Interview

Reflections on Vietnam

Sunday 25 March 2012, by BROCHEUX Pierre (Date first published: 1 January 2012).

Can you tell us something about your background?

Pierre Brocheux – I was born in Vietnam. My mother was Vietnamese, but her father was already a French citizen. I found his 'naturalization' certificate, as they called it in those days, number 18, dated 1906—which is to say, he was the eighteenth Vietnamese to acquire French citizenship, although he never went to France. He worked for a French company in Vietnam, keeping the books. In spite of what many people think, to acquire French nationality it was not necessary to be a collaborator. If one could speak and write the language correctly, live in the French style, and educate one's children in French—those were the conditions. My grandfather satisfied these requirements. He drank Bordeaux, but would eat Vietnamese food.

You must remember that Vietnam was divided into three parts: Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina. My mother's family were from Cochinchina—the first part of Vietnam to be conquered by the French. It was a very open society, the most commercial region. It was already a frontier zone for the Vietnamese: they had only arrived there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before them, there were the Cambodians; also many Chinese living in the Mekong Delta, who had been driven out by the Manchu dynasty.

The Vietnamese bourgeoisie was very open to influences from French or Chinese culture. My mother learned to read in French as well as in her mother tongue. She worked from a young age, again for a French import–export firm, the Union Commerciale Indochinoise et Africaine. She was in the cosmetics department, and my father worked in the food department; that is where they met. Her parents had promised her to a rich landowner, but she did not want an arranged marriage. She told them she had met this Frenchman, the son of a merchant from Normandy. There was a great dispute, because her parents did not know his family—they said: 'We cannot trust him; perhaps he is a crook, an escaped convict!' But my mother was determined, and they married in 1929. I was born two years later, their only child.

How had the French presence in Vietnam been established?

The conquest took place in stages between 1858 and 1897. Various interest groups pressed for expansion into Indochina. The earliest promptings came from the missionary Church. For the Catholic Church, colonialism was vital, since it provided a response to the grave difficulties that accompanied its work in Europe, a path to a renewed universality, compensating for the slow decline of Christian culture in France that had been going on since before the Revolution. Missionaries played an irreplaceable role as informants and advisors. Thanks to their daily contact with the native populations, they were the only Europeans who could provide first-hand information about these societies. French colonization in the Far East was also tied to the rise of the Navy, without which the global expansion of French commerce and the French state would have been unthinkable. The renewal of French maritime power would require a global network of bases, and the Indochinese ports were remarkably well situated between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.

We should not view the creation of the protectorate as the work of finance capital in the Hobsonian or Leninist sense of the term, of large monopolist groups looking to divide the peninsula between themselves. In France, these groups hardly existed in the 1880s, when the colonization of Indochina reached its climax—although they would be very active in Russia and Turkey after 1900. Nonetheless, economic factors were central. French capitalism suffered a long depression in the late nineteenth century, which reached its low point in the 1880s. Between 1875 and 1905, the country's gnp increased by only 10 per cent, compared to 113 per cent for Germany and 60 per cent for the United Kingdom. The export of capital became more critical than ever as a way of raising and regulating the rate of profit. Colonies were viewed as essential sites for the investment of excess capital.

Compounding this crisis was the weakening of French foreign trade. French leaders saw the creation of captive consumer markets as an effective response; over time, the whole of French industry and agriculture formed strong ties with the colonies. There was also a political aspect: imperialism was seen as the indispensable stabilizer of a nation torn apart by five revolutions between 1830 and 1870. 'A nation that does not colonize', Ernest Renan had warned, 'is bound irrevocably to socialism, to the war between rich and poor.' Jules Ferry defined social peace in the age of industry as 'a question of outlets'

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Was there any substantial resistance to French colonization? What forms did it assume?

In the final stage of conquest, which began in 1885, France had to grapple with a genuine national insurrection, the Cần Vương movement. Overall, confrontation remained limited to local guerrilla warfare, but the leaders of the Cần Vương repeatedly attempted to move beyond this stage and rise above the provincial setting. A part of the village elite directed the insurgency and gave it its traditional and patriotic character.

The troops of the movement were mostly peasants: several of its chiefs came from among the notables or the wealthy peasantry; others came from marginal elements of rural society. But it was the literati who supplied the insurrection with the majority of its leaders. In ancient Vietnam, the literati were the true managers of rural society: their social functions and influence were immense. Yet in spite of its popular following, the Cần Vương was not a modern national movement armed with a project of social transformation and modernization. The primary ideal of the resistance mandarins was defence of the Confucian order against the Western barbarians.

However, the final rallying of the court to the French protectorate, with the aim of preserving the monarchy and Vietnam's Confucian hierarchy, deprived the resistance of any credible political project. It also weakened and probably shattered the nation's royal affiliation. In the eyes of the literate elite, the Confucian monarchy was permanently discredited, and a breach opened between it and popular patriotism that would never close. Not only did the dynasty lose its 'celestial mandate', but its maintenance on the throne by foreigners made any continuation of this mandate impossible. Patriotism had to look for other paths.

How did modern nationalism develop in Vietnam?

It must be recognized that the social effects of French imperialism were contradictory: they were both revolutionary and conservative. Colonization destabilized the peasantry and generated urban growth and pockets of industrial development, creating situations that favoured the implantation of modern political movements. At the same time, the colonial regime checked their growth by sustaining the pre-modern powers. It forced the traditionalist components of Vietnamese nationalism into an impasse and condemned its 'reformist' currents to failure. This set the stage for future radical movements. We must avoid determinism, however: nothing was played out in advance. The

radical movements were not the only ones that spread modern national ideas. Recent historiography has shown the importance of peaceful forms of nationalism, gradual and reformist trends, and their ambivalent collaborations of varying sincerity with the colonial power.

Having suffered the pain of national humiliation, the Vietnamese elite rapidly developed a modern political culture. Certain words became charged with new significance: for example, the word dân, which had denoted 'child of the sovereign', acquired the meaning of 'citizen'. Modern nationalist vocabulary—'patriotism' (*ái quô´c*), 'nation' (*quô´c dân*), 'revolution' (*cách ma· ng*)—penetrated the language. The educated elite began to transfer its allegiance from the legitimacy of the king to that of the nation. The French gradually established *Quô´c ngu˜'*—the transcription of Vietnamese into Latin characters developed by French and Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century—as the national writing system of Vietnam. The colonial authorities saw *Quô´c ngu˜'* as an intermediary language that would allow the Vietnamese to familiarize themselves with French, but it became a tool of politics and modern Vietnamese literature.

Two schools of thought emerged within Vietnamese nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940) envisioned an alliance between the nationalist movements of the Far East and searched for external support in the struggle against France. His ambition was to construct a revolutionary organization abroad, composed of young people who would receive political and military training in Japan. This movement would spread among the educated elite of Vietnam, infiltrate units of fighters, gather together what remained of the Cần Vương, and prepare an uprising aimed at liberation. Phan Bội Châu exiled himself to Japan in 1905, where he established relations with Sun Yat-sen and with the Chinese anarchists.

At the same time, however, a 'reformist' approach also developed that was opposed to his project. Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926) sought to encourage progress and democracy within the colonized society, spreading knowledge through the formation of modern schools and putting pressure on the colonial power, with the help of the press, to engage the population in political affairs. It was also necessary, in his view, to forge an external alliance—inverse to that advocated by Phan Bội Châu—with the liberal elements among the colonizers, particularly with democratic forces in France. In other words, it was necessary to gamble on the logic of modernization in the colonial process, and on its potential for decolonization.

Both Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh addressed themselves to the elite; they were convinced that the true interests of the literati and rural notables coincided with those of the people. The conflict between these strategies was not finally resolved until the 1930s. For a long time, the approach of modernizing, democratic nationalism seemed to be the most credible one. Nguyễn Tất Thanh—the future Ho Chi Minh—held views close to those of Phan Châu Trinh when he left for Marseilles in 1911. Colonial reform reached its high point after the First World War. Over ninety thousand Vietnamese had been recruited to serve the French war effort, fifty thousand soldiers and forty thousand workers.

The collaboration of the mandarins and the new Vietnamese bourgeoisie was indispensable. At the beginning of the 1920s, Indochina was the only French colony in which the colonized elite had a political voice— admittedly one impeded by many limitations on its power. Yet reformist nationalism in Indochina was in the end identified with conservative forces. This was due to the historical inadequacy of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie and the failure of the French government to respect the promises of reform it had made immediately after the war. Its ambition was simply to transform the new Vietnamese elite into clients of the colonial administration. Constitutionalism did not try to mobilize the masses; it limited itself to promoting the interests of the rich propertied classes in the south. The possibilities for an evolutionary decolonization receded from the 1920s on, as Indochina witnessed the radicalization of the younger generation of intellectuals and the appearance of

modern social movements.

Was this the point at which the Communist Party was formed?

Communism had emerged from the Group of Annamese Patriots, founded in 1911 by Phan Châu Trinh. Ho Chi Minh detached himself from this group while he was in France, he joined the sfio and then became one of the first colonial militants of the French Communist Party. Ho went to Moscow in 1923 to make contact with the Soviets and prepare for his return to Vietnam. In France, communism took hold among Vietnamese workers, sailors, students and soldiers, winning several hundred recruits and sympathizers. A second pole of Vietnamese communism developed at the same time in Canton, in the wake of the Chinese revolution. Canton was in Guangdong province, which had been a sanctuary for Vietnamese exiles since the beginning of the century. The Kuomintang was using the city as a base to prepare its army for the northern offensive, with the help of Soviet advisors. Ho arrived there towards the end of 1924 as a Comintern representative and formed the Thanh Niên—the Association of Revolutionary Vietnamese Youth—recruiting its members from a wave of Vietnamese migration into Guangdong. This became the first revolutionary group to work throughout Indochina. Communism allowed the intelligentsia to break out of its social isolation and take charge of the new social movements.

Before unification in a single party, there were three communist groupuscules, none of them recognized by the Comintern. They were small, with a few thousand members, but they had a presence everywhere, in all sections of the population. They could be found among the peasantry, among the factory workers, they were in the schools, with the students. Ho managed to unite the representatives of all three groups at a conference in Hong Kong in February 1930. The same month, an insurrection began against French rule.

Was this uprising led by the Communists?

There were also the Vietnamese nationalists, the equivalent of the Chinese Kuomintang. They called themselves the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDD), the National Democratic Party of Vietnam, and were inspired by Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People. The nationalists began an insurrection in February 1930, and soon after, a garrison of colonial troops at Yên Bái on the Chinese frontier rose with them. The soldiers’ rebellion was put down within a few hours; the VNQDD insurrection was crushed altogether in fifteen days. All the leaders of the Vietnamese Kuomintang were guillotined.

Then, unexpectedly, a second phase of insurrection began, led by the Communist Party. The Communists mobilized tens of thousands of people from the countryside in the northern provinces, the Mekong Delta and the centre. The party leadership was surprised by the extent of the movement: there were a hundred strikes and more than four hundred peasant demonstrations in 1930. It culminated in what the Vietnamese call the ‘Soviets of Nghệ Tı˜nh’. The local village authorities were dismissed or assassinated; taxes on alcohol, salt and opium were abolished. The Communists intended to confiscate lands from property owners and divide them up, but apparently this was never put into practice.

Starting in September 1930, these movements faced a ruthless counteroffensive by the French. They called in the colonial infantry, the Foreign Legion, and the air force, who machine-gunned hundreds of demonstrators. They bombed one village from the air. This is still remembered in Vietnam. The party had organized the peasant wave more than it had directed it; it was incapable of managing the retreat of the popular movements. By the end of 1931, the uprising had been defeated.

The nationalists took refuge in China, but they were unable to regain a foothold in Vietnam after

February 1930. Many young militants of the VNQDD joined the Communist Party, which they saw as the only force now capable of leading the struggle. But the future looked bleak for the Communists, too: the French secret police captured the entire Central Committee in April 1931, and soon after that Ho Chi Minh was arrested by the British in Hong Kong. All of the party leaders were now imprisoned or dead.

How did the Communists recover? Was it the Japanese occupation that allowed them to regain the initiative?

We must be precise: when speaking of the 'Japanese occupation', people often think it was like the German occupation of France, but the Japanese did not have the same presence. There was a pact between Vichy and Tokyo. Indochina was in the Japanese sphere of influence; its army could use the ports and bases. There was mutual suspicion, sometimes conflict, but the French administration remained in place until March 1945.

Before the war began, there had been an amnesty for political prisoners when the Popular Front came to power in France. The press had more freedom, there were strikes everywhere; it was extraordinary. The strike wave was the biggest in the history of Vietnam. A decree passed in December 1936 applied a small part of the French social reforms to Indochina, though workers' organizations were still prohibited. Nonetheless, there were several hundred illegal unions in Indochina. The Communists had formed a legal front around the newspaper La Lutte, working with a group of Trotskyist intellectuals in the south. The Lutteurs established six hundred action committees in Cochinchina; there was fierce agitation there in the second half of 1936. The new governor-general was met in Saigon and Hanoi by crowds of people with raised fists.

Yet the hopes of reform were dashed by the summer of 1937. For the leaders of the sfio, under pressure from the Radicals, it was no time for political change in the colonies. The French communists downplayed the issue, although they were anti-colonial in principle. A project to legalize the unions was shelved and they remained clandestine. Repression resumed. The Popular Front proved to be the final lost chance of peaceful decolonization. A decree passed in September 1939 outlawed all the communist organizations, and the penal colonies filled up again, in Indochina as well as in France. Soon after that, France surrendered in Europe, and the collaboration between Vichy and Tokyo created a new political context for Indochina. The Communist Party believed that the moment had come to launch an insurrection, and started planning for armed struggle.

What role did Ho Chi Minh play in that decision?

By now, Ho was in China. He had been quietly released by the British after his arrest—they announced that he was dead in 1932, which was widely reported in the press—and spent several years in Moscow. The Soviets distrusted Ho; they suspected him of having made a deal with the British secret service. At one point he was brought before a disciplinary board of the Comintern. Eventually he was allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1938. Ho travelled across China with the help of the Chinese Communists. Võ Nguyên Giáp and Phạm Va˘n Đồng joined him on his journey, and together they crossed the border into northern Vietnam at the beginning of 1941.

Ho recommended that the party act with extreme caution, given the scale of the repression it had endured since 1931. The Communists had already launched what turned out to be a premature uprising in Cochinchina. The revolt was crushed with great brutality: dozens of insurgents were gunned down in the streets, hundreds were imprisoned. The party's central committee were in jail when the rebellion began, yet they were executed all the same, including the general secretary. A new executive met in Cốc Bó and decided to establish the League for the Independence of Vietnam, which became known as the Việt Minh; this was in May 1941. It brought together the dynamism of

nationalism and that of international communism. The Việt Minh gradually spread their influence and increased their numbers.

Then the situation in Indochina changed dramatically in March 1945. Developments in the war forced Japan to end its co-habitation with France. The Japanese feared that the French would attack them from the rear in Indochina, so they disarmed the colonial army and imprisoned its soldiers. The government was put in local hands; most French nationals were held in the cities.

Including your father?

No, he was not arrested, because he was the director of an import-export house that was important to the Japanese. But for example, a friend of my father, a Breton who owned a garage, was obliged to work for the Japanese when they took power, repairing army trucks. He was denounced by his Vietnamese deputy, who said he was a saboteur. He was transferred to Saigon, held in a cage, beaten, then released after three months. He came to live with us then.

By the spring of 1945 Indochina was in turmoil, especially the three nations of Vietnam: almost ninety years of French domination had come to an end in the space of twenty-four hours. The economy was on the brink of collapse. Famine struck in the northern provinces, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths, perhaps over a million in total. The Việt Minh blamed the French and the Japanese for the catastrophe, because they had requisitioned rice and forced the farmers to grow jute and oil seeds instead of food crops. The guerrillas came out of hiding and mobilized the people to seize the rice that had been stored in case of food shortages. Ho could see that the Japanese surrender was near, and the Việt Minh prepared for a general uprising. On September 2, Ho read the Vietnamese declaration of independence in front of a huge crowd in Hanoi.

I witnessed this revolution—because there was a revolution in Saigon too, not only in Hanoi. The Communists took over the police headquarters, and here too there was a massive demonstration on September 2. Then Allied troops arrived, Indians with British officers; they occupied the city's key buildings and confronted the Việt Minh. General Douglas Gracey began to rearm the French prisoners—that is to say, the French soldiers imprisoned by the Japanese. This was the same Gracey who later became the commander-in-chief of Pakistan's army. He issued an ultimatum, ordering the popular committee to leave the Hôtel de Ville.

I saw it myself. I was in front of the city hall, and I saw General Gracey pull up in his staff car and climb the steps very quickly with his baton. There were discussions inside, Gracey left, and the Việt Minh leadership evacuated the city.

Ho Chi Minh was not a man of war à outrance, I believe. He tried to avoid conflict with the French altogether. After the Japanese surrender, Ho was willing to accept a French Union, on condition that membership was voluntary and all members were on an equal footing. He went to Paris and negotiated with the government of Georges Bidault. When it became clear that the French would not compromise, he told General Salan: 'If we have to fight, we will fight . . . you will kill ten of us and we will kill one of you, but you will be the ones who grow tired.' Then came the battle of Haiphong, which began the war with France.

The Communist Party gave the resistance fighters organization, which had been sorely lacking in the generations before. Eighty thousand fighters were mobilized by the Việt Minh; the French army had 100,000 men. Everyone remembers the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ, of course, but the real turning point came earlier, at the battles for Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn. After those victories, the Vietnamese army was transformed —it could face the French in conventional battles. The triumph of the Chinese Communists over the Kuomintang was also crucial; it provided the Vietnamese

resistance with military aid and a sanctuary.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was recognized by Mao's government and then by the USSR. Talks to end the war began the day after the French surrender at Điện Biên Phủ.

When I was fifteen, in June 1946, my parents sent me away to France: they were worried I was not getting a proper education. I went by myself, to live with my aunt; my parents remained in Vietnam. After completing my studies in the lycée, I enrolled at the Sorbonne. It was only when I came to France that I reflected on what had happened, and began to say 'the Vietnamese are right, they want independence, I agree with them'. What intellectual currents influenced you when you moved to Paris? Not existentialism, although we read Sartre for our philosophy class. Emmanuel Mounier and his Personalist philosophy had a greater impact on me. But above all I read Marx, Lenin. That was how I came to join the French Communist Party in 1952. It was my Indochinese experience, my colonial experience that made me a Marxist. I believed that Marxism gave us many tools with which to understand imperialism. I committed myself to the PCF essentially on the basis of anti-colonialism. This was more important than the French social question, you might say— although at that time there were many hard struggles, a general strike in 1947, big strikes in the mines. My aunt owned a shop in a working-class neighbourhood; I saw many workers and their families. There was no sign of the trente glorieuses then. When I came to France they still had rationing tickets, even for bread, butter and clothes.

In the Sorbonne, I knew many of the Cambodians who would become leaders of the Khmer Rouge. I never met Pol Pot, but all the others, Khiêu Samphan, Hou Yuon, Son Sen, they were my friends. [1] I took part in all the demonstrations against the war in Algeria. Then I had to face the threat of conscription. I had two young children by then—my wife gave birth to our second child in 1960. One day a gendarme came to my home and said: 'You are M. Brocheux? Ah, you were born in Indochina . . .' There was a law which allowed those Frenchmen born outside the country to avoid military service, on condition that they left the country. This meant that I could apply for a teaching post in Vietnam and see my parents again. That was how I returned to Vietnam in 1960. I quickly found a job at a lycée in Saigon, and stayed for eight years.

Everything had changed since you left, of course.

Oh yes. There was now an independent government in the South, which called itself the Republic of Vietnam. Ngô Đình Diệm held power in Saigon. The republic had been established in 1955. When I returned in 1960, Diệm's regime was beginning to face strong opposition.

What was your opinion of the Geneva Accords in 1954? Should Ho Chi Minh have pressed for total independence at this time, rather than accept the division of the country?

Personally, I was in favour of the peace agreement. It allowed North Vietnam to recover, to catch its breath. We must not forget there was the promise of free elections to be held in 1956, which never took place, because of Ngô Đình Diệm and the Americans. Ho believed that unification could be achieved by peaceful methods, that elections would be held and another war avoided. When China and Vietnam were at war, two decades later, the Vietnamese accused China of wanting to keep Vietnam weak and fragmented at the time of the Geneva talks. It is true that Zhou Enlai pressed his allies to accept the division of Vietnam into two ceasefire zones. The Chinese wanted to set their country on the path to modernization; their commitments to Vietnam and North Korea had cost them greatly. But we know that Ho preferred negotiation to confrontation, so it should not surprise us that he seized the opportunity to put an end to hostilities. The resistance war had lasted nine years; it caused great suffering, huge sacrifices. He was concerned about the toll the war had taken on his country. Half a million people were dead.

Ho had also been reluctant to order a campaign of land reform on the Soviet or Chinese model. When he travelled to Moscow in 1950, Stalin criticized him for not having implemented land reform already. Khrushchev tells the story in his memoirs; he says that Stalin showed Ho two chairs and said: 'This chair represents the peasantry and that one the landlords. Where do you sit?' Stalin did not think much of Ho, according to Khrushchev: he called him a 'communist troglodyte'. The party leadership finally decided to begin land reform in 1953. It spread from the liberated zones to the rest of North Vietnam after the French withdrawal. They followed the Chinese example of 'people's tribunals': there were public accusations and executions. At least fifteen thousand people were killed; some believe it could be as high as fifty thousand. Rural society was less polarized in the North than in the South: landlords were sometimes non-existent, and their numbers had been reduced further by the war. In spite of this, the land-reform teams had to register 5 per cent of every rural community as landlords, so classification was often arbitrary. When the party began 'rectifying errors', as they called it, more than half of the so-called landlords were reclassified to a lower level. The government of the DRV made a self-criticism of the land-reform campaign in 1956; they said it was now time to 'straighten the tiller' after going too far to the left.

Was the Vietnamese party influenced by the events of 1956 in the Eastern Bloc—Khrushchev's 'secret speech', Poland, Hungary?

Certainly, although we cannot be sure what the Vietnamese delegates to the CPSU conference thought about Khrushchev's attack on Stalin; there is no explicit record. A French journalist asked Ho and Giáp if the 'rectification' of land reform was part of the developments shaking up the Communist world, but they denied it, claiming that the Vietnamese situation was determined only by local factors.

There was a movement of writers and artists in North Vietnam at the time which was very similar to the 'hundred flowers' movement in China; people sometimes refer to it by the same name. Their central focus was the relationship between literature and politics. By the autumn of 1956, members of the group were denouncing the lack of individual freedom, police surveillance, violations of 'socialist legality'. The party leaders came down hard on the movement: they claimed that it was supported by Ngô Đình Diệm and the South. Some of the dissenters were jailed or placed under house arrest, others lost their jobs and had their ration cards taken away.

By the time I returned to Saigon, peaceful unification between North and South was no longer on the agenda. When Ngô Đình Diệm took power with the support of Washington, he rejected the idea of a national election. There was a faction in the Communist Party that began preparing for war in the South. It was led by Lê Duẩn, with the support of Lê Đức Thọ and Nguyễn Chí Thanh. This troika took control of Vietnamese policy; Ho and his ally Giáp were pushed to the sidelines. Lê Duẩn travelled in secret to the South in 1958; he wrote a report arguing that the DRV needed to send help to their southern comrades, who were being hunted and killed by Diệm's police.

Ho dreaded intervention by the US. But the troika imposed their plans for an all-out war in the South. They decided that from now on, Ho would play a symbolic, diplomatic role, nothing more. In 1963, Ho and Ngô Đình Diệm began a correspondence; they discussed a plan for neutrality and co-existence between the two states, even a confederation.

We cannot say what might have come out of these negotiations— perhaps nothing—but it was enough to worry US officials. It certainly helped persuade the US ambassador to support the coup against Diệm by the army.

What was the impact of the war on the inhabitants of Saigon during the time you were there?

Until 1965–66, the presence of the war was not always felt. Not that life was dull in the city: in 1961, rebel paratroopers attacked the presidential palace; the following year, it was bombed by two air-force pilots, but Ngô Đình Diệm was unhurt. Then in November 1963, the South Vietnamese generals arrested the president and his brother, killing them both. As the conflict intensified, attacks on the Americans in Saigon itself became more frequent: there were bombings of the us embassy, of a cinema reserved for GIs, of the soldiers' mess and their bus station. Nonetheless, for the expatriate community of which I was a part, life in the city appeared strangely normal. One could have a professional routine—teaching and research, in my case—and leisure at the weekends; Saigon had its own sports club, and we could go for trips to the beach at Vũng Tàu. On two occasions I was stopped along the way by Viet Cong roadblocks.

This lifestyle was not really disrupted by the war until the Tết Offensive. It was in June 1968 that I left Saigon with my wife and our four children: I believed that we were no longer safe there.

It was Tết that changed everything. Between January and May of 1968, the NLF launched a general offensive across the whole country and in- every urban centre—beginning with the capital, where they attacked the presidential palace and the us embassy. Until then, everyone believed that while the Viet Cong had taken the countryside, they would never penetrate the towns. The battles which took place in cities like Huế, the old imperial capital, had a shattering impact: it was like a thunder-bolt.

Yet this came at a heavy price for the NLF, which lost almost all of its regular units, increasing its dependence on reinforcements from the North. The failure of the offensive gave the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies the illusion that they could inflict a lasting defeat on the Viet Cong, but among the general population it had a psychological effect that reinforced the 'neutralist' current of opinion. The anti-war sentiment which spread throughout South Vietnam was strengthened by the brutal methods of the US army: the Mỹ Lai massacre was by no means an exceptional case. I observed myself the growing pacifism which took hold even among those Vietnamese who had fled from the Communist regime in the 1950s: more than once I heard people say 'better peace without the Americans than war with the Americans'.

The final victory in 1975 was achieved by the People's Army of Vietnam under the command of Vaˇ n Tiến Duˇng, who had been Giáp's deputy at Điện Biên Phủ. The general has written a history of the campaign, awarding himself the main role, but his version of events was contested by the NLF commander Trần Vaˇn Trà. In a book that was first published and then withdrawn from circulation by the Vietnamese authorities, Trần Vaˇn Trà revealed the sharp debates which took place over tactics and strategy during this final phase of the war. This was the first time that a Vietnamese general broke with the langue de bois which characterizes all official writing.

The human price of unifying the country was enormous. If we count only the deaths and disappearances between 1961 and 1975, the NLF and the Northern army lost 600,000 troops during the war; 230,000 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed. Civilian casualties were even higher, of course: estimates range from two to four million. The entire country was devastated. If ever there was a Pyrrhic victory won by a nation and its people, this was it.

You mentioned earlier that you knew some of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge during your time at the Sorbonne. How did you view the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia which developed after 1975?

Yes, I knew many Cambodian communists when we lived together in the Maison de l'Indochine at the university. They all fell victim to the purges ordered by Pol Pot: Hou Youn, Sien An, Toch Phoeun, Vong Serevuth, In Sokan. Son Sen, the last chief of the Khmer Rouge army, was killed along

with his entire family. They were all sincere communists, idealists, for whom solidarity in the fight against colonialism was no mere slogan. What happened between their time in France and the moment when they found themselves plunged into the realities of Cambodia, at a time when US intervention was at its most intense, the Sino-Soviet split was deepening, and tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam had reached a paroxysm because of historic resentments and irredentist claims? I do not have an answer to these questions. To this very day, I have not found an adequate explanation for the slide of the Cambodian communists towards a chauvinistic nationalism that was shot through with murderous dementia.

How did Vietnam begin its shift towards capitalism and the global market in the 1980s? Was it simply a response by the party leadership to what was happening in China and the Soviet Union?

It was due to a combination of factors, both internal and external. Inside Vietnam, three main groups pressed for the abandonment of the Soviet model: pro-market economists and technocrats, managers of state enterprises who wanted to increase their profits, and Southern 'liberals' who called for a return to the system in place before 1975. After the war, the government had adopted a five-year plan, calling for Vietnam to become an industrial power by 2004, based on gdp growth of 13 per cent every year. Finance, industry and commerce were all nationalized, which helped precipitate the flight of the Chinese population—the 'boat people', as they were known. The plan did not achieve its goals: the party had already begun to change direction at the congress of 1982, where it decided to shift investment from heavy industry to agriculture, and to give more priority to foreign trade.

But we cannot underestimate the importance of events in the Soviet Union, where Gorbachev began his programme of perestroika in 1985. Vietnam had always been dependent on support from the ussr, and from China. During the war, it was receiving $1 billion every year, $300 million from China, $700 million from the Soviets. Chinese aid was cut off in 1978—China attacked Vietnam at the beginning of 1979—so Moscow and its allies became the main source of funding. Vietnam was a member of Comecon, and over 80 per cent of its foreign trade was with the comecon states. So they had to take account of what was happening under Gorbachev. The Soviets criticized the use of their aid by Vietnam, and announced that they would be renegotiating their agreements.

There was also the influence, less explicit, of the reforms in China under Deng Xiaoping.

In 1987 and 1988, the government passed a whole series of decrees removing obstacles to the private sector; this affected agriculture, foreign trade and investment, and the management of state-owned industries. The new turn became known as the Đổi mới—the 'renovation'. Vietnam made the transition from a planned and inward-looking economy to one that was regulated by the market and open to the outside world.

The project of developing heavy industry and import-substitution was abandoned: the Vietnamese adopted the same approach as the 'Asian Tigers', producing for export and exploiting the advantage of a cheap labour force. Today in Vietnam, there are 150 industrial zones along the coast. Decollectivization of agriculture in 1988 was followed by a formidable boom in productivity—thanks in part to a reduction in the rural workforce, and the spread of high-yield seeds; a delayed benefit of the Green Revolution. The country now became a major exporter of rice, the second-largest in the world, more than one million tonnes a year. Vietnam is also the second-largest producer of coffee. The resource sector has grown considerably, too: oil production went from 50,000 barrels per day in 1990 to 350,000 barrels in 2010, and Chinese firms are mining bauxite in the Central Highlands.

Openness has, of course, come at a price: the Vietnamese economy is now very much exposed to

shifts in global prices for commodities like rice and coffee, and to protectionism in the developed countries.

What have the social and political consequences of the Đổi mới been? Has inequality grown, as in China?

Of course, there has been a growth of inequality; it has returned in the countryside. The liberalization of the economy has allowed many people to enrich themselves. Disengagement by the state has created turmoil in the education system. Vietnam has a very young population: around half are under the age of twenty five. There are now over ninety million Vietnamese. The country is beginning to make a demographic transition to families with two children or fewer, but this is only happening now, and not in the countryside, only in the cities. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people enter the labour market. The number of strikes by workers is rising steadily: in 2008, there were almost eight hundred.

This happens in the industrial centres, and the strikes are often very bitter. They happen for three reasons: because the bosses do not pay the salaries they promised; because they demand overtime without payment; and because they do not respect the labour laws, they do not give enough time for lunch, for toilet breaks. Most of the enterprises where these strikes occur are Taiwanese or South Korean. Wages in Vietnam are barely a third of the Chinese level.

While the party has relaxed its control over the economy, it keeps the political system on a tight leash. At the time of the great changes in Eastern Europe, there were many calls for a loosening of the party's grip on political life. Vũ Đình Hòe, an old comrade of Ho Chi Minh, urged Vietnam to embrace 'democratic socialism' in place of 'feudal socialism'.

The novelist Dương Thu Hương condemned the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'—a technique honed in wartime, to be used against one's enemies, that in a time of peace had become the dictatorship of the bureaucracy over the proletariat. But from 1991, the party-state reasserted itself. Party leaders were greatly influenced by the disorderly collapse of the Soviet Union, which they contrasted with the stability of China. They also looked at the experience of South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, where economic development had taken place under authoritarian rule. The most radical opinions were condemned by the government as being incompatible with established 'truths'. Trần Xuân Bách was excluded from the Politburo because he called for a multi-party system. Dương Thu Hương was imprisoned for a time and kept under surveillance after her release.

Today, the Vietnamese system gives a central place to the National Assembly, which is no longer the rubber-stamp body it was before. The Assembly can hear petitions from citizens; debates are shown on television. But the party exercises control by filtering candidates: they are selected by the 'Patriotic Front'—which brings together all the mass organizations—and the party ratifies that choice. Just 43 non-party candidates were elected to the Assembly in 2007, out of 497 deputies. Laws are voted through by the Assembly, but then they go through another stage where they are amended or rejected by the Assembly's permanent committee, which is controlled by the Party leadership. The constitution formally guarantees the rights to free speech and free assembly. But when a network of dissidents was formed under the name 'Bloc 8406' to demand the enforcement of these rights, the government responded by jailing the Bloc's main leaders. It exercises repression against those who call openly for democracy, against those who denounce the corruption which exists at all levels of the party, and against those who accuse the government of bowing down before China. Having gained its first legitimacy by leading Vietnam to independence, the party is now trying to win a second legitimacy by leading it to modernization. But although omnipresent, the Party is not omnipotent or monolithic. Its composition is changing, like that of society itself—not only in terms of age cohort, education level, gender and ethnicity, but also in its outlook and strategy; it

has to take account of the resistance and aspirations of the population, of pressure from below. I am optimistic about the future,
ecause I think there are many things happening at the base. We can be sure that the Party will not emerge unscathed from its imbrication with society.

Pierre Brocheux

P.S.

* From The New Left Review 73 Jan.-Feb. 2012 pp. 73-91.

Footnotes

[1] Khiêu Samphan (1931–): Cambodia's head of state under Pol Pot, now facing trial for genocide in Phnom Penh. Hou Yuon (1930–75): odd man out in the Khmer Rouge leadership, distrusted by Pol Pot for his moderation; finally demoted after opposing the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975; died in custody or was executed soon afterwards. Son Sen (1930–97): Khmer Rouge military commander; played a central role in purges of 1975–78; executed in 1997 on Pol Pot's orders.[]