

A ‘Cheshire cat’ of politics in a post Cold War Communism? Ontological problems of ‘the state’ in contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract

In a situation where the scholarly literature remains deeply divided, this paper discusses possible meanings of exterior aspects of politics and policy in Vietnam. It presents evidence that whilst the formal political system continues to exhibit Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics, these observations at the same time co-exist with evidence for increasingly extensive ‘autonomous’ social organisation. It discusses how, just as both the political realities and political theory of the Cold War period accepted a certain degree of social autonomy, so the apparent freedoms of the market economy period since the end of the Cold War are also arguably problematic. In some ways this situation creates pitfalls for essentialist application of terms such as Leninist or neo-liberal, thus allowing different observed empirics to suit very different explanatory frameworks. The paper argues that we may observe here a common problem in much Western analysis, which is the assumption that relations between analytical categories and observables are relatively unproblematic, a tension greatly exacerbated by the projection into Vietnam studies of generalists’ inescapable views of the relative lack of such ontological issues. The paper concludes that what amounts to a ‘Cheshire cat’ of politics reflects shared assumptions in the literature, and suggests that at the centre of these are shared tendencies to use concepts, especially that of the state, that are inadequately theorised in the context of available information. A tentative hypothesis is advanced that this is compounded by a ‘definitional crisis’ (undefined) in the Vietnamese polity probably dating from the implicit dogmatic changes of 1979.

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Introduction

The ontology of the state

This paper is about issues to do with the ‘ontology of the state’ in Vietnam – by this I understand questions that arise from views that discuss and seek to define the nature of the state in Vietnam. For me this must include the possibility that such discussions may go nowhere in any coherent and consistent manner. If such outcomes occur, it may well be said by some that there is nothing that we can call a state in Vietnam that has any clear agreed definition. This of course raises an additional set of questions that ask who decides the criteria to be met for there to be said to be such agreement. Clearly, one can easily think of debates amongst various Vietnamese and external observers, and there is no reason why these people should agree. But it would seem equally clear that without some ontological consensus, whether one agrees with it or not (and there are as I will report good academic reasons for thinking that any definition of a state may be challenged), it is probably very hard for Vietnamese officials, politicians and ordinary citizens to act politically in coherent manner, resolving conflicts, knowing what conflicts and agreements are about, and so on. This is because it appears obvious that Vietnamese political culture is unimaginable, at present, without its possessing the ability (and the inherent desire) to make reference to national patterns of political order and authority that it seeks to link to a ‘state’. The historical origins of such habits are well discussed elsewhere, with their references to king (*vua*) Emperor (*hoang de*), republic (*cong hoa*) etc and so on.

Setting a scene

An outline history to underpin discussion of contemporary Vietnamese politics is easy to present. Extensive Western re-engagement with Vietnam may be dated from the emergence of a market economy in 1989-91 as Soviet bloc aid collapsed [de Vylder and Fforde 1996]. What appeared was a country governed by a Communist Party that had exerted power over the north since at least 1954 (the ‘Democratic Republic of Vietnam’) and over a re-united Vietnam since 1975-76 (the ‘Socialist Republic of Vietnam’). Development policy was identifiably Communist from the 1950s [Fforde and Paine 1987]. Initial steps away from standard Communist dogma may be dated from the 6th plenum of 1979, which approved a range of economic activities previously anathematised, followed by promulgation of various measures in early 1981. These, it has often been argued, announced acceptance of a co-existence of plan and market that was already rampant, posing a question as to whether policy was leading or following other processes.

Indeed various accounts argue that Communism in Vietnam was at times relatively ‘soft’ (*mem*). Thus, in the rural areas a collectivised peasantry reportedly often evaded Party prescriptions [Vickerman 1986; Fforde 1989], whilst in some analyses State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) saw their early and then increasing participation in commercial activities drive a push to a market economy [Fforde 2007a]: a ‘transition from plan to market’, rather than a reform process, led by policy.

After the turmoil of the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s saw rapid economic growth. A tax-base recovered in the early 1990s, helping restoration of public spending. The 1990s growth pattern saw the state sector’s share of the economy grow [Fforde 1997]. Only by the end of the 1990s did a significant domestic private business sector

emerge and, with a strong foreign-invested sector, pose new problems [Fforde 2004 and 2005].

But, politically, a simple question is - 'So what?' What political meanings might be associated with the period, and how, if at all, had a new political order been defined?

Confusion and its meanings

'The Devil (expecting an agreed sexual favour): *But you promised!*

Frenchwoman – *Yes, but I lied'*

[*Visiteurs du soir*, Dir. Marcel Carné, France, 1942]

The quotation above shows a familiar opacity, powerful in that it may generate closure as well as continued engagement with non-compliance; a 'rabbit hole' in that, perhaps precisely in the nature of its power, it defies authoritative response. This is not a matter of pretence, though; rather it points to the idea that ignorance is inescapable – is she still lying? And, it is well-known that the latent pre-Ockham 'realism' in our languages suggests often that we confront, not ignorance, but bias, dissimulation and other identifiable attempts to pretend that things are different from how they really, truly, are [Gillespie 1999]. In analytical terms, ontological issues are inadequately developed: the meanings of words may be insufficiently stable for reliable and repeated use. As the Devil appears to have found out, she did not mean what he thought she said.

In a recent study, Butler has argued that this opacity is not only an inescapable part of human interactions, but fundamental to a 'giving of accounts' that, so the young are often taught, must accompany ethical behaving [Butler 2005]. Thus, discussions of action may refer to debates about the 'philosophy of action', which include the notion that arguments about cause and effect are mainly to with ascription – of responsibility, of bad behaviour ... - a view which is intriguing [Stoecker 2007]. Such 'attribution of cause and effect' as an integral part of behaviour is thus distinguished from arguments about cause and effect 'in themselves'. In another language, analysis may be simply a 'blame game', uninterested in accessing robust underlying causes. And such judgements often attribute intentionality and agency, or deny them. There are deep-rooted problems here, and area studies such as Vietnam Studies confronts them precisely in that scholarly acts within it inescapably confront a general with a particular, even if for each scholarly product the meanings of general and particular can and will often vary. I would argue that irritation with the imposition of external gauges of the value of categories is the single most shared emotion of area specialists: yes, we say, I know, dear Professor, that you think you know what you mean by gender *there*, but *here* if we are to have meaningful discussions and translations, it takes time and resources, and who will pay for them? The point here is that stabilisation of meanings – ontological robustness – is something that is done, or not, according to context.

What is striking is that our knowledge production increasingly suggests that assuming that things *there* - and how we may think about them - are the same as their equivalents *here* does not get us very far in terms of robust perspectives (unless the Dear Professor has loads of money, or other valued things, in which case things may change fast). Assumptions of ontological universalism – that is, that things are the same *there* as things *here* - are, when we look at interesting sets of data, plausibly challenged. A classic result of global econometric studies is that, if we assume that the population is a single sample – that *here* and *there* are not essentially different - we

fail to get robust results [Levine and Zervos 1993; Fforde 2005 and 2009]. This argues, for instance, that ‘the state’ *there* and ‘the state’ *here*, if assumed to be the same thing, leads us to a range of research projects that each produce published results that obey their particular rules of the confrontation of account with evidence, but which contradict each other. Added together, thus, to be viewed as a ‘research program’, this suggests problems at the level of the untested assumptions of each piece of research. And, in that such research projects may be embedded in actions and organisational principles, even if unreliable guides to links between interventions and outcomes, this may explain a plethora of belief sets about ‘what works’.

Now, it seems uncontentious to assert that in Vietnam, as elsewhere, a wide range of developmental interventions occur, both with and without foreign participation. These tend to include discussions about success that involve judgements about actions, their consequences, and their contexts. These in turn offer valuable insights into accounts of the politics of a post Cold War Communism. In this vein, Dunn, a political scientist, highlights an academic distinction between viewing the state as a fact, and viewing it as an idea:

Each of these two conceptions (the state as sociological fact and the state as normative political proposal) must relate in some way to most of the entities which we now call states, but neither makes quite clear how to apply it in practice. [Dunn 2000:69]

This suggests that common notions of ‘the state’, when and if applied in Vietnam, will encounter precisely that ontological instability that we may start to anticipate. Such considerations may thus help clarify the precise nature of the contentious state of academic opinion on contemporary Vietnamese politics, whilst also illuminating observable tensions in developmental interventions, for at least in principle one may expect these two to be linked, even if just how may be contentious, or unclear. What people think they do, when they intervene, is surely influenced by their ontological and epistemological priors – what they think the state ‘is’, and what they think policy ‘does’.

What I will argue in this paper is that this confusion may be re-interpreted as a significant opacity, a sensation we may read in the literature viewed as a program (rather than taking each research project alone), that Vietnamese politics read in this way takes on aspects of Lewis Carol’s Cheshire Cat, enigmatically smiling and fading from view.¹ I will argue that this reflects shared failures to conceptualise core issues adequately, and take ‘the state’ as a central example.

Thus, for some, Vietnam appears in many areas as a meaningful and understandable – and intentional – example of success – post-colonial struggle, market-oriented development, political stability. Equally, in other fields, others see evident failure – of the construction of socialism, creation of a free – or freer - society ... And we find projected into these discussions terms familiar from wider discussions, categories that almost always embody the realist assumption that they refer to something that is ontologically stable, whether characterised by ‘authoritarianism’, ‘Leninism’, ‘markets’ or whatever. The central question is whether such assumptions are useful, or whether, in that they support a range of contradictory research projects, they reflect universalist assumptions of shared characteristics and content (‘ontological universalism’) as an underpinning to the application of general analytical frameworks (‘epistemological universalism’).

¹ For a study that treats much political behaviour in Vietnam as theatrical see Kleinen 2001.

Such disagreements may be found in those attempts to establish characterisations of her politics that we find in our academic literature (the ‘research projects’ that make up the ‘research program’).

Thus, some scholars use language familiar from classical soviet studies, stressing the architecture of formal political institutions: the state, the Party, with its Politburo, the Central Committee and Mass Organisations [e.g. Thayer 1992, 1995; Porter 1993; Vasavakul 1993 and 1996]. This terminology and associated analytical frameworks are applied to both before and after 1989-91. There are recent studies that argue, sometimes implicitly, that this terminology is still valid, with its implication that little in the Vietnamese political system has fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War [e.g. Will 2007; Malesky and Schuler 2008].

A scholar such as Gainsborough, in stark contrast, argues for a largely complete de-linking of politics from such structures and indeed from formal policy. He paints a picture of a politics mainly to do with factional in-fighting to secure control over a state assumed to exist in some stable manner [Gainsborough 2007].

Others, critical of global neo-liberal agendas, see these as increasingly evident in policy and policy-formation in contemporary Vietnam [e.g. Masina 2006; Nguyen-Vo 2008; Greenfield 1993]. In such views something has gone badly wrong: the intention to develop has been corrupted.

Since neo-liberalism arguably has as its core a shared notion of the viability of the rational ‘governance of subjects’, such views when applied to Vietnam usually imply major political change, perhaps towards greater ‘freedoms’. Scholars such as Beresford have indeed come recently to argue that a combination of ‘donor pressure’ (assumed to follow a neo-liberal agenda) with privileged access to ‘public-private networks’ has *effectively* prevented adoption of truly socialist policies [Beresford 2008], again, a corruption of some intention to develop [Fforde 2009:48-50].

Now, there are good reasons to contrast pretensions to freedom with experienced realities, well-put as the tensions between ‘Jeffersonian principles and Jeffersonian practice’ [Brogan 1999]. Powerful arguments have marked the inseparability of freedom and non-freedom (slavery) in many ‘Western’ cultural practices [Patterson 1991]. But, especially in the context of mainstream ‘developmentalist’ thinking, notions of freedom are strongly linked to the intentionality included in mainstream concepts. Thus, in the familiar context of the ‘developmental state’, the freedom to implement ‘correct’ policies is often argued to be limited by factors such as ‘state capacity’, and we indeed find contributions seeking to fit Vietnam into that particular framework [e.g. Painter 2003, 2005; Fritzen 2002]. In the mainstream, there is a tendency to view politics as an *inhibiter* that prevents realisation of good policy [Rodrik 1996].² Freedom – of the policy-maker - is thus constrained, and this may be seen as a bad thing. Others, feeling themselves to be on the receiving end of it all, may disagree.

Links between such fundamental issues of rationality have been made from very different perspectives, often stressing their problematic nature. Working within historical and East Asian studies perspectives, though informed by contemporary

² For an accessible study of the subjective reasons for instability of mainstream economic views, and so prescribed policy, see Lindauer and Pritchett 2002. Note that they characterise the present situation as being somewhat vacuous.

scepticisms over many of the rationalist pretensions of ‘modernity’ [Gillespie 1999; Fforde 2009] Woodside 2007 links elements of contemporary Vietnamese Communism to an argued centuries-old ‘bureaucratic scepticism’ of East Asian Mandarin traditions, using terms such as ‘proletarian mandarins’ [Woodside 1976].

Attempts have been made to fit differences in the literature into various configurations of state-society relations [Kerkvliet 2001], or into frameworks that stress the degree to which a particular analysis does or does not accept an open heuristics [de Vylder and Fforde 1996:246-253]. And so on. Yet it does not seem to me that there has been any clear convergence in how to answer the basic question of how best to understand Vietnamese politics.

Bearing in mind this lack of general agreement, I now examine and assess apparent characteristics - that is, characterisations - of Vietnamese politics. I start by examining terms commonly used. I then, bearing in mind tensions created by these terms and referring to what I will have argued they assume, contend that whilst the formal political system can indeed be said rather easily to continue to exhibit Leninist or neo-Soviet³ characteristics, it can as easily be argued that these co-exist – up to a point – with experiences of relatively autonomous social organisation increasingly observable since the demise of attempts at central-planning at the end of the 1980s. I argue, though, that arguments that such things are new are overdone, for such experiences may be dated back to the Cold War period [de Vylder and Fforde 1996; Fforde and Paine 1987]. This will enable me to pose fundamental questions about just why what we try to see through these literatures should appear as a ‘Cheshire Cat’, presenting an apparent opacity, enigmatic, mysterious and fading from view as we seek to come closer. I offer the hypothesis that this suggests that the Vietnamese polity has been in a state of unresolved definitional crisis since at least the 6th plenum of 1979.

Consider the following.

Scripts

Leninism?

The Vietnamese Communist Party self-identifies, as did many others, as ‘Marxist-Leninist’. What meanings does this have?

Examination of standard reference books offers characterisations of Leninism in somewhat general terms, implying rather than stating hostility to social organisation not directly penetrated and controlled by the Party. A ‘Dictionary of Politics’ [Ed. McClean 1996] argues (after Lukacs) that “the most distinctive feature of ‘Leninism’ was ... its revolutionary Realpolitik ... concrete, unschematic, unmechanistic, purely praxis-oriented ...” [Ed. McLean: 284] that was primarily focussed upon the acquisition of political power. A ‘Dictionary of Sociology’ [Ed. Marshall 1998] offers better clarity, stressing the importance of Lenin’s hostility to reformism, “seeking only an accommodation with capitalism that improves the workers’ lot” [Ed. Marshall 1998:365] leading to the idea that “revolutionary activity ... requires the ‘vanguard’ of a revolutionary party {that will} impose a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ [idem]. Finally a ‘Dictionary of Philosophy’ [Ed. Blackburn 1996] points to Lenin’s stress on a “moral absolutism whereby everything may be sacrificed to the revolution” [Ed.

³ I use this term to mark a distinction between the Soviet Union under Stalin and what followed him.

Blackburn: 216]. But such definitions say little directly about specific practices adopted by ruling Communist Parties self-identifying as Leninist.

To find references to the architecture of formal political institutions and their normative behaviour we may turn to discussions of the Soviet Union. Thus in Ed. McLean 1996 we find reference to Lenin's definition of Trade Unions as "conveyor belts of government and Party policy to the workers" [p.465]. Neither of the two other sources just mentioned refer to the Soviet Union. One may conclude that definitions of Leninism are somewhat de-linked from the textured architecture of formal political institutions discussed by authors such as Thayer and Porter.

So, what is being done when an analysis characterises Vietnamese politics as 'Leninist'?

Consider the following, from a recently published study:

"... the techniques of governance in Vietnam have been shifting from the former Leninist mode, in which the state monopolised power and recognised no society or realm outside itself" [Nguyen-Vo 2008:xiii]

This study offered empirical justification for its account, and was published in a serious academic series. Not surprisingly, its view contrasts with a range of significant opinions. These suggest instead that power was *not*, normatively, monopolised by a Vietnamese Communist state (unless one defines the term narrowly), and that if one chooses to use such terms, such a state *did* recognise autonomous behaviour 'outside itself'.

First, consider the formal doctrinal position, specifically the statement by Stalin himself that the 'law of value' legitimately operated in the Soviet Union [Stalin 1952]. By this he referred to various things, including revealingly the freedom to decide what to produce and how by a range of economic entities, such as collectivised farmers producing on their so-called 'private plots' for sale on local markets. Scholars such as Wadekin reported that these activities were extremely significant [Wadekin 1973]. Their equivalent in Vietnamese collectivised areas was the so-called '5% land' [Fforde 1989], and it is possible to theorise that they, as argued during the well-known 'Three contracts' dispute of the late 1960s [Gordon 1981], amounted to 'sprouts of capitalism in the socialist economy', a basis for the internal corruption of socialism and its demise (as, arguably, happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s [de Vylder and Fforde 1996]). Official reports showed that they generated a significant proportion of farmers' incomes [Fforde and Paine 1987].

Clearly, it would be easy to argue that such freedoms were limited, which is Stalin's point. Given the evidence, it is hard to suggest persuasively that they were insignificant. Indeed, scholars such as Bettelheim argued that the Soviet system should not (for such reasons – the 'existence of commodities') be called 'socialist' [Bettelheim 1971], and certain political opinions matched this by arguing (as had been done in the Soviet Union before the idea of 'private plots' was introduced) that such freedoms should be eliminated under alternative socialist projects, as Khmer and Chinese farmers found out during particularly ghastly periods in their histories.

Second, there is a strong strand of analysis, such as that by Kornai, which stresses the importance of choice, and incentives to mould that choice, within centrally-planned economies such as that of the Soviet Union [Kornai 1980]. This strand projects into work on Vietnam such as de Vylder and Fforde 1996 that argues for seeing change in

Vietnam as reflecting shifting patterns of choice, initially relatively supportive of the plan, then far less so.

These arguments indicate that it is unwise too glibly to treat ‘the state’ as an agent, something that is rather free to ‘do things’, for they suggest, contrary to Nguyen-Vo’s view cited above, that no range of powers was being ‘monopolised by the state’. Official doctrine was thus not ‘despotic’; it did not argue that the population was to be treated as choice-less ‘objects’, notwithstanding repression and violence. According to Stalin, collectivised farmers had rights to their private plots (for convincing evidence see Wadekin 1973).

A simple step back from this discussion shows quite clearly the common tendencies to universalism, in that terms are clearly meant to be meaningful *there* as well as *here*. Further, they invite analysts to use the labelling associated with dictionary entries (e.g. Leninism as translated by ‘*chu nghĩa Le-nin*’) as a basis for their accounts.

Neo-liberalism?

By contrast with references to ‘Leninist’, as I have already argued we can find common contemporary state policies and politics characterised as ‘neo-liberal’, and the term also used to refer to Vietnam. As with Leninism, though, use of the term is problematic.

Quoting Nguyen-Vo again:

“Governing for the neoliberal global market requires both a “realist” recognition and promotion of market freedom ... and measures of repression based upon notions of “the true” ...” [Nguyen-Vo 2008: xiv]

This may return us to the quotation from Dunn above. The allegation is that neo-liberal ideas and practices present references to an alleged stable reality whilst also including ways of energising themselves, through the presentation of these ideas as ‘truths’. It seems to me that Nguyen-Vo’s main research thrust is to argue that this apparent combination or duality can be mapped into a series of ‘sociological facts’, so that, to make a contrast across different scholarly contexts, examples can be presented to show where ‘Jeffersonian principles’ operate, and where, by contrast, we find ‘Jeffersonian practice’. The main empirical field is the treatment of prostitution, both encouraged and condemned – its encouragement reflects the ‘realist’ promotion of freedom, its condemnation reflects repression based upon assertions of ‘truth’. Nguyen-Vo then uses this distinction, mapping it into a ‘dual system of government’.

Yet, the argument is nigh categorical [compare Patterson 1991]. It appears that the statement of what governing for the global market requires is incapable of distinguishing between conditions in Vietnam and any government that appears to both support a market economy and limit freedoms. It appears impossible to imagine oneself observing (rather than dreaming of) a government that does not limit freedoms. Reference to practices such as assertion of rights of eminent domain would suggest that it is very hard to imagine an observable government that does not limit freedoms. Most normative notions of sovereignty imply that states be unrecognised unless they appear to have a certain degree of coercive power over their notional territories. Thus the category of freedom cannot consistently be conceptualised as unconstrained, for ‘promotion of market freedom’ is categorically linked to notions of ‘the state’ that entail limits to freedom. This supports the view, in my opinion, that Nguyen-Vo’s distinction collapses, for it is the asserted logic of the categories that

powers the nature of her distinction between ‘realist recognition’ and ‘notions of the true’, rather than empirics. But I may be wrong.

What the notion of ‘neo-liberal’ here seems to do, then, is two important things.

First, it refers simply to the mainstream belief-set of the rough period 1978-2008, as a point of reference.

Second, more importantly, it throws into the discussion the idea that such belief-sets are members of a particular set of change rationalities, with many members other than the neo-liberal, whose members seek to manage a core tension. This is the tension between pretensions to knowledge in a realist sense, which may be said to be beliefs that development can be managed because it is immanent and has known cause-effect relations within it, and problems in maintaining stability in such knowledges as contexts change [Cowen and Shenton 1996; Fforde 2009]. In more simple English, tensions between beliefs that we know what causes what and evidence that we do not.

But, and this is a big issue, whether Vietnamese cultures and attitudes to change belong to this set of change rationalities is an open question. Few people try to answer it. Yet, there are arguments that the East Asian mandarinal tradition, with its strong strand of scepticism and wariness of bureaucratic subjectivity, energises change rationalities differently [Woodside 2006]. From such a sceptical perspective, perhaps there is little difference, at the end of the day, between ‘realist’ positions and those that are ‘based upon notions of the truth’.

A fair conclusion would then be that caution should be used when using terms such as Leninist or neo-liberal in the Vietnamese context. I have already offered two very different reasons: first, the idea that from observing a divided literature one may conclude (though one does not have to) that there are shared untestable assumptions at the level of the research project, and that these may well be related to assumptions of stable ontology – that words refer to the same things in different contexts; second, the idea that the particular ways in which these terms are used embody particular assumptions that may be challenged. These are very different criticisms.

I turn now to examine evidence, how it may be used, and what it may imply about notions of a Vietnamese state.

The issue of ontology

Why should it be necessary to point out that questions of ‘ontology’ are important, and if ignored may lead to spurious and unstable beliefs? My basic issue here is that if, as I hypothesise, since at least the late 1970s there has been a definitional crisis in Vietnamese politics, then analyses that impose categories will read meanings into the situation that reflect observers’ varying prior assumptions and beliefs.

Take the example of the politics of rural development. Much conventional wisdom treats this in terms of state-society relations. This then permits and facilitates treating ‘public’ and ‘private’ as separate domains, and underpins views of change that assume that policy is best seen as something separate from its ‘object’: in this sense, development is then something that is ‘done’, and arguments about correct development and correct policy more easily linked to ‘one size fits all’ thinking, with its assumption that there are knowable and universal solutions to the ‘problem of development’. An example of such a study is the World Bank’s attack on ‘bureaucrats in business’ [World Bank 1995; compare Duckett 2001 and Dic Lo 1999 for China and Fforde 2007a for Vietnam].

An extensive literature may alert the student to ways in which such positions have been challenged. Almond argues [Almond 1988] that ‘state-society’ analytical frameworks were abandoned because of problems in sorting out, empirically, what was ‘the state’ and what was ‘society’. Mitchell 1991 argues that the ‘state-society’ boundary is always blurred – a ‘state’ is thus ‘epiphenomenal’ and an effect of more fundamental processes, for him ‘techniques of rule’.

The already-mentioned work by Levine and Zervos 1993 is now worth revisiting. They examined cross-country regression analyses, testing whether there were indeed robust relations globally between ‘policy’ and ‘outcomes’, and finding almost none. Kenny and Williams 2001 then argued that this result was caused by a choice and use of standardised categories: that those typically used to generate data on ‘policy’ and ‘outcomes’ globally entailed assumptions of ontological and epistemological universalism (implying that it could be assumed that sampling was from a single population). Fforde 2005 rehearsed these arguments, looking at citations of Levine and Zervos and arguing that the majority – the mainstream – had failed to re-examine the core assumptions highlighted by Kenny and Williams. This research suggests that the mainstream view, arguing that what works *there* is known to work *here*, is not only denied by its own data, but generally unwilling to admit it [Fforde 2005].

What may evidence show us?

My position is in part negative, in essentialist terms. Thus, I do not advance arguments as to exactly what the Vietnamese political system is. I think I know what the central issue is – the lack of stable ontological definition in the Vietnamese polity – but I do not assert what this should mean in analytical terms.

What I do try to do is to argue that a central failing of the existing literature stems from shared uncritical conceptualisations, at the core of which is the idea that the Vietnamese state, as a term, has any ontological stability. To do this I now examine various aspects of current Vietnamese politics, which illuminate this point from different perspectives.

I start by showing how one can indeed argue for the continued presence of Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics in contemporary Vietnamese politics.

First, I examine information on linguistic practices.⁴

I report on normative procedures for Party management of local elections and I contend that common references to grass-roots communities are better translated as references to the base of an apparat. Similarly, statements about state ‘policy’ are better viewed as attempted concretisations of Party intentions. ‘State’ and ‘community’, in formal political practice, may thus easily be made to appear to refer to Leninist or neo-Soviet implementation mechanisms. But this conclusion relies on crucial assumptions, centrally that ‘the Party’, through ‘the state’, is indeed something whose agency allows it to act in ways that reflect that agency, and so possesses a certain ontological stability. I then shift focus, arguing that notions of ‘policy’ are conceptually, in such discourses, inseparable from assumptions of the existence of stable relationships between the term ‘the state’ and its objects – what policy operates upon. And I question whether the evidence we have permits us to conclude that such relationships are observable.

⁴ This is an area where reference should be made to the work of others – eg Heryanto 1995; Rigg 1999.

Second, therefore, and in deliberate contrast, I examine evidence for notions of policy in Vietnam, and whether they are or are not consistent with mainstream views, specifically the notion that, through the ‘construction of subjects’, policy can and should be developed in ways familiar to the developmental mainstream, which stresses, consistent with mainstream change rationalities, the importance of policy in securing desired and desirable development outcomes [Fforde 2009].

To do so, I choose the ‘policy-question’ of poverty. I report views that further reductions in rural poverty will require attention to institutions rather than increased resources, and link this to the idea, common in this area, of the need for formal freedoms of association so as to project poverty issues into policy discussion. I argue that mainstream discussions should expect the lack of such freedoms to position suitable policies beyond the reach of the formal political system. This leads to a conceptual tangle, in that it is not clear how this may be resolved, yet Vietnamese development performance, as officially measured, remains good. Conceptualisations of development that give a central role, in terms of intentionality and agency, to a state, then confront a grave tension – does it, or does it not, matter? And, if it does matter, just how?

The paper then starts to develop its own and contrasting argument, which comes down to the notion that there are understandable reasons why applications of the term ‘state’ in Vietnam are problematic, an issue that, if taking a realist stance, would link to the hypothesis of an enduring crisis of political self-definition dating from 1979.

It notes reports of political contestation within Vietnam. It points to evidence that Vietnamese officials are concerned about lack of coherence in the apparat, that they articulate views of the apparent weakness of hierarchy and official authority and link this to explanations of corruption. And it describes how informal farmers’ groups appear to be creating alternatives to Party-dominated structures in the rural areas, often supported by local officials, and how elections at village level seem to increasingly breach official norms, with their apparently Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics.

I then present my basic argument, asserting that the ‘Cheshire Cat’ image gained from an examination of the existing literature, with its wide variation in conclusions and analytical frameworks, is suggestive. Shared uncritical assumptions most importantly include variants of ontological universalisms, so that notions of the ‘state’, and related terms such as ‘policy’, are easily shown to be highly problematic. In orthodox realist terms, what they seek to refer to simply does not exist. As Dunn, Almond and Mitchell (cited above) argued, in scholarly terms, this may not be surprising. What is perhaps more interesting is what this may mean to the rest of us.

The ‘grass-roots’?

What does the standard terminology suggest about relations between rulers and ruled, between population and Party/state apparat?

In the late 1990s rural Vietnam saw considerable unrest. The Party apparently responded in various ways, and central importance is often given to the push for ‘grass-roots democracy’ already mentioned [GoV 2003]. A common interpretation is that the intention was not to change formal practice in terms of Party control over selection for leadership positions through the VFF, but to require local cadres to take greater care. These measures formally required consultation with the population in sensitive areas such as the mobilisation of funds from them for local development

projects. The focus was upon the behaviour of officials within the apparatus and their relations with the population. Much formal policy, and discussions with donors, referred to ‘grass-roots democracy’.

The Vietnamese word ‘*co so*’ is usually translated as ‘grass-roots’, for example in the so-called ‘Decree on grass-roots democracy’ [GoV 2003; Duong Nhut Minh n/d]. It refers to the lowest levels of the apparatus (*bo may*), and in the rural areas this conventionally means its sub-structures (Party, State and Mass Organisations (MOs)) at commune level and below. These are not, the language implies, meant to be controlled by the local population. The Decree is thus largely to do, not with popular power over such structures exercised through mechanisms such as elections, but with oversight as decisions implemented via those structures (such as ad hoc taxation) should be popularly approved. Therefore, it creates tensions if one translates ‘*co so*’ as ‘grass-roots’, for doing so may lead to an assumption of popular political control.

The lowest levels of implementation discussed in program documents refer to MOs and ‘*co so*’ Party/state structures, which are thus revealed as the ‘front’ between the apparatus and the population; in other words, they are the lowest levels of the apparatus.

Any election to formal leadership positions at the ‘grass-roots’ is, we read in standard texts, in principle subject to methods that appear Leninist or neo-Soviet. Thus, procedures appear intended to ensure the Party remains in control. Consider arrangements for Party control over ‘*co so*’ elections in one province in the mid 2000s. At the village level, defined as a ‘self-managing unit of the local population’, the leader is directly elected.⁵ In different regions the term used here for village (*thon*) maps across to different local terminologies (eg *ban, xom, doi* ...et al).⁶ At levels above the village, the formal political structure, reported in almost all contexts, is that the Party works through a system of directly-elected People’s Councils that elect the People’s Committees that constitute the formal leadership of the local state.

Consider the prescribed electoral tasks that rely upon the notionally Party-controlled Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF):

First, planning and deciding on a date for the election, and establishing the Election Group. This is led by the head of the VFF Working Group (WG) (*Ban cong tac*) which is made up of Party and MO representatives.

Second, organisation of ‘consultations’ - the VFF WG prepares a draft list of candidates (Step 1), this is then (Step 2) presented to a Meeting or Meetings (if the village is large) of electors (in the village) chaired by the VFF WG head, the village Party Secretary and the village head. At this meeting electors may propose additional candidates. Finally the VFF WG fixes the final list with reference to a list of standards required of candidates.

⁵ This section draws upon a collection of documents prepared by the grass roots democracy management committee of a province in central Vietnam - ‘*Van ban huong dan thuc hien mot so qui trinh ve qui che dan chu co so*’ (Guiding documents for implementing some rules for grass-roots democracy) 1/2006.

⁶ It does not seem useful given the argument here to go into great detail about regional differences, though these are significant. One that is particularly prone to trip up people is the ways in which the ‘village’ level may be redefined, leading to variation, such as in expected size. This, yet again, is an example of the perils of ‘bureaucratic subjectivism’ [Woodside 2006].

Third, the election itself, which can either be through hand-raising or through closed ('*kin*' – this does not mean 'secret') voting. Voting involves striking out all but one name. 'Writing-in' of candidates is invalid.

Finally, the Chairman of the People's Committee issues the formal decision on the result of elections.

Other, also public, materials⁷ show the general principles being applied.

'The village head ... {is} under the leadership of the Party cell (*chi bo*) of the village or urban group, or of that of the commune if the village ... has no Party cell.' [Understanding...:10]

These materials confirm that elections are to be arranged by a Committee of 7 selected by the WG of the VFF and made up of:

... representatives of the Party organisation and MOs (Youth, Women, Farmers, and Retired Soldiers) of the village [idem.:15].

This Committee presents a list of candidates to a village meeting (quorate at 50% of either citizens or their representatives (if the village has more than 100 families)); this list can be added to by 'self-proposed' candidates [idem: 16].

Crucially, as a protection against 'community capture', village leaders may be made subject to a confidence vote by the WG [idem: 23].

Implications that may be drawn from such procedures are interesting. Consider the following, from Vietnamese researchers:

Many research projects have shown that as new democratic systems emerge, for their successful and sustainable operation the following are necessary:

- Sufficient power to really have an impact immediately upon the political system and development programs
- Sufficient financial resources to carry out their central responsibilities
- Sufficient administrative management capacity to carry out their central responsibilities
- Existence of a believable system of responsibility-bearing that guarantees that politicians elected by the population have responsibility to them and that public officials are responsible to elected politicians.

[Nguyen van Sau and Ho van Thuong 2005: 632]

Clearly, the implication here is that the formal electoral procedures I have just discussed are far from those of a democratic system as the two authors understand it.

Conclusions

What does this imply?

On the one hand, it would appear risky to conclude that references to the 'grass-roots' are to communities. Rather, it would seem easier to conclude that such references are then to the lowest levels of the apparat. Such issues of language and practice deny the validity of various assertions. It should not be assumed that elections 'are real',⁸ nor

⁷ '*Tim hieu ve to chuc va hoat dong cua thon, to dan pho*' (*Understanding the organisation and operation of the village and urban groups*), Hanoi: NXB Lao dong – Xa hoi (Labour and Society Publishing House) 2006. '*He thong van ban phap luat ve Cong khai tai chinh va dan chu co so*' (*Legal documents on open financing and democracy at the base*), Hanoi: NXB Tai chinh (Finance Publishing House) 2005. Both are sold openly and bought easily.

⁸ Discussion of such elections with villagers and others can be interesting. From personal experience two useful 'snap' questions are: (about the leadership of formal political structures) – 'according to

credence be given uncritically to views that development practices in Vietnam meet the norms of mainstream development, especially those of community-based engagement, empowerment, and rights-based approaches. Examination of such normative documents thus presents evidence that contrasts with any impression that the term ‘grass-roots’ (the ‘*co so*’), as used in formal documents, should be identified with communities. This evidence is thus consistent with ideas that formal Vietnamese politics in this area still exhibits Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics.

On the other hand, it is obvious that these documents need not be interpreted as telling us who village leaders are, what their sources of authority are, and so on. I present below evidence that the procedures just discussed are unreliable guides to how these questions may be answered. ‘Bureaucratic scepticism’ would suggest to us that such documents do not necessarily describe what happens in many villages, and so do not tell us how things ‘really are’. They do not, therefore, necessarily mean that the political system should be said to be Leninist.

I turn now to look at interactions with aid donors. To do so, I need first to discuss relevant terminology.

Policy

I will now discuss issues of ‘policy’ and how these relate to links between formal Vietnamese politics and a state as an intended site of agency. What is said to be ‘policy’? How is this said to impact upon developmental outcomes? My main reason for doing this is that, in the discourses generally relevant here, a notion of ‘policy’ links intentionality to agency – it frames description and proscription of what is ‘done’ by a ‘state’.

In the Soviet Union, it was often said that ‘the Party ruled through the state’, and the top leadership position in the Party was a far more important political position than the state Premiership. This poses useful questions - Does the Vietnamese government have primacy in terms of political power and authority? What is the meaning of ‘policy’, given that in usual English developmental usage this refers to the intentions of the country’s dominant political entity [Fforde 2009]?

Like the term ‘grass-roots’ (*co so*), terms such as ‘policy’ need to be treated with care. Language is, again, revealing. The term usually translated as ‘policy’ (*chinh sach*) may be glossed as a ‘document of the government or authority’. It has narrower semantic range than ‘policy’, and, of some importance, lacks reference to an agency bearing sovereign responsibility for the regulated public realm.⁹ More importantly, other terms refer to Party statements, such as ‘*chu truong*’, ‘*duong loi*’ (Line) and ‘*quan diem*’. ‘Policy’ (*chinh sach*) is then usually explained as being a concretisation (*cu the hoa*) of these Party statements of intention. This may help explain why co-called ‘policy departments’ (*Vu Chinh sach*) in Vietnamese Government Ministries are small, as they have mainly been responsible for coordinating the drafting of policy documents, rather than devising policy per se.

structure’ (*theo co cau?*), or ‘introduce 3 elect 23?’ (*dua 3 bau 2?*). Further, violation of the norms just presented may itself be discussed, and elections that do violate these norms said to be more ‘active’ (*chu dong*) – see below.

⁹ By ‘sovereign’ here I refer to a sense that there is not imagined to be some political power that has superior powers and/or authority.

Such evidence suggests that classic ideas of the importance of ‘policy’ to development will lead to dialogue with the wrong Vietnamese organisations. In the mid 2000s, for example, donor documents offer a rather clear account of what had happened to the ‘Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy’ (CPRGS) that was developed in the very late 1990s and early 2000s. The CPRGS was shown up as the clothing that had been placed around a large World Bank (WB) lending program so as to make it appear consistent with the Bank’s new global strategy under the Clinton administration in the US of presenting programs as locally-owned, ‘client driven’ and, in the context of largely-unchanged economic thinking, nevertheless ‘pro-poor’ and so ‘comprehensive’ (the ‘Poverty Reduction Strategies’). This involved arguments that the counterparts to the WB in its discussions were indeed the core agencies of local developmentalism – Vietnam’s political rulers. Yet, after the lending program was signed, competitors such as the IMF pointed out that the CPRGS had ‘in fact’ been treated by the GoV as separate from its own planning system. Evidence was soon presented to argue that important parts of the Vietnamese Party/state were unaware of it and its contents [World Bank 2006a passim; also Conway 2004].

Let us now look in greater detail at an example of policy.

Policy, the politics of development and poverty in Vietnam as a ‘policy-question’

Aid

Western aid, both official and INGO, started to return at the start of the 1990s (after the large-scale termination of Western aid in the late 1970s only Sweden and Finland remained). Donor concerns engaged with local interests, and there were no major disputes. By the mid 2000s aid flows were substantial.

Donors rapidly gave great attention to resourcing exposure to contemporary thinking [Dapice 1991], and it seems highly likely that core contemporary ideas of development practice had by the mid-late 1990s been presented, discussed and trialled. It seems also clear that it is at the very least not obvious that these were adopted, rather the opposite. For example, had early 1990s developmental orthodoxy been implemented, we would not have seen the continued high share of SOEs in GDP, nor the lack of support for informal farmers’ groups, nor the lack of a shift in the meaning of ‘policy’ to focus developmental agency upon the Ministries of the Vietnamese state. In a nutshell, it would by now be far harder to point to Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics of formal politics.

Established mainstream aid practice in Vietnam, both official and INGO, I think it is fair to say, generally worked *within* the norms of the formal overt political system as donors interfaced with it. As a result, much of the donor and donor-sponsored literature exhibited a certain theatricality. It tried to deal with tensions between standard development tenets, such as the importance of popular empowerment and participation, and official normative statements that defined, for example, ‘grass-roots’ organisations as local authorities and MOs. There is I think very limited evidence that donors sought to engage with farmers’ informal groups, which grew in extent and quality from at least the early 1990s [Fforde 2008]. See also Nguyen and Stewart 2005 on environmental policy.

Freedom of association was a significant irritant. Dominant pluralist and neo-liberal practices entail beliefs that such a Leninist or neo-Soviet political system would be

relatively good at mediating between ‘insider’ interests, yet only when pro-active comparably sensitive to the concerns of ‘outsider’ groups. Therefore, there should be concerns in situations where – so it was thought - associated political interests would have no right to form and attempts to do so resisted by trying to push them, consistent with expressions of normative political ideas (such as those discussed above regarding village-level elections), into MO structures. Thus, it could be feared that ‘outsider’ groups lacked formal political power, in the sense of the ability to generate policy that responded to their exclusion. Therefore, we can learn from an examination of analyses of poverty, its changing causes and therefore how these tensions input to poverty as a ‘policy question’.

Poverty as a ‘policy-question’ in the mid 2000s

Poverty as a ‘policy-question’ is interesting because in the mid 2000s significant donors changed their views of the causes of poverty in Vietnam, and so by implication how poverty as a ‘policy-question’ should be resolved. Consider the following:

Sources of agricultural productivity gains are shifting. Past growth was largely based on bringing additional physical factors of production into use, from land and irrigation water to labor and fertilizer, and policy shifts in incentives that came through land allocation and titling. Technical change and productivity increases made a less important contribution, but moving forward these relative roles are expected to reverse, as physical expansion of factor use is reaching limits.

However, these past sources have lost momentum prior to the possible new sources having picked up pace.

{This} puts a heavy emphasis on greater success with agricultural research, extension and technology transfer, as well as farmers being able to make (and adjust) efficient use of resources in response to market opportunities. [World Bank 2006b 1 p. vii]

This says that further rural development will not be based upon increased resources, but from improvements in institutions: the ways in which resources are used. And this has implications for the desired pattern of social change, likely involving ‘the political’, and so things start to get interesting.

There is evidence that elements within the Party at times paid great attention (though often not publicised) to any political and social implications of a market economy in the rural areas. Thus the late 1980s and early 1990s saw Party-sponsored investigations that focussed upon power relations in the rural areas, land concentration and the possibility of re-emergent landlordism [Le Van Toan, 1991; Nguyen Sinh Cuc, 1991; Nguyen Van Tiem, 1993; MOLISA 1990]. On occasion in the 1990s there were reports that instructions had been issued to some local party cells to pressure those acquiring rights over land; and state credit had been pushed into the Mekong delta, arguably aiming to hinder emergence of potentially hostile political forces.

Paralleling the World Bank’s views already cited, other donor research also started to push into qualitative areas associated with discussions of exclusion, local power structures and so on. Bearing in mind the importance such change rationalities usually attach to the idea that interventions should be based upon known cause-effect relations, it is striking how the discussion then started to report the lack of suitable data. This was despite (or perhaps because of) evidence that from the early 1990s donors had financed a series of expensive and large *quantitative* surveys into rural conditions that has underpinned much published research. This program has been criticised (eg Akram-Lodi 2005), often to do with ways in which the ‘policy-question’ had early been posed, and answered, in terms that encouraged certain research paths,

specifically the creation of quantitative data, and discouraged others, to do with issues of exclusion and disempowerment.

Political questions can be seen entering these discussions. Consider:

Although poverty is multifaceted, the lack of data prevents us from covering all of its dimensions including ... *participation in decision making and social inclusion*. [Poverty Update Final p.18; stress added]

The nature of the data that had been collected was for many thus increasingly felt to be unsuitable. This would limit analyses of the changing nature of poverty, with the causes of rural economic growth thus felt to be unknown and so the construction of suitable interventions problematic [e.g. Le Thuc Duc et al 2006].¹⁰ For donors, therefore, the 'policy-question' has thus evolved away from early 1990s positions that could rather easily ignore political aspects of development. This risks bringing back the tensions created, as I have argued, by evidence (albeit rather inconclusive) that Vietnam's formal political system had Leninist or neo-Soviet characteristics.

Arguments about whether this meant that Vietnamese politics should or should not be analysed as Leninist or neo-Soviet did not easily protect donors from pressure to confront evidence that the formal political system shifted 'policy agency' away from their counterparts - state organs - and that it is a big 'ask' to assume that local official political structures - their usual counterparts in the rural areas - were identifiable with communities. The quote from the World Bank shows how poverty as a 'policy-question' increasingly appeared to require institutional change if Vietnam's development success were to continue. Yet, it is far from clear just how 'policy dialogue' could or would proceed, given, for example, the idea that 'policy' (*chinh sach*) was no more than a concretisation of Party thinking.

Another interesting aspect to the question of 'institutions' in securing further rural progress is the question of village leaders.

In local politics, there is evidence that I discuss further below implying that these positions can be and were contested. 'Realist' positions may then ask pertinent empirical questions, formally or informally: What proportion of village leaders are not Party members?¹¹ What proportion of village leaders, whilst Party members, are not appointed through 'apparatus politics' but by community-based processes?¹² What proportion of communes have political structures dominated by local communities, rather than the apparatus?¹³ What is the civil society leadership density, as measured for example by the incidence of informal farmers' groups (see below)?

Increasingly, developmental thinking, given its own analysis, thus tended to find itself confronting a need to seek interventions that would address social issues such as those of exclusion. 'Politics' thus risked coming back in. Categories that arise here are often those of exclusion, linked to ethnicity, and class. Again, we find empirical tensions.

¹⁰ There is of course a large literature arguing that this 'blinding' of research was inherent and to be expected [Escobar 1995].

¹¹ To quote an informant: "The Party tried to put one of their people into the village leadership, but nobody listened to them, so now the position is held by a non-Party member the people trust".

¹² 'Community capture' of formal structures can be found in a range of histories of rural Vietnam [Vickerman 1986; Fford 1989].

¹³ To quote an informant: "The Party used to mess us around but now we have pushed back and in the commune and the district things are not too bad".

Some focus upon ethnicity [e.g. Baulch Ed 2002:1]; others upon the question of class. Thus:

It appears that processes of peasant class differentiation are underway, with the apparent emergence of a stratum of rich peasants with relatively larger landholdings, relatively larger quantities of capital stock, relatively greater recourse to hired labour-power, and larger yields per unit of land. These rich peasants, some of whom may be in the process of becoming capitalist farmers, and who might best be described as proto-capitalists, could be set alongside the great mass of the small peasantry, with relatively smaller landholdings, relatively smaller quantities of capital stock, relatively lesser recourse to hired labour-power and lower yields per unit of land. Sitting below these two peasant classes are the rural landless, whose numbers are swelling as the agrarian transition proceeds [Akram-Lodhi 2005: 107].

Not unsurprisingly, given the strong support for markets as a basis for progress, Akram-Lodhi's sense that land-loss is significant and something to be worried about has been strongly contested, usually by arguing that those without land are better off than those with it [e.g. Ravallion and van der Walle 2006].

But what is the evidence, in this 'realist' world, suggesting? Since the quantitative surveys can be analysed to argue that farming families' incomes vary systematically even when they have the same endowments (land, etc), this indicates variation in welfare based upon social position: in other words, that exclusion and inclusion are central to such explanations of poverty. When combined with the view that the nature of rural growth has changed qualitatively, and that new policies have not yet arisen, focus is inevitably shifted to questions of institutions, and so politics. New policies, in these discussions, appear to require political change since a shift from extensive to intensive growth requires a change in policy focus from resources and towards institutions, and institutions are, in this logic, to do with power and so politics. This arguably comes down to a search for agency – a state that can 'do something'.

How, then, may such change take place? It is perhaps natural, and elements of the literature surveyed at the start of this article may be said to do this, to juxtapose a past 'Leninism' with a future (or even present) situation that better meets mainstream norms, such as freedom of association, policy rationality and inclusion. In this way progress is constructed as political reform. But, as I am trying to argue, both the starting point and where things may move, tend to involve uncritical application *here* of concepts said to work *there*. And this has not led to agreement or convergence in the academic literature. Aid donors may then start to feel they are working in a vacuum.

Contestation

Close-up examination of the situation often leads to application of the notion of 'contestation' – the idea that various social forces challenge political norms and so become part of change. Yet such frameworks are often troubled, in part because it is not clear whether their categories reflect stable ontologies.

The reader may recall my arguments above that Soviet political doctrine may be interpreted to argue, not that no realm outside the central political authority was to be recognised, but rather, and to the contrary, that recognition of such realms was substantive and integrated into dogma [Stalin 1952]. I offered the example of the so-called 'private plots' (the '5 % land' equivalent in Vietnam) and referred also to accounts of the origins of the Vietnamese market economy within SOEs [Fforde 2007a]. This is a fruitful area in academic terms and continues to develop – see for example Mattner 2004. Note how Wischermann 2003 argues that pressure from

within formal structures helped to widen the scope of such realms (in his work, urban NGOs) and how these appear to contrast with informal farmers' groups apparently operating well outside formal structures (see below and Fforde 2008).

An obvious field on which to discuss contestation involves questions of hierarchy and leadership, to which I now turn. Here we can observe changing notions of leadership.

Leadership

The term 'cadre' (*can bo*) is often used in Vietnam to refer, inter alia, to those occupying leadership positions in the Party/state. The term usually used for leadership is the same as that used to refer to the Party's position as laid down in the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (*lanh dao*). The formal political system may then be read as intended to give leadership cadres political power and authority, and this may be seen as contested. One interesting aspect of this is that responses to apparent challenges (to formal hierarchies that one would expect to be valued highly) are often mild.

I focus upon two areas: village (*thon*)-level elections whose formal normative procedures have already been discussed, and informal farmers' groups. Both of these issues offer evidence for changes in the balance or spread of meanings commonly attached to the term 'leadership' (*lanh dao*).

Let us return to the issue of 'grass-roots' democracy. I argued above that the terminology is better translated as referring to change 'beyond' the apparatus, by understanding 'grass-roots' as referring to the lowest levels of the apparatus, not what lies beyond it.

Informally, there is evidence that there is considerable contestation of the position of village leader, widely interpreted in terms of the failure to implement the norms discussed above. But in what sense is this a failure?

Do Duy Thuong, a senior official of the central level of the VFF, offers an account of recent history in the election of village leaders [Le Kien 2009]. Thuong reports that organisation of direct elections of village leaders throughout the country started in 1998, after Order # 30 of the Politburo on 'enhancing democracy at the base'. What was meant to happen? The picture is at first very similar to that above.

First of all, the Work Group of the VFF was to put forward their list of candidates, whilst asking for the opinion of the Party Cell. The next step was to call the people to a meeting to discuss standards/criteria (*tieu chuan*) and introduce the list for election. Finally the VFF Work Group met again to certify (*an dinh*) those elected. [Le Kien: 2]

This matches the description of the formal system I gave earlier. But things, Thuong reported, immediately became complicated. The legal position formally allowed for additions to the VFF Work Group list, so, whilst it was initially intended that the Group choose one and then add one more, things could go wrong, for if the popular additions were suitable (*xung dang*) then use of the Group's right to exclude them could be risky:

If the VFF was not skilful in resolving these issues then they could be accused of being 'partial', with bad effects on public opinion. [Le Kien: 2].

Thuong then reports that, especially at so-called ‘hot points’ (*diem nong*)¹⁴ the population simply refused to accept village leaders chosen in this way by the VFF Work Group. The compromise was to let them elect their own leaders, and then the population would be peaceful (*yen dan*).¹⁵

This compromise appears to have been politically feasible from the start of the introduction of Order # 30, and to have increased in extent. Thus, even if the VFF Work Group (or its masters) was successful in getting its candidate elected, then if he or she did not do their job well they would fail to be re-elected.

It is the development of popular democratic rights that is the biggest thing. Through a direct selection of the village leader like this people come to believe that the position is very important. They see the village leader as somebody of the people, who works for the people, and they monitor them directly, so if he or she is not ‘their’s’ (*vi dan*) then they will removed (*mien nhiem, bai nhiem*). If he or she works well then they will be re-elected at the next elections; if they do not work well they will be struck out (*gat ra*). [Le Kien: 2]

It is worth remarking that this interview was publicly available and appeared in no sense contentious. This suggests (within a ‘contestation’ approach) a picture of an ongoing process of contestation, made up of a host of local political interactions, which had two main elements: first, village leaders were increasingly elected in ways that granted them local political authority by virtue of their election rather than apparat politics; second, that these processes were often accommodated, reminiscent of how the Stalinist Soviet Union had accommodated farmers’ private plots. But we need to ask the question – how reasonable is it to move from this comparison to a sense that this reflects residual Leninism?

A second example of contestations of leadership notions can be found in research on informal farmers’ groups [Fforde 2008]. Leninist or neo-Soviet norms would argue that these should be brought under the umbrella of the relevant MO, here the Farmers’ Union.

Evidence suggests that these elements of Vietnamese rural society were by the 2000s well developed, extensive and robust:

In a village of around 100 families, one could expect easily to find 6 or 8 credit IFGs with 10 members each, perhaps as much as dozen labour IFGs of various types, 2 or 3 artisanal IFGs and, depending on the situation, ‘quasi-public asset’ IFGs. This suggests that there are at least a dozen people acting as IFG leaders, soundly entrenched in these local informal organisations, negotiating, convincing, winning and losing arguments ... The quality of IFG leadership was usually impressive. [Fforde 2007b:37]

By contrast with formal central positions, local commune Party Secretaries were observed to see IFGs as a valuable part of local development, simply passing by them ‘every 3 to 6 months’ to see what was happening and not pushing them into MOs. Overall, this research suggested that these robust elements of Vietnam’s rural society were uncontentious, positive, and had largely arisen through self-empowerment despite opposition from the Party and lack of donor support [Fforde 2008].¹⁶

¹⁴ This term, I think, first came into relatively public use after the 1997 rural unrest, and referred to troubled places.

¹⁵ It would seem very likely that use of this Sino-Vietnamese term may, for those so inclined, be linked to the deep historical and East Asian roots discussed in Woodside 2006.

¹⁶ Ed Foerster and Apel 2004 argued, perhaps unwittingly, that there was already much de facto community-based land management in Vietnam, whilst noting an absence of discussion of community titling from relevant donor documents.

Conclusions

This limited evidence thus suggests a picture of contestation processes that, occurring at a certain pace, appear to contrast with Leninist or neo-Soviet norms. Further, they also appear to be recognised (though by whom and why is not clear). Yet there is, and this points needs to be stressed, no clear evidence that formal normative statements ('policy'), lead change. Policy agency, with its temporal logic, is thus not very evident. Rather, in stark contrast to mainstream change rationality, policy as viewed through normative documents often presents, as we have seen, as conservative. Such a contradictory position denies easy application of standard ideas of agency to a Vietnamese 'state'.

Cheshire Cat, Vietnamese mouse?

I argued initially that many if not most standard analytical frameworks applied at the level of individual research projects somewhat uncritically project ontological assumptions into their analyses. These usually assume universalism and may so engage with the wider disciplines and sub-disciplines within which scholars tend to operate. I then looked quickly at the literature and argued that it showed much disagreement at the level of the research project, and indeed tended to operate with relatively universalistic ontological assumptions.

I then discussed two particular examples – applications of terms associated with Leninism and neo-Stalinism, and arguments about neo-liberalism, to illustrate this point. I next examined evidence about principles intended to manage local elections, and showed that these suggested that conceptualising '*co so*' as referring to the grass-roots was problematic, presenting a challenge to communitarian views but also supporting ideas that Leninist thinking was designed to prevent the expression of a popular will through elections. I argued that it was misleading to translate '*co so*' as grass-roots. But I then suggested that this did necessarily imply that in this area Vietnamese politics was Leninist, as the argument did not refer to practice. To read this into the texts would have been to assume that the Party had sufficient agency to ensure that its normative texts were, usually, a guide to what actually happened. Clearly, such a reading may be thought as encouraged by many common preconceptions and analytical assumptions.

I then moved on to examine use of the term 'policy' as an expression of the agency of a Vietnamese 'state', and showed that this was also problematic, in a nutshell because 'the Party rules, not the state'. I developed this idea further by examining a specific 'policy-question' and showed that this important area of interaction between aid donors and Vietnamese 'realities' also showed by now familiar problems.

The discussion so far thus suggested that mainstream accounts of Vietnamese politics, and of matters closely related to Vietnamese politics, appear to share common difficulties, arguably at root related to their shared assumptions, specifically those that say that their terms and associated assumptions may without too much difficulty be applied in Vietnamese contexts. Throughout the exposition I tended to relate these to the view that the central issue is the so-called 'ontological stability' of the Vietnamese state. This means to me that it is such assumptions that tend to lead to the sense, on reading their arguments, that the Vietnamese state is, if it exists, enigmatic, mysterious and, on closer examination, inclined to fade away, like Lewis Carol's 'Cheshire Cat'. This, then, is my explanation for the state of the literature – a series of

published research projects, each consistent with certain rules, but mostly inconsistent with groups of other research projects within the overall research program.

I should now argue, more constructively, what I think this implies and how better accounts may be obtained.

Arguments about political or state agency and related concepts such as policy involve rather simple assumptions about a fundamental political issue – sovereignty. It is notions of sovereignty, surely, that underlie the beliefs of mainstream change rationalities that change is to do with action, and the idea that, so far as I can see, a central agency in this, a state, acts through policy to realise intentionality, whether directly or indirectly. Leninist states, if they exist, like the developmentalist ones (if they exist), are conceived in such ways. They are all meant to do things – albeit very differently. So are neo-liberal ones.

Whilst there seem to be inescapable links between notions of leadership, policy and politics, these links, equally clearly, can be and are understood in different ways. The question may very easily be asked – what is leadership for? If understanding it is to do with understanding power, then clear answers to such questions would suggest that we have a clear conceptualisation of important aspects of power and authority. But the evidence I have presented argues that there are considerable tensions involved in categorising Vietnamese politics.

I am arguing that this is itself very indicative.

Indeed, this paper has tried to argue, negatively, that whilst it is possible to identify various characteristics of Vietnamese politics, these are capable of multiple interpretations, so things are not at all clear, and within the academic literature there is little agreement. Perhaps this should mainly evoke aspects of what Dunn may have meant, in that we are observing precisely a lack of clarity in just how ideas of the state as ‘sociological fact’, and as ‘political proposal’ may fit together. Nguyen-Vo 2008 indeed argues that such tensions are inherent, manifest in a dualistic application of state power, conceivable both in terms of coercion, based upon ‘truth definitions’, and in terms of the ‘realisms’ – policy logics - of modern social science. I tried to argue that this view relied upon the internal logic of the categories used, so that conclusions were tautological, ‘driven by the theory’. Yet the extent to which such accounts should themselves be taken as ‘sociological facts’, or as ‘normative propositions’, is, I think, unclear.

At another level, we may read Dunn as implying that it is precisely in local political cultures that particular ways of closing the circle may be found. It is only through interrogating local understandings that valid definitions, in terms of local politics, may be accessed. Perhaps political order, following Dunn’s scepticism, relies upon such authoritative characterisation (rather than, ‘reasonable’, ‘scholarly’, ‘academic’ and so on - if we care to think of such areas as distinct, founded upon persuasion rather than authority); if so, its absence suggests that such authority is absent.

This can be rather easily done, so long as the locals are themselves clear, for those tensions that arise from a failure adequately to answer some definitional questions are I think also felt deep within both the Vietnamese bureaucracy and amongst the wider population. Citation of the former is not hard.

Consider Pham Hai 2005, a large Vietnamese study from within the planning ministry, which looked at ‘losses’ in investment and construction projects receiving state budgetary funding. General opinion, the report stated, was that these were

around one third of such activities. The main reasons were the failure to follow existing regulations:

Causes: first, obedience for the law and regulations in investment and construction is not yet serious; not a few cadres in management and implementation lack responsibility, have poor ethics, exploit their positions, dodge their responsibilities and are corrupt. [Pham Hai 2005:40]

Pham Hai understands the issues he confronts as being macro-systemic, interpreting them as to do with ways in which non-compliance with norms influences processes of planning and project design so as to create corrupt opportunities. He can thus be read as arguing that the current situation, from his point of view, is precisely to do with the absence of state agency. As an official, he cannot do what he thinks he should be able to do - there is for him an edgy mismatch between 'sociological fact' and 'normative political proposal'. Viewed in the large, clearly the Vietnamese polity is not so very constrained in defining what needs to be defined, to meet a range of interests; yet, I think, there is no clear set of answers.¹⁷

This suggests that the most useful characterisation of Vietnam's politics is simply and centrally that its principal arena, called by so many the Vietnamese 'state', has no stable content in ontological terms.¹⁸ Further, that this in turn implies confusion in hierarchies and patterns of authority, so that apparently normative texts offer little reliable guide to what we may generally observe, if we care to look.

Accompanying such a lack of clarity and consistency we may nevertheless observe in superficial phenomena various building blocks – perhaps 'tropes' – that may create familiarity amongst audiences who have very diverse beliefs. As in the case of Carné's incarnation of a stricken France as a woman lying for apparent good reason, it may be that a flexibly contingent playing of parts is itself indicative of fundamental elements of Vietnamese politics. Mystery may hide something, or it may not. Deciding whether it does or not is rather important to stable relations, whether those of a family or a polity. Perhaps people need to act in character.

What I think is wrong with much of the current literature is the assumption that standard categories, when applied in Vietnam, make sense. It follows that analyses are relatively free to reflect analytical priors, and so are both publishable and often contradict each other (theory so often presents a need to be 'contestable' [Fforde JS 1995]). I have tried to show that, since the 'ontological nature of the state' is unclear, and that this is characteristic, we should not at the end of the day be too surprised. This in turn suggests that, at least in the case of Vietnam studies, tensions between the general and the particular should – if we are to be reasonable - evolve in favour of the latter. Finally, then, it would seem inescapable that, for clear Vietnamese answers, we will have to wait and see. Like Carné's Devil.¹⁹

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¹⁷ I do not think it is hard to marshal other evidence for these perceptions on the part of officials, and plead limitations of space here.

¹⁸ Do I need to remind the reader that ontology is simply yet another 'logos', or set of signs?

¹⁹ Thus the old workers' joke – "If they keep pretending to pay us decent wages, we will keep pretending to work..."

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