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GROUNDING AREA STUDIES:

Development Sociology and the Study of Agrarian-Environmental Change in Southeast Asia

Students in development sociology (DSOC) view their approach to studying rural, agrarian, and environmental change as distinct; always starting on the ground or “in the field.” This approach evolved over the years in the department and clearly applied to DSOC students working in Southeast Asia after SEAP’s formation in 1950.

Most students arrive at Cornell for graduate studies having spent time in one or more countries of Southeast Asia. Some have been involved in development work through organizations like the Peace Corps or the Canadian volunteer organization Cuso International. Others spent time in academic programs in Southeast Asia, and choose Cornell because of the university’s strong reputation for research and political engagement in Southeast Asia as well as its broader profile in the region for research in history, politics, and anthropology.

Our intention in this article is to provide a sense of the ideas guiding Southeast Asia-based research of Cornell students and faculty in the Department of

Rural Sociology, later the Department of Development Sociology and now the Department of Global Development. Further, we offer a few reflections on this community of practice and how it has changed over time.

SEAP’s founding in 1950 provided opportunities to deepen and extend work on rural transformation and development with attention to the study of communities, agrarian change, and environments in Southeast Asia. Applied and theoretical research on these topics already had a long history at Cornell. In his 1909 Farmers’ Week address, Liberty Hyde Bailey, the director of the College of Agriculture called for new studies into “the structure of rural society.”¹ The Department of

Rural Social Organization was founded in 1918 to answer this call, in the vanguard of a larger trend at US Land-Grant universities.

Over the next century, the Department changed its name twice—to ‘Rural Sociology’ (RSOC) in 1930 and then ‘Development Sociology’ (DSOC) in 2003—and incorporated a sub-unit on demography in 1989. The most recent change came in January 2020, when DSOC was incorporated into a new Department of Global Development (at the time of this writing the graduate field remains DSOC). The department’s mission has changed over the past 110 years as it built on its initial goals of applied research on and for US farmers to work internationally. Many faculty and stu-

dents embraced a commitment to what might now be called public sociology, or a sociology that aims not just to study, but also to contribute to improvements in people’s welfare, human and other kinds of rights, and to catalyze social transformation.

From their beginnings, SEAP-affiliated faculty and graduate students have conducted research on a wide range of topics related to development and agrarian-environmental change—from farm mechanization to irrigation to labor migration to state territorialization; they have conducted fieldwork in fields, forests, and seas, in settlements, slums, and on boats. Foreign students from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia had come to RSOC even before SEAP was founded, but the latter program attracted (and often helped fund) additional graduate students from Southeast Asia to study in the Department. Many of these scholars went on to become prominent academics, officials or practitioners in the region.

During the 1950s, as the Cold War heated up and the United States became more involved in political conflicts in Southeast Asia, the National Defense Education Act offered generous funding for US citizens to study the languages and cultures of countries of strategic interest, many of which were in Southeast Asia. Additional funding supported international development as a response to communist and other challenges to US-allied governments, including funding from the Ford Foundation in 1962 to the College of Agriculture. Increased funding for regional research from institutions like Fulbright and Social Science Research Council followed. While area studies has been criticized as a tool of the imperialist powers, this funding did not come with strings attached. Most SEAP-affiliated scholars and RSOC graduate students conducted research that was often critical of US government actions in the region, and they often worked with groups in Southeast Asia who opposed US intervention.

The authors of this essay are part of a large and diverse group of SEAP-DSOC PhDs. A partial list compiled from SEAP’s records and our own recon-

naissance yielded at least fifty-eight students conducting doctoral research on one or more of the following countries: Indonesia (17), the Philippines (15), Thailand (14), Malaysia (12), Vietnam (7), Myanmar (3), Cambodia (2) and Laos (1). After graduation, many went on to careers with international development organizations and foundations such as the Ford Foundation, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the CGIAR institutions. Others became engaged scholars and academics doing research and conducting trainings to inform social and environmental justice initiatives and development practice. Many of these scholars worked closely with NGOs, peasant and labor organizers, and other advocates in the region when these sorts of organizations were finally able to emerge from under the authoritarian “thumbs” of post-colonial governments.

Nancy & Peter on the 1980s

Research interests among our fellow Cornell students were shaped by the intersection of ongoing events in Southeast Asia with emerging theoretical perspectives. The decade of the 1980s

was only a few years after the ending of the Vietnam war, an “American” war that radicalized many scholars working in Southeast Asia. Looking back, the number of faculty across the Cornell campus working in Southeast Asia at that time is phenomenal! The Cold War continued through the 1980s, making many countries in Southeast Asia inaccessible to US-based scholars, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. “Pro-western” countries were mostly ruled by dictators who came to power via military coups. Research permissions were difficult and time-consuming in the countries that allowed foreign researchers in at all.

The research access difficulties we faced as students were shared by founding generations of the SEAP faculty, with some later blacklisted or carefully watched while in the countries they studied. For example, it was during this time that Ben Anderson was famously invited back to Indonesia after a long exile due to his and Ruth McVey’s infamous “White Paper” on the events of 1965-1966. When he arrived at the Cengkareng Airport, he was turned away by security forces.



Nancy tramping through swiddens to the birds nest caves of, East Kalimantan, ca. 1980.

In addition, it wasn't until the end of the 1980s that NGOs became prominent political voices and actors in environmental, agrarian development, and social justice movements in the region: It was a slow process. To gain research access, many scholars and activists strategically framed their studies as "environmental" or as supporting community development, and offered up "constructive criticisms" rather than blistering critiques or calls for major political transformations. Efforts that stood behind the banner of environmental sustainability, at the time publicly presented as "apolitical," were tolerated by governments that had violently repressed more openly left-wing polit-

ical organizations such as peasant and worker unions.

Among many students in rural-cum-development sociology, these regional processes provoked an interest in using Marxist and Gramscian analyses of rural class relations as articulated through peasant studies and critical political economy lenses. At the same time, growing interests in environmental change and community resource management led many of us to research that "took nature seriously." These commitments were shared by most students in DSOC, leading to a lively culture of conceptual exploration and sharing that also engaged students who worked primarily in Southeast Asia.

Both theoretically and translated into practice in the region, these different conceptual approaches were constantly in tension, but also informed each other. Many combined components of both. During the 1980s, many activists in Southeast Asia turned away from more radically inspired mobilizations because of the threat of imprisonment or worse. Dire consequences could be imposed on citizens (and researchers) of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines if they were labeled "communist," let alone "Marxist." The community-based approach also inspired research in Development Sociology on small scale irrigation, community forestry, and smallholder farming, the effects of the Green Revolution on property, poverty, and differentiation, and the displacement of communities due to ongoing construction of dams, widespread "political forest" reservation, the increase in logging, mining, and other forms of resource extraction, and resettlement programs. The effects of political violence on agriculture and resource control, and the rise of conservation set-asides were also subjects of SEAP-DSOC student and faculty research.

Graduate students thus extended the department's long-standing concerns with agriculture to the governance of other resources (water, forests, urbanization, dams, fisheries), as interest in environmental studies and agroforestry expanded. Researchers often promoted community resource management, as activists in the region struggled to stop the displacement of rural people from these resources. Graduate students did not see theoretical differences as dividing their commitments and drew on multiple approaches while often emphasizing one or the other. Political ecology as a field was kickstarted at the time through the creative merging of these different approaches.

The two main faculty members working on Southeast Asia in the Department of Rural Sociology in the 1980s and into the 1990s were Walt Coward (E. Walter Coward) and Milt Barnett. Both had previously held positions as advisors to presidents, academics, and foundation representatives in the region, and continued to do so while professors at

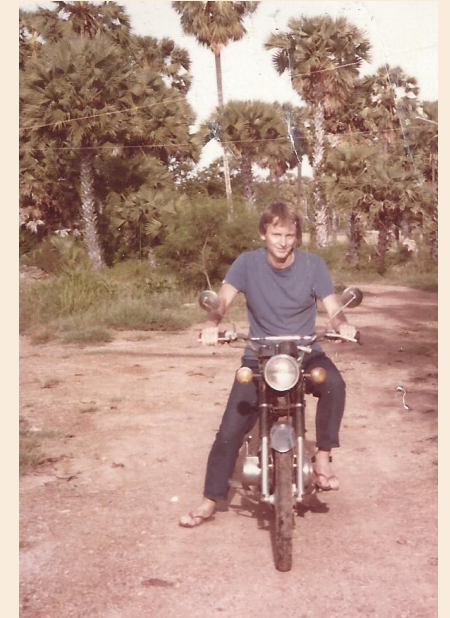
Cornell. Coward as a young man was a missionary in Laos. He later joined the Ford Foundation as a program officer in Indonesia. His work with Ford continued while he taught at Cornell where he led a large project on small-scale community irrigation supported by student research. He left campus in the late 1990s to lead the Ford Foundation's Global Rural Poverty and Resources Program, the effects of which, on research and local development initiatives were profound and long lasting.

Barnett was hired in 1962 at the age of forty-four by the Agricultural Development Council, a Rockefeller-funded institution created to encourage grounded development work. He was first posted in the Philippines to advise the government on community development and teach at the University of the Philippines. He subsequently advised Prime Minister Tun Razak of Malaysia on rural development while teaching at the University of Malaya. A memorial of Barnett written by Walt Coward, Shelly Feldman, and SEAP founder, George Kahin, stated that he was "awarded the Government's *Panglima Setia Mahkota* Award, normally reserved for Malaysian citizens."

While Coward and Barnett were key figures in Rural Sociology, other pro-

fessors active in rural development in Southeast Asia included Agricultural Economist Randy Barker, now an emeritus professor, who until just two years ago was still living in Ithaca and posing questions at Gatty lectures. Paul Gellert was hired and taught in Development Sociology for much of the 1990s, conducting research on the political economy of logging in Indonesia.

We and most DSOC students took many courses outside of the department. This allowed for a broad and often eclectic training that facilitated engagement with interdisciplinary programs such as SEAP, and with the many other faculty on campus from a variety of departments. The scholars of Southeast Asia in Anthropology, Politics, History, and Socio-linguistics were just a (usually cold) walk down the hill from Warren Hall. Taking classes with Ben Anderson, Jim Siegel, Jim Boon, Tom Kirsch, George Kahin, David Wyatt, Charles Hirschmen, and Oliver Wolters exposed students to the academic, political and activist voices from the diverse countries around the region, and to diverse disciplines and approaches. This extended to every day interactions as most students regularly worked on campus, had lunch together, attended seminars, etc. Everyone also knew John



Peter during MA fieldwork in Sathing Phra District, 1984.

Wolff and Amrih Widodo, the Indonesian and Javanese teachers.

The 1980s were a time when important new theoretical approaches were being introduced and elaborated—from political ecology to post-structuralism. Jill Belsky introduced us to geographer Piers Blaikie's seminal 1985 book, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* at just the time we

A partial list of our fellow graduate students and their research topics in the 1980s illustrates the kind of innovative scholarship that stems from a cross-theoretical approach:

Peter Vandergeest on agrarian transformations and peasant resistance in a rice and palm economy in Southern Thailand;

Nancy Peluso on the history of non-timber forest product trade in East Kalimantan and later on the dispossession of poor Javanese peasants from the island's rich teak forests;

Jill Belsky on agroforestry and upland agriculture in Indonesia and the Philippines;

Benjamin Bagadion on the political economy of logging and a pulp mill in the Philippines;

Filomeno (Jun) Aguilar on sugar plantations and agrarian capitalism in the Philippines;

John Duiwel, John Ambler, Bryan Bruns, and Uraiwan Tan-Kim-Yong (who famously threw water on her dissertation examining committee in celebration of the Thai New Year), on small scale irrigation in Indonesia and Thailand;

Stephanie Fried on Dayak leaders and writers in East Kalimantan;

Joe Weinstock on identity and rural change in Borneo;

Anita Kendrick on fishers on the northern and southern coasts of Java;

George Adicondro on Indonesian dams and development;

Charly Mehl on rural change in Thailand;

Mohammed Habib and Ernest Sternberg on rice farming and irrigation in Malaysia;

William Sunderlin on social forestry in Java;

Anne Hawkins on smallholder farmers in the hinterlands of Semarang,

Kamala Soedjatmoko on ethnic-based political movements in East Sumatra;

Diane Wolf on the "factory daughters" of rural Java;

Angkarb Korsieporn on labour and migration in Indonesia and Thailand;

Connor Bailey, who worked closely with Milt, graduated in 1980 but deserves mention for his pioneering research on the political economy and ecology of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Malaysia and the region.

Nancy's extended family in a village now part of Singkawang Metro Area, West Kalimantan, 2014.



were looking for framings that could combine the attention to grounded ethnographic histories with more macro international (the descriptor of the times, pre “globalization”) processes. We were also inspired by scholars of the Annals School and the Binghamton-based World Systems Institute and by the politically-aware peasants and underground organizers we met during fieldwork. Paolo Freire’s approach to development for empowerment as articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was an inspiration for many, as was the scholarship of E. F. Schumacher, Amartya Sen, James Scott, Michael Watts, Ben Kiernan, Michael Aung-Thwin, Ruth McVey, Hal Conklin, Clifford and Hildred Geertz and the other members of the Harvard Research team sent to Indonesia. Tom Harrison’s work in Sarawak also informed Indonesian Borneo research in the 1980s.

Ben Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* made him globally famous and known across disciplines. An SSRC colleague once confided that for years his book was the most heavily cited in research proposals all over the world. The first edition was written in his (old yet still beautiful) 102 West Avenue office and published in 1984. Less widely known is his 1978 essay “Studies of the Thai State: the State of Thai Studies,” which exploded the basic assumptions of SEA/Thai history with the argument that Thailand’s engagements with colonialism were not in fact so unique. Cornellian Gillian Hart’s book (she graduated from Agricultural Economics in 1978), edited with Ben White and Andrew Turton, on *Agrarian Transformations*, came out at the end of the 1980s. It became the classic peasant studies text on the politics of rice agriculture and Green Revolution in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, and included a piece by Anan Ganjanapan, who had recently graduated from Cornell Anthropology while working closely with Milt Barnett. These influences shaped student research on a wide range of topics, and subsequently influenced the careers that many of us pursued after graduating, whether as academics, program officers, or research supervisors and contractors in development organizations.

Hilary on the 2010s

I finished my PhD in summer 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed persistent inequalities and normalized new surveillance technologies across the globe. As we watch the pandemic’s health and economic impacts unfold across Southeast Asia, development sociologists’ classic questions—whether about migration patterns, food production or class politics—seem more germane than ever.

Graduate students who conducted research in the 2010s negotiated a dynamic region, one in which research access was both extensive and often contingent. New geographies have opened



Hilary conducts dissertation fieldwork in villages in northwestern Myanmar in 2018.

up for rural research since Nancy and Peter were students—my colleagues conducted ethnographic, archival, survey, and participatory fieldwork in previously inaccessible countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. And yet we worked at a political moment marked by resurgent racialized nationalism and militarized authoritarianism. Countries like Thailand and the Philippines have become more repressive, while great democratic hopes for Myanmar have faltered in the wake of the Rohingya genocide.

As in earlier generations, many DSOC graduate students came to Cornell in the 2010s with experience living in the places we chose to study and a

commitment to applied work and development practice. My time at Cornell followed work with activists in Yangon, and began with two Burma Studies Workshops, organized in 2014 and 2015, that were indicative of SEAP’s support for a new wave of Myanmar research. Emerging research communities working in places like Myanmar build on SEAP’s long tradition of expertise in places like Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

On campus in the 2010s, graduate students took DSOC’s required courses—quantitative methods is still dreaded by many incoming students—and many absorbed the department’s Marxist

leanings and critical theories of development, for example as delivered by the ineffable Phil McMichael. The themes of eclecticism and interdisciplinarity continue. Graduate students typically take a range of electives across departments (I regret missing Eric Tagliacozzo and Tamara Loos’ Southeast Asian history class!) and language classes. Some I spoke to recalled engaging in more informal linguistic education; one alum remembered trading dirty words in Tagalog with Ben Anderson.

When I arrived in Ithaca, I read recent scholarship on land grabbing and work in what has become a long and robust tradition of political ecology, a tradition that Nancy and Peter

helped to establish, and recent faculty member Jenny Goldstein is continuing in the department. My work and that of many of my peers has also been shaped by Lindy Williams’ work on migration in Southeast Asia. Under her guidance, some grads authored demographic dissertations. Others incorporated study of transnational and mobile dynamics into their analysis of agrarian change: for example in Tim Gorman and Alice Beban’s work together on Vietnamese migrants farming across the border in Cambodia, or Katie Rainwaters’ analysis of shrimp farmers and migration in Thailand and Bangladesh. Work with Southeast Asian activists continues to motivate and inform my work and that of many of my colleagues from the past decade. My research incorporates participatory methodologies that build, in part, on the community-based approaches and development scholarship of the 1980s, while also incorporating new feminist and critical voices.

When I asked graduate students from the most recent decade (2010-2020) for memories of SEAP and DSOC, my colleague Rebakah Daro Minarchek put it beautifully:

“To me DSOC was a dive into the deep end of a swimming pool, whereas SEAP was a long swim back and forth across the pool—so many interesting people working on fascinating topics in different disciplines and different countries. We were all united in our passion for the region... It was like we were all looking at the same events happening in a courtyard, but we all saw them unfolding from different windows overlooking the courtyard.”

Many of my graduate student peers navigated between DSOC and SEAP, finding continuity in the grounded and critical approaches emphasized in both communities. In the past few years, as DSOC has negotiated its place in a new Department of Global Development within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, a strong sense of identity as critical, engaged, and public scholars has prevailed among the DSOC grads. The Cold War is over, but many of us still find ourselves negotiating the ethics and politics of research, theory, and practice in relation to research

funding and its ideology, though this increasingly comes not only from the US or Southeast Asia governments, but also from the private sector.

Most graduate students from the last decade are now in academic teaching positions, though our ranks also include a data analysis specialist at Cornell’s CISER, Florio Arguillas, and a rabbi, Rachel Safman. Many continued their research in the region. I was delighted to learn while writing this that Ama

nda Flaim was just awarded a Luce Grant for an interdisciplinary program on Mekong sustainability at Michigan State University working with a team that includes both Daniel Ahlquist and Alice Beban, also former SEAP/DSOC graduate students. The last public talk I attended as a student on Cornell’s campus was alum Christian Lentz’s Gatty Lecture in February 2020 on histories of territory and state formation in Vietnam. Many of these projects build on the legacies of earlier SEAP/DSOC research, bringing updated questions and research approaches to new puzzles and sites.

Conclusion

Peter, Nancy and Hilary each arrived in Ithaca as graduate students from research and work in Southeast Asia. When Nancy walked onto campus, she was committed to working in Indonesia and planned to return there after grad school, only to be waylaid by an opportunity in academia (“filling in” for another DSOC grad from the 1970s, Louise Fortmann!). Like many of our peers, we already had a close connection to the region and choose Cornell primarily because of its strong area studies reputation. Our commitments to a particular program were decidedly less clear. When Peter’s acceptance letter from Cornell’s Department of Rural Sociology arrived to where he was working in rural Thailand, he had never heard of the department, as he had applied to another unit that forwarded it to Rural Sociology. Our interests in applied research and social justice, and our eclecticism, made us awkward fits for more traditional disciplines like anthropology, political science, or



Palm sugar tappers climb in the background during Peter’s dissertation fieldwork in southern Thailand.

even sociology; thus we all ended up in “Rural,” later called “Development,” Sociology, then and now committed to grounded and engaged work.

While research sites, influential faculty, and theoretical paradigms have changed over time, we found a common interest in socio-environmental transformations and their unequal effects, experience of interdisciplinary inquiry, and orientation as scholar-activists that cut across decades. Later graduate students built on the foundations forged by earlier generations. For example, Hilary read Nancy and Peter’s work on political forests in Southeast Asia during coursework and drew on their insights to frame her study. As SEAP celebrates its 70th and the Department again transforms as part of a new Department of Global Development, we hope and expect future graduate students to continue to be critical voices concerned with equitable development in specific sites across Southeast Asia. ✨

THANKS TO Lindy Williams, Christian Lentz, Amanda Flaim, Daniel Ahlquist, Rebakah Daro Minarchek, Luin Goldring and Jill Belsky for sharing reflections.

¹ Julie N. Zimmerman, *A Century of Scholarship and Service: 100 Years of Rural Development and Sociology at Cornell* (Ithaca, The Internet-First University Press, 2020).