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Susan Bayly

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

Themes and approaches

This book deals with the tumultuous life experiences of Asians whose lives were shaped by the death throes of the great European-ruled colonial systems, and by the making and unmaking of socialism in its various distinctive Asian forms. Its central focus is Vietnam, a country in which the legacies of colonialism and socialism have played out in ways that challenge many current understandings of postcoloniality and the moral and social ambiguities of ‘late’ or post-socialist societies.

A great deal of this current scholarship uses the Indian subcontinent as the central point of reference in discussions of the psychic and social afterlife of empire, especially in the case of the many educated Asians who identified themselves with nationalist as well as socialist forms of emancipatory modernism. But while the book builds in part on my past research on pre- and post-independence India, its main concern is with lives that offer comparisons and contrasts with those of India’s colonial and socialist moderns. In focusing on Vietnam, and more specifically on the distinctively cosmopolitan world of Hanoi’s intelligentsia families, its concerns reflect my continuing interest in the comparative study of colonialism and its legacies both within and beyond French- and British-ruled Asia.

As an anthropologist originally trained in history, I have combined the approaches of both fields in this study. Its textual sources include a diverse array of documentary and pictorial materials. Among them are personal letters and photographs belonging to the families with whom I have done fieldwork, as well as propaganda posters and other official texts, and such items as schoolchildren’s drawings and lesson books dating back to the days of Vietnam’s liberation wars against France and the USA. I also build on previous work using materials such as official records and newspapers from a variety of archival collections in Vietnam, India, Britain and France.

At the book’s core, however, is the ethnographic fieldwork I have been conducting over the last five years in Vietnam, working primarily with

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multilingual men and women who have negotiated a remarkable array of divergent socialist and postcolonial modernities over the past forty to fifty years. My first stay in Hanoi was in the winter of 2000, though I had previously spent time visiting historical and religious sites in Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon) and the Mekong Delta. Even in that early visit to the south, I found in Vietnam a host of compelling and sometimes perplexing parallels and contrasts with the regions of India in which I had previously worked. Arriving in Ho Chi Minh City for the first time on Christmas Eve 1998, I had a foretaste of the exuberant conviviality and eclectically ‘globalised’ consumer tastes which also mark present-day urban life in north Vietnam. In the city centre, the streets were thronged with young people on motorbikes shouting ‘Merry Christmas’ to everyone in sight. Virtually everyone – teenagers as well as parents and their small children – sported a tasseled Father Christmas (Santa Claus) hat. Many women wore these with the tunic and trouser outfit known as the *ao dai*, in past decades a dress style condemned by the Communist authorities as decadent and unproletarian, but very much in fashion in the new age of so-called ‘market socialism’.

Over the next few weeks I visited such places as Ho Chi Minh City’s Revolution Museum, which was situated next door to a newly opened Toyota car dealership, and a short walk away from the city’s recently renovated colonial hotels and elegant shopping boulevards. Some of these were once again being referred to by the French names used in the days of empire. A case in point was the former Rue Catinat, named in memory of the French warship that initiated the colonial occupation of Indochina by bombarding the port of Danang in 1856. Once hailed as Saigon’s Champs Elysée, Rue Catinat was renamed Tu Do (‘Liberty’) after independence in 1954, and Dong Khoi (‘Uprising’) following reunification with the Communist north in 1976. At the time of my visit it was once again a street of cafés and smart shops with names like Catinat Fashion selling international brand-name goods, together with silk *ao dais* and other luxury items designed for the city’s growing mass tourism and expatriate business community markets.

It was striking too that there was active worship honouring ancient heroes, sages and family ancestors in the pagodas and spirit temples. There were also public rites at Tay Ninh, the Holy See of the Cao Dai religion, with its exaltation of the prophetic spirits of Joan of Arc and Victor Hugo. Cao Daiists also honour the classical sage Confucius, together with a sixteenth-century poet now revered as an early prophet of Vietnamese nationhood, and the Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat Sen (1866–1925) (Bayly 2004b). As I explored these sites, I found myself wondering just how many pasts local people felt they were living with in

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present-day Vietnam. I wondered too how far their definitions of past and present epochs resembled or contrasted with those shaping Indians' diverse and often hotly contested perceptions of their personal and national histories.

Contrasting intelligentsia worlds: Vietnam and India

Of course anyone doing research in India over the past thirty years will have strong memories of the many ways in which the phenomenon of ethnocommunitarian discord has pervaded public life. This has given rise to contending visions of 'communalism' in the form of Hindu–Muslim conflict as the dominant historical narrative of Indian life and history over many centuries. But during and since that first stay in Vietnam, what I recalled just as vividly from my earliest Indian fieldwork in the 1970s was the ferocity of public debate about the rise of regionally based peasant populist movements. Their prevailing vision was of an India long dominated by 'feudal' elites, and their key rallying cry the call for radical new forms of redistributive justice for the rural 'masses' and other non-elite and deprived groups. These movements were widely characterised as a serious challenge to the high-minded developmental modernism which had long been associated with the still dominant political legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress which had spearheaded India's anti-colonial 'freedom struggle'.¹

From the vantage point of the 1970s, Vietnam and India were 'friends' at the diplomatic level and spoke a common language of global anti-imperialism and solidarity with other 'progressive' states including the USSR. As Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977, Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi had pledged support for socialist North Vietnam's war against the USA and its client regime to the south, the RVN (Republic of Vietnam).² Yet in other crucial ways, the two countries appeared to be

¹ For an overview of the literature on these topics, see Rudolph and Rudolph 1987; Brass 1990; Brass 1995; Bose and Jalal 1998.

² Here, too, the naming of public spaces told a fascinating story. When I first went to Hanoi in 2000, one of the landscaped public garden spaces facing the city-centre lake and ancient island pagoda, which are the capital's most famous landmarks, was known as Indira Gandhi Park, a name honouring the former Indian Prime Minister as an anti-imperialist 'friend' of Vietnam (Logan 1995: 453). In 2005, the garden received a lavish facelift and was reopened under a new name, that of the eleventh-century Vietnamese ruler Ly Thai To, whose giant statue now adorns the park (see Plates 1 and 2). This semi-legendary dynast is now revered as a protonationalist visionary who chose the riverine site of modern Hanoi as his royal capital, thereby paving the way for the commercial take-off which launched the nation on its path to prosperity and 'development'. Among key works on *doi moi* (partial marketisation, usually translated as 'renovation' or 'renewal') in

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worlds apart. North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV) was a one-party Communist state. Its leaders had fought a revolutionary war against Indochina's former colonial rulers, and then established their authority over the entire country through military victory against the USA and the RVN in 1975. India was a much larger and richer 'non-aligned' power which, despite its warm diplomatic ties to the Soviet Union and other COMECON states, was still committed to multi-party electoral democracy and was soon to embrace liberalising reforms of its 'soft socialist' economic regimen.³

So at first glance, these were two postcolonial countries which had taken dramatically divergent paths in the aftermath of empire and in the processes of political partitioning which each had undergone so traumatically. Yet there was a common thread, that of the socialist ideals espoused officially by Vietnam, and also long championed by a high proportion of India's modernist intellectuals. These included the anglophone academics, scientists, development planners and other educated individuals whom I had come to know in the course of my research in the subcontinent from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Such people were precisely those whose leftist cosmopolitanism and patrician lifestyles had come to be widely reviled as élitist and un-Indian by those peasant populists of the 1970s, and latterly by their many successors. The most notable of these more recent anti-'Nehruvians' were the champions of so-called Hindutva or 'Hinduness' who came to prominence in the 1980s and are still a critical force in contemporary Indian life. The Hindutva ideologues have propounded visions of Indian nationhood that are apparently much at odds with the secular Nehru tradition, always strongly associated with opposition to the 'passions' and destructive 'irrationalities' of so-called communalism in its many different forms and manifestations.⁴ Although there are many divergent strands in the Hindutva cause, most versions of the 'Hinduness' ideal represent India's past as an enduring struggle between the forces of native faith-based culture and its supposed enemies, Muslim as well as 'secular'.

Everyone I knew in India, including the people with whom I did my fieldwork, and the academics and other university-trained individuals

Vietnam see de Vylder and Fforde 1996. On planning and building schemes in Hanoi, see Logan 2000; Thomas 2001; 2003; Waibel 2004.

³ The Soviet-dominated economic community known as COMECON (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) was founded in 1949 as an association of Eastern Europe's Communist states. Mongolia became a member in 1962, Cuba in 1972 and Vietnam in 1978; the organisation was disbanded in 1991.

⁴ Madan 1987; Jaffrelot 1998; Hansen 2001.

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who befriended me in the course of my research trips, had much to say about these debates over the meaning of the nation's history, and the lessons that should be taught and learned from its ancient and modern pasts. There was one thing about people's engagement with this rethinking of national narratives that I found particularly striking if not altogether surprising. This was that many of the educated people I came to know over a period of twenty years or more had come to question or actively repudiate the Nehruvian 'idea of India' (Khilnani 1997) which had once been so central to their understanding of the lives that they and their forebears had led in the pre- and post-independence periods.

There was a strong personal dimension to this rethinking. By the late 1980s and 90s, what many of my educated Indian friends said they wanted for their children in such matters as marriage, education and career choice no longer had much in common with the ethos of public service and austere secular modernism that I recalled from their professed views and values of the 1970s. I knew people who had once been proudly 'secular' expressing passionate regret that a son or daughter had married a spouse of 'alien' faith. Other friends had discouraged their children from following their paths into public service employment. Some said aloud things that would have been unsayable in 'enlightened' company fifteen or twenty years earlier: the nation's history was full of wrong turnings and opportunities wasted; university careers were futile and unrewarding because 'redistributive justice' policies, once hailed as a righting of historic wrongs suffered by the disadvantaged, especially the ex-'untouchables' or Dalits, gave promotions and plum appointments to the 'unworthy' and unqualified.

Socialism in the 'postcolony'

This shift to very different narrative accounts of personal and public pasts was much in my mind as I began my work in Vietnam. And what I was beginning to learn as far back as 1998 was that Vietnam is also a country in which contending historical narratives have become a prominent and sometimes painful feature of national life. In ways that are strikingly reminiscent of India's encounters with multiple accounts of its national history, Vietnam's people are now dealing with at least three distinct though interacting pasts: that of its colonial experience; that of its revolutionary socialist life in the years of its two resistance wars and their turbulent aftermath; and that of its more recent past of reformist 'market socialism'.

This certainly invites comparison with what I recalled about the multiple pasts with which my educated Indian friends have been

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contending since the 1970s. Again, what came to mind particularly were the intellectuals I had originally known as champions of Nehruvian ‘soft socialism’. These were the people who had rethought their views of the Indian past as a triumphal progress towards national unity, with a common goal of achieving enlightened modernity in the form of equality for all citizens, and a state-regulated market with global capitalism held at bay. As I have already suggested, by the early 1990s many of the educated Indians I knew had embraced new narratives in which a muted but still actively anti-market ethos no longer held pride of place.

As a child of the Cold War, I had been brought up in an environment in which Europe’s non-revolutionary forms of socialism were both admired and vilified, while its Chinese, Soviet and other Communist variants were routinely demonised as embodiments of state terror and gulag-based totalitarianism. So I was initially startled when I first met Indian intellectuals for whom the Soviet Union was a ‘friend’ and role model, much admired in the 1970s as a bastion of staunch Third Worldism and progressive social ideals at home and abroad. What I soon came to realise was that a high proportion of the educated Indians I knew valued the Western-style constitutionalism which made their country very different from the USSR and other Communist states. Yet they also clearly valued the fact that through the language of socialism, with its diverse but distinctive idioms and moral claims, they could speak so readily and on such a strong basis of professed equality with their counterparts in a host of other lands.⁵

As fellow users of those idioms and reference points, either they themselves, or the politicians and statesmen who represented their nation abroad, could present themselves to their fellow Asians, and to Africans, Russians and other COMECON citizens as well as leftists from the capitalist West, as co-participants in a world of common aims and virtues. In this study I use the term socialist ecumene to describe this arena of personal and official contacts, interactions and ‘imaginings’. It is a usage which I take more from the work of the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock on the ‘vernacularised cosmopolitanism’ of ancient south and south-east Asia than from the ideas of a strictly ‘late capitalist’ worldwide ecumene proposed by contemporary globalisation theorists (Pollock 1998; see also Humphrey 2004).

⁵ Khilnani 1997; Zachariah 2005. On past and current interpretations of the Indian national past, see Bose 2003.

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These are issues which I discuss in more detail below, building on the perspectives of scholars such as Frederick Cooper, whose studies of ‘imperial state-making and un-making’ (2005: 154) point insightfully to the many forms of mobility and interaction – pilgrimage circuits, trade routes, migrant labour networks, supralocal and transcontinental information flows, professional career trajectories and merchant diasporas – both defining and constraining political and cultural life in a host of rigorously contextualised sites and settings for which loosely teleological notions of globalisation lack precision and purchase. My thinking in this area has also been shaped by Sugata Bose’s nuanced account of the Indian Ocean as a cultural ecumene of ‘multiple and competing universalisms’ (2006: 270). My particular concern is with the distinctively mobile lives led by students, scientists, medics and other ‘moderns’ from Asia’s so-called postcolonies. I see such people’s often very testing experiences of cosmopolitan family and career life as central to the processes which sustained and represented much of what I have in mind in my use of the term socialist ecumene.

The forms of circulation and displacement experienced by large numbers of these educated Asians involved children as well as adults. I hope to demonstrate that the emotional and intellectual lives of the young require particular emphasis in any account that seeks to engage in depth with the world of ‘socialist moderns’ under colonial rule and in postcolonial settings. And what I want to suggest about the Indian intellectuals I knew in the 1970s and 80s is that as they travelled or projected themselves imaginatively within that worldwide socialist ecumene, they found the use of socialism’s idioms and reference points both gratifying and instrumentally valuable. In deploying them, they were able to represent themselves to the people of more ‘backward’ lands, as well as those of apparently more ‘advanced’ societies, as ‘friends’ and fellow anti-imperialists. They could thereby claim to be on an equal footing with all other participants in the great moral projects of socialist life and thought, and thus resist being seen as the relatively advantaged citizens of a still poor or ‘developing’ ex-colony.⁶ I was to find something very similar in the course of my Vietnam fieldwork, when Hanoi people told me about the pleasure they had taken in having been able to forge personal friendships with the Russians, Poles and other

⁶ Compare Dirlin 1994: 339–40. For an account of the mobile lives led by Muslim intelligentsia world travellers from the French-ruled colonial societies of north Africa, see Bayly 2002.

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foreign scientists and ‘development’ experts they had worked with in such settings as Algeria, Madagascar and Mozambique.

I do recognise that Asia’s educated ‘moderns’ have engaged with a whole host of divergent socialisms rather than a single homogeneous tradition or power structure, and that they have done so as critics as well as admirers of those systems and ideals. Indeed one of the book’s key concerns is to show that in that world of harmonious and fraught interactions which I refer to as the socialist ecumene, what these trans-national travellers encountered was actually a very broad spectrum of political and cultural modes ranging from those of the two big revolutionary superpowers and their regional neighbours to the vernacularised developmentalisms of Nyerere’s Tanzania, Nehru’s India and Sukarno’s Indonesia.

None of these were self-contained isolates; all interacted, and all presented contrasting visions of socialism’s traditions and neo-traditions, thereby offering significant numbers of people the possibility of both actual and imaginative movement across a terrain comprising many more points of reference than those of a single ‘postcolony’ and its former metropole. Thus for the younger Indians I knew twenty or thirty years ago, professing admiration for the peasant-based radicalism represented by Mao’s China and India’s rural Naxalite insurgents entailed a repudiation of the ‘soft’ Nehruvian socialism of their elders. And, of course, even in the 1970s and early 80s there were many educated south Asians for whom all variants of socialism were anathema. Vietnam too has engaged with radically different socialist traditions before and since independence.⁷ As I explain in later chapters, steering a difficult middle course between Vietnam’s Soviet and Chinese ‘friends’ was a process that bore very directly on the personal and professional experiences of the Hanoi intellectuals with whom I worked. For some, even the legacy of France’s non-Marxist socialist thinkers and activists left distinctive traces in the views they brought to bear on the great changes taking place in their personal lives, and that of the nation.

Furthermore, within as well as beyond the former Asian ‘post-colonies’, socialism has been much more than an evocative and empowering language, though its discursive qualities have certainly been one of its most enduring and significant features. And for all its diversity, as well as the many challenges to socialist ideas and values emanating from many sources, some inside the officially socialist nation-states,

⁷ Among key works on this topic see Turner 1975; Pike 1978; Marr 1981; Hue Tam Ho Tai 1992; Duiker 1996; Giebel 2004.

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there have been real commonalities at the level of ‘imagining’ and historic experience for an extremely large number of people around the world. This is why I feel it is legitimate to refer to socialism as a body of shared, supralocal reference points and distinctive claims about the world, made and referred to not only by officials and politicians, but by ordinary citizens. And I see the often strongly articulated language of affect in which socialist ideals have been so consistently expressed as a striking and significant feature of the world in which such citizens led their lives, both at home and further afield.

This notion of socialism as a set of broadly inclusive moral, emotional and even aesthetic dispositions is central to the perspective I adopt in this book. I see it as crucial to my exploration of the lives led by people of intelligentsia background, particularly when they travelled either literally or imaginatively beyond their homelands. I emphasise yet again the importance of their experiences of actual and imagined movement through spaces made productive and morally meaningful in their eyes through these acts of purposeful circulation and sojourning among the near and distant sites and settings of the socialist ecumene. What I seek to show in later chapters is that this is something which has interacted in complex and far-reaching ways with the divergent legacies of colonialism. These legacies are too often treated as the only important force at work in the shaping of intelligentsia minds and epistemes in former colonial societies, and one of the key aims of this book is to call attention to the limitations of such assumptions.⁸

I am certainly not suggesting that the educated Hanoi people I know possess an uncritical allegiance to any of the many variants of Marxist analytical or political thought. Nor am I suggesting that they would all call themselves socialists today, rather than patriots, ‘moderns’ and/or thoughtful and ideologically uncommitted makers of a new, post-modern world. But what I am proposing is that there is a host of moral and emotional as well as intellectual dispositions which have defined and animated the very broad sphere of operations which I am calling the worldwide socialist ecumene. Its contours have been eroded but not expunged by the demise of official state socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, together with the embrace of ‘market socialism’ in China and Vietnam, and the ‘liberalisation’ of economic life in much of Africa and South America as well as India. It is certainly alive in the

⁸ Aijaz Ahmad (1995) and Arif Dirlik (1994) have been powerful contributors to debate on these issues.

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memories and personal narratives of the people with whom I have worked in Vietnam.

As I show in later chapters, many key traditions and ‘neo-traditions’ of the socialist ecumene have recently been given new life in official accounts of Vietnam’s long-standing moral legacy as a high-minded participant in worthwhile international exchanges of knowledge and modernising expertise.⁹ I also seek to show that it greatly enhances our understanding of past and contemporary life and thought in the sub-continent to recognise the extent to which India’s intelligentsia world has been shaped by the moral and cultural interactions of that same global socialist ecumene.

What I found in the course of my fieldwork is that within that supralocal arena of diplomatic, personal and intellectual contacts, socialism has existed as something animating and also transcending the meanings that have been attached to the term for the peoples who have lived within the terrain of any one individual socialist state. I have in mind here the meanings given to the word socialism by its admirers and vilifiers during and since the Cold War. I do recognise that for many people around the world, socialism registers above all as a fearful project to regulate, coerce or override individual will and identity, nourished by a determination to expunge cherished traditions of faith, community and nationhood in the name of progress and people’s justice. Yet it is important and illuminating to see socialism as something which many self-avowed Asian ‘moderns’ have regarded as more than – or not only – the problematic cultural initiatives, planning regimens and allocation arrangements which have been studied as critical features of life within individual socialist states.¹⁰

⁹ For the notion of socialist tradition and neo-tradition I am indebted to Harry West: my use of the term focuses on the exaltation of revolutionary ideals and other key elements of socialist life and thought as a distinctive moral tradition still relevant to contemporary ‘late socialist’ or even ‘post-socialist’ conditions, rather than the idea of pre-socialist values or reference points enduring within or beneath the officially defined modernities of the socialist states and societies. See Chapters 8 and 9, below.

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick 1992; Verdery 1996. This is not meant as a criticism of those who have done so much to document and theorise socialist life within individual countries. On the contrary: I am greatly indebted to the works of leading figures in the study of socialism, notably C. Humphrey, K. Verdery, S. Fitzpatrick, R. Mandel, C. Hann, D. Kandiyoji, S. Smith, R. Mitter, E. Perry and N. Ssorin-Chaikov. I have also been much influenced by ethnographers of socialist life in non-European societies, especially Donald Donham (1999) whose use of interdisciplinary methods to explore Ethiopians’ engagement with the experience and aftermath of socialist revolution has been of great importance to my work. I have also learned much from the writings of Vietnam specialists including Hue Tam Ho Tai, Dang Phong, K. Taylor, P. Taylor, H. Kwon, D. Hémery, P. Brocheux, M. Beresford, D. Marr, C. Thayer, Hy Van Luong,