

***Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954.* By Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Hardcover: 490pp.**

This is a useful if curiously old-fashioned survey of the establishment, operation and eventual demise of the colonial empire in what came to be called French Indochina, the political entity made up of modern Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It is presented by its authors as an effort to apply contemporary analysis to events that took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at a time when there are still “nostalgias” that distort understanding of the past. In doing so, they argue, it is important to recognize that the period of colonialism was beset by ambiguities, such as “the appropriation by the colonized of the innovations imposed by colonization” (p. xv). Those who do not follow contemporary French domestic politics will fail to realize that the authors are referring to a debate that has been ongoing in France for more than a decade over, essentially, how to judge France’s past colonial record, not just in Indochina but in all its former colonial possessions. Against widely-held contemporary attitudes that are fundamentally critical of the colonial endeavour, there has been an effort by conservative forces in French political life to argue that despite the wrongs there is much to admire in France’s colonial past.

It is perhaps a case of stating the obvious, given both the nationality of the authors and the subject of the book, to note that this is a very French study with a very heavy emphasis on economic issues. Both Brocheux and Hémery have shown a concern in their previous publications to focus in detail on such issues and it is no surprise, therefore, that Chapter 3, “Colonial Capitalism and Development”, is the longest in the book, occupying no less than 64 pages. In contrast, the chapter entitled “Colonial Society: The Colonizers and Colonized”, occupies only 36 pages and is also quite strongly oriented towards economic matters. Moreover, the authors’ own research interests in developments in Vietnam mean that the attention given to the other components of French Indochina is relatively limited. Given the disparity in size between the populations of Vietnam, on the one hand, and Cambodia and Laos on the other, this might be expected. But it also raises some questions over the extent to which the coverage of developments in the two smaller parts of France’s Asian colonial empire is adequate, and on occasion correct.

In the case of Cambodia, the reference to a French intention to introduce “direct rule” in the 1880s (p. 74) is, at the very least, in need of qualification, both in terms of the policies the Governor of Cochinchina, Thomson, was seeking to impose on King Norodom and in terms of the failure of that effort. As for the later treatment of Cambodian reactions to the French colonial presence, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s (pp. 285–89) there is reason to question the judgement that Cambodian royalty was “conscious of its political dispossession” (p. 289). In the case of Sisowath (reigned 1904–27) and Monivong (reigned 1927–41), at least until the final years of his reign in the late 1930s, it is not at all clear this was the case. The Cambodian king who did, indeed, resent French colonialism was Norodom I: he never ceased to harbour resentment of the French until his death in 1904.

Overall the treatment of developments in Vietnam is more satisfying in tone and detail, leaving the reader a little puzzled by some of the observations in the final chapter, “Land of Lost Opportunities: Indochina Ablaze” (pp. 375–79). Is it really possible to justify the observation that, “the colonization of Indochina was only a particular case of the grand failure, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the quest for an *equal exchange* between the peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa ...”? (p. 377, emphasis added). To cite Jean Juarès’ 1911 condemnation of France for its pursuit of economic return from its colonies (pp. 375–76) scarcely addresses the indisputable fact that, in all issues that mattered, France in Indochina placed the interests of the colonizers above those of the colonized. The pursuit of what the French called their *mission civilisatrice* does not, in the present reviewer’s opinion, invalidate this judgement. The author’s assertion that “a number of Vietnamese ended up, at least for several decades, also thinking of themselves as ‘Indochinese’” (p. 378), is a comment that would only seem to have applied to the very small group of southern Vietnamese (Cochinchinese) who were briefly prominent in the 1920s and linked to the Constitutionalist Party.

At times the translation of the French original into English is less than felicitous, particularly in relation to rather obscure terms and usages. For instance, the choice of the word “commandership” to describe the territory of Cambodia occupied by the Vietnamese in the 1830s and part of the 1840s (p. 7) is odd, as the usual English term is “commandery” for territory; “commandership” more usually applies to an individual in command. The rendering of the French *problématique* — the procedure or art of posing a

problem — as “problematic” is unsatisfactory, as for instance on p. 34 (“The New Economic Problematic”) and elsewhere, such as in the following sentence which forms part of the discussion of the rise of nationalism: “None of the currents of the national movement in the twentieth century would be in the position to escape this alternative problematic, with which Confucian culture was not capable of dealing.” (p. 297). The bibliography is useful but lacks some of the more recent English language publications which deserve to be cited, such as Gregor Muller’s *Colonial Cambodia’s ‘Bad Frenchmen’: The Rise of French rule and the life of Thomas Caraman, 1840–87* (2006), and Jacob Ramsay’s *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in early Nineteenth Century Vietnam* (2008). The authors cite Penny Edwards’ Ph.D. thesis, but not her book, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (2007).

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