

SOME NOTES ON THE LITERATURE ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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SINOPSIS

Penulisan tentang perubahan socio-ekonomi desa sangatlah banyak jumlahnya, dan tersebar pula dalam pelbagai cabang disiplin sains sosial. Artikel ini membicarakan beberapa penulisan tentang perubahan socio-ekonomi desa di Asia Tenggara. Penulisan-penulisan ini boleh dibahagikan mengikut tajuk-tajuk berikut: penulisan tentang perubahan dalam zaman kolonial; penulisan yang berkait dengan kerja-kerja antropologi gunaan atau perubahan berarah; penulisan tentang penerimaan petani-petani terhadap unsur-unsur inovasi; penulisan yang menunjukkan perhubungan antara kuasa-kuasa ekonomi, politik dan budaya dalam proses modenisasi; penulisan yang membincangkan kesan aktiviti modenisasi terhadap masyarakat dan ekonomi tradisional.

SYNOPSIS

The literature on socio-economic change is extremely large, and is spread over several branches of social sciences. This article reviews a sample of the literature on socio-economic change in Southeast Asia. Mainly, the literature can be labelled as follows: works on change under colonial situation; works on applied anthropology or directed change; works on the responsiveness of peasant farmers; works that show the mutual interaction of economic, political and cultural forces; works on the effects of modernizing activities upon traditional society and economy.

Anthropology has had a long history in the study of socio-economic change. Keesing's analytic bibliography on culture change indicates that anthropological sources on culture change extend back over a century of anthropological literature. Interest in the study of culture or socio-economic change is indeed widespread among anthropologists, as can also be seen in the several survey articles by Spindler (1959), Rubin (1962) and Voget (1963). Spindler (1959) notes that the interest in the study of culture change is rivaled only by the interest in the study of social structure.

The kinds of topics and problems dealt with are extremely diverse. It includes studies of unobserved change, like *The Evolution of Culture: From The Development of Civilization to The Fall of Rome* (White 1959),

of nativistic movements, like Mooney's *Ghost-dance* (Mooney 1896) and Worsley's *Melanesian cargo-cults* (Worsley 1957a, 1957b), of changes in totemism (Worsley 1955), and of psychological process in culture change (Rivers 1922). This wide range of studies commonly appear in anthropological literature under several headings: evolution, diffusion, culture change, social change, culture contact, acculturation and applied anthropology. Although the problems studied vary enormously, the common focus of interest is on change at the village community level.

The recent interest in economic development and modernization has increased the volume of the literature on change at the village level. Indeed, the literature on case studies and theory is rapidly growing (eg. Smelser 1963, Douglas 1965, Brokensha 1966, Wharton 1971); and it is widely scattered in the various disciplines — anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, history, etc. (See the bibliographies in Bernstein 1973, Dalton 1971, also Brode's annotated bibliography, 1969).

This paper will review the literature on socio-economic change in Southeast Asia. It will, however, only sample the literature available.

But first a point to note: compared to Africa and Latin America, the literature on socio-economic change in Southeast Asia is not very encouraging. The literature is also not evenly distributed among the countries in the region. Most of the works that have been done are on Philippines and Indonesia. The other countries have been given less attention.

Change Under Colonial Situation

The literature on socio-economic change in Southeast Asia reaches back right to the early part of colonial days. Much of it consists of European colonial incursions which produced misery and cultural decimation — political subjugation and severe disruption of usual activities. The literature describes specific cases under situations of colonial presence and political control of conquered people: the indigenous people were prohibited from pursuing rituals or activities which were meaningful within traditional society; indigenous groups were made to pursue new activities, for example, forced labour in plantations; traditional political authority was displaced by the colonizers who neither understood nor respected the culture of the society under their control. The atmosphere that filled the air during those centuries was the belief among the colonizers of the total superiority of western culture and civilization: that the indigenous way of life was "queer", that the indigenous structure of social and political power was not worth preserving (Hagen 1962, chap. 17).

Phelan (1959), for instance, writes on the "impact" of Spanish conquest in the Philippines. He remarks that the Spanish programme there envisaged a radical transformation of the Filipino society. The Spaniards

came with the intent to deprive the people of land and to “westernize” them at all costs, and in the destruction of what was indigenous. To transmit the features of Hispanic culture into the local people, the Spaniards adopted two main methods. First, they imposed Christianity upon the people. The Spaniards put a heavy emphasis on Christianization as the most effective means of incorporating the Filipinos into Spanish culture. Spanish missionaries destroyed temples and idols. In their eyes pagan artifacts were but “the visible symbols of the devil’s tyrannical dominion, and hence they merited destruction” (*Ibid*, p. 53). Second, as in Latin America, they established the encomienda tribute system. The alleged abuses of the early encomienda in the Philippines were the same catalogue of complaints that had previously come from Mexico. Phelan writes:

The encomenderos were collecting their tribute with blood and fire methods without providing their wards with any of the protective services established by law. The agents of the encomenderos were harsh and brutal. Native chieftains, who frequently acted as tribute collectors, were a scourge. Many of the encomenderos compelled their wards to pay tribute in a scarce commodity, which goods the encomenderos then resold at a handsome profit (*ibid*: 95).

In Indonesia, Schrieke (1955) reports on the Dutch Company’s policy with regard to the native rulers. The company wanted products, and it made sure that the regents deliver the products to them. Gradually, the powers of the local rulers were curtailed, and they were no longer permitted to appoint district chiefs themselves, even though they had to provide their salaries. They were often obliged to suffer the grossest discourtesies. Moreover, “fines were imposed upon them for their missions” in order to keep them under a “bond of obedience which was reasonable and absolutely essential” (*Ibid*, p. 205). Finally nothing remained of their judicial powers in penal affairs.

The development of “colour-caste” in colonial societies is mentioned by Wertheim (1954, 1956). Wertheim (1954) notes that at about the turn of the century the Whites in Java were firmly entrenched in a position of complete supremacy, and they occupied all key positions in government. The great majority of the Javanese was relegated to small farming or to menial work as cheap labour in European plantations or in urban sectors, such as public works or industry. Wertheim (1956) also points out that the “seperation” of the resident white population from the native masses by the social barrier of colour line existed in most colonial societies. In Burma, Cochin-China and the Philippines, for instance, not even the middle class of professional traders and artisans was recruited from the native population.

Some of the historical case studies of community change reported in the literature describe the social and psychological changes which accompanied the commercialization of agricultural production and mining activities. European commerce and industry brought changes in traditional social organisations and the beginnings of new economic activities. Dual economies were created by the establishment of European commercial enclaves of mining and agricultural production for export alongside traditional societies producing subsistence goods with simple technology (Boeke 1942). The effect of Western commercial activities was that it dissolved all kinds of traditional autochthonous social ties and institutions, causing regression in the villages instead of gradual development (Boeke 1954). "In this way social unity has been disrupted and the homogeneity of the old society destroyed, with the result that a social dualism has come into existence" (*Ibid*, p. 282). In like manner, Geertz talks about the social and psychological changes accompanying European commercial activities in the Outer Islands of Indonesia around 1910:

This (economic) mentality has had its customary sociocultural accompaniments: increasing flexibility of land tenure; growth of individualism and slackening of external family ties; greater class differentiation and conflict, intensified opposition between young and old, modern and conservative; weakening of traditional authority and wavering of traditional social standards; and even the growth of "Protestant ethic" religious ideologies (see Schrieke 1955, pp. 107ff). What change here (as in Java though in a different way) was not just a pattern of land use or a set of productive techniques but a system of functionally interrelated adaptively relevant institutions, practices and ideas — a "culture core". (Geertz 1963, p. 120).

Perhaps the single most important change during the early period of colonization, that is, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was brought about by the introduction of money into village economy. For this reason, several writers have been engaged in analyzing the effects of monetization on the indigenes. They all want to know: What happened to the traditional village economy and to the morality accompanying it when money was introduced?

Pal (1956), for instance, analyzes the changes in social relationships among peasant families in the Philippines which followed the greater use of money. He writes:

Before the advent of money, each peasant family in a village was self-sufficient unit with production for exchange rate. When a person did not have sufficient land at his disposal (because of a

variety of reasons not excluding over population in particular areas) to meet his own needs, as those of his family, he offered his services to another peasant family in order to earn a portion of its production. This usually placed him in a relation of sub-servience either to the village community as a whole or to particular members of the community. But the relationship of subservience was social not economic... All this changed with the introduction of money; the Spanish introduced many new wants into the village which money alone could command as well as taxes which were not payable in kind. (*Ibid*, p. 13).

The introduction of money and the concomitant spread of the market brought new form of indebtedness to the peasants — one which we know only too well. In subsistence economy there was no debt because there was no credit, save among kinsmen whose activities were aspects of family status, not acts of money-lenders. The introduction of European monetary system created the notion of debt in the subsistence sphere divorced from kinship and status (Bohannon 1959). Firth (1954), for example, notes that the use of money had caused many Malay peasants to be in debts. An inquiry made in 1934 among coconut smallholders showed that they were practically all in debt. The debts were mainly to Chinese and Chettier money-lenders.

Writing on social change in Indonesia, Wertheim (1956) reports that the introduction of money was the first effect of Western capitalism. It made many peasants ran into debt and became more or less “proletarianized”; and they lost the sense of security which tradition and membership in a collective group had given them.

DEVELOPMENT AND MODERNIZATION

(1) Applied Anthropology or Directed Change

Works on applied anthropology or directed change seems to be the concern of a good number of scholars. Their writings consist of cases of successful or unsuccessful introduction of an innovation piecemeal. These cases are analyzed and policy conclusions are drawn from them.

Overwhelmingly, the studies describe situations of a temporary presence of a technical expert in a village community trying to introduce one or a few innovations. They stress the need of the visiting expert to understand the cultural complexity of innovations — the many resistances to innovation stem from people’s values, attitudes and past experiences (see Dalton 1971). An innovation usually fails because the change agent does not have the technical expertise in it, as well as lacking sociological

expertise in the sense of cultural sensitivity to the hinterland group's values and traditions.

Here is what one scholar says about farmers resistance to change:

Many extension agents have only a 'book of garden' knowledge of farming. It is true that they might have graduated from a college of agriculture but most of them do not have farm backgrounds. Consequently, these extension agents do not know enough to make a straight furrow with a carabao and plow; they do not know how to harvest palay with the native scyth used by farmers. (Pal 1964, p. 60).

The same theme is being stressed by Byrnes (1966), Hendry (1964) and Sibley (1969). Byrnes (1966) believes that people respond or react in terms of their definition of a situation. Thus, to change their reaction one must know what they perceive and the basis of this perception. The reason why many Filipino farmers resisted change was because change agents did not understand the cultural factors of innovations.

Hendry (1964), in his study of peasants in Laos, informs us that several innovations were introduced successfully because change agents gave good instructions. Citing an illustration on the use of phosphate fertilizer, Hendry notes that the instructions given by the change agent were simple, the fertilizer sample was free, and the risk to the farmer was negligible. It was an attractive combination, and the farmer accepted the innovation readily. On the other hand, several other innovation failed because change agents gave less instruction and advice.

Sibley (1969) compares the attitudes of farmers in two villages in the Philippines. Farmers in both villages responded negatively to change. In one village it was due to the lack of opportunity to change; in the other it was due to the history of unpleasant experience with agents of change.

(2) The Responsiveness of Peasant Farmers

The analysis of peasant economic behaviour has taken much of the time of many writers. While some writers have argued that much of the peasant's agricultural behaviour is determined strictly by economic calculations of profit and loss (eg. Mellor 1969, Schultz 1964), several investigators who have carried out studies in Southeast Asia suggest that discussions of peasant economic behaviour must also take into account that various "non-economic" considerations, such as values, attitudes, social obligations, etc. These investigators view the problem of development of peasant communities as having economic, technological, social and cultural dimensions.

In the study of peasant conservatism, Houston (1964), for instance, concludes:

A farmer who must exist from what nature provides him is reluctant to change unless certain fundamental conditions exist or will inevitably develop which will guarantee success. His willingness to adapt is determined by spiritual beliefs or convictions, by the capital cost of adaptation to himself, by conclusive illustration of a benefit to be derived, fear of technological displacement and what will be available to those thus displaced, and his estimate as to the desirability or possibility, within his cultural limits, of change. (*Ibid*, p. 79).

The interplay of various social and economic factors in the process of village community modernization is shown by Golden and Ralis (1957). In their attempt to determine the conditions of acceptance of agricultural innovations and conditions for using the facilities of modern medicine in clinics and hospitals among farmers in Thailand, Golden and Ralis suggest that the level of economic achievement, the level of literacy, the degree of acceptance of urban ways of life, the extent of exposure to mass media, the degree of social contacts within the community and the extent of usage of credit facilities are some of the several factors that influence peasant receptivity.

Wharton (1962) shows that the relationship between rubber smallholders in Malaysia and the middlemen is both social and economic. The middleman is not only the buyer of rubber, but also a money-lender who gives credit to the smallholders in times of need. Sometimes, the rubber dealer is also the local merchant with a store near the smokehouse. In such a situation, the smallholder will not transfer his custom or allegiance to a government operation which only markets his product but does not provide credit.

Fraser's study of a fishing village in South Thailand shows that peasants attempt to maintain traditional values in making their decisions (Fraser 1960). The introduction of bigger fishing boat by a small group of man in the community is because of the prestige value they felt the innovation would bring them. The introduction of tow boats by a group of individuals is also because of the same reason. The prestige value of such innovations is of particular importance as older forms (i.e. coconut plantations, plank and tile houses) are losing their value as symbols.

(3) **The Mutual Interaction of Economic, Political and Cultural Forces**

“Modernization is a sequential process of cumulative change over time, generated by the interaction of economic and cultural innovations

impinging on traditional economy, polity, and society, with feedback effects on the innovating activities" (Dalton, 1971: 5). In respect of this, several authors have recognised the need to invent analytical categories which could reveal the strategic workings of the complicated process of economic development and modernization. They recognise that the conceptual categories must include both economic and non-economic attributes; and they recognise that the conceptual categories must show how the attributes mutually affect one another in changing traditional society.

Manning Nash's *Some Social and Cultural Aspects of Economic Development* (Nash 1959) stresses the mutual interaction of social, cultural, political and economic forces in the process of economic development in Burma and Cambodia. Nash examines how social stratification, value system, economic sub-system and political sub-system affect economic development. His findings can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The more frequent the recruitment of lower class members into upper class strata by merit of achievement, the larger the opportunity for seeking development;
- (2) The greater the value agreement between different segments of the elite, the easier it is to transmit development values;
- (3) The more economic units are weighted on the subsistence side of production and the more they are anchored in local, communal organizations, the more difficult it is for them to save;
- (4) The more organized the group holding political power, the easier it is to embark on development programmes.

Frank's work on economic development in the Philippines shows that culture, reproduction, health and economics are intimately related (Frank, 1966). A fundamental change in any of these factors tends to bring about changes in the others. McHale's analysis of the factors of development in the Philippines indicates that the established economic and political interests have actively or passively opposed any attempts to change the existing economic structure (McHale, 1960).

Mynt (1963), who writes about the problems of economic development in Southeast Asia, points out that non-economic aspects are important attributes of economic development. His point is that the problem of economic development in Southeast Asia "is not fundamentally one of lack of material resources, or of over population or starvation, but of what is happening in the people's minds and in their social attitudes" (*Ibid*, p. 252). The thing that should be done is to try to find out the extent to which the traditional society still exists, to learn its strong points and to try to use them.

Some observers, however, show that traditional social organization (e.g. kinship obligations) act as impediment to social change (Tanco, 1952); and they thereby deduce the need for change in traditional social institutions as necessary precondition for economic development. The pluralistic form of the societies in Southeast Asia (from the ethnic, linguistic and religious point of view) is also said to be not conducive to progress, for it interferes with the attainment of a high level of national integration. Lissak's analysis of the class structure in Burma highlights this view (Lissak, 1970).

Effects of Modernizing Activities

One question that seems to be of interest to many anthropologist and other social scientists is: With the beginning of modernizing activities how and why do traditional societies change? Many case studies show that modernizing activities — roads, electricity, irrigation — bring several changes to traditional economy and society. The use of modern technology by the Karen people in Thailand, for example, brings changes in work organization and the distribution of agricultural produce. Their greater involvement with the market has brought further changes in social organization (Hamilton, 1963). The coming of electricity to a number of villages in Burma has brought many changes — fewer fires now, fewer thefts, people work more, through radio there is now general knowledge, proved useful for children's study, opportunity of working in the evening hours (Versluys, 1966). The building up of roads around Jogjakarta in Indonesia has reduced the importance of cows and buffaloes in the transportation business because of the increase of modern vehicles on the roads. Cattle which were once a symbol of wealth have now become a mere economic instrument. A man who owns cattle is no longer envied by his neighbours, let alone honoured (Selosoemardjan, 1962).

Downs observed that in Malaysia the improvements of the means of communication in the eastern part of the country has made it easier for people to move about, and has also reduced the isolation of villages. This development also encourages commercialization of the economy. New alternative for jobs are now opened up to the villagers, and individuals and their outside contacts and interests are increased. In the process the strong community attachment is now loosened, and the role of kinship altered (Downs 1967). Change in familial relationships accompanying new economic activities is also observed by Swift in his study of Malay peasants in Jelebu (Swift 1967). The introduction of cash economy has weakened family ties; and cash crops have taken the place of many ricelands. Many Malay youths have left their homes to seek employment in towns, and the status of women is changing.

Raymond Firth's *Malay Fishermen* (1966) and Rosemary Firth's *Housekeeping Among Malay Peasants* (1966) are two studies that analyze the structural changes that accompany economic development. Both studies show that innovative activities — road development, credit facilities — have brought changes to the village economy and social structure. However, of the three sets of changes which comprise development — economic, technological and cultural — only the first two have displaced indigenous practice to a significant extent. Traditional values, beliefs, attitudes, domestic habits and social organizations remain unchanged.

The rise of entrepreneurs has been said to be an important element in economic development. Geertz (1962, 1963b) traces the development of entrepreneurs in two Indonesian towns. Geertz shows that the extent of entry into market economy and the degree of urbanization are important elements in the creation of entrepreneurial ability (for both factors tend to weaken traditional cultural practices and social structure).

Conclusion

Which are the promising ideas or lines of analysis in the study of socio-economic change, development, and modernization at the village level? Which concepts and generalizations contribute to the formulation of theory? Which published works on microdevelopment (village development) should be read for the theoretical guidelines they provide? What are the interesting questions to be answered about processes and problems of socio-economic change? (Dalton, 1971, p. 4). These are some of the problems that students of modernization face.

The literature on socio-economic change is extremely large, and is spread over several branches of social science. The anthropological literature alone is voluminous and appears, as indicated earlier, under several headings. Anyone who attempts to create a theoretical framework has to do a great deal of reading. Undergraduates and graduate students in anthropology would do well to do library research extensively, particularly to read deeply the writings of other social scientists — sociologists, economic historians, agricultural economists, political scientists — who have made several contributions to our understanding of the processes of village transformation.

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