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“Power, Labor, and Livelihood: Processes of Change in Rural Java”:

Notes & Reflections on a Village Revisited

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Preliminaries

These notes represent an initial effort to record my key impressions of a very brief return to Sukodono, a pseudonym for the Central Javanese village in which I conducted research in 1975-6 for my PhD through Cornell University. A much revised version of the dissertation was published in 1986, entitled *Power, Labor, and Livelihood: Processes of Change in Rural Java* (Berkeley: University of California Press). In addition to trying to clarify my own initial perceptions and reactions, my purpose in these notes is to provide some feedback to friends and colleagues in Indonesia, to solicit responses and further questions, and to reflect more broadly on questions of revisits.

My dissertation fieldwork was carried out under the auspices of the *Survei Agro-Ekonomie* (SAE or Agro-Economic Survey), which Ben White has recently placed in a larger historical context.¹ The Sukodono study was a pilot for the larger Rural Dynamics Study in West Java. In addition to research on agrarian change in the village, my job was to help train a group of data processors and to wrestle with the monstrous challenges of the Pertamina mainframe computer in Jakarta. I spent part of each month in Sukodono, and the other part in the SAE office in Bogor with occasional (dreaded) trips to Pertamina in Jakarta.

After completing my fieldwork in November 1976, I returned only once to Sukodono – as I recall in October 1978. My companions on this trip were Dr Siti Fatimah and Dr Satoto, both affiliated with the Faculty of Public Health at Universitas Diponegoro in Semarang, and Glen Williams, the director of Oxfam-UK in Indonesia. In 1976 all four of us had been involved in helping to set up a village health insurance scheme (*Dana*

¹ See Ben White “Between Apologia and Critical Discourse: Agrarian Transitions and Scholarly Engagements in Indonesia,” in D. Dhakidae and V. Hadiz *Social Science and Power in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Equinox), due to be published in 2004.

Kesehatan) in Sukodono, which seemed to be flourishing when I left in November 1976. On our return to Sukodono, we discovered that the *Dana Kesehatan* had fallen apart – in large part, it seemed, because it represented a political threat to the village headman (*lurah*). Satoto and Glen Williams used this case to point to the importance of local power relations in shaping how public health projects operate.²

For me, this return to Sukodono in 1978 was profoundly important. Academically it helped to sharpen an argument of my book about how the exercise of state power in the countryside under the New Order operated through a small but influential class of relatively large landowners. On a personal level it brought home the eerie parallels between the repression of the New Order and the apartheid regime in my native South Africa, and heavily influenced my decision to stop working in Indonesia.³ During the 1980s I did research in Bangladesh and Malaysia before returning to South Africa for the first time in nearly 20 years following the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other political parties in 1990.

My return to Indonesia in July 2004 took place in a wonderfully fortuitous and fortunate set of circumstances. In 2003 my South African colleague Lungisile Ntsebeza expressed an interest in spending some time in Berkeley, and I set about trying to identify some resources to make this happen. In May 2003 Suraya Afif, who was in the process of completing her PhD, told me about Noer Fauzi – one of the leading activists in the field of agrarian change in Indonesia – and mentioned that he had visited South Africa and would be spending Fall 2003 in Berkeley. My Berkeley colleague Nancy Peluso and I very quickly decided to put in a joint proposal to the Ford Foundation’s Crossing Borders program for a project on “Resurgent Agrarian Questions in Post-Suharto Indonesia and Post-Apartheid South Africa.”

Our original proposal was for two meetings in Berkeley, in the Fall of 2003 and Spring of 2004. The Fall meeting was a resounding success, with our mutual intellectual and political commitments coming together to produce fresh and exciting insights and ideas. It also attested to the value of what I have called “relational comparison.”⁴ Instead of taking pre-given cases or ideal-types, relational comparison entails focusing on key connections and processes of constitution. These extremely productive discussions extended over two weeks, and culminated in a very successful workshop on the Berkeley

² Glen Williams and Satoto, “Sociopolitical Constraints on Primary Health Care: A Case Study from Indonesia,” in D. Morley et al. (eds) *Practising Health for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983): 208-228.

³ In the late 1970s I became peripherally involved in a project based at Boston University to process large numbers of agricultural survey questionnaires, but did not follow up on this work. As I recall, this project brought me back to Indonesia very briefly at the end of 1982, but I did not return to Sukodono on that visit.

⁴ I develop this idea more fully in *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

campus on October 24, 2003.⁵ At this juncture we decided to change course; instead of a second meeting in Berkeley, we requested that the remaining funds be used for what we called a “travelling workshop” in Java in July 2004.

The rise of agrarian movements demanding access to land in the era of *reformasi* formed the central theme of the travelling workshop, which began in Bogor and ended in Yogyakarta. We focused on the SPP (*Serikat Petani Pasundan*) movement in West Java, and its relationship to KPA (*the Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria*, a national network based in Bandung that advocates agrarian reform agendas) and student groups in each of the three Pasundan districts (Garut, Tasik Malaya, and Ciamis) that support the SPP. In Yogyakarta we were affiliated with KARSA (*Lingar Pembaruan Desa dan Agraria* or Circle for Village and Agrarian Reform) that runs courses for newly-formed legislative bodies at the village level. The highlight of the trip was two days in Cieceng, a West Javanese village in which SPP members have occupied a former plantation, torn down rubber and cocoa trees, planted bananas, built houses, carved out rice fields, and taken over village government. The five of us (Suraya Afif, Noer Fauzi, Lungisile Ntsebeza, Nancy Peluso and myself) are currently in the process of writing a working paper that documents this trip, the insights that emerged from it, and directions for future comparative work.

Following the travelling workshop, Nancy Peluso and I decided to visit our former field sites together.⁶ Despite the extreme brevity of the visits, we felt that this was an extraordinary opportunity to gain at least a broad sense of changes over time in two very different regions of Central Java – a relatively remote teak forest village that Nancy had last visited in 1984, and a lowland rice village on the northern coastal plain.

One of the key issues that emerged in the course of the travelling workshop was the extent to which the new agrarian movements demanding access to land are concentrated in upland areas where they come into conflict with the Department of Forestry, the state forestry corporation, and state-owned as well as private plantations. KPA and other groups are grappling with what Noer Fauzi called the “organizationability” of the huge landless proletariat in the lowland rice regions – or, as Dianto Bachriadi put it very clearly, the difficulties of organizing in these regions.

On the visit to Sukodono, we were accompanied by Sediono Tjondronegoro and Gunawan Wiradi, two leading academics in the field of agrarian studies in Indonesia who have played a tremendously important role in keeping alive a critical approach to agrarian studies during the dark days of the New Order, and in supporting a young generation of

⁵ A transcript of this workshop is available from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (*put it on the website?*)

⁶ Her book *Rich Forests, Poor People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) is based on field work in two upland villages in Central Java. We returned to one of these – a village in a teak forest near the town of Blora.

scholars and activists in the era of *reformasi*.⁷ Both were also major figures in the Agro-Economic Survey since its inception and, together with the late Sajogyo, were very influential in shaping my own understandings. In addition, both are deeply familiar with Sukodono and have been closely associated with efforts to track changes over time in villages that were part of the original Agro-Economic Survey.⁸

Their participation in the trip to Sukodono in fact grew out of a meeting with them in Bogor on the first day of the Travelling Workshop. At that meeting we very quickly honed in on the question of why it is that, despite the seemingly advanced development of capitalism in rice agriculture in the main lowland plains, the emergence of any sort of organization from below appears to have been minimal. This was the broad question that we took with us to Sukodono. While we could not even begin to answer it on the basis of so brief a visit, it shaped many of our questions and probably also our interpretations.

Transformations

The 40km trip from Semarang to the north coast town of Kendal was in itself an amazing experience. I had travelled this road many times en route to Sukodono and was prepared for lots of changes – but was nevertheless taken aback by the extent of *modernisasi*. What in the 1970s was a narrow road choked with every imaginable form of transportation is now a double-lane highway, flanked by huge factories. None of us knew the road, and there were several points at which no one knew which way to turn (we decided, as a general rule, to turn left when in doubt). The drive heightened my mixed feelings – delight at returning with this group of people; and my apprehension that Sukodono might have disappeared into urban sprawl. This apprehension intensified as we entered Kendal – which has transformed from a sleepy little town into a sizable urban agglomeration. We lost our way looking for a place to buy *oleh-oleh* (gifts), and had to turn back.

After making our purchases, we drove past a huge new mosque, and turned down a small street that seemed more or less where Tjondronegoro, Wiradi and I had remembered the road into Sukodono. It seemed vaguely familiar – a road flanked on either side by *sawah*, although now paved, leading to the residential area amid a cluster of trees. As we came closer, it didn't seem right – especially when we entered through a small portal that identified this as a neighboring village. Pak Wiradi got out of the car to talk to a man sitting in a shelter on the right hand side of the road, but a group of women on the left called out that this was an “*orang gila*” (mad man). They informed us that we were on

⁷ For a recent acknowledgement of their importance, see Anton Lucas and Carol Warren “The State, The People and their Mediators – The Struggle over Agrarian Law Reform in Post-New Order Indonesia,” *Indonesia* no.76, October 2003.

⁸ See Sediono Tjondronegoro *Social Organization and Planned Development in Rural Java: A Study of the Organizational Phenomenon in Kecamatan Cibadak, West Java, and Kecamatan Kendal, Central Java*. (Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); see also the recent book by Gunawan Wiradi and Jan Breman (referenced in footnote 16 below).

the wrong road, and directed us to Sukodono. My sense of discombobulation was heightened by Ebod (our driver's) music – “Another one bites the dust!” seemed weirdly appropriate.

Let me start off with a quick “read” of the landscape of Sukodono, and identify three particularly striking visual transformations in addition to the paved road into the village: (1) a large (new for me) building on the left as one enters the village with a sign identifying this as the *Kelurahan* of Sukodono; (2) a rice mill that has sprung up in the huge, immaculate expanse of *sawah* in which the rice had been planted at more or less the same time; and (3) a stunning transformation of the housing stock. In the 1970s, the size and physical condition of a house provided a fairly accurate indicator of a household's landholding – large brick and tile houses for large landowners, wooden structures with concrete floors for small landowners, and woven bamboo walls and mud floors for the landless. A very large proportion of houses have been rebuilt with brick and tile, and several mansions now adorn the entrance to the village.

While these visual markers offer important clues into transformations since the 1970s, they undoubtedly conceal as much as they reveal. Over the course of the day we were able to engage in four fairly intensive sets of conversations – with village government officials in the *Kelurahan* building; the son and daughter of the former *lurah*, now deceased, in whose house I had lived; a village teacher (now retired) with whom I had worked closely; and conversations with one of the village government officials with whom we walked through a section of the village and visited the *tambaks* (brackish water fish ponds). Each of these encounters carried a powerful emotional valence for me that has undoubtedly helped shape my interpretations – something on which I will reflect more fully in a later paper.

Accordingly, it is with caution – indeed trepidation – that I suggest some key processes and transformations. In summary, they are (1) the bureaucratization of village government; (2) consolidation of the large landowning class, part of which has become a “land mafia” that controls access to *tanah bengkok*, the former salary lands that in the past were used to compensate village government officials; (3) a rise in the number and proportion of landless households; and (4) the (rather shaky) emergence of an industrial proletariat within and beyond the region that retains strong ties to the village, along with numbers of younger women being drawn into domestic work contracts in other Asian countries and the Middle East.

1) The bureaucratization of village government.

Shortly after turning into the road to Sukodono, we came to *Kelurahan* building. As we got out of the car, we were greeted by a large group of *pegawai negeri*, wearing the official, somewhat military uniforms of civil servants. Recognition registered on several faces; a relatively young man came up and greeted me as “Miss Gill,” identifying himself as the son of a prominent landowner and saying that he remembered my coming to his house when he was about ten. Two other officials who recognized me were the son of the former *carik* (village secretary) – terribly aged, seemingly blind in one eye, and totally unrecognizable from the dynamic young

man I remembered – and the son-in-law of the former *lurah*. Of the 14 civil servants who now govern Sukodono, these three are – as far as I can tell – the only ones from within the village.

The *Kelurahan* building at the entrance to the village, and the civil servants who inhabit it, signal a highly significant shift in government. That Sukodono is now defined as a *kelurahan* means that it has officially become “urban” – as opposed to a “rural” *desa*. The shift apparently began in 1982, when a *lurah* from outside the village was first brought in.⁹

In effect, the process I identified in the mid-1970s through which village government officials – and the large landowning class of which they were a part – were becoming incorporated into larger structures of state power has taken a new twist: local government has become completely bureaucratized, and one is made aware of this presence the moment one enters the village.¹⁰

The implications of this shift are multiple and deeply significant. First is the sheer size of the bureaucratic presence in relation to the population – 14 full-time government officials located in a village with an official population of 3,169 (according to the statistics posted on the wall of the *Kelurahan*). An Agro-Economic Survey census of the village in 1974 enumerated a population of 2,149. At that time there were 14 *pamong desa* (village government officials) who were also large landowners for whom village government was very much a part-time activity.

A second set of implications concerns the system of decentralization and, at least in formal terms, democratization in the era of *reformasi* signalled by the passage of Basic Law 22 of 1999. In overturning the rigidly top-down authoritarian state structures of the New Order, this law devolves considerable authority to regional and district government.¹¹ There is, in addition, a section on village government which designates the village (*desa*) as an autonomous level of government and, very significantly, makes provision for elected village councils (*Badan Perwakilan Desa*, or BPD) with the power to approve the village budget, draft legislation, and monitor the village executive branch. According to Antlöv (2004: 200) “These regulations

⁹ According to Gunawan Wiradi (who visited Sukodono in 1990), the initial impetus came from the old *lurah*’s having lost an election – presumably to the Nahdatul Ulama, which historically had a strong following in the village.

¹⁰ My observations were based on conditions prior to the passage of Law 5 of 1979 on Village Governance which, as Antlöv (2004: 195) has recently noted, “brought [village affairs] firmly under the supervision and control of higher authorities, and village structures were recast within a single homogeneous mould, designed by the Department of Home Affairs in Jakarta and tightly preserved by an army of loyal extension officers and village branches of state organisations.” See Hans Antlöv, “Village Government and Rural Development in Indonesia: The New Democratic Framework,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 39(4): 193-214.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the implications of this legislation at provincial and district levels, see the issue of *Wacana* 2(5) 2000 on decentralization, and Noer Fauzi and R. Yando Zakaria “Democratizing Decentralization: Local Initiatives from Indonesia” (Yogyakarta: KARSA, 2002).

constitute nothing less than a quiet revolution in the countryside, not only providing a mechanism for checks and balances in village government, but also revising the old paradigms of villagers as objects of development to one in which villagers have the right to exercise their democratic authority over public matters.” For Fauzi and Zakaria (2002:8),

“The prospect of liberating village government from the constraints of the state bureaucracy depends on the intentions and action of the newly empowered district governments. Herein lies one of the most important arenas of reform in Indonesia. Recognizing this, NGOs and local traditional leaders throughout the country are engaged in efforts to ‘take control’ of the village government reform initiative. Likewise conservative political forces in many localities recognize the vital role of village government in controlling resource allocation and decision making, and are busily trying to ‘hijack’ the process.”

In other words, the village (*desa*) – and its relationship to the district (*kabupaten*) – has become a key arena of contestation, shot through with tensions but also possibilities. In the two West Javanese villages we visited, the SPP is actively engaged in promoting their members to take control of village legislatures, and intervening as well in district-level government.

Herein lies the significance of Sukodono’s having been designated an “urban” *kelurahan*. In addition to the huge presence of higher-level bureaucracy located within the village, there is no locally-elected legislative body to which this bureaucracy is accountable. As in the past, local government officials are hooked into supra-local structures of governmental authority – albeit structures that are, at least in nominal terms, less directly under the control of central government.

The ongoing power of the district is linked, in turn, to a third and highly significant dimension of the bureaucratization of Sukodono – namely the disposition of *tanah bengkok* (salary lands) – the 27ha of highly productive *sawah* (rice land) that were formerly used to compensate village government officials, and are now rented out every year. The official account of this process given to us in the *Kelurahan* office was that the land is auctioned every September for an average of Rp5.1million per hectare. The auction is run by officials from the *kabupaten* (district). Initially they put the land up for auction in the village, allegedly to give Sukodono villagers the first shot. If no-one within the village “can afford” the rental price, it goes up for auction at the *kecamatan* (sub-district); if there are no takers at the *kecamatan*, the final auction takes place at the *kabupaten*. If at any point a resident of Sukodono wishes to take it, s/he gets priority. In effect, we were told, the land is always rented by residents of Sukodono. Our initial presumption was that the rental price drops as the auction moves up – but several officials denied that this was the case. They insisted that the rental is fixed, and determined only by the quality and location of the land. In principle, the returns from the auction go into *kabupaten* coffers. On a visit to Kendal in 1990, Gunawan Wiradi observed *kabupaten* officials quite openly divvying up the proceeds of *tanah bengkok* rentals among themselves.

Later in the day another wrinkle in the *tanah bengkok* saga unfolded, thanks in large part to skillful probing by Nancy Peluso. I draw here on her notes:

We were trying to get a sense of who gets this land, as it had come up in a couple of conversations. I asked if the people who tended to get access to it were the people who used to have it as *bengkok*. [Our respondent] became agitated (not at the question, it seemed, but at the response): He said no, that wasn't it... When he tried to bid on it in a land auction, he was "*dikroyok-kroyok*." Asked by whom, he said "by the *mafia tanah*—you know what I mean—in Italy there is also a mafia, right?" We asked if he had been beaten up – as *kroyok-kroyok* can mean that. He said no, that the mafia here have a more subtle (*halus*) way of *kroyokan*—by threats and bad talk. He was forced to withdraw his bid.

He said there were about 20 individuals who make up this *mafia tanah*. The mafia create a situation that makes it difficult if not impossible for someone else to bid on the land. They keep it so that no one buys it at any of those levels. When it gets to the *kabupaten* level, they buy it. Then they rent it out at a profit to other villagers who want access to it. It is not clear why they bother letting the auction go all the way up to the *kabupaten* level in order to do this. I asked if the price got lower at each higher level of government but he said no.

There are no rules guiding this process—at least according to this man—except that the land should go to a Sukodono villager. That means, and he said, that the land mafia all live in Sukodono as well. There are no rules, for example, that if you get the land one year, you can't get it the next.

The *kabupaten* officials who run the auctions don't worry about this. They say all they want is for the auction to go quickly so as long as it is a Sukodono person who gets the land, they are fine.

The *mafia tanah*, in turn, appears to be one of the mechanisms through which a large landowning class – which was very much in evidence at the time of my research in the mid-1970s – appears to have consolidated its position.

2) Consolidation of the Large Landowning Class

In the mid-1970s, the landowning structure of the village was more or less as follows:¹²
(a) relatively large landowners – those with a hectare or more of rice land – constituted 9-10% of households and controlled in the vicinity of 60% of the land, as well as most of

¹² I developed a measure of control over land that included ownership, renting, and sharecropping arrangements. See Hart (1986): 96.

the lucrative *tambaks* or brackish water fishponds; (b) small landowners (those who owned at least 0.2ha) formed 36-40% of the population and controlled less than 40% of the village land; and (c) landless and near-landless households accounted for over 50% of households. At that time, a fairly large number of small landowning households had fallen into debt – mainly as a consequence of pest infestation of high yielding rice varieties – and many had entered into complex relations of indebtedness with large landowners. Especially common in this village was a system through which a small landowning household would pawn its land to a large landowner, and then pay back the debt by working on the land and handing over a large share of the crop – typically in the vicinity of two thirds. Yet, at the same time, what often happened was that small landowners would gain preferential access to wage labor on the *sawah* and *tambaks* of large landowners. There emerged what I called a system of exclusionary labor arrangements: lacking the means enter these interlocking relations of land, labor, and indebtedness, many men and women belonging to landless households frequently earned lower wages – particularly in periods of off-peak demand for agricultural labor.

Differential access to and control over non-agricultural income sources also fed into growing inequality. Several large landowners were expanding into lucrative activities such as trading and transport – often by parlaying their close relations with supra-village government officials into licences and contracts – while many desperately poor landless households got by through supplementing their agricultural wages with long hours spent in activities such as gathering, weaving mats, and petty trade that yielded extremely low returns.¹³

While it is both impossible and irresponsible to make any sort of definitive claims about social differentiation in Sukodono on the basis of a visit of less than a day, there were several indications – in addition to the *mafia tanah* – of the consolidation of the large landowning class. Consider first the statistical “facts” with which we were presented. As mentioned above, the official population data suggest an increase of around 45% since the mid-1970s. According to a village government official, some 70% of the approximately 600+ households do not own any rice land; of those who do own land, he estimated average landholding at 0.5ha. We then pointed out there are at least 250ha of rice land in Sukodono – excluding the *tanah bengkok* – and that if there are 180 to 200 households that still own land, the average for the village is over one hectare. At that point he conceded that there is a smaller group of perhaps 20 to 30 households that own considerably more than a hectare, and that several of them have extensive landholdings in other villages.

At the time of my study land was, without question, *the* single most important indicator of economic strength – there were a few wealthy households with *tambaks* (brackish water fishponds) and small landholdings, but they were a minority. It may well be that

¹³ For a fuller discussion of similar processes in other regions of Java, see Ben White and Gunawan Wiradi, “Agrarian and Non-agrarian Bases of Inequality in Nine Javanese Villages,” in G. Hart, A. Turton, and B. White (eds), *Agrarian Transformations: Local Processes and the State in Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 266-302.

other forms of wealth and accumulation have become more important over the past 30 years – a point to which I return below – and that one can no longer read wealth so directly off landholdings. It is also possible that “disaccumulation” has taken place among at least some of the wealthiest households in the past. What does seem clear, though, is that a large landowning class has retained a dominant position and, in at least some instances, these are direct descendants of the old landowning class.

It also appears that this group continues to own most of the *tambaks*, although several people complained that pollution from surrounding factories has sharply reduced yields of shrimp and fish. Rice production, however, has become a highly streamlined operation – especially compared with the early 1970s when pest infestation was a major problem. Rice yields are now around 6 tons/ha (compared with around 2 tons/ha in the mid-1970s), achieved in part through simultaneous planting of two high-yielding crops per year. The large herds of sour-faced *kerbau* (water buffalo) have disappeared from the village, and most land preparation is done with hand tractors – which are owned, we were told, by about 10 people in the village who rent out the tractors once their own land has been tilled. At prevailing wage rates for male labor, the costs of mechanized land preparation are 40% lower than using hired labor to hoe the land.¹⁴ A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that, on an annual basis, mechanized land preparation in Sukudono has replaced 11,200 male labor days – amounting to a total wage bill of Rp224million (about \$25,000). Transplanting is still done by women workers, but pesticide use means that there is relatively little weeding. Harvesting is organized by brokers who bring in labor gangs, each comprised of about 10 men, who are paid in cash. The rice mill mentioned earlier belongs to a large landowner with close ties to village government.

In short: although several people complained that farming became less profitable after *reformasi*, the indications are that rice production remains a lucrative source of accumulation, as well as a major source of employment – despite becoming increasingly mechanized. According to the (notoriously unreliable) village statistics, some 30% of the working age population in the village was classified as “*buruh tani*” (agricultural laborer), and another 26% as “*tani*” (farmer). One can quibble about the meaning of the categories and the accuracy of the numbers. What does seem clear is that, while agriculture remains substantial, non-agricultural income sources outside the village have expanded significantly – along with the fairly sharp rise in the number and proportion of “landless” households.

3) The emergence of a non-agricultural proletariat?

The evident danger with extrapolating trends from two moments nearly 30 years apart is that one draws a straight line through nonlinear processes. The most obvious nonlinearity in this instance is, of course, the financial implosion of the late 1990s known as *krismon* (*krisis moneter*). Fierce debates continue to rage around the “impact of *krismon*” on the

¹⁴ In dollar terms, agricultural wages seem to have increased from less than \$1 dollar a day in the mid-1970s to around \$2 a day. The differential narrows if one takes account of food supplements to the cash wage, which were fairly common in the 1970s but seem to be rare nowadays.

employment and material well-being of millions of Indonesians. The conventional wisdom holds that the negative effects of sharp economic contraction on the lives of the poor were moderated by labor market flexibility, along with the capacity of agriculture and the informal sector to absorb vast quantities of labor.¹⁵ Jan Breman and Gunawan Wiradi have launched a vigorous critique of this interpretation, drawing on longitudinal studies of two former Agro-Economic Survey villages on the northern coastal plain of West Java.¹⁶

This debate and its underlying premises evoke a powerful sense of *déjà vu*, on which I will reflect later. While it is impossible to make any claims about the effects of the monetary crisis on the basis of a brief return to Sukodono, what did become evident was the extent to which villagers and their labor power have been drawn into wider circuits of accumulation, along with the vagaries of this process.

Clearly there has been a massive expansion of industry and urbanization in this region of Java, and many of the people with whom we spoke attested to large numbers of younger people from Sukodono having been drawn into non-agricultural employment outside the village. What also became clear, however, is that industrial jobs in the region have become increasingly scarce and insecure in recent years.

Several different conversations suggested that two large factories in the vicinity have been the major source of industrial employment for young men and women from Sukodono – PT Kayu Lapis Indonesia, a plywood factory processing logs rolled in from Kalimantan, and Texmaco which is a large producer of synthetic textiles – both of which have shed large numbers of workers. In the case of PT Kayu Lapis Indonesia, our informants claimed that the factory can no longer get sufficient logs from Kalimantan to keep going on a full time basis because the forests have all been cut down.¹⁷

The explanation we were given for what has happened to Texmaco is that it has become bankrupt. According to Asia Times Online in 1999 “Texmaco had bad debts to state-owned Bank Negara Indonesia totalling Rp9.8 trillion (\$1.4 billion). The loans... were made possible with former president Suharto’s intervention and violated legal lending limit rules.”¹⁸ The Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency (BPPN) gave dispensation for

¹⁵ For a summary of this position, see Chris Manning, “Labour Market Adjustment to Indonesia’s Economic Crisis: Context, Trends and Implications,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 36(1) 2000: 105-136

¹⁶ Jan Breman and Gunawan Wiradi *Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002).

¹⁷ *More here about PT Kayu Lapis Indonesia? Was this a Suharto crony company, and was it affected by Krismon and/or Reformasi? If so, how?*

¹⁸ <http://www.atimes.com/se-asia/AL08Ae03.html>; accessed 8/7/2004. My web search also revealed that Marimutu Sinivasan, the CEO and owner of a significant share of Texmaco, opened a factory in Pinetown, South Africa. Further, according to one source, “The strength of the relationship between Sinivasan and Soeharto was demonstrated when the president inaugurated Texmaco’s factory in South

Texmaco to settle its debt in 11 years. By 2003, however, the debt had ballooned to Rp29 trillion, and the head of the Texmaco Group submitted his resignation.¹⁹

In short, industrial capitalism has turned out to be a very shaky proposition for the incipient industrial proletariat of Sukodono. In the face of shrinking jobs in the regional economy, working abroad has become the major source of non-agricultural income for many younger women – as well as some men, although this transnational labor recruitment is commonly known as TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita, or women’s labor power). Estimates of how many Sukodono villagers had entered into these contracts varied between 30 and 100. We were told of women going to Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Taiwan and Korea to work as domestic servants, as well as men working in some of these places as drivers and factory workers. The official version of the story that we were told at the *Kelurahan* building emphasized that many women have achieved “*sukses*,” returning to Sukodono with millions of rupiah that they use to rebuild houses, and in some instances rent or purchase rice land. Another informant presented a more critical assessment, pointing to instances of sexual abuse as well as the recruitment and “training” fees that workers have to pay to brokers. In the course of the day we only encountered one woman who has returned from one of these contracts. She approached us as we walked through the village, saying that she speaks English and would like to talk to us. As she embarked on what promised to be a fascinating account of working for an elderly couple in Singapore as an *ayah* (nurse), her baby started screaming and the conversation unfortunately came to an end.

There are many indications that TKW is becoming widespread in Java.²⁰ The most detailed discussion of which I am aware is by Jan Breman and Gunawan Wiradi, who offer a vivid account of how it is operating in a village in the Subang area of West Java, including the brokerage chains through which workers are channeled into sites all over Asia and the Middle East.²¹

The emergence of TKW in Sukodono made clear a major lacuna in my book. At the time I sought to connect what was happening in Sukodono with broader political-economic forces – but really only at the national level. In the present day and age this sort of oversight simply isn’t possible – transnational connections have become a pervasive feature of everyday life. If, at the time of my study, I had used a wider analytical lens, undoubtedly the picture of Sukodono that I presented would have shifted. This in turn raises the issue to which I now turn – namely, how revisits compel one to reflect on one’s theoretical formation, and how it shifts over time.

Africa in the middle of the 1990s. At the time, Soeharto invited Nelson Mandela to witness the ceremony.” (cited in <http://articles.ibonweb.com/magarticle.asp?num=263>; accessed 8/7/2004.

¹⁹ <http://articles.ibonweb.com/webarticle.asp?num=1423>; accessed 8/7/2004.

²⁰ See for example <http://www.nakertrans.go.id>, the website of the Indonesian Department of Labor and Transmigration.

²¹ See the reference in footnote 16.

Reflections on Revisits

When everything changes, from the small and immediate to the vast and abstract – the object of study, the world immediately around it, the student, the world immediately around him, and the wider world around them both – there seems to be no place to stand so as to locate just what has altered and how. (Geertz 1995: 2)²²

It is to precisely this challenge that Michael Burawoy is responding in his recent piece on “Revisits,” in which he maintains that Geertz “fails to address the dilemmas of revisits, dissolving his reflections into a virtuoso display of literary images” (Burawoy 2003: 674).²³ His critique of Geertz is part of a more general critique of a tendency within anthropology which, he argues, has “decentered its techniques of field work, sacrificed the idea of intensively studying a ‘site,’ abandoned its theoretical traditions, and forsaken its pursuit of causal explanation” (ibid.). From the perspective of a critical realism, Burawoy deploys the lens of “revisits” to define and refine the contours of what he calls a theory of reflexive ethnography.²⁴ For Burawoy it is theory that provides the compass for navigating the seas of change; revisits require theory and history, and contribute to reworking theoretical and historical understandings.

Yet revisits also force one to reflect on where this theory has come from. If theory is inextricably linked with our political and practical engagements in multiple, interconnected sites, then the theory we bring to a revisit is inextricably linked with how we have been produced and changed through these engagements. For me returning to Indonesia and to Sukodono has been, *inter alia*, about making a transition from an economist (albeit of a rogue variety) to a geographer, as well re-engaging with my native South Africa after an absence of nearly 20 years.²⁵ From these vantage points, I want to suggest the usefulness of critical conceptions of spatiality in grappling with questions of revisits – and to start off doing so by enrolling some of Geertz’s remarkably “realist” observations in *After the Fact*.

²² Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²³ Michael Burawoy, “Revisits: Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography,” *American Sociological Review*, 2003, 68: 645-679.

²⁴ Reflexive ethnography for Burawoy (2003:668) “recognizes two dilemmas: (1) There is a world outside ourselves (realist moment), but ethnographers can only know it through their relation to it (constructivist moment); and (2) ethnographers are part of that world (internal moment) but *only* a part of it (external moment).”

²⁵ It was the inimitable Geertz who coined the term “rogue economist” in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

In the opening pages of the book, Geertz talks about returning over three decades to the town of Pare in Central Java, where much of his more empirically-based work on Indonesia is based. He started working in Pare in 1952, returning in 1958, 1971, and 1986. He describes how, in 1952, Pare was a dusty little town caught up in a rising clamor of political bitterness following the first democratic election in independent Indonesia. When he returned briefly in 1958, “a furious mixture of fear and bravado” pervaded Pare. In the 1955 elections the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) had won about 75% of the town vote, while revivalist Muslims took 75% of the rural vote. In 1965 Pare became the site of intense and horrendous violence toward the PKI. Geertz describes returning in 1971 to a place still quite traumatized by violence. He provides a verbatim account of an interview with a retired Nationalist leader who describes the slaughter of PKI members in 1965 in shocking detail.

On returning to Pare in 1986, Geertz found a place in which economics seemed to have eclipsed politics:

The conjunction of the Green Revolution, which began to be effective in this part of Java only toward the end of the seventies when problems of implementation got finally worked out, and the settling in of military rule, which found an operational style to suit its conception of itself as an engine of progress at about the same time, led to a commercialization of town life at least as pervasive and nearly as obsessive, as its politicization once had been. (Geertz 1995: 11)

Had Geertz gone back to Pare any time in the first half of the 1990s, he would probably have found this commodification of everyday life ratcheting up several notches. Yet in a prescient observation made before the Asian crisis and the fall of Suharto, Geertz notes that one must resist presuming this to be a linear process that has simply to be secured and extended. The world, he hints, is distinctly non-linear, full of unexpected twists and turns.

It is interesting to contrast the account of PKI violence and its aftermath that emerges from Geertz’s reflections on revisiting Pare with his earlier writings on the place. The same goes for *Agricultural Involution* (1963), the influence of which has far eclipsed his work based in Pare. For me, one of the surprises of returning to Indonesia and re-engaging with contemporary debates has been the extent to which notions of involution and poverty sharing remain bones of contention, despite what is now a substantial body of research pointing clearly to high levels of social differentiation in Java. It was, of course, precisely this differentiation that underpinned PKI mobilization in the 1960s.

When I was in Java in 1975-6, the PKI massacres of 1965-6 were the proverbial elephant in the room – pervasively present but unspoken. When I received research clearance from BAKIN (the State Intelligence Coordinating Agency), I was explicitly instructed not to ask any questions about GESTAPU. For the first several months of my fieldwork, I was followed around by a member of the village militia. He got bored when I conscripted him into helping measure fields, but would pop up from time to time to check on me. These quite explicit restrictions on fieldwork went hand in hand with intense repression in other spheres as well. As Ben White has recently noted,

In ‘New Order’ Indonesia the development of critical discourse on key issues of agrarian transformation was hindered by the long periods in which public and academic discussion of agrarian reform or even agrarian poverty was either impossible, or severely constrained by the hostile political context. For a period of about 10 years (1966-1976) public discussion of land reform issues was virtually impossible (White 2004: 11).

The parallels with repression in South Africa resonated powerfully for me, and fed into my decision to stop working in Indonesia. They also, of course, shaped (some would say blinkered) my understandings and interpretations of agrarian change in Java. Spending time in Bangladesh in the late 1970s and early 1980s was also a vitally important influence. In retrospect, I can see how the passage from my PhD dissertation to *Power, Labor, and Livelihood* circuited directly through Bangladesh – although there is no explicit reference to Bangladesh in the book.²⁶ Part of what I find compelling about *After the Fact* is Geertz’s description of how he tacked back and forth between Pare and Moroccan town of Sefrou; how his understanding of one place was constantly being refracted through the other; and how he was compelled to think of Pare and Sefrou in relation to their nation states and to the wider world.

What these considerations make clear is that revisits are always comparative, not simply in the sense of trying to fathom changes over time in a place that is no longer the same, but also in the sense that our understandings of these changes will necessarily be shaped by our engagements elsewhere. Theory is not just a compass, but also in part a product of these engagements – and reflecting on this process of production seems to me an important part of what a revisit is all about.

²⁶ A comparative piece on Java and Bangladesh that I wrote in the summer of 1981 was only published in 1988 (“Agrarian Structure and the State in Java and Bangladesh,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47(2): 249-266.) This article is about to be reprinted in a book edited by David Ludden entitled *Capitalism in Asia*.