
Legacy

**W.F. Wertheim: A Sociological Chronicler
of Revolutionary Change****Jan Breman**

EN ROUTE TO A COLONIAL CAREER

Willem Frederik (Wim) Wertheim was born in St Petersburg in 1907 and spent his early years there. Wim and his slightly older brother were the sons of Dutch parents who, as expatriates, were part of the city's bourgeoisie. With their father a well-to-do businessman, the household included three live-in servants, and nannies were employed to take care of bringing up the boys. After the 1917 revolution, all expats had to leave the country and in 1918 the family returned to The Netherlands. After secondary school Wim went to read law at the University of Leiden, completing his study by the end of 1928. The economic crisis that had broken out made it difficult to find a suitable job and his applications for a position in the civil service came to nothing. A public appeal for law graduates prepared to complete an extra course in the law of the East Indies in preparation for an appointment to the colonial judiciary offered Wim a way out of his predicament. The lectures he had to attend allowed him sufficient free time to write a dissertation. Known as a good student, prominent professor of civil law Eduard Meijers proved willing to become his mentor. Wim obtained his doctorate in mid-1930 and, before the year was out, had also taken his examination in Law of the East Indies. Later in the same year he married Hetty Gijse Weenink, whom he had met at university and who was to remain closely involved in her husband's career until her death in 1988. Shortly after their marriage the young couple departed for the Orient (Wertheim and Wertheim-Gijse Weenink, 1992).

On arrival, Wim was appointed to the judiciary of the Lampong¹ districts in South Sumatra. In this position, he gained valuable practical experience in applying the law to which the indigenous population was subjected. But his stay in Telok Betong did not last long: within six months, the young lawyer

1. Now written as 'Lampung' in Bahasa Indonesia.

was invited — on the recommendation of his mentor in Leiden — to go and work at the Department of Justice in Batavia. Wim and his wife automatically became integrated in the colonial lifestyle, which meant that their social life was limited to contact with the European community. Their residence reflected their status and rank as members of the elite, and domestic servants were employed to run the household and look after their three children, born between 1933 and 1936. The couple had already learned during the outward voyage to avoid contact with all kinds of ‘others’ and their initial placement at an outstation completed their habituation to the code of decent conduct. Back in the colonial headquarters, however, it proved a little easier to break through the isolation of the white caste. The Wertheims’ interest in art and culture — Hetty gave song recitals accompanied by Wim on the piano — contributed to their slowly widening field of social interaction. The circle they now moved in was lightly mixed, as a consequence of the presence of highly educated Indo-Europeans, while in Wim’s department at headquarters there was also some degree of mixed blood. But, even in this late colonial period, there could be no question of social intercourse between the white elite and the Indonesian people.

That changed somewhat in 1936, on Wim’s nomination, at the age of 29, to a professorship at the Law School in Batavia. It brought him into contact with well-educated Indonesians and Chinese born in the colony; some as colleagues, but most of them as students. The expansion of the colonial machinery had made it necessary for members of the native population to be permitted entry to the lower ranks of the civil service. A small vanguard succeeded in accessing one of the few courses of higher education available in the colony, or even attending university in The Netherlands. The costs involved made it clear that, although they were — with a few exceptions — excluded from top-level positions in the bureaucracy, they came from the elite of Indonesian society. The racial discrimination they suffered would certainly strengthen their nationalist aspirations, especially in this circle.

Wim now became familiar with that spirit of resistance and his understanding for it only increased through his contact with colleagues who contributed to *De Stuw*, a periodical that argued for a less reactionary and repressive policy than was setting the colonial tone during these years. Wim’s conversion onto a moderately progressive track was strengthened when, in the course of his work, he acquired better knowledge of the miserable conditions in which the mass of the indigenous population existed. A coolie budget survey conducted in 1939–40 showed that, during the ongoing economic crisis of that period, the workforce on the sugar plantations of Central Java had to survive on a daily food ration of 1,300–1,400 calories, and in some cases as little as 900 calories or less.² Receiving students at his home and attending meetings

2. This critical level of nutrition, which amounts to no more than a survival ration, must be seen in the light of data on wages. According to the source that Wertheim refers to, male field coolies on sugar plantations in Central Java were paid 1.1 cents per hour, while women

of their student association, Wim developed a growing appreciation of their desire for independence. Yet this was only one side of his shift towards a dissenting perspective. It was accompanied by an increasing interest in the system of economic exploitation — an awareness fuelled by his realization that, under colonial rule, there were hardly any limits to the power of Western corporate business. A further sobering insight was that, after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, no effort was made to accommodate even the most minimal desire for the country's autonomy. As a member of the government committee set up to formulate recommendations on constitutional change, Wim was asked to draft a report on racial discrimination. Hearings were held in which a whole procession of people testified regarding discriminatory practices to which they had been exposed both at work and in their everyday lives. However, the political leadership of the colonial enterprise — itself driven out of its homeland after the German invasion — saw any alleviation of the regime of foreign occupation as taboo. The Dutch government in exile in London rejected any concrete proposals for reform.

The downfall of the colonial regime was sealed when Japan, after a short-lived war in the spring of 1942, overran the territory of the Dutch East Indies. The former masters and their families were interned — with men and women in separate camps — and the leaders of the nationalist movement acquired a greater opportunity, under the domination of the new Asian superpower, to pursue their aims. While he was interned, Wim discussed with like-minded internees, of a socialist to social-democratic bent, what the future had in store. His leftist leanings crystallized under Japanese occupation which made him realize the dead weight of oppression. In his own words, it then became clear to him that colonialism and capitalism were like identical twins. With all the uncertainties of the time, he became convinced that after the expected liberation — news of the end of the war in Europe had filtered through to the camps — the old times would not return in the colony. Yet, the majority of his fellow inmates responded with incredulity and aversion when they heard that nationalist leaders Bung Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta had declared Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945. Two weeks later, Wim succeeded in reaching Batavia — now known as Jakarta — to help build up the Red Cross organization, an urgent task in the power vacuum of this period. Another two weeks later, he was reunited with his wife and children, who had also survived their detention. Wim met with the returned colonial authorities, but remained at a distance from them, instead seeking contact with high-ranking Indonesian leaders in a futile attempt to prevent further escalation between the parties, who were already in open conflict with each other. He also approached Dutch politicians directly and tried to convince them that the old order could never be restored, but his pleas

were paid even less. These data are from the final report of the coolie budget committee (Koelie Budgetcommissie, 1941). See also Huizenga (1958).

fell on deaf ears. The former colonial rulers proved completely devoid of any understanding of the anti-colonial sentiments that had rapidly gained momentum in 'our Indies'. This inability to see the reality unfolding in front of their eyes applied equally to the majority of those repatriated to The Netherlands. But the Wertheims returned in early 1946 in a completely different state of mind than when they had departed for the colony 15 years earlier.

CHANGE OF DISCIPLINE

Once back in The Netherlands, Wim wasted no time in calling publicly for the acceptance and recognition of Indonesian independence (Wertheim, 1946). His dissenting stance was not welcomed in official circles and cost him a professorship in the Law Faculty at the University of Leiden, where he topped the list of candidates. This was not too much of a disappointment for Wim, however, as Leiden had long been an avid supporter of colonial policies, and would remain so in the immediate future. The scholarly ambit and social outlook of this impassioned academic now took him in a very different direction. This new course in his life was facilitated by historian Jan Romein, on whose recommendation Wim was offered a professorship in the newly established Political and Social Science Faculty at the Municipal University of Amsterdam. The two became not only colleagues, but also close friends. It was a bond founded on a shared perspective on past and future human development (see Wertheim, 1980). This common strand rested on a political way of thinking based on belief and hope in a socialist future and extended to the faculty as a whole. Clearly, the well-wishers that Wim encountered on the home front saw him as an advocate of the Indonesian cause. He was only too pleased to take on this role and became first a member and shortly afterwards chairman of the *Vereniging Nederland-Indonesië* (Netherlands-Indonesia Association).

His uncompromising stance led to a break with many colleagues and acquaintances from the colonial past. In their eyes, Wim had gone from being a supporter of what was seen as a civilizing mission to a defector who defended rebels out to disrupt the public order in what was still acclaimed as 'our Indies'. Negotiation was not considered an option in resolving the escalating conflict. The decision to take a hard line was partly motivated by the threat of a coup in The Netherlands planned by a shady bunch of right-wing figures — politicians, former colonial officials, high-ranking members of the military and magnates of colonial business houses — who had united around the slogan '*Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren*', which roughly translates as 'Once the Indies are lost, catastrophe begins'. The plans in place for a *coup d'état* included killing a leading social-democratic politician. The conspirators were afraid that this moderately leftist party would resist the military campaign they were about to launch in the colony to put down the

revolt, which they persisted in portraying as incited by a small clique of rabble-rousers.

In the event, the coup got no further than the planning stage; they had intended to undertake it with the approval of the monarchy, but that support never materialized. If such a restorative putsch had occurred, it is doubtful whether a radical firebrand like Wim would have remained a free man. Under pressure from the Indies lobby — now out of public sight but still very influential — the leading political parties yielded to the call for military intervention to restore ‘law and order’ in the lost colony. Only the Dutch Communist Party, which still had a large support base in those years, spoke out against this last colonial war and declared its solidarity with the not-insubstantial number of enlisted soldiers who refused to go and reoccupy ‘the Indies’. These objectors faced stiff punishment. As the fighting overseas increased in ferocity, national emotions ran high and the voices of those who refused to swear allegiance to the patriotic cause were scarcely heard. The largely like-minded press was vehement in its condemnation of friends of the enemy, like Wertheim. By contrast, leftist media outlets gave him space to present his facts, opinions and commentaries. He soon joined the editorial board of the monthly publication *De Nieuwe Stem*, which in the Cold War years sought space for a non-aligned course — a third way — between the two superpowers in the new world order. Wim’s refusal to commit himself unconditionally to the ‘Free West’ contributed to his reputation as a political troublemaker or, even worse, a Communist sympathizer. On returning from a conference in Poland in 1948, he refused an order to allow the board of the university to read the speech he had given on behalf of the Dutch delegation: he considered it a violation of his academic freedom and paid no heed to the instruction. When the speech was published shortly afterwards in the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland*, it was clear that, besides criticizing Western capitalism, he had also condemned the intolerance of the Soviet Union towards dissenters.

The colonial practice that Wim had experienced at first hand proved to have been an excellent training ground for him. His stay at colonial headquarters gave him the know-how required to design the programme of teaching and research that he pursued as holder of the chair in the History and Sociology of Indonesia that had been set up in Amsterdam in 1945. The public lecture with which he accepted his appointment — entitled ‘The Indo-Europeans in Indonesia’ (Wertheim, 1947) — dealt with the organizing principle of colonial rule: relations between the races of which that society was comprised. The main dividing line was of course between white and brown but, in the course of time, legal jurisprudence had introduced a finely graded hierarchy. The prominence given to racial demarcations, he claimed, was often intended to sow discord and apartheid rather than promote cohesion, and to safeguard the legitimacy of dominance of the few over the many. With a series of lectures in 1948, Wim voiced his opposition to this delusion of racial superiority and inferiority which, in his view,

dated from the 19th century and had to be expunged before it could destroy the fabric of mankind (Wertheim, 1949). But condemning racism as a myth did not lead to its disappearance. Now presented as a clash of civilizations, the doctrine of racial segmentation is once again enjoying a heyday in the early years of the 21st century, with roots that clearly go back to the colonial past.

Wim made use of the insights he had acquired during his career in the Indies to address the problem of how to determine his position in a discipline different to that in which he had been educated and trained. He had to replace the legal perspective from which he was accustomed to view the world with a social scientific approach. The development of a sociological vision required more than simply familiarizing himself with the jargon and literature of another discipline. It also required the ability to look at the world through a different lens, to see what presents itself as reality from a new angle. Although Wim did not speak in any detail about this change of course in his life, I tend to see such a radical shift of perspective as a significant milestone on the long road that he travelled. The sociological imagination that he must already have possessed resounds strongly even in his early work. In a volume of essays *Herrijzend Azië (Resurgent Asia)* (Wertheim, 1950a), he put on record the decline of the colonial idea. This certainly did not mean that he remained bogged down in considerations of the past. What occupied him in the mid-20th century was, on the one hand, the global eclipse of colonialism and, on the other, what this sea change promised for the advent of the world's most populous continent, which was displaying renewed vigour (Wertheim, 1950b). What form would this take?

BREAKING AWAY FROM ORIENTALIST EXCEPTIONALISM

Wim analysed the geo-political changes that were taking place with an open mind. The era of development politics that emerged started with the call for cooperation between countries that were portrayed as either 'advanced' or 'backward'. Wim voiced an opinion on the divide itself, how it had come about and how it could best be bridged, which deviated from the prevailing wisdom. But, for the time being, he stayed close to the field of study that was familiar to him and expressed his ideas on the state of development in Indonesia in a book entitled *Indonesian Society in Transition: A Study of Social Change* (Wertheim, 1956).³ The study took a radically different stance to most textbooks. To start with, it was not written from the top down, but from the bottom up. Rather than describing the comings and goings of princes, state and governance, Wim focused on the wide range of

3. After a second edition in 1959, the book was reprinted in 1964. Several editions have been published in Bahasa Indonesia.

events unfolding at the base of society. It evinced a sociological perspective described in the preface as ‘to pay due attention to basic processes and facts such as competition between social strata, rural discontent, hunger, human bondage, class strife, which are decisive for future developments’ (ibid.: ix). In his depiction of the history of the country and its people, it was not political moments that determined the continuity of past and present, but processes of social change that culminated in the struggle for independence. Wim’s historical argument did not begin with the arrival of the first Dutch ships at the end of the 16th century and focus on the final century of their colonial presence — as was customary in accounts originating in The Netherlands. Moreover, rather than presenting the results of foreign domination as a successful civilizing mission, the essence of the colonial era was described as a pattern of ossification and subordination.

To distance himself from the classical study of Asia, known widely as orientalism, Wim changed the focus of his academic programme in Amsterdam. It was now called the Modern History and Sociology of Southeast Asia. This did not mean that he was not interested in what had happened in the unknown realm of the archipelago before the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) — far from it. He described this remote past on the basis of the dissertation left behind by Jacob van Leur. This promising historian, who had died at an early age, had interpreted the available source material not merely as an ode to the VOC. Wim arranged for the translation of this important sociological-historical study of the pre-colonial past and published it under the title *Indonesian Trade and Society* as the first of a series in English (van Leur, 1955). With this publication, Wim drew the attention of foreign colleagues to scholarly work on Indonesia in Dutch that had previously been inaccessible to them. Of equally great importance was his initiative to publish a selection of the works of Julius Boeke on the dualistic nature of the colonial economy (Boeke, 1966). The publication was accompanied by a number of critical comments on the concept of dualism and appeared in the same series as the van Leur translation: *Selected Studies on Indonesia by Dutch Scholars*.

ON SABBATICAL LEAVE IN POST-COLONIAL ASIA

In 1956–57, after 10 years of teaching, research and publications, supplemented with a wide variety of activities outside the university, Wim was delighted to go on sabbatical leave — accompanied by Hetty — to the new Asia. Together they kept a diary of where they went, what they did and whom they met (Wertheim, 1992a). The invitation to spend the year in Indonesia was extended by the Indonesian government in appreciation of the goodwill Wim had earned in his role as chairman of the Netherlands–Indonesia Association. He and Hetty decided to make a stop in South Asia on the outward journey. The visit, lasting about two weeks, included a short stay in Pakistan

for a lecture at the University of Lahore before going on to North India. Wim gave lectures on post-colonial Indonesia at universities and research institutes in Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow and Calcutta, reaching Jakarta in early October 1956.

At the Agricultural University in Bogor, Wim was a guest professor in the Department of Agrarian Sociology and taught a course on social demography, a theme that was high on his agenda at that time. He was delighted to join staff members on a trip to East Java, where students were conducting rural research. It was the same area in which studies of peasant households had been carried out in the colonial era. The visit gave Wim the opportunity to compare the present with the earlier situation. As well as some progress, especially in education, he also encountered stagnation and even deterioration in the local people's living standards, including a reduction in what sharecroppers used to get from the paddy harvest. After independence, the divide between landowners and the landless had grown even bigger than before, and Wim particularly noted the absence of cottage industry. He deliberately chose an anthropological research method, in contrast to the standard technique of investigations in the colonial era, when village leaders and elders used to be called to the sub-district town where they were interviewed by the official researcher. As Wim put it himself:

By contrast, we spoke to peasants from different social classes, both more prosperous and poorer, in the field or in their homes. We not only questioned them about their personal circumstances, but also how they felt about the social relations in the village. These views could vary widely, according to their social position. We tried in this way to free ourselves from the official presentation of the situation, as usually expressed by leaders and elders, as representatives of the local 'establishment'. (Wertheim, 1992a: 57–8)

In his reported findings, Wim emphasized the high population density in the Javanese countryside, which had risen further after decolonialization. Raising productivity per hectare by improving agricultural methods was one possible solution, but the chances of achieving that seemed remote. A more promising course of action was transmigration to the other, much less densely populated islands of the archipelago, combined with diversification of the economy, and especially industrialization, to relieve the pressure on the agricultural means of production. Increased economic activity outside the primary sector would help boost employment and, with a consequential fall in the consistently high birth rate, lead to lower demographic growth. He visited his old duty station in South Sumatra, which had become a magnet for newcomers relocating from Java, to determine how this transmigration had panned out in practice. A notable lack of means of livelihood other than agriculture in the areas of settlement was bound to lead to a steady decline in soil fertility. That alarming development would result in a pattern of static expansion that already seemed to be taking place in Java.

The Wertheims returned to Lampong in the company of Kampto Utomo, a staff member of the sociology department at the Agricultural University. He accompanied them as a guide through the region, which was familiar to him from his doctoral research into the development and impact of transmigration. Under Wim's supervision, Kampto Utomo succeeded in writing up his findings in the months that followed. As guest supervisor and promotor at the Institut Pertanian in Bogor, Wim was able to congratulate his junior colleague on the award of his doctorate a few days before the end of his stay in October 1957. In the preceding months the Wertheims had toured all parts of Java and further afield, to West Sumatra, Sulawesi and Bali — Wim for lectures and study visits and Hetty for song recitals, but almost always in each other's company. What is striking when reading the extensive account of their travels is the cordial treatment they encountered in meetings with prominent figures, high-ranking officials and provincial governors, including a reception by President Sukarno in his palace. These contacts with the country's elite circles were not surprising as, wherever he went, Wim met his former pupils from the Law School, who now held high positions as politicians or bureaucrats and who were pleased to help him travel wherever he wanted to go and find out what he wanted to know.

The sabbatical leave was, however, not yet over. What would turn out to be the most exciting part took place just before returning home: a visit to mainland China. Before leaving The Netherlands, during a conversation with the official representative of the People's Republic, Wim had expressed a desire to visit the country. His request was forwarded to the authorities and in Indonesia, by way of the friendship accord between the two countries, he managed to obtain an invitation for an official visit of a month. In those years, China was still a closed society and the diary that the Wertheims kept during their stay provided plenty of material for articles in periodicals that were favourably inclined towards the Chinese regime. The interpreter who accompanied them not only had the job of translating but also had to ensure that they understood 'the correct meaning' of what they saw and heard. Their welcome was very cordial but they were treated largely as tourists and Wim repeatedly expressed the wish to visit villages and talk to the peasants. The programme did allow him some opportunity to talk to Chinese from Indonesia, who had settled in the People's Republic after the revolution. He was not, however, given permission to meet the internationally known ethnologist Fei Hsiao Tung in Peking, who was still working at his academic institute but was subject to fierce criticism for his 'right-wing' ideas.

Wim was very aware that the responses he received from government bodies were ideologically tinted, which made him even more keen to visit the countryside. His obstinate desire to get an idea of the situation in China's collectivized agriculture was eventually fulfilled. He got permission to visit a number of large-scale agricultural estates, state-run farms and cooperatives in both the north and south of the country. He was even allowed to go further

than simply receiving information from managers, and could actually talk to farmers themselves — although these meetings were inevitably mediated by the presence of officials. Wim took account of this surveillance in the travelogue notes that he sent home about the lectures he gave. These lectures — to the staff of the institutes he visited — solicited little in the way of acclaim from his audiences. Wim knew that he had been taken to ‘model’ enterprises and did not hesitate to lecture the officials who had accompanied him if they tried to influence the answers to his questions. Nor did he desist from giving advice — for example, on planting crops at home to supplement the household income. This tendency to counsel others would remain with Wim for his entire life.

He summarized his conclusions in an article, once again published in *De Nieuwe Stem* (Wertheim, 1958). It was a positive judgement on the second phase of the land reforms that had led to the abolition of private property in China. This had improved cultivation methods and thereby increased productivity, and encouraged secondary activities to push up the standard of life by expanding the area of arable land, especially in the hills. Wim left no doubt about the impact of this policy — progress — in the most densely populated continent where the large mass of the population still only just eked out an existence. Back in Jakarta, Wim summed up the lessons of his study year in Asia in a farewell speech (Wertheim, 1992b). The biggest problem, he felt, was the abject poverty in which the majority of the inhabitants of India lived, in both town and country. Living standards in Indonesia were slightly better, especially among the better-off, but economic need as a result of insufficient land, its low yield where irrigation was lacking, and absence of employment outside agriculture, was also widespread. There was a lack of effective leadership in the development process. These considerable shortcomings weighed heavily in the balance compared to improved healthcare and education. Wim was more hopeful regarding China. After the revolution, strong leaders had come to power who had set about building up the country and improving the lot of the people. The problems they had to overcome were not inconsiderable, but there had been progress in all fields. The reduced poverty and improved well-being did not only benefit a small part of the population, but penetrated down to the base of Chinese society.

A WIDER FIELD OF STUDY

Wim’s comparative summary of what he had learnt in Asia was also the outline for the agenda that he was to pursue back in Amsterdam. The first change he made was to expand the scope of his study far beyond the society on which his knowledge had initially been based. Although he remained interested in Indonesia, he also widened his perspective to embrace other parts of Asia. To emphasize that the comparative focus also applied to time-scale — the study of both past and present — the

name of the centre that Wim had established was changed to Sociologisch-Historisch Seminarium (the Sociological-Historical Seminary). South and Southeast Asia were added as regional areas of focus, a change that was also reflected in the specializations of the staff. In the following decade, the institute gradually expanded with the appointment of not only upcoming Indonesian specialists, but also PhD candidates engaged in conducting research on the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, India and China.

I was one of the first batch of new additions. During my studies, I had increasingly concentrated on the sociology and history of Asia and I was now given a part-time job as one of four research assistants to my foremost mentor. At that time, Wim's institute was housed in what was originally called the Koloniaal Instituut (Colonial Institute). The building had been constructed in 1926 with funds from corporate business in the Netherlands Indies; it was renamed the Indisch Instituut (Indies Institute) after World War II, and in 1950 became the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (Royal Tropical Institute). As he walked to his room, Wim passed murals depicting colonial heroes from the past, including Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen, who had expanded the power of the VOC with an extremely hard hand, and Johannes van den Bosch, the architect of the cultivation system which had forced Javanese famers into tied labour. It was how the tale of the 'good old days' of colonial rule was kept alive. Wim's Seminarium was housed in two rooms of the building. In one room, Wim received visitors, held examinations and discussions, did his correspondence and made constant telephone calls. His secretary sat in the other room, kept company in turn by four assistants.

As research assistants we performed a wide range of chores: fetching or returning books to the library, correcting our mentor's proofs before printing, and accompanying him to lectures. But we also enjoyed the privilege of being supervised by Wim in conducting our own research. In my case, this was a historical-demographic study on Java's population growth. After graduation, Wim had set out a follow-up study programme for me, but a heated conflict between The Netherlands and Indonesia in the early 1960s put paid to my original plan to conduct research on Java. Wim found a solution to this problem when he met his renowned Indian colleague M.N. Srinivas at a conference, who suggested that he send me, together with fellow research assistant Chris Baks, to Gujarat. After experiencing some difficulties acquiring a scholarship, I arrived at my destination, a village in Gujarat, in late-1962. India was still largely a peasant society, which would take several decades to change. I chose where to do the research, but the methodology was decided in advance: anthropological fieldwork. Based on the experience gained during his own study year in Asia, my supervisor was convinced that the researcher must try to stay as close to reality as possible and of course for a much longer time period than he himself had managed to do during his short field excursions. He also believed

that the researcher should not gather data through interviews or surveys but should rely on participant observation, being physically present in the daily life and work of those he was studying, and engaging with a wide range of informants about what was happening in and around the site of investigation.⁴

Besides myself, 14 other doctoral students had the privilege of being coached by Wim throughout the years and of being awarded their doctoral degrees, with Wim as promotor, at the University of Amsterdam. He always tried to find time to visit his PhD candidates in the field. In my case, that happened early in 1963. I had decided not to receive him in the village where I was conducting my fieldwork pointing out by way of excuse the lack of amenities in my accommodation, with no toilet or running water and no electricity. But in the next village, where I arranged for him to stay in the comfortable house of a landowner, exactly what I had anticipated came to pass. Wim heard that his host employed farm labourers as bonded servants. He not only criticized this man and other large landlords but also made it abundantly clear that such practices were morally and socially reprehensible. These members of the elite listened to Wim in silence, but his opinions remained the main topic of discussion for many days after he had left. He had also responded with incredulity when, in answer to his repeated questioning, I told him that I had found no evidence that the landless proletariat resisted bondage. It was impossible, he insisted, as slaves have always and everywhere risen up against their masters. His critical comments kept me preoccupied. In the historical source documentation that I consulted extensively after completing my fieldwork, I also found no evidence of any organized proletarian resistance.⁵

A DISSENTING VIEW ON DEVELOPMENT

Wim had already expressed in an early publication (Wertheim, 1950c) an opinion on the distinction between economically developed and underdeveloped areas that was at variance with the prevailing view. What was now labelled as the underdevelopment of the Southern hemisphere, Wim saw as the consequence of colonial intervention, which had led to stagnation. He referred to the disbanding of the commission that had been set up in the Dutch East Indies after World War I to promote industry. The

4. Of the student batch who presented Wim in 1971 with a volume of sociological essays *Buiten de Grenzen (Outside the Borders)* celebrating his tenure for 25 years as Professor at the University of Amsterdam, 11 had conducted their PhD research in this way (*Buiten de Grenzen*, 1971).

5. This conclusion later proved incorrect, when I got access to an archive with factual evidence of a protest movement in the late-colonial period. I incorporated this revised view into a new publication: see Chapter 4 in Breman (2007).

large-scale agribusiness lobby had successfully resisted economic diversification (Wertheim, 1960; see also Gordon, 2009). A considerable percentage of the land not under regular tillage had been expropriated and could therefore not be opened up by the peasantry for cultivation; peasants were forced to remain available to work as labourers on the plantations growing crops for export. The pattern of shared poverty that had arisen on Java and elsewhere was not caused by a stubborn desire of the inhabitants to hold on to a pre-capitalist tradition, but was the consequence of the advent of capitalist economic activity in a colonial or semi-colonial guise. The new mode of production was in foreign hands and exclusively served external interests. The native population became confined in a system that offered them insufficient opportunity to create any momentum for change of their own. Clifford Geertz described this downward spiral, evidenced by becoming immobilized in traditional structures and institutions, as ‘involution’ (Geertz, 1963). Outside agriculture, there was little employment available. The man–land ratio had further worsened, but escape from the village offered no prospects of a better life. In a report on his urban research, Geertz (1956a) described a kind of economy that, a quarter of a century later, would be called ‘the informal economy’. Wim included this quote in an essay of his own in 1964:

The lack of opportunity for employment in the town, the growing stream of impoverished rural inhabitants moving there, and the generally low standard of living lead to the available opportunities for work being spread over large numbers of applicants each of whom has too little to do and is living on the very margin of minimal subsistence. The innumerable street-vendors, pedicab drivers, ‘peons’ and little clerks in the offices all testify to the same system, in which social justice takes precedence over efficiency and a minimal output per head is put up with so that the available means of subsistence can be spread over a maximum number of people. In urban industry, too, the efficiency and viability of an enterprise suffer from the social pressure of the environment, which demands that the factory owner takes on and maintains so many male or female workers that each has too little to live on and too much to die, while there is no incentive to and possibility of further investment left. (Geertz, 1956a, quoted in Wertheim, 1964b: 12).⁶

Wim’s article, originally written in Dutch, formed the introduction to a volume entitled *East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia* (Wertheim, 1964a). This work once again illustrated his belief that a historicizing approach was necessary to understand social change. He was critical of the claim that the way to modernization in Asia was to follow the same path taken by Western societies and rejected as naïve the notion that the take-off experienced by the latter would be repeated. He explained his objections to the dominant view with what his colleague and friend, the historian Jan Romein, called ‘the dialectics of progress’. This means that, in the course of development, pioneers and stragglers would not always remain in that position with respect to each other but, during the process of transformation, could change places. The possibility of this reversal in

6. See also Geertz (1956b); Wertheim (1964d).

ranking between leaders and followers in development was well received by social scientists in countries that had only a few years previously freed themselves from (semi-)colonial domination. In 1976, I found a quotation from Wim's work on the name card of the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies in Patna, India. It was an expression of approval by staff enamoured to read that 'the underdeveloped countries' had to develop themselves using their own strength rather than being confined in a rigid pattern of front-runners and late-comers.

FIERCELY OPPOSING INDONESIA'S DICTATORSHIP AND ITS DONORS IN THE WEST

In the years that followed, Wim's attention remained strongly focused on Indonesia. This was to a large extent due to the worsening political situation there, which culminated in 1965 in a military dictatorship that was to last for more than 30 years. The coup that ended the reign of Sukarno and brought General Suharto to power was met with relief in the West. But not by Wertheim who, together with other authoritative experts, spoke out fiercely against the regime change. Their condemnation focused on the campaign of murder by the army, aided by civil militias, of at least half a million of their compatriots. While international attention was focused largely on the violence in and around Jakarta, Wim was already writing early reports on the slaughter in Java, Sumatra and Bali of people considered to be left-wing activists or sympathizers. This reactionary fury was turned especially on the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) — the Communist Party of Indonesia — against whom a campaign erupted between the autumn of 1965 and the spring of 1966, aimed at completely eradicating the movement. The primary targets were party members and leaders, but the state-sponsored violence also focused on trade unions in which workers had united to demand higher wages, and the Barisan Tani Indonesia, the large peasant union that pressed for tenancy reform and the abolition of private land ownership, which was considered radical. The victims, who were often killed in horrific ways, were mainly land-poor and landless peasants in the countryside whose names and identities went unregistered. Those fortunate enough to escape with their lives in the orgy of hatred and cruelty disappeared into prison for an indeterminate length of time without ever standing trial for the 'crimes' they were alleged to have committed. Anyone who was suspected of being critical of the New Order was considered subversive.

With his protests against the reign of terror, Wim distanced himself from the prevailing wisdom in Dutch political circles, which accepted and approved the new regime. He underscored his divergent opinion by joining the newly established Komitee Indonesië (Indonesia Committee) — a forum which voiced opposition to the right-wing seizure of power — and, in 1968, became its chairman. Wim participated in the protest against the official

state visit of Suharto to The Netherlands in 1970 and, over the course of many years, met with refugees who kept him up to date on the situation in Indonesia and who found in Wim a spokesman for what they themselves were not able to voice. Many exiles had been abroad when the coup took place and would be thrown into prison or sentenced to death if they returned. Wim helped them to get residence permits in The Netherlands and also called public attention to the more than 100,000 'suspects' confined in camps or prisons in Indonesia. I remember accompanying him to meet the Dutch prime minister to urge him to lodge a strong protest with the Indonesian government after the leaders of the peasant union and other trade unions had been sentenced to death in mock trials.⁷ Such displays of solidarity were of course not welcomed by the regime in Indonesia but they let the victims, or at least their families and comrades, know that their suffering had invoked outrage and opposition abroad. When I visited the well-known novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer in 1989, after his release from a long period of detention, he was still under house arrest. Above the table in his workroom, there were portraits of Benedict Anderson and Wim Wertheim, two men whom he considered his patrons and who, in his words, had fought his cause like no other for many years.

The advent of a dictatorship in its former colony was greeted in The Netherlands as heralding the start of better times. The members of the parliamentary delegation that undertook a working visit to Indonesia in 1967 enthusiastically reported on the hospitable welcome they had received in Jakarta. The leader of the delegation — a prominent politician of the Dutch Labour Party — praised the cordial atmosphere in which the talks were conducted. Restoration of good relations, he announced, would be profitable to Dutch business — a prediction that was readily fulfilled. Under the auspices of IGGI, an international consortium chaired by The Netherlands, steadily increasing flows of development aid were sent to Indonesia, which was rich in natural resources that the 'free world' needed. In a critical essay (Wertheim, 1967), Wim claimed that what was passed off as development cooperation concealed a neocolonial policy aimed at subjugating the southern hemisphere to the Western powers. The countries receiving aid had become underdeveloped because of, and under the yoke of, foreign domination that had often lasted for centuries. The support now offered as redemption from poverty and deprivation was founded on the enlightened self-interest of the generous donors, and the desire to maintain their lead and increase their wealth in the global order. He supported this position by showing that the gap that had opened up historically between the 'advanced' and the 'backward' parts of the world was becoming wider rather than narrowing. Providing more aid, he said, would only make it wider still. His simple message was that development is a process that does not happen by

7. This meeting with Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers took place in 1990 and was mediated by Jan Pronk.

itself but must be driven, not from the outside but from within and from the bottom up. He denounced both the argument that the private sector was the instigator of economic growth, and the trust in a government that served only the interests of a privileged class. In essence, he was arguing in favour of:

cultivating a certain feeling of self-respect among the mass of the population, arousing their dissatisfaction with the existing social and political relations and strengthening traditional peasant mistrust of a caste of public officials linked to the landed nobility. If a social revolution is required to achieve economic development, then the only acceptable form of aid is non-colonial and stimulates the resolve of the population no longer to accept its subjugation. (Wertheim, 1967: 482; my translation)

These recommendations flew in the face of the prevailing and authorized practice of Western aid, including that of The Netherlands. Sponsoring what was called development worldwide became big business, in an era designated the 'decade of development'. Since those heady days of the 1960s, the budget allocated by the Dutch government to overseas development activities has been drastically cut, and the ministry that once bore the name has been transformed into one promoting foreign trade. At the time, however, Jan Pronk and myself (both then based at The Netherlands Economic School in Rotterdam) took the opportunity presented by the publication of Wim's critical essay to organize a public debate between Wim and Jan Tinbergen, to present the arguments for and against the development policy that was being pursued. The meeting took place in Amsterdam in 1968, and the two speakers politely but clearly demonstrated their fundamental difference of opinion.

EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

In the years that followed, the social climate gradually came to offer more space for voices and opinions that strongly deviated from the prevailing, and what was until then considered proper, discourse in and beyond the political sphere. There was increasing appreciation for Wim's work and his perspective on what was happening in the Third World. Jan Pronk, now a leader of the swing to the New Left in the Labour Party, became Minister for Development Cooperation at the end of 1973; when taking office, he asked not only his own mentor Jan Tinbergen but also mine, Wim Wertheim, to become his advisors. This mark of recognition was no reason for Wim to shift his standpoint but he did begin to adopt a different style. He had always been very conventional in dress and use of language. The only exception to the former was his choice of attire when travelling to and from the institute: dressed in a heavy leather coat and a crash helmet, he would zip in and out of the city traffic on one of the motorized bikes which had become quite popular in the 1960s. But Wim was a courteous and obliging man who

conducted himself according to the rules of professorial habitus. Inviting me home on the evening before I was to defend my dissertation, he asked me to address him, after the proceedings of the following day, as ‘je’ rather than the more formal Dutch ‘U’, as a sign of us being equals after I had been awarded my doctoral degree. Wim’s less formal behaviour was also expressed in his more frequent appearance without a tie; but he remained a gentleman who was always polite to his critics, no matter how fierce their accusations. In the turbulence of the late 1960s, he sided with the student revolt which wanted to democratize the top-down style with which universities were run. This partisanship came naturally to him: he had previously been a board member and then chairperson of the Dutch association of scientific researchers (Verbond van Wetenschappelijke Onderzoekers) which took a progressive stance, during the Cold War period, in dealing with issues concerning sustainable development and in opposition to political and bureaucratic disruption of academic freedom.

Wim had in the meantime extended the reach of his studies beyond Asia, though he made good use of the expertise he had gained. He now devoted his full attention to the shift from gradual processes of social change to accelerated transformation. This choice was inspired by two historical tipping points that he had experienced in his own lifetime: the Russian revolution in 1917 and the uprising and struggle for national liberation in Indonesia in 1945. These crucial events provided him with the insight that revolution, rather than evolution, can occur in an attempt to break through a state of stagnation or social ossification. As well as drawing on his own experience, his observation that, in large parts of Asia, decolonization had done little or nothing to improve the lot of the common man played an equally important role in his reassessment of the course development politics had taken. The essence of revolution should be derived from the direction the change would take. The pressing question that arose was whether human progress is best served by evolution. He referred to Barrington Moore, who observed that ‘the costs of moderation have been at least as atrocious as those of revolution, perhaps a great deal more’ (1966: 505). Wim saw the developments underway in China, Vietnam and elsewhere as expressions of an emancipatory trend — understood as fighting free from the forces of nature and as liberation from social domination — which, in his view, was taking place all around the world.

Wim’s choice was for a perspective based not on stability and equilibrium, but on dynamism and radical change. His *Evolution and Revolution: The Rising Waves of Emancipation* was announced as ‘sociology of a world in movement’ (Wertheim, 1971, 1974). It appeared in Dutch in 1971, in English in 1974, and then in several reprints.⁸ The wavering progress made in the

8. Although the text was originally written in English, it took several years before it was published in this form. In the meantime, Hetty translated the English manuscript into Dutch, and this version was published first.

process of change that he observed and championed led him to review the book's subtitle. What was first described as a 'rising wave' was modified in the fourth reprint in 1975 to a more cautious 'long march'. But Wim continued to believe in his prognosis and criticized me for my more sceptical appraisal. The dedication that he wrote in the copy he presented to me read that 'when accelerators are triggered, an escalation of dissatisfaction can no longer be averted'. After he retired in 1971, the book remained on the reading list for students for many years.

The assertiveness with which Wim pointed the way to a better future did not mean that he expected his students to follow suit. He selected his PhD students for the interest and apparent competence that they showed, but without eroding their freedom to hold a different opinion from the start to the finish of their studies. To surround himself with a flock of disciples was not his style; it was not how he set up the department or recruited staff for it. These shades of opinion and widely varying social perspectives were reflected in the volume presented to him on his retirement which also included a bibliography of the extensive works that bore his name and had been published between 1946 and 1971 (*Buiten de Grenzen*, 1971).

FOCUS ON CHINA'S ACHIEVEMENTS

As a professor emeritus, Wim continued his scholarly work. In a new book on the sociology of ignorance (Wertheim, 1975) he described the repression of unwelcome information that had been customary in the colonial system and which had surfaced again in the post-colonial era. A curtain of ignorance had made social reality invisible to a succession of leaders. The screen of elitist delusion driven by a desire for dominance concealed a mass rejection and denial of rank oppression.

China was now in the forefront of his interest. The 1949 revolution gave shape to the progress he envisaged and it was a desire to see how it had worked out that drove his recurrent excursions to the country. These visits occurred every seven years — 1957, 1964 and again in 1970–71 — as he noted in the reports of his ongoing findings (Wertheim, 1993). They were short visits, the first and third together with his wife Hetty, and as far as possible to the rural locations he had visited before, to give him a reference point for what had happened in the intervening years. His final visit was in 1979, at the invitation of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and accompanied by a member of that institute's staff (see Stiefel and Wertheim, 1983). The results did not entirely confirm what Wim had expected to see. On the one hand, the transformation process that was underway seemed to offer an alternative to leaving the world's poor to the vagaries of the unbridled free market economy. But, on the other hand, the question arose whether the all-powerful state had not hampered rather than promoted the emancipation of the peasant masses. The confidence that Wim

had previously expressed in new socialist China lost much of its persuasive force when, during his final visit, he was forced to acknowledge that very little had materialized in the way of any genuine emancipation. Initiatives for local change were taken by expert party members from outside rather than by peasants themselves. The plan to return for a longer study focused on active participation at the local level fell through when the required permission from the authorities was not granted. Although Wim showed a certain reserve in expressing his appreciation of the Chinese regime, this reserve was too sparse and too nuanced for him to avoid the accusation that he was overly eager to see what he wanted to see. Above all, the progress he described in China failed to acknowledge the authoritarian nature of the state, which held the population in a straitjacket of subjugation.

The criticism he received was often based on the settling of old scores. In the first place, there was Wim's refusal to toe the line in the 'Indonesian question', his resolute refusal to align himself with a policy aimed at restoring the colonial empire. His fierce opposition had created a lot of bad feeling towards him, as had his attempt during the Cold War — together with like-minded colleagues — to seek a middle way between what was known as the 'free West' and the dark world behind the Iron Curtain. Later, Wim was referred to with some respect as a dissident, but his kind of dissidence was considered beyond the boundaries of required decency. During my visits to the now elderly couple, a clearly upset Hetty would show me the scrapbook in which she kept the unrelenting stream of criticism from newspapers and other periodicals. The cuttings varied from more or less objective responses of disagreement to personalized messages of hate. Wim's more positive views on China were undoubtedly coloured by his disappointment about post-colonial regimes elsewhere in Asia. The politicians who had taken charge after independence in Indonesia and in South Asia did no more than pay lip service to improving the miserable plight of the rural masses. Wim chose to distance himself from the kind of developmentalism which was inspired by the promise of an end to poverty and inequality in which the subaltern classes of mankind remained entrapped — a distancing that, with the benefit of hindsight, has attracted more support.

Wim admitted in later years that he had depicted the outcomes of the Chinese revolution too positively and had based his opinions on assumptions behind which a more sinister reality was hidden. He had remembered too little of the criticism that he himself had aimed at the kind of social scientific research that was customary during the colonial era, typified in this extract from 1964:

A great distrust of 'official' informants, such as chieftains, village elders and 'experts' on customary law, is essential for a social anthropologist or sociologist doing fieldwork in the non-Western world. These people are in general only expressing the 'dominant' value systems. To detect hidden or overt forms of protest, the attention has to be shifted to how representatives of different layers of society think and feel about the society in which they live, and how they actually behave. (Wertheim, 1964c: 37)

One reason for Wim to revise his earlier standpoint was undoubtedly the fact that China left the path it had initially taken after the revolution, abandoned its socialist doctrine and switched to a capitalist market economy. Wim expressed his disillusionment with this change and announced that the country had lost its attraction as a large-scale and unique social and ideological experiment. He could do little more than endorse what Barrington Moore had previously concluded, ‘that in China too the claims of socialism rest on promise not performance’ (1966: 506). As far as Wim was concerned, China’s change of course at the end of the 1980s placed it back in the same situation as the Third World. Its unconditional surrender to what was portrayed as the free market signified not so much its subordination to Western hegemony as the abandonment of its own long march to a better, non-capitalist future. While Wim expressed his disgust at the neoliberal world order that had emerged and in which exploitation and oppression were inherent, he continued to believe until the end of his life in a revival of emancipatory forces. He wrote of this in what was to be his final book — *Third World Whence and Whither: Protective State versus Aggressive Market* (Wertheim, 1997) — stating that the success of this revival depended on the return of a strong state founded on the democratic principles of the participation and shared power of those at the base of society. Wim appeared to have drawn up this final balance once again based on wishful thinking rather than on empirical reality.

WERTHEIM’S LEGACY

How can Wim Wertheim’s legacy be appraised in hindsight? As that of a great scholar who developed a vision based on social engagement that was diametrically opposed to the tone of self-satisfaction and assumed superiority that permeated Western social science. The study of modern Asia from a historical and comparative perspective owes much to this sociologist who dared to venture off the beaten track. A large number of papers and articles published in international journals — usually written by himself in English, French, German or Russian — reflected the high regard his work and views enjoyed abroad. There is little doubt about Wim’s achievements among his fellow scholars in The Netherlands, but his reputation as a dissident meant that he never received recognition from official bodies like the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) or, even more insulting, in his own field of study from the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). He did, however, enjoy abundant respect abroad; a few examples will suffice by way of illustration. On Gunnar Myrdal’s request, Wim was a member of a panel to which the Swedish scholar submitted his magnum opus *Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (Myrdal, 1968) for comment before publication. Clifford Geertz, who as a young anthropologist conducted his first fieldwork in

East Java in 1952–4, came to Amsterdam on his way to Indonesia in order to meet Wim and sent him the working paper that elaborated on his theory of involution. James Scott spoke in the foreword to his ground-breaking study *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Scott, 1976) of the inspiration he had derived from ‘the brilliant Dutch scholar W.F. Wertheim, many of whose values and perspectives I have come to share’. And, lastly, Benedict Anderson was delighted to accept the invitation to deliver the Wertheim Lecture in 1992, entitled ‘Long Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics’. It would not be difficult to add more prominent names to this list, fellow sociologists who felt indebted to a colleague who did not settle for an area-study approach but had a much more ambitious goal in mind: to shed light on the long-term processes of change in which humanity is entwined.

How did Wim himself look back on his quarter of a century at the University of Amsterdam? In a contribution to a memorial book for the Faculty of Political and Social-Cultural Sciences in 1997, Wim wrote that he had seen his task as developing a sociology focused on the specific characteristics of Asiatic societies or, in more general terms, on those of the ‘underdeveloped’ parts of the world (Wertheim, 1998). The programme he unfolded differed fundamentally from that of Leiden University, where the long tradition of oriental studies had been transformed into the study of Asia as the history of ‘Western expansion’. He opposed this Eurocentric approach by placing the internal dynamics of the world’s most populous continent at the forefront. What Wim left behind after saying farewell to the university was a thriving centre of Asian studies. The department responsible for sociological and anthropological teaching and research was expanded and transformed into the Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA) in 1987. In 1992, it merged with the Postdoctoral Institute for Sociology, which resulted in the establishment of the Amsterdam School for Social-Scientific Research (ASSR). Wim heartily welcomed this initiative, as throughout his career he had advocated closer cooperation with colleagues who specialized in the study of Western societies. The separation of Western and non-Western sociology that had developed in The Netherlands was unique (see Breman, 2015). The division was based on the assumption that Western sociological theory and concepts were not applicable to societies that had not experienced development towards and transition to a Western model. Until this transition occurred — it was assumed without doubt that it would occur — the study of their structure and culture had no place in general, that is Western, sociology. Wim, of course, thoroughly disagreed with this separate status for non-Western societies and their study. He interacted with his ‘Western’ colleagues, was permitted to join them now and again,⁹ but remained an outsider. He was very enthusiastic about the merger that had now taken place in

9. For example, in 1960, he participated in a conference organized by the Nederlandse Sociologische Vereniging (The Netherlands Sociological Association), to which he contributed

Amsterdam, not only bringing together Western and non-Western sociology but also broadened to include anthropology, political science and history. The new agenda, which promoted social-science research in a comparative and historicizing perspective, was also in line with Wim's way of thinking.

When the merger came about, a Wertheim Lecture was introduced to mark the close of the Asian calendar of the academic year at the ASSR. The first in the series was held in 1992 and Wim took part in these special proceedings with a discussion on racism in both the colonial setting and in the metropolis.¹⁰ What initially appeared to be a somewhat dated topic — colonialism was, after all, long gone — grew to become an important social issue in the years that followed. The advent of virulent racism would result in reconfirmation of the belief in Western superiority that had its roots in the colonial past. The 'clash of civilizations' notion derived from this development is an aberration that Wim fought against his whole life. Wim attended the lecture that bore his name every year until his death in 1998. The Amsterdam School no longer exists and Asian studies have also lost the gloss that Wim gave to them, but his memory and his work have fortunately been preserved.¹¹

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a paper entitled 'Corruptie als sociologisch studie-object' ('Corruption as an Object of Sociological Study'), published in the association's yearbook (Wertheim, 1961).

10. For an earlier paper on this, see Wertheim (1990).

11. Wim's personal archive has been deposited at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, where it is open to the public. His home library, a comprehensive collection of books and other texts, was donated to the institute at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta set up and led by Sartono Kartodirdjo, who was awarded his doctoral degree under Wim's supervision for his study on peasant revolts in colonial Java.

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