

## BOOK REVIEW

*Vietnamese Communism in Comparative Perspective*. Edited by William S. Turley. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980. Pp. xiii, 271.

John King Fairbank used to complain during the Vietnam War that, unlike the previous conflicts in China and Japan, the United States plunged into the war in Vietnam knowing virtually nothing about the cultural and historical background of that country. This information gap is being progressively narrowed; a generation of specialists on Vietnam has emerged, who know the language, culture and history of the country — though fortunately this body of knowledge is no longer needed to make war efforts more effective.

The volume under review is written mostly by such specialists. Except for two French authors, the rest are American scholars in their late thirties or early forties whose interest in Vietnam evolved during the recently concluded war. The background of some of the authors is worthy of note. Two had worked for the U.S. Government in Vietnam; two had been active in the anti-war movement, and one of the French writers had worked in the jungle with the Viet Minh and later with the Hanoi Government. Collectively, they bring to this book a wealth of personal experience, information, insights and erudition in matters communist and Vietnamese. They address themselves to a significant question: what is unique and what is comparable in the Vietnamese communist experience.

The book itself is an outgrowth of a conference on “Vietnamese Marxism in Comparative Perspective” organized in October 1978 by the Vietnamese Studies Group, a “country committee” of the Southeast Asia Council of the U.S. Association for Asian Studies. The volume covers a wide range of issues: historiography, revolutionary doctrine, “the present question”, “classism”, religious sectarianism, distinctiveness in Vietnamese revolutionary experience, political participation, institutional structure, and foreign policy. Composed of nine essays (and an Introduction that unfortunately fails to introduce), this collection is an important contribution to the understanding of Vietnamese Communism.

As is usually the case with collections, the essays are uneven in quality. John K. Whitmore’s learned historiographical essay, the first chapter of the book, will certainly benefit those who wish to place the evolution of Vietnamese Communism in its international context. It also offers an excellent survey of published materials on Vietnamese Communism. Edwin Moise and Jayne Werner each contributes a knowledgeable piece on a particular aspect of recent Vietnamese history — the former on “classism” as seen in the land-reform campaign of the 1953–56 period, and the latter on the relationship

between the Indochinese Communist Party and the politico-religious sects (Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) in South Vietnam. Neither paper quite succeeds in its effort at theorizing, and one would be hard put to find a “comparative perspective” in either essay.

William J. Duiker’s chapter on “Vietnamese revolutionary doctrine” is the least satisfactory part of the book. This largely descriptive paper is a summary of well-known events up to 1975, but contains little that can be considered doctrinal. The author discusses none of the revolutionary doctrines — on political violence, organization, worker-peasant alliance, importance of ideology, national united front, and so forth — and ignores altogether the fundamental works of a theoretical nature by Vietnamese Communist leaders, such as Le Duan’s *The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks*; Truong Chinh’s *On the Vietnamese Revolution*; Vo Nguyen Giap’s *People’s War, People’s Army*, to name just a few. William S. Turley’s chapter on political participation in Vietnam is no more satisfactory. Modelling his discussion on James Townsend’s work on China, the author shows a poor understanding of Vietnamese political culture (particularly Vietnam’s colonial experience). Strangely, the paper contains no discussion of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s National United Front Policy, and especially the role of communist-sponsored mass organizations in the political process — the very instruments of enforced political participation in Vietnam today.

Whatever its weaknesses, the book is, however, valuable especially for its four outstanding essays by George Boudarel, Pierre Brocheux, David Elliott, and Gareth Porter. Boudarel’s insightful contribution, “Influences and Idiosyncracies in the Line and Practice of the Vietnamese Communist Party”, though somewhat disorganized, provides probably the most incisive observations available on some of the doctrinal and practical aspects of Vietnamese Communism. The discussion on the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese approaches — the emphasis on organization and secrecy, the evolution of a Party line in conditions of perpetual warfare, the *dac cong* and *biet dong*, and the “only case where suppression of internal debate has not been followed by spectacular purges” — and on the internal debate within the Vietnamese Communist Party on various international and ideological issues forms the central part of this perceptive chapter. Pierre Brocheux, too, breaks new ground with his discussion on the Indochinese Communist Party’s position on “the peasant question” and especially the dialectic of “the national question” versus “the social question” in the Vietnamese revolution. Perhaps I may be accused of nit-picking, but it should be pointed out that the Ho Chi Minh essay which forms the basis for a large part of the discussion here is entitled, “The Party’s Military Work among the Peasants: Revolutionary Guerrilla Methods”, and not “Armed Insurrection” (the title of the book edited by A. Neuberg, of which this essay forms a part); this essay was also written, not in 1929, but late in 1927, in the immediate aftermath of the communist debacle in China, and was originally published in German in 1928.

David Elliott’s paper contains an astute observation of the problems of

institution-building. These are not peculiar to Vietnam; they are faced by all other post-colonial societies: how to develop an appropriate institutional framework that would permit not just the maintenance of public order and social harmony, but also help make possible economic progress; how to manage a post-revolutionary society, in which local initiatives and improvisations must yield to the necessity of a centrally planned development; how much central control is desirable and how much local management should be encouraged; and most importantly, how a government of men can be transformed into a government of law so that respect for "socialist legality" can be made a norm in social development. The author deals with these issues with expertise and insight. The only comparable discussion on these Vietnamese issues is also written by Elliott, in his earlier essay, "Institutional Development in a Time of Crisis", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1979*.

The final chapter of the book is a penetrating analysis by Gareth Porter of the intricate relationship between Vietnam and the more senior members in the socialist camp, the Soviet Union and China. Rich in historical perspective, the chapter permits an understanding of the problems faced by Vietnam's foreign policy-makers: how to maintain independence of action while adhering to a common ideological line, often dictated by these more powerful partners, and perhaps more importantly, how to pursue one's own national interests in a time of crisis without alienating either of these powers both of which were Vietnam's benefactors and were engaged in an acrimonious conflict among themselves. As we all know, the balancing act deftly executed by the Vietnamese for over a decade came to an end in 1978, with Vietnam siding firmly with the Soviet Union. The subsequent conflict between Vietnam and China is well known. Porter's essay provides an in-depth analysis of the causes of the fragmentation of the communist world and how Vietnam became both author and victim of this process.

All in all, this book is highly recommended for those who are seriously interested in contemporary Vietnam, although it is worth mentioning that for its rather hefty price one could expect a book properly typeset, not a "replica edition", with the authors supplying a camera-ready typewritten manuscript and the publishers offering an offset version between covers.

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