

## Review

**POWER, LABOR, AND LIVELIHOOD:  
PROCESSES OF CHANGE IN RURAL JAVA,**  
by Gillian Hart. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, xvi + 228 pp. Hardcover, \$30.00.

by Olle Törnquist

In 1963, after Indonesia's president Sukarno had passed a basic land reform law, the then second largest communist party in Asia, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), expanded its previously cautious campaigns on Java in particular, focusing on demands for redistribution of property. Chairman Aidit spoke of an imminent revolutionary situation. He declared that the party would support and lead peasant activities to implement land reform laws, even if these activities bypassed the established cooperation and consultation between communists, nationalists, and Muslims. Sukarno had legitimized efforts to pursue the peasant struggle because of the laws and his ideas about self-reliance versus imperialism. The party leaders made strenuous efforts to produce and disseminate statistics and qualitative studies indicating that there was a considerable concentration of land in the hands of a small group of feudal landlords while the vast majority owned no land at all, or else so little that they could not reproduce their families. In their view, about 90 percent of the villagers should rationally have a common interest against the landlords.

I shall not go into details. It is well known that the PKI failed; that it was extremely difficult to locate "surplus land"; that far from 90 percent of the population could unite; that many poor and landless preferred to follow their patrons; that many (perhaps most) of the conflicts were not between landlords and the poor; and that it all ended in the holocaust of 1965 and 1966.

In trying to understand what went wrong, at least some concerned scholars, like Rex Mortimer, have questioned the radical tradition of emphasizing the concentration of land as the basis of exploitation in rural Java.<sup>1</sup> My own conclusion was that the obvious socioeconomic inequality must also have been due to other bases of power and other forms of exploitation—through political and administrative control of vital means of production besides land, as well as such things as prices, and thereby

capacity to centralize a surplus.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand old as well as new processes of change in rural Java it should be fruitful to focus more on studies of the role of political and administrative power over these other conditions of production.

However, with the New Order came the green revolution. Many scholars were, of course, interested in analyzing the socioeconomic impact of new inputs and technology, the spread of commerce, rise of capital, and so forth. Perhaps most important of the various studies that have been carried out over the years, including various censuses and surveys, are detailed case studies. As I see it, the main problem was and still is that the need to go beyond overall statistics by studying specific villages, reproduction of households, and so on, is difficult to combine with research on the role of the state. The reasons for this are not only theoretical and methodological but also political.

At the same time, concerned scholars like Ben Anderson, Arief Budiman, Harold Crouch, and Richard Robison carried out extremely interesting research on the role of the state in the formation of capitalism—but usually on a macro level and concentrating on political and military leaders and trade and industry.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, the links with what happened in the villages in the processes of agrarian change were missing.

Neither of the more fruitful traditions of radical scholarly research of the political economy under the New Order was thus able to analyze, on the one hand, the decisive role of the state in exploitation of the villages, and on the other hand, the importance

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1. See, for example, Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959–65* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974); and his "Traditional Modes and Communist Movements: Change and Protest in Indonesia," in John Wilson Lewis, ed., *Peasant Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

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2. Olle Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Third World Communism: The Destruction of the PKI in Indonesia* (London: Zed Books, 1984), esp. chap. 17.

3. See, for example, Ben Anderson, "Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1983); Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Richard Robison, "The Transformation of the State in Indonesia," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1982); his recent book, *Indonesia: The Rise of Capital* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986); and for a more recent contribution, Arief Budiman, "The Emergence of the Bureaucratic Capitalist State in Indonesia," in *Reflections on Development in Southeast Asia*, ed. Teck Gheel (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988).

of this for the general accumulation of capital and political stability. It was therefore with utmost pleasure that I read Gillian Hart's *Power, Labor, and Livelihood: Processes of Change in Rural Java*. She has made a successful and, to my knowledge, pioneering attempt at bringing the role of the state into the interpretation of detailed village data as well as into many of the important debates on the nature of rural transformation.

Gillian Hart went to north-central Java in the midseventies to carry out field studies on labor supply functions, with econometrics as well as Clifford Geertz in her luggage. However, her approach changed radically in the process of research: she concentrated on one village only; she took different asset groups as points of departure; she became decisively influenced by the research of scholars like William Collier, Sajogyo, Rudolf Sinaga, Benjamin White,<sup>4</sup> and others, by no means least in importance the research they did in Bogor, as well as by the debates these scholars were engaged in. She thus tried to address the issues at stake by drawing on her own data; and finally, stimulated by scholars like Ben Anderson, she found that fruitful explanations and contributions to the debates on the processes of rural change could not be made without emphasizing the role of the state. It is at this point that her book becomes fresh and exciting. Therefore, let me at least hint at some of her "evident solutions" to issues at stake in the ongoing discussions.

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Contemporary research on transitions in rural Java frequently stresses various exclusionary labor arrangements (such as the so-called *kedokan*). It is not easy to understand them by, for example, arguing that they are a direct result of labor market conditions—they occur under tight as well as slack conditions. Also, the arrangements vary over time and between villages in such a way that explanations in terms of growth of population or commercialization are inappropriate. However, they seem to vary with different relations of political and administrative power. As long as the rural poor were able to organize with the support of the communists, exclusionary labor arrangements were held back and, for example, open harvests dominated. After 1965, on the contrary, the bargaining power of rural labor was drastically reduced, and their masters could introduce arrangements that kept labor cheap and manageable by giving some villagers comparatively

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4. Here I would refer the reader to Benjamin White, "'Agricultural Involvement' and Its Critics: Twenty Years After," since it was a good piece that appeared in this journal and included a list of additional references. See *BCAS*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1983), and also the book by Wiradi and Manning (see note 6 below).

secure jobs and leaving others out. The social control this created in the villages was, of course, essential also for general political stability.

Another often-debated issue is whether labor is pushed or pulled out of agriculture. Is there a process of displacement and marginalization, or do laborers respond to economic expansion and leave agriculture for better alternatives in "modern" sectors? Again, there are difficulties in finding clear answers if we restrict ourselves to studying such things as the labor market, employment conditions, and economic growth. For example, there are no clear correlations between growth and increased nonagricultural employment in modern sectors. And even if some problems are solved if we add that initially many nonagricultural rural activities were in marginal sectors, we still have to answer the question of why this process of marginalization did not result in declining wages among those who could stay on. Again, Hart's answer is that the reserve labor pool essentially had a disciplinary function because those who could hold their jobs within agriculture were more favorably treated for social and political reasons, and this was made possible by the shifts in power relations after 1965.

Also, there is a debate as to what extent rural change can be analyzed in terms of the development of capitalism. Hart has good reasons to refute most of the established explanations. Obviously there is, for example, no simple process of proletarianization, and a lot of "precapitalist" labor arrangements reemerge. The rural elite is not a typical capitalist class. As an alternative, she suggests that most of the rural masters have to be viewed as state-sponsored clients, whose support and capacity to domesticate the rural masses are essential for their patrons, who could subsidize their clients, particularly with oil revenues. These favored clients have thus been able to use their preferential access to agricultural inputs, credits, and so on, as well as their political and administrative powers, to introduce the previously mentioned exclusionary labor arrangements.

How, then, do the rural poor survive? The labor arrangements cause serious divisions. Those who are included in favorable contracts are difficult to analyze in terms of a "typical rural proletariat." They have more secure positions and are better paid but are, for example, very dependent upon their masters. The latter can trust their workers and rely also on the labor of their families. Those who are excluded, on the other hand, usually cannot even choose the most remunerative income opportunities. They have to give priority to security and diversify the family's sources of income, which is easier if they have many children. And, again, Hart stresses that the process of marginalization is not only, or even mainly, due to lack of assets among the poor, but rather caused by their political powerlessness.

Why is it, then, that the processes of exclusion within the framework of the green revolution have not produced a red revolution or at least rural unrest? It follows quite elegantly from Hart's previous arguments that many countervailing forces are present. Rural laborers are fragmented. Political, administrative, and military controls are tight and built into the very work processes. Many of the new jobs that have been created are in urban areas—where there has been some unrest. But in the rural areas "free" labor—that is, laborers who are more or less freed from "feudal" relations—usually depends on patrons and contractors, and seasonal workers are desperately in need of credits during the slack seasons. However, Hart also stresses that when



*Rice cultivation in Sukodono in north Central Java in 1975-76. Gillian Hart studied rural labor and livelihood in this village and linked the agrarian changes there with massive changes in the political-economic system as a whole, changes that were brought about by General Suharto's New Order. This photo is by Glen Williams and appeared on the front cover of Gillian Hart's Power, Labor, and Livelihood. The photo is reproduced here courtesy of the University of California Press.*

the dispossessed protest, the capacity of the state-sponsored rural clients to control them is essential, and related to the ability of their central-state patrons to provide them with subsidies—which is increasingly difficult now that the oil revenues are drying up.

I have only been able to hint at some of Gillian Hart's fruitful arguments. But of course there are also problems. First some minor ones: I miss, for example, J.D. Zacharias's interesting study of the roots of power of the rural elite in a village on, precisely, north-central Java,<sup>5</sup> which could have enriched Hart's discussion about the state-dependent rural clients. Also, was it not possible to include some of the results from the 1983 Agricultural Census supervised by the government, and from the existing recensus of some Javanese villages recently made by Gunawan Wiradi and Chris Manning in Bogor?<sup>6</sup> Finally, I think that Hart, without too much extra work, could have further developed her arguments by extending her attempts at comparisons with results from South Asia. She does include some of Ashok Rudra's and Pranab Bardhan's findings.<sup>7</sup> But of course

there is much more on rural labor relations.<sup>8</sup> And not least, the ongoing discussion about the farmers' movements could have enriched her hints at possible future protests against the Indonesian state because of fewer subsidies to the state-sponsored rural clients.<sup>9</sup>

But the main problem with Hart's book, as I read it, is that it is not consistently structured by either the debates on processes of change in rural Java, or by a theory about how state and political power influence control and exploitation of labor in the villages. Instead, the book sometimes falls apart. The ongoing debates are referred to and addressed, but her concrete case study lives its own life. The state approach, which she draws into the picture in order to solve the puzzles, has not developed from within her own research but is imported, and it is not systematically presented or critically discussed.

Of course, it is very difficult to alter the design in the middle of the work process. Actually, her book can also be read as a thought-provoking report from a dynamic process of critical

5. Johannes Daniel Zacharias, *A Lurah and His Dynasty: A Study of Village Officialdom in a Village of North Central Java, Indonesia* (Clayton, Australia: Monash University, 1983).

6. *Pemerataan Pendapatan: Jumlah dan Persentase Penduduk Miskin di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Central Bureau of Statistics, 1984); Gunawan Wiradi and Chris Manning, *Landownership, Tenancy and Sources of Household Income: Community Patterns from a Partial Recensus of Eight Villages in Rural Java*, Rural Dynamics Series no. 29 (Bogor, Indonesia: 1984).

7. And in 1988 she did publish a separate comparison with Bangladesh: Gillian Hart, "Agrarian Structure and the State in Java and Bangladesh," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2 (May 1988).

8. For a recent anthology with an approach partly similar to the one employed by Hart, see Meghnad Deasi, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, and Ashok Rudra, eds., *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

9. The readers of this journal might wish to refer to the recent articles in *BCAS* by D.N. Dhanagare and Gail Omvedt in vol. 20, no. 2 (1988), for more information.

education and research. And there are hardly any ready-made theories about the role of the state in rural subordination and exploitation available on the academic market. But had she at least held on to an understanding of how the rural poor are exploited, she could have developed it into the main thread. On the contrary, when she, for example, presents the asset groups, she does not discuss to what extent differentiation and concentration of land really are due to proletarianization in the sense that people have actually lost their land and other means of production to others. I also find it very difficult to understand why *tanah bengkok* (land allocated to village government officials) is included among "land owned"—especially since Hart herself on other pages is eager to stress the differences and argue that most of the rural masters do not base themselves primarily on privately owned real assets but draw on privileged access to state resources.

But having said this, the crux of the matter as I see it is that most of the state powers and resources do not come from heaven. It is true that a lot of the huge oil revenues, which the Indonesian rulers gained access to after the late sixties and partly injected into agriculture, did and do come "from outside" and are not the result of appropriation of surplus produced by peasants and rural laborers. But the injections are not free nor without costs. If we are going to talk about state-sponsored clients, we need to know not only how they themselves plunder the state, and that they exploit the poor, but also how they, presumably, use these assets and capacities to squeeze something extra out of the very producers who need them. What decisive means of production are politically and administratively controlled in the villages and used for appropriating surplus? How is this done? And if a lot of surplus is also extracted on distorted markets, how, then, is this managed? Is there a basis for conflicts between, for example, the

state-sponsored clients and their dependents on the one hand and the central state on the other hand? Will there be farmers' movements in Indonesia?

When analyzing such things as rural change we are obviously in desperate need of a theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing the importance not only of ownership of land but also of a lot of other conditions of production—many of which are formally state-owned and regulated. In my own research I now prefer to talk about rents on individually and collectively controlled state resources and capacities."

A theoretical framework is also essential when we try to discuss prospects. Hart is definitely right in stressing a lot of obstacles to radical changes based on the rural poor. I'm not even sure that the extremely state-dependent rural clients are capable of forming a solid opposition against their patrons if and when their subsidies are reduced. But if we are able to identify how exploitation is carried out and upheld by, not least of all, monopolized control over formally collective resources, we should also be able to say something about the options for, and struggles in favor of, democratization of the state—more equal rule of common resources—as a prerequisite for better standards of living.

Anyway, the very possibility to discuss issues like these after having read Gillian Hart's book is another reason for recommending it enthusiastically.

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10. See Olle Törnquist, *What's Wrong with Marxism? On Capitalists and State in India and Indonesia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989). To be followed by a second volume. *On Peasants and Workers in India and Indonesia*, forthcoming 1991. ★

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