

JONATHAN LONDON, ED.

Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State, and Authority Relations

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This book is a collection of chapters by well-known writers on aspects of Vietnamese politics. In his introduction, Jonathan London offers an overview of the literature. Much of the empirics of this are questionable, as it ignores a number of the most frequently cited works in the field (by Gareth Porter, Melanie Beresford, David Marr, Brantly Womack, and Mark Philip Bradley, among others). The problem of dealing properly with extant work runs through the volume. This relates in turn, I think, to the book's lack of coherent debate, which London acknowledges himself: "Thayer's analysis of state-repressive institutions, which emphasizes their efficacy and harshness, is contradicted by Wells-Dang and Kerkvliet's assessment that the Party-State is essentially or significantly 'tolerant'" (20). Well, which, and why were they not forced to argue it out? Why do they disagree? To what extent has this to do with their priors, their theories, or their data? The papers generally do not engage with each other enough for the reader to sort out how these apparent differences can be assessed, and this adds to the problem caused by the tendency to ignore recent literature.

Tuong Vu's chapter has a logical position, arguing that the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) expanded and institutionalized in the period up to 1960, after which its decay raised questions about its adaptability. A key element of the argument is that the coherence of the party declined under Lê Duẩn as his "faction tightened its grip," leading to a decline in the quality of party members and the growth of a "massive informal economy in the late

1960s” (29). The former seems hard to understand, as one response to decay is obviously to centralize power, unless the argument follows earlier studies such as McAuley to argue that much as post-Stalinist communist polities attained coherence through institutionalized checks and balances, *cơ cấu* principles in Vietnam ensured a range of internal party-state blocs on Committees, so that if one faction started to dominate coherence would arguably decline. However, Vu’s conclusion, based solely on citations from a large official VCP collection of documents, is contradicted by his claim that “an important factor that has been overlooked in the comparative literature but helped the CPV to persist was its near-total grip of public life until the late 1980s” (34). Traditional communist hostility to informal—and thus unplanned—sectors of the economy stemmed from the political threat this would pose to the proletarian dictatorship. Having framed his analysis strongly in terms of “decay,” Vu concludes that “for decades the party has been able to persist amid decay but one wonders if that is still an option” (38). This is a bit lame. Vu does not quote major recent studies by David Marr and Christopher Goscha about the process of the construction of state power in the late 1940s. This is unfortunate, as they disagree strongly, specifically about the foundational communist state order.

Thaveeporn Vasavakul, who has done extensive consultancy work on public administrative reform (PAR) over two decades, looks at the development of accountability in Vietnam and argues that this “has not entailed a move towards democracy; rather, it reflects a reconfiguration of authoritarianism in response to particular sets of institutional and organizational needs” (42–43). She too does not really situate herself within a wider literature. She argues that the core issue in the enforcement of accountability is that “at least in principle . . . it occurs . . . through rational political-bureaucratic means” (43). I am not sure what she means by this—that enforcement requires some rationality? Moreover, it is not clear what rationality she is referring to. In any case, the key issue for her is actual implementation, not formal accountability. What she seems to argue is that narratives about PAR, mainly generated by aid donors, tend to *assume* such technocratic politics, but this is not really discussed. She develops the issue of implementation, first by looking at the mechanisms that are in place to permit accountability, concluding that “there remains a gap between enforcement and standards” (49), and second by a case

study of the directly elected People's Councils (directly elected in a Leninist sense, guided by the party). She does not discuss the issue of what is meant by "election," apparently believing it is sufficient for readers to be told that this is "an elected body," without explaining what that means apart from saying that they have been "granted considerable powers" (51). Similar things used to be said about the local soviets in the USSR. There should at least be some argument about the meaning of these "powers" and how, guided by documents that are publicly available (I have bought copies in bookshops in Vietnam), the local party is to carry out the party's constitutional task of "leading" state and mass organizations. These documents would show whether and, if so, how the intriguing changes in local political practice that she reports fit into a macro political picture of a ruling Communist Party in motion, and if so how and why.

Thomas Jandl focuses his analysis of political power in Vietnam upon central-provincial relations framed as a relationship between central and provincial party elites. We are not told why. The justification is that this relationship became more important after the 1986 reforms "as provincial revenue increasingly paid the bills of the central treasury" (64), but he offers no source for this. Jandl sees the center-provincial relationship essentially as one between principal and agent, tapping into Western legal and economic arguments that such relationships tend to be troubled because it is, at the end of the day, expensive for a principal to monitor what their agents do "on their behalf." However, no political analysis is given to support the argument that local governments are intended to be the agents of central government, rather than, perhaps, constituent elements of a polity seen holistically. Dismissal of provincial and city party secretaries by the center in Vietnam has been extremely rare, and until recently the former tended to be local people. So the author is assuming what needs to be demonstrated—"the chapter addresses the question how the center maintains control over provincial party leaders" (64). There are no references to the wider literature on Vietnamese communist politics in the opening section of the chapter. The author is wrong in stating that market reforms were "officialized" in December 1986; for example, the January 1981 25-CP decree legalized market participation by all state-owned enterprises in all of their product lines. His claim, moreover, is contradicted by his point that it was rather normal in the late

1970s for the political centre *not* to control localities (72–75). So what this comes down to, perhaps, is not a “principal-agent” problem but the politics of hierarchical relationships within the Vietnamese polity. Huy Đức tells us much about this, as do other studies.

Edmund J. Malesky asserts that “the country’s representative politics have always been an object of curiosity and controversy” (84). No justification is given. So far as I can see from citation metrics, scholars have been far more interested in other topics. It remains to be shown that the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA, Vietnam’s “Supreme Soviet”) has often been at “the centre of the action” in Vietnamese politics (85). Be that as it may, Malesky’s chapter in fact focuses upon an online experiment he co-designed, which was intended to provide material for “general political science audiences [on] . . . the effects of transparency interventions on performance in authoritarian legislatures.” Central to this is “the notion that authoritarian regimes use parliaments to co-opt potential opposition” (85). But the line of attack avoids a discussion of what could be called core political issues in favor of considering whether or not the VNA has become more assertive, and whether its changing behaviour has in fact “been carefully designed and cultivated to achieve regime goals” (87). Malesky assumes much—for example, that the regime was “seeking to secure public support and solicit helpful advice” when it had the VNA circulate a draft version of the constitution (89). Was it? Malesky tends to assume that the VNA is a political tool that brings benefits and costs to those who wield it. This may be true, but it may be not. Evidence is needed.

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet argues that there is an important argument to be had about the extent to which the VCP is tolerant, or heavy-handed, in its treatment of critics and dissenters. He quotes, somewhat selectively, from press reports, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and the US State Department, which collectively “depict it as extremely intolerant of political dissent of any kind” (100). Kerkvliet flags his analysis as one that will examine “to what extent its leaders resort to repression and to study the mix between repression and other actions” (101). His focus is upon those who “publicly criticize and often oppose their country’s system of government” (103). This is of course a rather narrow focus if one is interested in the targets of repression (what, for example, about organized labor?). His dataset

is therefore made up of just over sixty people who have publicly criticized Vietnam's political system, all of whom advocate peaceful change. His analysis of the dataset leads him to conclude that, while some suffer for their acts, not all do, and "a few regime dissidents have not been detained despite years of public criticism." The data, he concludes, "provides no clear explanation for such varying degrees of repression" (128). What he does not conclude, though perhaps he could have, is that greater uncertainty can make repression cheaper by making its targets more careful. Moreover, it is not clear what audience Kerkvliet is addressing when he puts so much energy into arguing that the Vietnamese security apparatus is not as nasty as some say it is.

Carlyle A. Thayer offers a clear and valuable, if limited, analysis of the formal apparatus of authoritarian rule, a far darker picture than Kerkvliet's. Like all the other contributors, he ignores the role of the Soviet Union in providing advice and organizational models (not least on how to "avoid a Beria" and subordinate the security structures to the party), referring only to "China's security apparatus that historically has exerted influence on Vietnam"—the footnote here refers to one of Thayer's own reviews of a book on China. Thayer's principal and powerful conclusion is that "Vietnam's one-party state is a divided entity and its organs or repression are manipulated by leaders engaged in factional infighting" (135). But is that all? The beginning sections of the paper give us a good empirical account of the apparatus of repression and its structural positioning within the party-state, as well as its evolution due to technological advances, such as for mobile phone tapping (for a while, many Vietnamese believed that a mobile phone could be used to eavesdrop). I have a feeling that certain inner-party structures are invisible, though, to his gaze. Thayer rehearses what is publicly known about the role of Department II of the Ministry of Defense in tapping the phones of senior officials, linked to the political demise of Lê Khả Phiêu who failed to gain re-election as general secretary in 2001. Thayer goes on to analyze the targets of repression, looking in turn at pro-democracy activists, the Catholic Church, and ethnic minorities. He divides repression into three components: surveillance, harassment, and formal "legal" attacks, such as arrest and imprisonment. This gives him greater flexibility than Kerkvliet in explaining variations in patterns of repression. The balance between the use

of technology, denunciations and “people’s violence,” and ‘the law’ appears by now to have moved well away from the second, a familiar element of both Vietnam’s communist past and classic Stalinism (and Chinese land reform practices). While this is a useful chapter, I take issue with the conclusion that “public security authorities in Vietnam conduct their business with impunity and without accountability” (157). Following Soviet practice, Vietnam’s security apparatus elements are clearly accountable, but through and to party structures. Again, Huy Đức offers good evidence that occupation of positions in such party structures can be used to factional advantage.

Andrew Wells-Dang offers an empirically rich and theoretically founded paper. He argues convincingly that “a vibrant reality” of civil society exists beside formal dislike or prohibition of it. His main empiric here is registered NGOs, though he could also have considered informal labor organizations, farmers groups (which he does mention) or others. He poses an important question – how “civil society actors [are] able to achieve political influence”—in terms of a choice between two alternative contrasting theorizations: an associational one, and a political-oppositional approach (163). Within an associational framing, he argues that one sees examples of civil society organizations influencing policy, and treats these as case studies. A key duality for him is whether this influence has happened “through or outside the political system,” thus defining the political system as the *formal* political system of the party-state and its associated structures (163). This seems to me to be, theoretically, to throw the baby out with the bath water. Nevertheless, this portion of the essay offers a good history of the formation of Vietnamese NGOs that situates them within a classificatory system that (perhaps oddly for outsiders) *includes* the party’s mass organizations (technically the party itself is a mass organization, a member of the Vietnam Fatherland Front). He convincingly demonstrates the close social networks that allow Vietnamese NGOs to influence the policies of the party-state, while acknowledging the arguments of some analysts that many Vietnamese bodies classified as civil society organizations would “not meet basic international criteria of autonomy, voluntarism and representation” (168).

In his second, political-oppositional framing, Wells-Dang notes that, as such models tend to seek an absolute independence from the state, “then the logical finding is that Vietnam has no organized civil society at all” (168).

Now profitably deploying the theoretical distinction, he notes that that the NGOs that embody “associational” framings of Vietnamese civil society “are conspicuously absent from land disputes and other forms of political activism” (169). He explores this point through three case studies, and concludes that “both organized and informal expressions of civil society are increasingly active in Vietnam . . . The capacity and voice of formal organizations is greater than in the past, yet the preponderance of new energy has recently been on the informal side” (179). He then takes a major step in concluding that “the initiative has . . . shifted towards actors outside of state structures” (180). We can put this beside the evidence from Thayer that repression has greatly *reduced* its use of extra-legal harassment in favour of a mix of surveillance technology and “legal” methods such as arrest and imprisonment. But this assumes that the nature of political power tends to confer ability to actually implement—implementation power, when we know that in Vietnam it often, if not usually, does not. In Jandl’s terms, the “principal agent” problem is that it is not actually clear who is who; the writ of central government is not assumed to run in the localities. We can add to this the conclusion reached by Vasavakul that accountability within the party-state, while changing formally towards far greater prevalence of a theatre of a “rational bureaucratic state,” in fact lacks corresponding changes to secure a far greater degree of policy implementation. No wonder Kerkvliet can see no clear pattern when trying to answer the question of which dissidents get off and which do not.

Such conclusions may be drawn from the papers, and suggest profitable research questions. As London concludes, “Perhaps the most salient development in Vietnam’s politics has been in the realm of associational life.” Wells-Dang reports how, in many accounts, following traditional post-Stalinist Soviet thinking, the party’s mass organizations are labeled as part (oddly for some) of Vietnam’s civil society. Their leaders’ presence in the “structured” committees of the party arguably built checks and balances into the interior of the party-state while offering career paths to politicians. The Women’s Union is well known among aid donors for its good development work. This poses good questions about the possible effects on structural tensions within the party-state that sees part of its *raison d’être* wither and then re-emerge outside of it. But this book does not help us much here.

Years ago, as I was being rather negative about the then (in my opinion) gloomy state of the reconstruction of East Berlin by the reunified German government, a German colleague said to me, “that is as much as they could do.” I feel the same about this book. Solipsism and a failure to engage with relevant literatures are widespread in Vietnamese Studies, and this book reflects it. Despite the editor’s efforts, the contributors went their own way. This is unfortunate. They should have been locked in a room and forced to argue it out. There is a need for a decent and likely very noisy argument about how best to analyze Vietnamese politics. This book is not that.

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DAVID KIERAN

Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory

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David Kieran’s *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory* is an ambitious work. It seeks to move “beyond existing scholarship on the memorialization of the Vietnam experience in the United States and the inevitable comparisons to it that every new crisis engenders.” It seeks to do so by exploring how “this one event has created the conditions according to which Americans have meaningfully remembered other seemingly unrelated events” in ways that “foster their continued embrace of a foreign policy that endorses aggressive militarism to maintain American empire” (6). Its purpose is quoted in full as Kieran applies it to six case studies that are offered as evidence that militarism so haunts the patterns of remembrance of the Vietnam War that it precludes meaningful conversations regarding American interventionism abroad. Kieran believes such conversations are necessary to ensure that the United States uses its military power less “cavalierly” and also enable it to more honestly and effectively confront “the struggles that many veterans face” in the aftermath of its wars (13). These case studies are considered topically rather than sequentially so that the author’s intent can be better understood from the perspective of the reader.