

Critical Views of Modernity from Vietnam

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Is modernity a social scientific category or a self-ascribed identity? The repeated use of this term to justify major political and social transformations should alert us to its ideological and subjective dimensions and make us ask whether the application of this label masks inequalities in the power to allocate or categorize time.

Alternative Modernities

Vietnam is a country that has encountered "modernity" in many guises. In the 1990s, journalists and social scientists debated the impacts that Vietnam's normalization of relations with the US might have on this "traditional" society. But similar debates that portrayed the country as passing across a threshold into modernity had occurred many times before. Past nominees for this epochal encounter include the "liberation" of Saigon in 1975, the creation of South Vietnam in 1955, the declaration of independence in 1945, the emergence of the communist movement in the 1920s and the French colonial project. The French colonists saw themselves in confrontation with a "traditional" society, as bringers of "progress" and "civilization." By labeling the Vietnamese as "pre-modern," they arbitrarily allocated positions along a universal timeline to justify naked inequalities in power. Some theorists still speak of the French era as the "modern" era. However, the search for the roots of Vietnamese modernity has not ended there. Some scholars have portrayed the commercial and trade relations of 17th- and 18th-century Southeast Asia in such terms. They seek to overturn colonial-era images of these societies as static, place-bound or culturally conservative.



According to this billboard, the task of building a modern city is a struggle that brings into play the revolutionary heroism of former resistance. The billboard is located in the seaside resort of Vung Tau.

On each of these occasions, a social scientific narrative of the transition to modernity has been reactivated. Countries such as Vietnam are forever entering the "modern" world. Oddly, this overuse has not led to rejection of the concept, which seems impervious to critical scrutiny despite the epistemic jolts meted out to the peoples or places repeatedly categorized in this way. To the contrary, the concept has witnessed an upsurge in popularity. It is now *de rigueur* for social scientists to link the societies they study to an achieved modernity; that is, a global condition divergently realized but temporally unifying all points on the planet.

COMMENTARY

To present matters in this way is to transcend the Spencerian, "evolutionary" ranking through which the former colonial powers separated themselves from the peoples they colonized. The new notion of modernity confers identity by inclusion within this formerly exclusionary time frame and by pointing to the synchronic engagement of all societies in global interactions. Furthermore, modernity has been pluralized, so there is now a Trinidadian modernity, an East Asian modernity, various European modernities and many others. The anthropology of alternative modernities suggests a world in which invidious time distinctions do not hold sway. However, the question

that needs to be posed is: How universal is the view of the present as modern? Another problem with the concept of diverse modernities is that, like all efforts to categorize time, it is grounded in huge power disparities.

The Present in Fragments

Vietnam has been a home to many people and projects that identify themselves with the modern. Yet its recent history casts doubt on the claim that modernity is a global reality. The sequence of debates within Vietnam that began with the "liberation" of southern Vietnam in 1975 forms a discourse on modernity that is very unlike the analyses of social scientists. The "liberators" of southern Vietnam regarded the cultural forms that they encountered there—pop music, individualism, urban lifestyles, commodity forms and markets—not as expressions of "modernity," but as forms of "poison," "barbarism" and "enslavement," all antithetical to the very idea of the modern. In a single conceptual move, the capitalist world was abolished as an ideal that one should move toward. Instead, the people of southern Vietnam were urged to emulate the socialist path taken by the northern half of the country.

This view excluded many people from the nation's present and, consequently, from its projected future. The symbolic and material violence of its imposition helped impel the Boat People exodus of the late 1970s and early 1980s. But many

citizens questioned the unifying regime's self-ascription as modern. Beginning in the 1980s, a debate took place among dissidents and Vietnamese social scientists, many of whom rejected the equation of Hanoi-style communism with modernity. In the process, quite a number resurrected the "South Vietnam" experiment (1955-75) as more consistent with that ideal.

Another perspective emerged in tandem with the liberal reforms of the mid-1980s that many claimed were initiated in the southern parts of the country. Some social scientists in southern Vietnam came to conceive of commodity relations, ceaseless transformation and cultural ferment not as recent imports, but as indigenous and ancient characteristics of the southern Vietnamese plain. This localized and pushed back by many thousands of years the origins of contemporary social relations, which were legitimized in terms of an inherent local condition of hybridity, restless dynamism and constant flux.

Party stalwarts have held their ground, insisting that the pinnacle of human progress is indeed Party-led socialism; that engagement with the capitalist world contains risks to stability, national integrity and the process of modernization; and that the south of the country contains many threats to these goals. Within southern Vietnam, there are also many who do not endorse the path taken in the post-war years. Ho Chi Minh City (the former Saigon), residents of which often embrace the new, the market or the ever-changing identity of the cosmopolitan, also is home to many cultural conservatives. They seek to defend their city's "traditional" essence against the processes that they view as threatening and external.

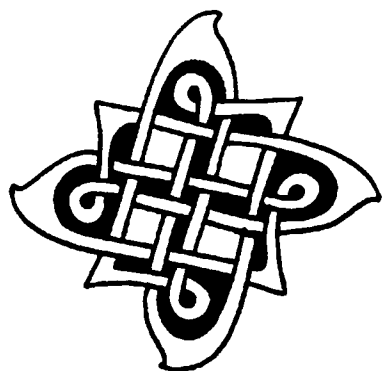
During the Second Indochinese War, the South Vietnamese countryside, where the fighting raged fiercely, was considered by the Maoist-influenced Communist leadership as a proving ground for a militaristic view of agency. Alternately, it was considered a great success story for the modernization paradigm. In the hectic urban world of the 1990s, the countryside was romantically associated with unchanged tradition. But underlying the frag-

mented and contested nature of people's conceptualization of their temporal identity are the views of some Mekong delta villagers. They complain that their rural home's own, alternative "orchard civilization" has been marginalized by state or urban perspectives.

A Language Game

Indeed, because people endorse various notions of modernity or cognate categories in describing their identities—or sometimes reject modernity entirely—we should see modernity more as part of a language game or a struggle with hegemonic discourses, rather than an objective reality. Because the sites of enunciation are so disparate, the temporal unity that is proposed when people speak of "the modern" is not one that should be taken for granted. If ever there were a need for anthropologists—committed as they are to equality and sensitivity to multiple viewpoints—to collect fresh information from the field, its time is now, for the modernity paradigm in its current objectivist form threatens to suppress local knowledges. This tendency can only be combated by learning again to listen to what differently placed people really do say. ■

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