the colonial economy into a traditional indigenous and a European-dominated capitalist sector; and Furnivall used divisions of ethnicity or 'race' to form three major groupings: European, local Asian, and non-local Asian (Chinese and Indian). Both concepts had their problems. Overall, they presented an oversimplified conceptualisation of a complex reality. Two further concepts provided an orientation for Evers, 'involution', not a concept created by the American cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), but adapted and used by him (1963a, and see below); and John F. [Fee] Embree's concept of a 'loosely structured social system' (1950). Embree (1908-1950), an American anthropologist and briefly Director of the Yale Southeast Asian Studies program before his untimely death, based his concept on a limited ethnographic investigation in Thailand; it enjoyed very little attention outside the country. In hindsight. perhaps it should not have been included in the compilation. However, Evers had a particular interest in Embree's proposition (1969).

Willem F. Wertheim and Non-Western Sociology

In our contemporary sociological history, there seems to have been a relative neglect of Historical and Non-Western Sociology promoted by Professor Willem Wertheim (though he was represented in two papers in Evers' 1980 reader) and his colleagues in the University of Amsterdam and other Dutch scholars. Higgott and Robison offer a passing mention (1985: 5); Taylor and Turton, in their sociology compendium, provide nothing from Wertheim and his colleagues (1988; and see also Schmidt et al. 1997 [1998]). Not only had Wertheim produced an important monograph on social change in Indonesia which engaged with issues of historical interpretation and periodisation, but also the utility of concepts derived from Karl Marx and Max Weber in understanding social processes in Indonesian history (1959 [1956]). Marx (1964 [1952]) and Weber (1947 [1920], 1951 [1922], 1958 [1916], 1963 [1922] had both addressed Asian political and economic formations, and religion). They were both interested in explaining why industrial capitalism and a bourgeois class had not emerged outside Western Europe. Moreover, Marx's categories of 'Asiatic', 'feudal' and 'capitalist' modes of production were

debated, particularly by left-leaning scholars in Thailand, among them Udom Sisuwan, Jit Poumisak, Chatthip Nartsupha, Chai-anan Samudavanija, Somchai Suwannasi and Nidhi Aeusrivongse (Reynolds 1987, Reynolds and Hong Lysa 1983).

In addition, Wertheim's essays in *East-West Parallels* (1964; and see 1973, 1993) takes up the problem of the appropriateness of Western ideas and approaches in the study of Asian societies. His *magnum opus* was *Evolution and Revolution* (1972 [1974]). Though I do not accept elements of his framework there, particularly his central premise that society can be understood as 'a composite of conflicting values systems' which seems too idealist, nor certain arguments in his use of the concept of evolution, Wertheim does demonstrate, in grand fashion, the importance of the analysis of Asian experiences for sociological debates on dynamic processes of change (King 1994: 190-192; 2008a 33-35; 2023a). He does search for material, politico-economic factors as well, and his central ideas focus on the importance of contradiction and conflict in understanding socio-economic change. Nevertheless, he pays insufficient attention to political structures and economic processes and prefers to operate at the level of ideas, interests and values. I have some sympathy with his view. Nevertheless, in a telephone conversation I had with him in mid-1995, after he had read my paper in the Dutch journal *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde,* he said, in passing, 'good sociology knows no boundaries' (in disciplinary and spatial terms). His observation has stayed with me.

Wertheim made an important contribution to the comparative investigation of sociological concepts generated in relation to Western societies and their applicability to Asia, and of processes of change and parallels between Western and Eastern experiences. He proposes that parallel developments can be discerned but that they only hold to a certain degree. He points to the greater importance of the role of the state in economic affairs, change and development and the more diminished role played by an urban bourgeoisie in the East; he also argues that human history, evolutionary and revolutionary is not unilinear (and see 1993: 3). Other Dutch scholars who influenced Wertheim's work on Indonesia were J. C. [Jacob Cornelis] van Leur (1908-1942), economic historian and scholar administrator in the East Indies, and B. J. O. [Bertram Johannes Otto] Schrieke (1890-1945), an anthropologist, and one-time Professor of Sociology at the University of Batavia [Jakarta) and then at the University of Amsterdam. Van Leur reoriented European-colonial perspectives on the Netherlands Indies towards those which have emerged from local populations within the region. It sowed the seeds of a wide range of research on 'history from below', history from those who were colonial subjects (1955). Van Leur relied heavily on the ideas of Weber in his examination of

'patrimonial bureaucracies' and 'harbour principalities'. Again, using Weberian concepts, particularly that of 'ideal types', Bertram Schrieke's sociological studies, particularly with reference to Java, explored in detail the nature of patrimonial bureaucracies, as well as social and economic change in Sumatra, among other subjects (1955-1957).

Clifford Geertz and James C. Scott: Involution, Moral Economy and Everyday Resistance

There were other contributions to sociological debates in this early period of development, from Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), though he operated on the boundaries between anthropology and sociology (1963a, 1963b, 1965; and see 1984). Geertz was imaginative and eclectic; he borrowed ideas from others, as did James Scott, and then applied them to a Southeast Asian context. Geerttz adapted modernisation theory, and concepts of 'tradition' and 'modernity' to his own concerns with culture, addressing social and economic change in Indonesia, with reference to the Dutch colonial past and the early period of Indonesian independence. From his research in the 1950s and 1960s in Sukarno's Indonesia, he also hoped for the development of democracy in Southeast Asia and other developing countries, though his 'old societies-new states' binary seems close to the distinction between tradition and modernity (1963c). However, in his historical excursion into Java, Geertz 'borrowed' Alexander Aleksandrovich Goldenweiser's concept of 'involution' (1936; Kan 2023), with some modification, and applied it to Javanese peasant society and culture, where there seemed no hope of achieving modernity. Goldenweiser, born in Kyiv, Ukraine (1880-1940), settled in the USA in 1900 and studied anthropology under Franz Boas at Columbia University.

Geertz turned involution into one of the central obsessions of those researchers working in Java and the wider Indonesia. Criticisms of his thesis are numerous and substantial, particularly in regard to his rather limited attention to the large Dutch literature and archives, his relative neglect of the dynamic aspects and resilience of peasant society and economy, and of the power and class dimensions of rural societies (see, for example, King 1994: 186-189; 2008a: 46-47, 53-54; Li 2014, 2023; Kahn 1978, 1980; Van Schaik 1986; White 1983). Subsequently Geertz responded to his critics and presented a partial reinterpretation of his thesis (1984). Geertz too operated within the framework of the possibilities of modernity, and he searches for potential modernising groups in 'peddlers and princes' (1963b), and rather than 'evolution' or indeed 'revolution', he sees in Javanese society and economy a process of

'involution' and 'permanent transition' (1963a). Evers also chooses the concept of 'involution' as another crucial focus of debate in his sociological compilation (1980). Another of Geertz's concepts was *aliran* or 'political streams' (*santri*, *prijaji* [*priyayi*], *abangan*] which cross-cut Javanese social class formations; he examined this concept in his The *Social History of an Indonesian Town* (1965) and in *The Religion of Java* (1960), though it was subject to considerable criticism (King 1994: 189-190).

As with Geertz, James Scott was an important influence in the study of Southeast Asia. In his political-historical-anthropological approach to peasant rebellions, he used the concept of 'moral economy' (1976; and see King 1978b, 1981b; Moise 1982; Popkin 1979), and like Geertz he 'borrowed' it from another scholar. In this case it was E. P. [Edward Palmer] Thompson's study of the 'moral economy' of the English crowd in the eighteenth century and the making of the English working class which Scott drew upon (1963 [1968], 1971). Thompson (1924-1993) was an English historian, an ardent socialist and peace campaigner, and celebrated for his studies of early industrial England. In using Thompson's concept, critics of Scott argue that he underestimated the complex nature of relationships of power and social class, and overestimated the moral as against the rational dimension of decision-making among small-scale rural populations. In his accompanying studies of 'weapons of the weak' and 'hidden transcripts', he examined the ways in which the downtrodden and those without power and control over their own lives resist domination in 'low-grade, hit-and-run, guerrilla action' (evasion, unobserved sabotage, foot-dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, pilfering, arson, false compliance), and, though showing public deference and respect, connected to their 'weapons', they had their own 'oppositional consciousness' and ways of expressing their direct evaluation of their position in 'off-stage discourse' (jokes, scorn, denunciation, speeches, slander, gestures) (1985, 1990). These studies were received with general enthusiasm, but there is an 'intellectual genealogy' (Sivaramakrishnan 2005). Again, Scott draws on Thompson's work, as well as Eric Hobsbawm's 'primitive rebels' (1963), and, in 'weapons of the weak' Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' (2011).

Scott's 'history from below' also owes a debt to the then Singapore-published, seminal papers of John R.W. [Richard Wharton] Smail (1961), an American historian (1930-2002) and Harry J. [Jindrich] Benda (1962). Benda, born in Czechoslovakia into a Jewish family (1919-1971), went to Java as a young man to avoid the excesses of Nazi Germany, then emigrated to the USA and became a citizen in 1960. He was the first Director of the ISEAS in Singapore from 1968 and died tragically young. Scott seems not to make much, if anything, of this move

towards ‘autonomous history’. Smail’s reference to our perspectives on Southeast Asia is echoed in Scott’s ‘moral economy’ some 15 years later. Smail, in turn, heavily dependent on Dutch scholarship, quotes from Jacob van Leur, one of his main inspirations, and draws on the work of G. [Gertrudes] J. [Johan] Resink (1911-1997), G.[Godfried] W. Locher 1908-1997], Jan [Marius Nicolas] Romein (1893-1962), C.C. [Cornelis Christiaan] Berg (1900-1990), and Justus M. [Maria] van der Kroef (though American-based, van der Kroef, was born of Dutch parents in Jakarta in 1925 and educated in the Netherlands East Indies (1925-2007); see, for example, 1958). Van Leur says: ‘Why then does more light not fall on that [Southeast Asian] world? Why is it only seen as the antagonist: why does it remain so grey and undifferentiated? (cited in Smail, 1961: 72). Benda joins him, in his questioning of issues in the structuring of Southeast Asian history, in that his investigation ‘may appear premature in view of the youthfulness – not to say the woefully underdeveloped nature – of Southeast Asian historiography, particularly in the United States’ (1962: 106). This was written over a decade after the founding of Southeast Asian programmes at Yale and Cornell.

The Rise of Political Economy, Neo-Marxist Theory, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and Richard Robison

Underdevelopment, Uneven Development, Dependency and World Systems

The seeds of the counter arguments against modernisation theory ran in parallel with McVey’s ‘regnant paradigm’ in the USA. The main contributors, and the main concepts and publications have been covered in two chapters in *The Sociology of Southeast Asia* (King 2008a: ‘Underdevelopment and Dependency’, pp. 56-90, and ‘Social Class, the State and Political Economy’, pp. 91-128. Very briefly we need to draw attention to the Prebisch-Singer thesis on unequal trade in developing countries (Prebisch 1950; Singer 1950). The publications of Raűl Prebisch, an Argentinian economist of German descent, and Sir Hans Singer, a British German-born development economist, gave rise to the concepts of dependency and core-periphery in the global economy. It was influential in the work of the American, Russian-born, German-educated Marxist economist Paul A. [Alexander] Baran (1909-1964) on the political economy of growth (1957) and Baran, with his co-author Paul M. [Marlor] Sweezy (1910-2004), a fellow Marxist economist, on monopoly capital (1966). Baran and Sweezy further developed the concept of dependency and provided the basis for the outpouring of work on the world economy, unequal exchange and underdevelopment. In particular, it led to the wide-ranging work of Andre [Andreas] Gunder Frank (1929-2005), a German-born American economist on

'underdevelopment', 'lumpen development', 'dependent accumulation' and 'metropolis-satellite' relations (1971), and though most of his earlier publications focused on Latin America, he eventually turned his attention to the global economy and then to Asia, particularly China (1978, 1981, 1998; see King 2008a: 61-62, for critical commentaries).

Another development from earlier days of political economy was Immanuel [Maurice] Wallerstein's prolific portfolio of writings. A sociologist and economic historian, he was born in America of Polish-Jewish émigré parents (1930-2019) and educated at Columbia University. He held Professorships in Sociology at McGill University, Montreal and the State University of New York (SUNY), ending his distinguished career as a Senior Research Scholar at Yale University (Wikipedia 2024). After several books on African politics and the African move to independence in the 1960s and early 1970s, focusing particularly on West Africa, he published his first major work on world-systems in 1974. This was to become a multi-volume project (1974, 1984, 1989, 2011). His first general book setting out his concept of the capitalist world economy appeared in 1979, and numerous others followed. He worked with a number of sub-concepts: core-periphery, semi-periphery, quasi-monopolies, and Kondratiev waves [from the Russian economist Nikolai Kondratiev's concept of 'waves' or 'cycles' in the world economy] (see, for example, 1979, 1980, 2004). Several versions of the world-system approach, applied to Southeast Asia, appeared from geographers and political scientists, among others, in the 1980s and 1990s, but these did not seek a particular engagement with Wallerstein and his followers (see, for example, Dixon 1991; Wurfel and Burton 1996).

Matching Frank and Wallerstein in distinction in the study of dependency, world-systems and peripheral capitalism was Samir Amin, an Egyptian-French Marxist political economist (1931-2018). His two-volume study of capital accumulation on a world scale (1974) and on unequal development (1976) proceeded in tandem with other prominent radical thinkers and strengthened the continuing critique of American modernisation theory.

The work on underdevelopment, dependency and world-systems was also influenced by the considerable literature on imperialism and the global capitalist economy. However, those who wrote on imperialism as an inevitable outcome of the development of capitalism, with the partial exception of Rosa Luxemburg, were more concerned to understand the inner workings of capitalism than to address its impacts on dependent economies and the colonies; the major contributors include Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) (1950 [1917]); Rosa Luxemburg(1871-1919) (1951 [1913]); Rudolf Hilferding (1877-1941) (1981 [1910]); and Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin

1888-1938) (1972 [1917]). There are some shortcomings in his ambitious survey, but Anthony Brewer provides critical insights into the major literature on imperialism (1980). However, the literature is substantial and wide-ranging (see also, for example, Fieldhouse 1976; Magdoff 1978; Warren 1980).

What is interesting about these schools of radical thinking is that they owe their origins primarily to European scholarship; the infusion of knowledge of the developing capitalist economy into the USA was crucial from European émigrés from German-speaking and East European regions, particularly from those of Jewish descent who fled Nazi Germany and Austria and the occupied territories to the east. Later developments in our thinking were due immeasurably to Australian-based political economists. We should also remind ourselves of earlier contributions from British and Dutch scholars working in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian Contributions

Marxist and Neo-Marxist writings emerged increasingly during the 1970s and 1980s. Among several others, and selecting work from a range of countries, there are studies by Jonathan Fast and Jim Richardson on the Philippines (1979), Frijtof Tichelman (1980) and Alfons van der Kraan (1980) on Indonesia, Mohamed Amin and Malcolm Caldwell (1977) on Malay(si)a and Grit Permtanjit (1982) on Thailand. Moreover, Wertheim, in his studies of Indonesia and the wider Asia, provided a bridge between neo-Marxist interests, modernisation and socio-economic evolution, historical sociology and Weberian-inspired sociology. He combined both sociological and historical perspectives, engaged with issues of class, class conflict and power, and adopted a global vision (Van den Muijzenberg and Wolters 1988). However, in my view, a significant figure in this shift, in deploying neo-Marxist theory, and concepts of underdevelopment and dependency, particularly in his studies of communism in Indonesia, was Rex [Alfred] Mortimer, an Australian-born solicitor, communist, turned political scientist (1926-1979) (1973a, 1984; and see Legge 1980). He was a severe critic of the prevailing political and economic policies and practices embodied in modernisation theory in relation to Indonesia, and the political conformism and technological determinism of such economists as Heinz Wolfgang Arndt (1915-2002), a German-born Australian economist, and an authority on the Indonesian economy. Arndt founded the *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* and was a long-serving Head of the Research School of Pacific (and Asian) Studies at the Australian National University (ANU) (1984; and see Mortimer 1973b).

Other important contributions were published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia,* launched in 1979. With reference to Asia, it published articles in the neo-Marxist tradition, focusing, among other subjects, on underdevelopment, dependency and unequal exchange, class formation and conflict, the role of the state and its composition, authoritarian regimes, corruption and transnational corporations. Papers appeared regularly on Southeast Asia early on in the development of the journal; Catley's general overview of underdevelopment and dependency in the region was important (1976) and that of Bell and Resnick (1970), as well as country-specific studies of the Philippines (Resnick 1973), Thailand (Bell 1978, 1982; Elliott 1978), Java, Indonesia (Gordon 1979) and Malaysia (Shamsul 1979; Lim Mah Hui 1985). The equivalent American journal was the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars,* from 2001 renamed *Critical Asian Studies*, founded by a group of graduate students to voice their opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War (Allen 1982).

Richard Robison, the Murdoch School and Political Economy

Since the early 1980s the radical analyses of Southeast Asia have taken different directions. First, a most important book, and one which was followed by a series of volumes and papers produced by a closely-knit group of political economists based at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, was Higgott and Robison's political economy of structural change in Southeast Asia, though it only covers the then five founding member states of ASEAN from 1967 (1985; King 1986). Chapter 1 in the book brought together Richard Higgott, Richard Robison, Kevin J. Hewison and Garry Rodan (pp.16-61). They proposed then that neo-Marxist analysis did not replace modernisation theory in that the latter continued to exert its influence on politico-economic orthodoxy into the 1980s. Rather, 'the development of theory is best seen as the development of contiguous and parallel streams of competing descriptive and prescriptive traditions' (1985:16). John Taylor's work on from 'modernization to modes of production' and his critique of underdevelopment and dependency perspectives confirms this (1979).

The members of the Murdoch 'stream' of political economists, under the direction of Robison as Director of the Asia Research Centre, which has dominated the field of studies over at least three decades since the early 1980s, have analysed in detail various international processes of change, focusing on Southeast Asian nation-states and social classes as units of analysis. Their volumes examine changes in the global economy and domestic political and

economic interests, the emergence of the 'New International Division of Labour' and 'Newly-Industrialising Countries' (NICs), peripheral capitalist development and the Asian Tiger economies, including Singapore, the shift to 'export-oriented industrialisation' and the continuing tension with 'import substitution industrialisation', class formation and inter-class relations and the conflict between labour and capital, the role of the state in capital accumulation, the tensions between political authoritarianism and liberal democracy, and the cycles of growth and crisis in the world economy. For some sociologists and political economists their approach has come to be called 'social conflict theory'.

Related to this reorientation in our thinking about Southeast Asian development in the 1980s there were two key studies that were nation-state-based: Richard Robison on Indonesia (1986; and see 1981, 1988) and Jomo Kwame Sundaram on Malay(si)a (1986). They demonstrate a quite dramatic difference from earlier modernisation studies, though capitalism and its global reach is still a preoccupation. Interestingly, and perhaps somewhat provocatively, Robison proposes, in his study of Indonesia, which derived from his University of Sydney doctoral thesis, that rather than socialism or communism, capitalism is 'the most revolutionary force'. The embedding, dominance and the global reach of capitalism underpins his approach and his founding of the Australian-based Murdoch School. He examines forces external to the Indonesian state and the role of capital in decision-making, the policies and practices of senior military officers-cum-politicians, and civilian politicians and bureaucrats as the embodiment of the state. He also examines the formation of a 'capitalist class', which slides into a 'middle class', and its relations with the state and the internal divisions within these groups and sectors vying for power (and see Winters 1988). He also joined forces with Vedi Hadiz in investigating the aftermath of the collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia (Hadiz and Robison 2004; Robison and Hadiz 2013).

Jomo's book stemmed from his Harvard PhD, and, in a neo-Marxist and radical political economy tradition, he examined class formation and relations, as against ethnic differences, which he sees as class-related, and the role of the state in capitalist development. He argued that 'it is class contention that makes history', and he traces this proposition from the eve of British colonialism through to the implementation of Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s. Though some reviews were generally positive, Doshi and Woo were particularly critical (1986) to which Jomo responded vigorously (1987).

The Murdoch team continued to produce a flood of co-edited books monitoring the changing global and domestic situation in regard to Southeast Asia, though they each had a focus on one country within ASEAN (Robison et al. 1987; and see King 2008a: 106-115, 120-127). Robison investigated Indonesia as his detailed case study (and see 1978 for an early contribution), and over 30 years later continued to examine the changing configurations of the Indonesian state, and the exercise of power, using the concept of 'oligarchy', and 'economic forces' (Robison and Hadiz 2013). Hewison's main work was on Thailand (see, for example 1989a, 1989b, 1997), and Rodan examined the case, somewhat exceptional in a Southeast Asian context, of Singapore, among other publications (1989; and see 2004). Their joint examination of the 1980s focused on financial and debt crises in Southeast Asia and the underlying reasons for these events and processes, including, among other factors, the drop in oil prices, corruption and the practices of authoritarian states and internal political and class conflicts, and for Thailand the movement of large numbers of refugees from Indochina, though, as with the 1985 volume only the ASEAN countries are covered, and perhaps unusually Australia is included (Lindsey 1992). Australian relations with Southeast Asia (and East Asia) loom large in a subsequent edited book by Robison (1996).

For the Murdoch political scientists, attention to the definition of a Southeast Asian region appears to be relatively unimportant. It serves as a convenient field for their studies, a regional designation close to their Australian home, a geographical and political-economic space on the global map. They then produced a volume on the 1990s, examining continuing authoritarianism, capitalism and developing forms of liberal democracy in seven Southeast Asian countries, and the effects of capital accumulation, in particular in the formation of a capitalist class, a bourgeoisie (Hewison et al. 1993). This was rather different from the social class that emerged from a mercantile class in England in the second half of the seventeenth century which consolidated its position during the eighteenth century. Yet again the co-editors do not address Southeast Asia as a whole. The five founding members of ASEAN continue to feature. Brunei Darussalam is there for the first time; it joined ASEAN in 1984. A chapter is devoted to Vietnam; it joined in 1995 after the publication of the book in 1993. Other than in general chapters, the Lao PDR and Myanmar are not included (ASEAN membership 1997) nor is Cambodia (membership 1999) as country case-studies.

They are especially critical of American structural-functionalism, under the influence of Talcott Parsons, Weberian-inspired studies and institutionalist approaches; and, more generally, orthodox political and economic analyses. The work of Samuel Huntington, the

distinguished Harvard political scientist, on the character and direction of political forms in developing countries, including Southeast Asia, and the emergence of developing industrial countries, as a variation of modernisation theory, using the concept of political order and Huntington's aspirations for democracy, commands particular and searching critical attention (1968, 1984). Other classic examples of American perspectives are Lucian Pye's (1962) and Manning Nash's (1965) studies of the path to modernity and nation-building in post-independent Burma. The Murdoch School also dispensed with underdevelopment and dependency theories and those focusing on the 'developmental state' some time ago. Rajah Rasiah and Schmidt, in their interdisciplinary approach to 'the new political economy', summarise and critically examine the various perspectives deployed to understand post-colonial processes of development (neoliberal or neoclassical, promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; state-capitalism and the developmental state; classic Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches [though the boundaries are fuzzy, but interests in social class and class conflict loom large]; and structural-functionalist-populist concepts, embracing modernisation theory and nation-building) (2010: 1-43).

From the mid-1990s and into the early 2000s, the Murdoch school embarked on an ambitious project, documenting their work since the 1980s, examining current political and economic conditions and looking forward to changing landscapes in the global economy as they affected Southeast Asia. In these endeavours an introduction to Southeast Asian political economy appeared (Rodan et al. 1997). Again, adopting the nation-state-based methodological approach, the original member countries of ASEAN plus Vietnam feature; Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia are again excluded, and also Brunei Darussalam. Subsequent editions appeared (Rodan et al. 2001, Rodan et al. 2006). The 1997 book was written following some ten years of economic boom and the possible emergence of an Asian model of economic growth and development and the significance of Asian values, which signalled the retreat of concepts of underdevelopment and dependency.

Economic growth did not last. The second edition, subtitled 'conflict, crises and change' covers the economic crisis of 1997-1998; the collapse of currencies in Southeast Asia, along with financial institutions and businesses, capital flight, and increasing foreign debt, and its consequences in unemployment and poverty with unrest among the lower urban and rural social classes (Rodan et al. 2001). Economic turmoil gave rise to political volatility and intense debates about future political and economic configurations: conflict and competition increased between sectors of the political-economic-bureaucratic elite over development trajectories and

resource distribution; this included the collapse of Suharto's 'New Order', and the devolution of power and signs of a degree of liberalisation; and then increasing discontent in Chuan Leekpai's government in Thailand and the succession of Thaksin's populist Thai Rak Thai party in 2001, founded during the crisis in 1998. The effects and consequences of the crisis across Southeast Asia evoked a range of responses among the constituent members of ASEAN. The second edition covers six countries of ASEAN, in addition to general chapters which aim to cover the whole of the region, and there is one which examines the relationship between Japan and Southeast Asia and its relocation, from the 1970s, of its manufacturing and assembly plants to the south.

Having addressed economic boom and bust, the economic recovery in Southeast Asia from the late 1990s was surprisingly swift. This is captured in the third edition, subtitled 'markets, power and contestation', and the involvement in Southeast Asian states in their engagement with the international and domestic capitalist market, debating the role of the state in directing market forms to promote economic growth, constructing transnational development zones, and establishing stable foundations for business and investment (Rodan et al. 2006). Yet we return, in this volume, to the issues of competing political-economic forces and interests, regional and international, and how these play out in the Southeast Asian region, interlocked intimately with the world economy. The complexities of contestation and who emerges as winners provide an additional factor in the varied responses of Southeast Asian nation-states to the issues of domestic and international capital. Though social class has featured significantly in the political-economic analysis of global and regional events in Southeast Asia, it becomes more problematic when those supposedly with the same broad class interests turn in on one another and compete for precedence and access to political and economic resources. The Murdoch School also proposes that their approach is an advance on those that came before; institutional economics and historical-institutional sociology are considered to be minor players. I have my doubts (and see Henley 2010). The volume also includes a chapter on China and its increasing economic, cultural, infrastructural and touristic presence in Southeast Asia (and see Evans et al. 2000).

However, again, the focus was on the five founding members of ASEAN plus Vietnam as case-studies. Thus, in a strict sense, the three volumes and the earlier structural change book are not general political economies of Southeast Asia as such, but as edited compilations, rather partial studies, if one takes the spread of country case-studies into account. Though it is accepted that the volumes also included general chapters.

Reference should also be made to the fourth edition edited not by Rodan, Hewison and Robison, but by those connected to the Murdoch School (Carroll et al. 2020; and see Carroll 2018). Rodan and Robison make an appearance in two of the chapters. We can see how their legacy has spread far-and-wide with this volume. In any new overview of Southeast Asian sociology, the Murdoch School would continue to require attention, if only because they provide a national, regional and global vision. Their preoccupation with 'class forces', socio-economic-political conflict and the struggles over the exercise of power, the construction of authority and the constant imperative to access and control resources continues to engage them (Booth 2021; Iqra 2021). In addition, their charge that neoliberalism is 'ideological' and of little conceptual and analytical value needs serious questioning, and Booth suggests that neoliberalism is a far broader church than the Murdoch School proposes and, among other issues, addresses poverty, inequality and the role of the state which overlap with the concerns of radical political economists (Booth 2021: 154-155).

What is interesting is the way in which the editors of this volume frame what they term 'class forces', and their concentration on 'dominant conglomerates' associated with 'powerful politico-bureaucratic networks' or 'politico-business oligarchies', analysing them from a top-down regional and national level, and not bottom-up from a local level. This arises from the problematical way in which they contemplate and attempt to define social classes, in that, in important respects, some of their analytical categories are not classes at all, in the sense in which I understand the term. They comprise 'ruling cliques of families and crony capitalists'; 'illiberal consumers and new rich', 'middle classes disinterested in democracy', though some are active in civil society actions and NGOs, and the 'ravaged and disorganised working class and peasantry'. (Carroll et al. 2020: vii). These are rather vaguely-defined categories with not much analytical purchase: cliques; families; consumers and the new rich; middle classes (note the plural); working classes (note the plural) and peasantry (a conglomeration of rural-based populations).

These categories relate to class issues, but they seem to require recourse to the concept of 'class fractions' or 'factions', or which Evers has referred to as 'strategic groups' (see, for example, 1973b, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c), and the realisation that the 'middle classes', 'working classes', and 'peasantry' are much more complex entities than the editors of this volume allow; they require deconstruction; they are not solidary classes. In addition, other terms jostle for our attention in the Murdoch literature: 'capitalist class', 'elite business', 'pro-free market elites', 'oligarchies' and 'oligarch businesses', 'low-skilled workers', 'high-skilled professionals',

women involved in 'feminist forms of work' and so on. This may well derive from the Murdoch School's lack of attention to the details and complexities of more local level groupings, activities and behaviour. They observe 'from above'. We only have to turn to the middle classes (not one class) in Southeast Asia to realise its complexities (Abdul Rahman Embong 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Kessler 2001: Hsiao 2001). Pertinently, Kessler says, in a chapter on Southeast Asian middle classes, 'We are forever condemned to fathoming complexities through the use of simplicities. And we are always at risk, especially those of us from the theoretical "classes" who tend to become infatuated with our most beloved concepts, of forgetting that our concepts are just that: convenient constructs (or 'heuristic devices') drawn from intractably complex realities' (2001: 32). The simple division of state-dependent members of the middle classes and the activist civil society campaigners frequently surfaces (see, for example Neher and Marlay 1995).

The political economists also do not address in sufficient detail, given their focus on conglomerates, oligarchies, crony capitalists and sectors (not all of them) of the middle classes, dependent on the state, the importance, at the local level of issues of health, education and literacy, demography and levels of infant and child mortality, rural development and the improvements in rural infrastructures, and the active responses of those who have less room for manoeuvre. In other words, they lack on-the-ground anthropological sensitivities; they tend towards the macro-perspective without including a micro-level approach; they focus on the top-end of the class spectrum, which elides into politico-economic-bureaucratic elites/classes (?), and they do not exhibit much of an understanding of the lower, impoverished and exploited margins of society.

This is where we might part ways with political economy. Culture, religion especially, and identity is given very little attention; local and ethnic perspectives are passed by in the examination of the processes and factors which generate class conflict (see Abdul Rahman Embong 2004). Though Wertheim leans more towards the importance of 'conflicting values', and cultural context (1964, 1974), as does Syed Hussein Alatas (1972), they do capture the significant roles of religion, and ethnic and cultural identity in group formation and social conflict, factors and processes which are not easily and straightforwardly translated into class identities and conflict. Subjectivities, meanings and imaginations should be accorded more attention, and though related to political-economic matters, communities are also 'imagined' (Anderson 1991, 1998).

Agrarian Differentiation: The Local Level

Another strand of Neo-Marxist approaches and a complement to the work of the political economists, is the focus on local processes and agrarian differentiation, though in the context of wider political-economic forces and processes (Hart et al. 1989:1; and see Iqra Anugarah 2021). It is exemplified in studies by anthropologists, rural sociologists and agricultural economists, among them Anan Gajanapan (1988); Gillian Hart (1986; Hart et al. 1989); Ann L. [Laura] Stoler (1977); Andrew Turton (1989), Benjamin White (1989); Christine Pelzer White (1988); and some of the work of Joel Kahn (1978, 1980). The important difference between these researchers and the Murdoch School is that they engage with 'the conceptual and methodological problems of linking local-level institutional arrangements with larger political and economic forces' (Hart et al., 1989: xiv). These constitute more fine-grained examinations of social, economic and political inequalities at the lower levels of the social order. They address changing structures of power distribution in contexts of technological advancement and integration into capitalist markets. An excellent example of this is Turton's study of local powers and agrarian differentiation in northern Thailand, and he uses the increasing body of research by Thai researchers, published in Thai in this endeavour (1989). Rather than 'theoretical formulations, this body of work investigates 'concrete situations'; and these, in turn, are constantly subject to change; the consequences are complex and varied; they may be specific to a particular location; and there may be 'conflicting processes at work' within and outside both rural (and urban) communities (Benjamin White 1989: 18-19). Hart's study of power, livelihoods, and control over labour and its allocation in rural Java also illustrates the interaction between local processes and the wider political economy (1986: xv).

Taylor and Turton's compilation of reprinted readings sets out this complex and variegated social landscape and addresses, mainly in the more radical literature, both the political economy of the state and its interventions and the relations of capital and labour in the context of industrialisation, and local-level rural transformations and agrarian differentiation, and production and gender relations. However, the co-editors also point to the neglect of 'culture' in much of the earlier literature on dependency, world systems and modes of production. They therefore include a section on 'culture and ideology', examining this in relation to Gramscian dimensions of power and hegemony (in which James Scott makes an appearance) (1988: 177-210). Joel Kahn's reprinted paper is a case in point in which he deconstructs folk, or conscious models of social organisation in Indonesia, used for analytical purposes by social scientists (*aliran,* ethnicity and patron-client relations), proposing that 'An

analysis of economic and political structures of the Indonesian social formation does not coincide with the folk models nor with appearances' (1988: 189).

The final section of Taylor and Turton's reader covers aspects of the dilemma of indigenous ethnic minorities, sometimes referred to as 'tribal' or 'hill peoples', though limited to case-material from Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysian Sarawak. The theme of state intervention reappears with such difficult and pressing issues for them as their incorporation into the nation-state, and through 'development' programmes, the transformation of their everyday lives and livelihoods; the state constructs notions of 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness', and the need to bring them into 'the modern world'. Attention is also drawn to 'minority consciousness', histories, and local responses to what are precarious situations (Taylor and Turton 1988: 211-254).

The Sociology of Southeast Asia (2008 [2011], [2016])

Having reviewed the state-of-play of Southeast Asian sociology up to the early 1990s (King 1981, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1996), a general book was published and, in the intervening years up to 2008, perhaps surprisingly, no introductory text had appeared. I indicated, in the Preface, that the approach taken was 'very explicitly historical and draws inspiration from the Dutch historical-sociological school of Wertheim. It is much less "culturalist" and post-modern in orientation' and does not dwell much on 'discourses', other than the Asian values debate (King, 2008a: x). The 11 chapters commenced with a consideration of the sociology of a diverse region and whether it was possible to undertake a regional sociology with the difficulties posed by defining a discrete global space - 'Southeast Asia'. The context at that time was the relatively 'underdeveloped' research and publication performance of students of Southeast Asian sociology. In regard to regional definition, I pointed to the need for comparative sociological studies, and the recognition of an emerging political and institutional regional identity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (2020a). Nevertheless, diversity within the region, its artificially created territorial boundaries, the importance of global processes, the impacts of media and communication technology, and the trans-national movement of people, capital, objects, ideas, information, images, culture, and tourism present substantial problems for the social scientist in operating within the confines of a 'constructed' region (and see Jenks 1993: 136-158). For me Southeast Asia, primarily in ASEAN terms, was a convenient space

for narrative, research and contemplation; and, in Thongchai Winichakul's terms, a Southeast Asian 'geo-body' has emerged (1994).

My position on regional definition gradually changed, partly arising from the crisis in Southeast Asian Studies and area studies more generally (King 2012a, 2005, 2006, 2017a). My research on tourism and heritage also brought issues of culture and identity to the fore, in addition to a more recent literature searching for Southeast Asian identities. These concerns enticed me away from historical and structural sociology and political economy, and, though I attempted to revise the sociology volume, drafting several chapters, I put it aside, though continuing to rethink what a revised volume would comprise.

The criteria and perspectives which have been deployed to define and characterise the region are wide-ranging, and, I would suggest, constantly require critical scrutiny. They include, though not in any order of priority: distinctive social and cultural features; an 'indigenous genius' and active responsiveness and adaptability to extra-regional influences; a noticeable sensory and behavioural character; particular historical moments and processes; scholarly styles and methodologies; a locus of theoretical innovation and locally constructed concepts; a specific geographical environment (in climate and geomorphological configurations); a region defined in contrast to China and India; a unity-in-diversity character comprising core areas-peripheries, uplands-lowlands, and majorities-minorities (King 2001, 2014). The search for Southeast Asia has been especially prominent in disciplines, particularly geography and history, which require a sense of place, concreteness and contextualisation and those who follow this pathway tend towards more grounded, empirical investigation. Others such as researchers in economics, politics and sociology are usually preoccupied more with global issues, and, using Southeast Asia as a 'contingent' and internationally defined global space, look beyond. Anthropology has rarely moved into regional perspectives, remaining rooted in 'the local', or the sub-regional: Borneo, Sumatra, Java, Eastern Indonesia, the Indonesian-Malay world; the uplands of mainland Southeast Asia, northern Luzon and so on. Anthropology, history and geography in expansive mode, and archaeology, prehistory and language/linguistics usually spill over into areas and cultures beyond the ASEAN-defined Southeast Asia, into East Asia/China, north-east India, East Africa and the Austronesian-speaking-culturally-connected Pacific islands. However, these are tendencies and preoccupations; they do not specifically define disciplinary approaches in relation to Southeast Asia.

In this connection, Heather Sutherland's concept of Southeast Asia as a 'contingent device' is compelling; as a researcher one's definition depends on the nature of the project we choose to pursue; the disciplinary approach we decide to adopt, and the definitional criteria on which we deliberate. Do we perceive the region in these terms as fixed, or changing and borderless; how do we address boundaries and 'constructed' nation-states? (2005). Ruth McVey has a similar view in that her advice is that 'there are many Southeast Asias' (1995, 2005, and see King 2012a). In my view, Sutherland and McVey led the way in rethinking Southeast Asia. Using the concept of 'contingency', which is for me is primarily to do with culture and identity, we can expand or contract our regional definitions, depending on our purposes. However, Goh Beng-Lan attempts to provide an alternative definition based on 'local priorities', a position with which I disagree (2011: 1-59). We have to return to the question, who constructed Southeast Asian Studies? (King 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2016a, 2016b, 2020a, 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, in regard to methodological approaches and other criteria – conceptual, cultural, historical - these do not delineate a distinctive region.

Then the several chapters in the introductory sociology text followed predictable paths. 'Modernization and Post-War Social Change', 'Underdevelopment and Dependency', 'Social Class, the State and Political Economy'. It moved into important preoccupations in Southeast Asian sociology: 'Ethnicity and Society', 'Patronage and Corruption', 'Asian Values and Social Action', 'Transformations in Urban Worlds' and in the conclusion 'Modernity, Globalization and the Future'. The areas which fell within the frame of culture and identity were obviously to do with ethnicity and values, beyond this the focus was primarily addressing social structural and political-economic concerns and issues.

Rather than plough furrows that had already been tilled and rigorously farmed by the Murdoch School and globalisation theorists, I felt it necessary to shift attention from the 'social' to the 'cultural'. Historical and political-economic preoccupations required a rehearsal, but more importantly Southeast Asia had moved on from, among many others, Milton Osborne's *Region of Revolt* and Bernard K. Gordon's *Dimensions of Conflict in Southeast Asia* (1966) and the turbulent, conflict-ridden times of the 1950s through to the 1990s. I insert Gordon to demonstrate how tyro were the efforts of many American academics addressing the complexities of a region that they had only begun to know after the Pacific War. There are many more examples of American scholars struggling to understand Southeast Asia, moving beyond their temporary, distanced colonial base in the Philippines and their trans-Pacific perspectives, inherited from the Spanish. After all, much of the early or 'classical' history of

Southeast Asia had to be understood from the relationships forged across the Indian Ocean and the Indian sub-continent, including Sri Lanka, and the Muslim Middle East (King 2013a, 2019, 2020a).

The period of decolonisation in Southeast Asia was an arena for super-power intervention: the USA, Soviet Russia, and the Peoples's Republic of China, and, with declining energies, the former colonial powers, particularly the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France. It also generated internal tensions and conflicts in the search for new nations, independent nation-building and the question of which 'politico-economic forces' would command their future direction, which, in turn, could not be understood straightforwardly within a political economy framework. It demanded attention to culture and identity, and it was an arena explored by several scholars, including David Brown and his concept of the 'ethnocratic state' and his analysis of relationships between ethnic identity, state and class (1988, 1994), and especially in studies of Malaysia, where ethnicity (or in local terms 'race') looms large (see, for example Husin Ali 1981; Nagata 1979). What is more, though super-power interests are still evident in Southeast Asia, conflicts conducted between various Southeast Asian nations, primarily generated by territorial and ideological issues, and some with the support of outside powers, have given way to more decentralised ethnic and religious conflicts. Continuing concerns with national identity, security and integrity have placed ethnic consciousness rather than class consciousness in the foreground of social conflict.

The circumstances of post-colonial decolonisation served to determine, circumscribe and direct a substantial amount of research, and this occurred primarily in the context of the Cold War (Murfett 2012). For the Western academy, it mainly excluded Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Vietnam up to the 1990s; and Brunei Darussalam until 1984. Until that time, it could be argued that there was 'no Southeast Asia', though academics in Southeast Asian Studies, possibly side-stepping the political-economic realities, proposed that there was a geographical, cultural, historical region that was indeed 'Southeast Asia'.

A truncated Southeast Asia of five nation-states came together, after some rather bitter border disputes and arguments about the ways to address continuing Western hegemony; these disputes were partially resolved in order to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967; ASEAN progressively incorporated the four remaining mainland states, outside Thailand, which clearly, until then, had not come to terms with, or, at least, were gradually coming to an understanding of the power of global capitalism and situating themselves in 'the

global market-place'. We then entered the era of economic booms and busts, and a period of growth and industrialisation in Southeast Asia; even radical political-economists had to address the phenomena of the 'new rich' and 'middle classes' in the region and industrial and economic growth in the former colonial world. The Singapore model was paramount and conjoined with the other East Asian 'tiger' economies (South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong). Other countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, followed, whilst the Philippines, under Marcos's authoritarian and corrupt regime, lagged behind. Brunei flourished on its hydrocarbon wealth. This all entailed a rather radical rethinking of underdevelopment and dependency, world systems and core-peripheries, and a movement towards political economy. The 'Asian model of development' and 'the developmental state' held sway for a while in Southast Asia, enhanced by the interaction with East Asia. The state and its policies and actions were considered to be crucial in this new world of economic development.

A New Sociology of Southeast Asia?

Attempting to rethink the sociology of Southeast Asia is no easy task. The most straightforward solution was to maintain broadly the structure of the 2008 book and update it, and perhaps add a reflective chapter, though without addressing rather outdated debates about Asian values and the earlier forms and processes involved in gendered work, urban life, and patronage and corruption. A rather different book would look something like this: the sociology of culture; identities, nations and ethnicities (see, for example, King 2017a); globalisation and identities (King 2012a) ; the media and identities; identities, consumerism and the middle classes; tourism encounters and identities (see, for example, King 2015a); gender and sexual identities; migration, diaspora and identities (see King 2008b, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a; and adapted from King 2021: 23-28; King and Wilder 1982; and King et al. 2021). It would address political economy but not indulge itself in this arena of contemplation about Southeast Asia, which, wearing my anthropology hat, I find rather unexciting.

A 'new sociology' would certainly require a historical and political-economic context which could be captured in an introductory chapter, but it would also need to shift the ground away from the relatively negative perspective of social conflict theory to an approach which captures the culture of and active responses to globalisation in Southeast Asia. It would also have to move from the grand sweep of political economy, which reduces the region to another global space subject to the vagaries of global capitalism to an engagement with the everyday

experiences of those at the local level who are both shaped and shape what is happening at the national, regional and global levels. It requires a closely observed, on-the-ground perspective on the important issues which affect, bring meaning to and a comprehension of the lives of those who have to endure and respond to globalisation. It also results, in our realisation, that we need a sociology of the everyday and a narrative of the multiple, varied experiences and expressions of Southeast Asian modernity and economic development (see, for example, Lian et al. 2023; and see Elias and Rethel 2016).

Culture and Identity and the Sociology and Political Economy of the Everyday

Ethnicity is embedded within the concept of culture, but we need to examine the concept of culture before we embark on an excursion into an examination of ethnicity or rather identities constructed around ethnic relations, majorities and minorities, situated territories and locations, social class, consumption, gender, age and migration and diaspora. 'Culture is one of the most crucial, though "complex", "controversial" and "divergent" concepts in the social sciences' (Jenks 1993: 1; King 2012b, 2012c). Given its status as a focal point of interest and analysis, it has been the subject of ongoing debates and disagreements. Culture is usually seen as expressing our humanity and identity; it is what distinguishes us from the rest of creation (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 63; Vervoorn 2002: 41). It is a term that is used in a multitude of different ways in popular discourse and appears regularly in discussions within and across a range of disciplines. In these debates, culture is (or more specifically elements of it are) constructed, deconstructed, invented and imagined, adopted, reproduced, adapted, discarded, inherited, disseminated and exchanged, deployed and manipulated, elaborated, displayed and performed, and commoditised. Joel Kahn, from his earlier Neo-Marxist mode moved into comparative work on Southeast Asian cultures, multicultures, post-cultures and identities, still with attention to politico-economic contexts (1981, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Kahn and Loh 1992; and see King 2017a).

There is no need to rehearse these debates in the detail necessary to provide a comprehensive history of the concept of culture in the social sciences. There are numerous substantial volumes which have attempted to set down what culture comprises (see, for example, Geertz 1973a; Alexander 1990; Alexander and Seidman 1990; Salzmann et al. 2011). Here are two snap-shots. One such attempt is that by Chris Jenks. He writes: 'The idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences and even paradoxes such that only a

confident and wise person would begin to pontificate about it and perhaps only a fool would attempt to write a book about it' (1993: 1). In addition, Stuart Hall argues for the importance of 'cultural studies' in breaking with previous disciplinary approaches; 'moving the argument into the wider field of social practices and historical processes' and engaging with multidisciplinary endeavours, to embrace ethnography, history, media studies, and English language and literary studies (1980: 4-7; and see 1990, 1996, 2000). There has also been an important stream of writing within the cultural studies framework focusing on issues of decolonisation in the former colonial world, including Malaysia (Chen 1998).

'Culture' and 'the Social'

Returning to Jenks, I view culture as primarily a sociological and historical issue, enmeshed in societies, social contexts and social relations, though it is not generated directly through social organisation and social processes (including the political and economic) in a determined way. Therefore, we should not argue for a 'social' and mechanistic explanation of and origin for culture; neither should we argue that culture is totally dependent on or a mere reflection of society nor, in some way, reducible to it, nor that it simply and straightforwardly 'reproduces' society. As Jeffrey Alexander says, in examining certain dimensions of 'the cultural', '[t]he meaning of an ideology or belief system cannot be read from social behaviour' (1990: 25). In other words, culture is, in some degree, autonomous, interacting with social relations in dialectical and dynamic ways. It has the capacity to condition and direct forms of social action and generate social, economic and political change.

John Clammer, who captured these issues many years ago, also proposes, individuals engage in change subjectively; they have an 'inner relationship' with it, negotiate 'new understandings of reality and of relationships and expanding or changing conceptions of the self' (2002: 16). Culture quite obviously lends behavioural quality, content and meaning to social relationships, as Raymond Firth (1951) suggested before many of us, who read it now, were born. Among others, Firth (1964) and Fredrik Barth (1966) realised the importance of relating individuals to structures. It has an imaginative and creative dimension because it is also clearly a product of our mental processes and is expressed and embodied in our language. And as Nirmala PuruShotam observes, even though we are aware that everyday social constructs are indeed 'constructed', we cannot but be 'emotionally connected' to them (1998: vii).

However, culture is not a free-floating, detached agent and it tends to adhere to particular social forms, including ethnic identities. In this connection, Boike Rehbein's formulates the concept of 'socio[-]cultures', though the cultural dimension appears to be closely implicated in what he calls 'the division of work' (2007: 1). I think this is a mistake and he should have broadened his horizons. What needs to be emphasised is that cultural regularities and certain cultural elements are given more significance, relevance and meaning in the context of and through the demands generated by the imperative of living and surviving together. They are also brought into the field of identity construction and transformation. In other words, '[i]ndividuals interacting together impose their constructions upon reality' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 63). Nevertheless, those constructions are not set in stone; they are malleable and they feed back on social encounters in various ways, particularly in the context of late modernity with the emergence of groups of specialists whose professional roles and responsibilities are to produce, reproduce and disseminate knowledge, symbols and material expressions of culture (Featherstone 2000: 15–16). Well, academics also carry a burden of responsibility.

Jenks attempts to capture this problematic relationship between what Alexander calls 'mechanistic' and 'subjective' approaches to culture in his discussion of Weber's sociological methodology, and in his concept of an 'ideal type' (1990: 1-3). In attempting to grasp and analyse culture, Jenks proposes, on Weber's behalf, that

> The state of a culture … makes reference to the shared individual unconscious held by a people. This is a very diffuse concept but it enables us to reconcile the multiplicity of possible meanings that derive from how any particular aspect of culture appears to different individuals and likewise the multiplicity of different courses of action that may all contrive to give rise to a particular aspect of culture. So social life and the understanding of social life contain strategies … which contrive to bring off a sense of uniformity and singularity in relation to our knowledge of cultural events. We create types, typifications or ideal pictures (1993: 53).

Culture, like the social order, also has certain biological and psychophysical interconnections, which suggests that each (the cultural and the social) is not derived from or dependent on the other in any direct cause-and-effect sense. Social orders (which include both economic and political relations) present opportunities, constraints and pressures. Cultural expressions or representations are also used to legitimise, symbolically express and assign values to particular sets of social relations, differences and reciprocities, for example with regard to ethnic interaction, social class hierarchies or the gender division of labour or the

relations between generations or residential arrangements (Alexander 1990: 1–27; Vervoorn 2002: 42–44).

They do so through the formulation of ideologies or at least a set of ideas, which serve to generalise the specific interests of those who formulate them, though I can think of ideologies that are hardly coherent. Yet culture does more than this because it is embedded in and is an essential part, indeed both a motor and expression, of social actions and the choices made in acting, 'all of which are subjective, intersubjective and volatile—but real, tangible and material in their consequences' (Jenks 1993: 57; Clammer 2002: 16–17). The overriding fact is that people ostensibly act and choose as individuals (human beings are defined by the ability and capacity to make choices) and they do so subjectively and in terms of cultural meanings and understandings, but they do so in a collective environment in relation to others, and they do so in pursuing their livelihoods and interests and in engaging in economic, political and social activities and in formulating strategies of action and engagement.

Moreover, culture is a concept. It is, as Kahn proposes, an 'intellectual construct' (1992: 161). It is taught, learned, shared and transmitted as a part of collective life. It comprises the ideational, conceptual, conscious dimension of human life and the ideas, accumulated skills and expertise embodied in material objects (art and artefacts) and carried and given expression most vitally in language. It encompasses the symbolic, meaningful, evaluative, interpretative, motivated, cognitive and classificatory dimensions of humanity (Geertz 1973a). It refers in its more popular connotations to 'ways of life' and 'ways of behaving'; it is therefore pervasive. It has to be understood in terms of form, content and process and, although there are cultural regularities and continuities which are easily detected, there are also quite obviously alterations, modifications, transformations and contestations. In some ways, though not as neatly bounded as was once originally supposed, it is patterned and has a certain systematic quality so that someone who has not been socialised into a particular culture can—when he or she has discovered its ethical judgments, values, standards, beliefs and views of the world, the connections which it makes between cause and effect, and the explanations which it provides for the place and function of humans within the natural world and for the bases of human interaction, organisation and behaviour—make sense of it even without necessarily approving of its underlying principles. Having said this, I accept that there may be events and behaviour which are beyond culture or constitute a 'counterpoint' to it which is not 'meaningful' or 'comprehensible'; there are chaotic, unexpected experiences in our lives for which we search for meanings (Daniel 1991). In my view, the global world, given what is happening in 2025,

in, for example, Gaza, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon is searching for meanings and explanations for what, for many people, is a process of destroying their families and their lives and livelihoods, in pursuit of an ideology; sadly, an ideology that will never be realised.

We should also take note of what culture is not. It is not, in 'essentialist' mode, firmly bounded, closed, delineated and integrated (Mackerras et al. 1998). It is not a totality; rather it is open-ended and constantly in process. In this connection, social science analyses also need to adopt comparative perspectives, examine several sites, and move across disciplines, space and time. Culture is contested and is part of systems of power and privilege, as well as generated, sustained and transformed in strategies, discourses and practices. These contests and struggles operate at different levels and in different arenas. Although those who have power and control over economic resources can more easily impose their cultural visions and values on others, this imposition, or in Antonio Gramsci's terms 'cultural hegemony', is never complete (Gramsci 1990: 47–54, 1978; and see Béteille 1990: 16–17; Hall 1996; Wertheim 1974; Winter and Ollier 2006: 11).

This perspective is close to Michel Foucault's concept of 'discourse' and the role of knowledge, ideas, images and cultural categories in exercising control, regulation and domination over others (1975 [1997, 1995], 1980). In short, people deal in cultural capital and use it in social and political strategies. Indeed, in a Southeast Asian context, debates about the appropriateness of Western-derived poststructuralist and post-colonialist frames have reached a high level of intensity in Thai cultural studies during the past couple of decades (Morris 1994, 2000). It was here that essentialist and modernisation readings of the uniqueness of Thai culture and its non-colonial status provoked reactions which sought for an understanding of Thai culture in a qualified, modified, nuanced comparative, poststructuralist analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge and meaning (Jackson 2004, 2005).

Using less dense post-modern language, Goh Beng-Lan usefully summarises these various strands of analysis when she says, in relation to conscious and 'purposeful' actors, that the cultural system possesses 'very powerful and determining effects on people, yet there are always emergent and residual possibilities located in people's experiences, passions, and aspirations to effect changes in society' (2022a: 37).

The Everyday

After James Scott's thesis on 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' (1985), Benedict Kerkvliet published two important books on 'everyday politics', based primarily on his research in the Philippines and Vietnam (1990, 2005; and see 2009). He demonstrated how local political behaviour and the debates, tensions, contestations and cooperation between individuals, groups and organisations, and particularly, in these two cases, between local-level farmers and state agents led to the assertion and realisation of their rights and interests, often informally, deftly, cautiously and subtly, and other times more directly and openly. In the case of Vietnam, which Kerkvliet examined between 1955 and 1990, the national socialist policy of cooperatives and agricultural collectivisation collapsed in the face of the everyday practices and resistance of family-based farmers.

Elias and Rethel, in their appreciation and critical commentary on the Murdoch School of political economy and earlier global, regional and national analyses of political and economic transformations in Southeast Asia, investigate the 'multiple experiences' and 'variegated manifestations' of Southeast Asia's pathways to modernity and economic development (2016; and see Brassett et al. 2022; Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; and for early exponents of 'everyday life', see Goffman 1956; Douglas 1970; Adler et al. 1987). Following James Scott, Benedict Kerkvliet and others in the field of peasant responses to change, including a range of anthropological research, Elias and Rethel argue that, in understanding Southeast Asia in terms of state action and market forces, it is necessary to consider:

> [H]ow processes of economic transformation are refashioning – and refashioned by – the lives and daily routines of ordinary people; their decisions to migrate across borders; their experiences of growing affluence as well as of inequality, poverty and associated forms of violence and destitution; their activities as activists, citizens and workers; and the ways in which economic and social relations, responsibilities and activities are being transformed (2016: 3).

Thus, an important dimension which is missing from much of the debate in political economy, and particularly in the Murdoch School propositions, apart from the need for much clearer specifications of social class structures and 'fractions' or 'factions', is the relationship between social structures and institutions on the one hand (including political and economic organisation), and individuals in their everyday lives and livelihoods. Lian Kwen Fee, Paul J. Carnegie and Noor Hasharina Hassan spell this out very directly, in terms of a third-generation sociology of the everyday, following on from a preoccupation with structures, functions and

systems and the 'unpacking of social behaviour and action'; it comprises the 'fluidity in identity formation through day-to-day activities'; the 'situatedness of place and locality' in making sense of day-to day actions, behaviours, interactions and identities; a 'pragmatic performativity …. in response to situational demands'; and 'the intersubjective ways in which individuals manage social and cultural material within the context of everyday life' (2023: 3). Yet there is a reminder of the gap in sociology. Kalekin-Fishman says that '[a]lthough everyday life is the core of anthropology, it is relatively new as a concern to sociologists' (2013: 71; and see Lian et al. 2023: 3).

The contextual literature is rather different from that of political economy. Michel de Certeau, for example, addresses the relationships and engagements between two kinds of action. There are overarching structures of political and economic power, authority, control and inequality which require discipline and obedience on the part of their populace, which de Certeau refers to as the formulation and implementation of 'strategies' (1984); this is the Foucauldian arena of definition, categorisation, administration, and discipline (1975 [1977, 1995]; see also Rabinow 1984). They are countered by 'ordinary people' who deploy 'tactics' to manoeuvre, negotiate, resist, or adapt, and sometimes acquiesce. Yet even acquiescence and passivity are tactical processes. People have agency. Understanding and capturing fluidity, flexibility and movement, and the contexts, conditions, contents, and responsive diversities of everyday life, which requires the adoption of a wide range of 'micro-perspectives' and preferably multi-disciplinary approaches, is demanding. It is eased by examining 'the familiar' in cultural expressions of modernity, but also to expose 'the strange in the familiar' (Johnston et al. 2016).

Addressing people's everyday sensibilities, subjectivities and narratives among themselves and with powerful others requires an understanding of, in Edmund Husserl's terms, the meaning and sense they give to their 'lifeworld' (1970 [1936]; and see Carr 1970). This is a concept which Jürgen Habermas explores in considerable detail and is closely identified with phenomenological approaches, though Husserl and Habermas did not go uncriticised (1984, 1987; and see Baxter 1987; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Luckmann 1972; Schütz 1967; Schütz and Luckmann 1973, 1983; Thompson and Held 1982).

Our major focus on the 'founding fathers' of Western sociology (Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber in particular) has tended to pass over others including George Simmel (1971). Though he was not an 'on-the-ground' researcher,

Donald Levine proposes that Simmel searched for 'novel topics' and 'distinctive concepts' (1971: ix; Kaern et al. 1990). He charted a pathway towards a sociology of the everyday in his distinction between the subjective experiences of the individual and 'objective culture', echoed in Habermas's 'lifeworld' and 'system' and de Certeau's 'tactics' and 'strategies'. Simmel examined categories of human experience focusing on human types: the stranger, the poor, the miser and spendthrift, the prostitute, the adventurer, members of the nobility, in the context of forms of individuality and the freedom and the individual, subjective culture, social forms and inner needs, and subordination and personal fulfilment (and see King 2023b: xv-xvi). In important respects, Simmel's and Weber's sociology has meeting points, particularly in Weber's concept of *verstehen* ('to understand in a deep way') (Weber 1930, 1968; and see Faught, 1985, Oakes 1977, Scaff 1988) and through close observation in empathy with the motivations, sensibilities, understandings, interpretations, perspectives, interests and identities of ordinary people in their everyday lives, in order to produce what Clifford Geertz referred to as 'thick description' (1973b: 310-323). Geertz, and this is his skill, took the concept, and elaborated it in anthropological terms, from the internationally recognised British philosopher, Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976), who worked in the field of phenomenology and behaviourism and developed the seminal idea of 'thick description' in his famous essay 'The Thinking of Thoughts: What is "Le Penseur" Doing?' (see 1968 [1971]).

From the Sociology of the Everyday to Transnational Culture and Identity: Aihwa Ong

In conclusion, I encountered Aihwa Ong's contribution to the social sciences some forty years ago. In her first major study when she provided an ethnography of the everyday working lives of young Malay women from rural backgrounds in Kedah. They were employed in factories in Penang, and her narrative focused on their search for who they were, their attempts in creating new identities, and the potential construction of a Malay Muslim model of 'womanhood' which fitted with the lives of Malay working class women (1982, 1987 [2017]; and King 1988). This resonated with my interests then on ethnicity and identity. Then I reviewed her study of 'flexible citizenship' where she examined the experiences and consequences of 'transnationals', studying the mobilities and 'strategic practices' of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, relocating family and business overseas and their continued interactions across the Asia Pacific, Hong Kong, China, Southeast Asia and the USA (1999; and King 2002). This was a rather ambitious move for an anthropologist; we might say unprecedented.

It is clear that these transnational movements have created problems for those who want to define and construct areas or regions. This issue has been apparent for a considerable period of time among area studies specialists, and they continue to struggle with the disruption of areas. There are those who have continued their work within a defined region; others have been involved in pointing to situations of crisis and finding other ways out of the dilemma of area studies. An anthropologist of Penang Straits Chinese descent, Aihwa Ong has spent most of her life studying, working and teaching in the USA, both in New York at Barnard College and Columbia University, and then at the University of California, Berkeley, where she was appointed to the Robert H. Lowie Distinguished Chair in Anthropology in 2015 and is now Emeritus Professor there (Wikipedia 2025). She has been a significant scholarly presence in the study of 'the local' in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia in a global context. It seems to me she connects the everyday with the global; it is no mean feat.

She has a sophisticated command of sociological-anthropological language and ideas; she has engaged with 'mutations' in identities and national affiliations; 'flexible citizenship'; and 'fungible life', based particularly on her study of Singapore. She has written extensively on globalisation, mobilities, multiculturalism, identities and people's adaptations and responses to mobile lifestyles and the processes involved in settling into foreign terrain, but continuing to look beyond a nation-state. For example, she studied the adaptation of Cambodian refugees to life in the USA (2003, 2006, 2016; Naka et al. 2017: 15). Along with Stephen Collier she has also formulated the concept of 'global assemblages' in order to capture the complex interplay between global forms and processes and local situated practices (Collier and Ong 2015).

She has demonstrated a particular affection for the work of Michel Foucault, who has appeared in other guises in this paper, and his concept of surveillance as a means of control, subjectification and the more subtle rather than direct exercise of power, sanction and punishment (1975 [1977, 1995]). Foucault, in turn, was attracted to the work of the British philosopher, Jeremy Bentham's and his younger brother Samuel's notion of the 'panopticon' as 'an inspection or surveillance house', and as a means of control (Milne 1981). Clearly, she also draws on anthropological-sociological ideas from a wide range of scholars. However, I would take issue with her brief summary of American anthropology, which primarily predated her work (ranging over Stanley Tambiah, Benedict Anderson, Clifford and Hildred Geertz, George Marcus and James Clifford), and there is a need to bring in anthropology as it developed

in Europe, and indeed, in Southeast Asia, which, in some respects, is so different from what was happening in the USA (Sinha 2010: 90-93; and see King 2001, 2019, 2020a).

However, what intrigued me about re-reading some of Aihwa Ong's later work and her interviews and conversations, in particular, was how close my thinking about anthropology, and indeed sociology in a global context, was to hers, though we come from quite different social, cultural and academic backgrounds (see, for example, her interviews with Vineeta Sinha 2010; Nina Trige Andersen 2015; Naka et al. 2017; and see Wikipedia 2025). Her trans-Pacific scope is much greater than my more restrained and intense preoccupation with Southeast Asia, but when anthropologists move outside 'the locally situated' they have to address global processes, and engage with the wider sociological and political-economic literature. Ong says, anthropologists study, or at least, should study 'how everyday practices shape the imagination, configuration, and meaningfulness of social life in conditions of flux' and that 'We tend to study how various human activities give patterns to ways of life that are not necessarily circumscribed by physical and administrative borders' (Naka et al. 2017: 15). She wants to 'disrupt overarching theories' in the context of 'heterogeneous activities on the ground' and she questions such constructs, dear to the hearts of social scientists, as 'culture', society', 'economy' and 'gender' (ibid.: 16; Andersen 2015: 13, 14). She captures the problem of the everyday in interaction with the political and economic forces of globalisation.

My concept of 'jobbing', which can be very much misconstrued (see Sutlive and Appell 2018; Gaitanidis 2020; King 2009, 2017c, 2020b), (the very concept invites disapproval from senior academics) emerged from a rather different research context than Ong's move into citizenship, transnationalism and globalisation. Though it seems to have some resonance with Ong's position in that she does not 'do theory' rather she does 'concept work', as I do (Anderson 2015). She suggests, in her work with Stephen Collier, that she adopts 'a kind of mid-range theorizing' in that we 'stay close to practice' (Sinha 2010: 93). There is a spectrum of work between theory and practice, and it is difficult to discern exactly where we would place ourselves in this undefined and non-delineated 'mid-range'. My practice emerged from on-the-ground work in Southeast Asia, specifically in Malaysian Sarawak, in rural development and the everyday role-playing of members of village populations in identity formation, negotiation and change, where of course cultural behaviour, values, meanings and understandings play a part. Yet, I also still hold to the importance of discourse, texts, questioning what we do as social scientists, and reflexivity. But it requires concepts rather than theory. So, I am close to Aihwa Ong, but how close?

She is also sceptical of a distinction between 'Western intellectual and cultural traditions' and 'so-called native or postcolonial' scholarship; she says it is not an issue of the 'the West versus the Rest' (ibid.: 96). I could not agree more, in that it chimes with my scepticism about the insider-outsider binary and with alternative, locally-generated discourses as against Western social science (King 2016b). And for her the nation-state does not constrain and confine people, nor, for that matter, does a region like Southeast Asia. Again, I am in full agreement.

I like to think that I have been committed to working concepts, addressing Southeast Asian diversities and contingencies, movements, encounters, flexibility, hybridisation and hierarchies, and culture and identity in motion, breaking down constructs and thinking about flexible categories and groupings in the context of ethnicities. This involves recognising that the core of our humanity is the constant engagement in conceptualising and determining similarity and difference, increasingly in the context of mobilities. But perhaps this is where I differ from Ong, who thinks in terms of publicly observable 'social and institutional practices' which form the context of human action, and though heterogenous and contingent, are patterned and structured in various ways. For me humanity is rather more personal and meaningful, based on encounters and interactions; and the exercise of power in Foucault's terms, is not everything. We have to accept that, though we are all subject to the forces of globalisation and its consequences, there are those who simply continue to live in 'the local'; they continue their everyday lives with no or virtually no reference to what is going on 'out there' or they cope with globalisation in a variety of ways. Aihwa Ong's 'global assemblages' mean nothing to them; these are part of academic discourse. And depending on how you conceive of culture and identity and how these concepts combine, they are certainly not stable, fixed, static, nor are they incapable of addressing global issues, transnational citizenship and the problems of defining Southeast Asia.

Some concluding thoughts

Is a new sociology of Southeast Asia possible, or, even more improbably, a sole-authored volume? Our American colleagues would probably devise an edited book. All I have done is provide the elements of a general sociology, and I have given reasons why I would not pursue a rather stark political economy road; a 'new sociology' needs something more nuanced and

grounded; obviously in a global context it requires a sociology of culture, identity and the everyday.

Since the 2008 introduction to the sociology of Southeast Asia, the literature has increased exponentially. It is an expression of the commands of university senior management 'to publish or perish'. In this environment it is impossible for an individual working alone to capture this substantial literature? What it does require us to do is try to sort the useful and interesting from the 'chaff'; and the 'chaff' exasperatingly increases. You read it and dispense with it; it is part of the global publication regime. In retirement, I view what is published, and making a judgement, I can dispense of around 85 per cent of what I read.

In Gilbert Ryle's terms we need to find space and time in 'the thinking of thoughts'. Nevertheless, I have tried to work out from 2008 what I think is important, and I give no concessions to academic fashions. If we are serious about Southeast Asia as a region, then we must continue vigorously to conduct comparative studies. We must be more flexible in our definitions of Southeast Asia, and to follow Heather Sutherland in pursuit of 'contingent devices', and Ruth McVey in the pursuit of 'many Southeast Asias'. We can do this by marrying culture and identity, by investigating the various levels of analysis - global, regional, national – but above all, by addressing the local, the everyday, and by recognising political and economic context, but being mindful of the limits to the explanatory power of political economy.

It is appropriate to leave this disquisition with the introductory promotion of the reprint of Gilbert Ryle's masterpiece *The Concept of Mind* (2009), which we should all carry with us in our scholarly investigations of the human condition, especially in relation to Southeast Asia: 'an erudite and beautifully written account of the will, emotion, self-knowledge, sensation and observation, imagination and the intellect'. Even Clifford Geertz was impressed with the thinking and thoughts of a British philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, and James Scott was inspired by E. P. Thompson, a British social-economic historian's study of the English working class. This demonstrates, in Southeast Asian terms, that the distinction between insiders-outsiders, between Western and alternative, locally-generated discourses is untenable. It is a false distinction. Even Western ideas have depended on an interchange and debate across a world of scholarship that knows no boundaries.

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