

BOOK REVIEWS

***Vietnam. Anatomy of Peace.* By Gabriel Kolko.** London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 190 pp.

Gabriel Kolko made an important contribution to the study of the Vietnam War in an earlier book on the subject. With this new book, Kolko makes an equally important contribution to the study of Vietnamese society in the post-1975 period. Given Kolko's intimate knowledge about Vietnam, which stems from a long period of observing and researching developments in the country, his study and the analysis and observations therein have to be read and assessed carefully. Significantly, he analyses the economic, political and social impact of the renovation process implemented since 1986. He carries out his analysis from a critical perspective, highlighting the contradiction between the political goals and aims of the current Vietnamese leadership and the impact of the ongoing renovation process on Vietnamese society. This has been noted by other observers but not explored to the same extent as in Kolko's study. Nor have other observers exposed the contradictions to the same extent as does Kolko.

It is refreshing to read a book on Vietnam which does not view the struggle through the rubric of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), that is, as one taking place between "conservative" and "liberal" elements. The customary dichotomy implies that the latter group is more progressive and implicitly "better" compared to the former. Kolko presents an alternative analysis of the two groupings within the CPV. According to him, one group would like to see a slower pace of reform, salvaging as much as possible of the gains achieved under the socialist

system; whereas the other group has opted to adhere to the perspectives of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, that is, economic liberalization and structural adjustment. From Kolko's perspective, the policies implemented by the second group are leading to the dismantling of the achievements made under the socialist system, and their policies are creating a class-driven society with huge differences between various social strata.

Undoubtedly, many readers would question some of the views expressed by the author and some aspects of his approach, but it is undeniable that much of the negative impact on Vietnamese society is caused by the implementation of the policies of economic liberalization and structural adjustment — that is, what is often referred to as “economic renovation”. Few would disagree with Kolko's observations, in particular, the contradiction between the professed policies of the leadership and the impact of the implemented policies. Many of the problems that Kolko highlights are serious and need to be addressed.

This overall positive impression does not imply that all the arguments in the book are to be accepted at face value. One area which is problematic is the way in which the role and activities of the ethnic Chinese is addressed. Some of the author's observations about the economic activities of the ethnic Chinese seem to display his negative view of such activities rather than observations based solely on empirical evidence (p. 45 and pp. 51–52).

Kolko's approach to economic liberalization and the impact of the process of “renovation” as well as the discussion related to intra-party developments in the CPV is, as noted above, interesting and innovative but it has to be read, understood and assessed within the context of the larger scholarship on economic, political and societal developments in Vietnam. It is only against this broader picture that one can fully understand the contribution that Kolko's book makes to the overall understanding of the developments that are taking place, their impact on Vietnamese society and the challenges ahead for the country.

The fact that Kolko argues strongly in favour of his convictions and displays a strong commitment to his personal values and ideals is refreshing since most analyses which are “supposedly” objective are, in fact, supportive of values opposed to those professed by Kolko.

The author's openness about his ideological convictions and his commitment to his ideals relating to the construction of a just and egalitarian society in Vietnam might put off certain readers. However, it should be noted that his study does provide an alternative to conventional or mainstream studies on Vietnam, and it raises important issues.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that this book is an important contribution to the understanding of Vietnamese society since 1975, with an emphasis on the current process of economic renovation in the country. The book is recommended reading for anyone interested in current developments in Vietnam as well as those interested in the broader implications of economic and political change in socialist countries.

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Southeast Asia: The Human Landscape of Modernization and Development. By Jonathan Rigg. London: Routledge, 1997. 326 pp.

This book is a very welcome addition to the literature on modernization and development, written from the perspective of a human geographer, but it contains exactly the sort of inter-disciplinary insights that all good social scientists aspire to. It is also a very timely book, appearing before the so-called "meltdown" of the miracle economies in Southeast Asia and, of course, the wider implications of that for the region as a whole. These economies were previously held up as models of development, examples which the emerging economies in South America and Africa could follow and assume their place among the prosperous nations. The foremost proponent of this thesis was the World Bank which, in its now famous report, the "East Asian Miracle" (published in 1993), argued that the fantastic growth in this region was due mainly to the superior accumulation of human and physical capital, combined with the ability to use these more productively than other developing countries. In July 1997, this miracle first appeared to falter and then later was on the verge of collapse as currencies in the region became subject to widespread depreciation on world markets for a variety of reasons.

Jonathan Rigg, however, is not concerned with the macroeconomic policies of international organizations, or the large-scale context of where they fit into world markets. Rather, he is concerned with the fundamental relationships within these societies which shape development and impact upon the local people in a highly individual way. There are four parts to the text. First, he deals with the conceptual