Book Reviews

Trung Dang, *Vietnam's Post-1975 Agrarian Reforms: How Local Politics Derailed Socialist Agriculture in Southern Vietnam*. Acton: Australian National University Press, 2018, xix + 322 pp. ISBN: 9781760461959, price: AUD 50.00, paperback.

In agrarian-based societies, land reform is an important tool that existing and new regimes utilize to address social, economic, and political imbalances in their polities. Through its dependency and state-building properties, agrarian reform brings communities into the government's fold. Redistribution of land, then, allows a state to lay claim to its constituencies, and signal and enforce its preferred sociopolitical order. These consolidating properties are crucial specifically to nationalist movements that, having successfully ousted an incumbent government, now have to behave like states themselves.

In *Vietnam's Post-1975 Agrarian Reforms*, Dang shows how one such nationalist movement, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), having defeated the Republic of South Vietnam and their ally, the United States, in open warfare, used land redistribution and collectivization to legitimize its governance over a Vietnam in the throes of unification. Through these reconstructions, the VCP tried to build an equitable and egalitarian society while simultaneously streamlining production.

Dang's book analyzes how, over the course of roughly twenty years, the VCP—and with it, south Vietnamese communities—experienced a steep land redistribution learning curve fraught with setbacks and contestation. As Dang succinctly puts it, land reforms 'fell short of leaders' visions and expectations' on the national level due to regional differences, local resistance, and equally important, VCP representatives' hypocrisy, greed, and duplicity. To make this argument, the book has been partitioned in such a way that the central chapters correspond to the various cycles the land distribution program went through, roughly speaking. These chapters are preceded by two chapters that discuss the ideological pillars of VCP agrarian reforms and the preparations for collectivization, respectively.

The VCP opened its campaign by piloting collectives and experimenting with land redistribution and making farmers adopt more high-yielding crops across the Mekong Delta and the Central Coast Region. These proved lead-ins to the intensification of collectivization between 1978 and 1981. The VCP had already laid the groundwork for reform prior to 1978 through consolidation of government institutions and attempts at restoring the local, war-torn economy.

Initial results, however, did not meet hopes and projections. Food production declined across the south. Worse still, from the VCP's point of view, was that the early contours of conflict became apparent. Land owners and laborers railed against collectivization and the demeanor of local VCP officials, who seemed to conspicuously prosper under the new allocation schemes. Those forced to work on now collectivized land found their income and access to food compared unfavorably to pre-collectivization.

After careful evaluation, the VCP chalked up the lagging results to the leniency and weakness of those implementing reforms. The party therefore ordered collectivization to be sped up in a more forceful fashion. Local officials were exhorted to more vigorously pressure laborers to support the push for collective work. Consequently, more rigidly operated production units were established, along with a 'work point system' by which laborers could earn points that, being tallied up, reflected their productivity.

Again, reorientation failed. Farmers and their families favored work that netted them work points, rather than taking on tasks for the benefit of the collective. Meanwhile, party bosses' self-enrichment further irked laborers' sensibilities. The party's next five year plan (1981–1985), therefore, implemented a contract system that allowed families to keep what they produced beyond the government determined quota. The system allowed for more individual farming. Initial successes such as improved living conditions, however, soon dwindled. Production dropped across regions and as some farmers refused to pay into the collectives, they incurred debts. In places, farmers abandoned their collective, seeking livelihood elsewhere. Ironically, local cadres told farmers to return to household farming. Naturally, farmers did not need to be told twice: the rift between them and local cadres had continued to grow.

Between 1981 and 1988, the force of unaddressed land disputes steadily eroded the drive for sustained collective farming. As Dang clearly shows, collectivization never worked locally, as cadres could not translate the VCP's top-down planning into programs that addressed the grievances of farmers and previous land owners alike. Instead of addressing the problems, local officials continued to enrich themselves. Naturally, farmers soon followed suit; they took from the collectives when they could. Well into the 1990s, this dynamic changed little, with the state taking over village lands without compensation.

Based on sources linguistically inaccessible to most historians, Dang has delivered a unique study into how a government coming out of a period of protracted warfare discovers it cannot merely dictate the terms of reality under which it must operate in its attempts to centralize and legitimize its power. Time and again, the VCP was forced to alter its plans to accommodate local issues and differences that officials underestimated or could not predict. Instead of addressing grievances, however, local cadres were instructed to more ruthlessly enforce collectivization, thereby further antagonizing local communities. Through the lens of 'everyday politics', Dang elucidates how relatively powerless farmers managed to frustrate VCP plans by sabotage and duty-shirking, unintentionally aided by local cadres' seemingly insatiable greed.

While Dang's reconstruction of events is academically sound, in places it reads like an institutional interpretation of collectivization. As a consequence, the narrative remains close to the source materials. The wonderful interviews with farmers offset this to a large extent, but government policies provide the main analytical building blocks. Making farmers' points of view the unassailable focal point of the narrative would have allowed Dang to lend more weight to the primary concept he employs, namely 'everyday politics' as defined by James Scott, and Benedict Kerkvliet. (Dang's narrative seems structured on Kerkvliet's *The Power of Everyday Politics* in North Vietnam.) Dang provides further examples of how everyday politics work, rather than truly engaging with the concept. Therefore, Dang's findings have little implications for studies into peasant resistance, post-war state building or consolidation outside Vietnam or even for studies into North Vietnam.

The single focus on southern VCP policies and their failures begs other questions, as well. Mainly, what were the reverberations of the decades of violent war against the Republic of South Vietnam? Dang's story starts in medias res in that regard: the VCP's power in south Vietnam in 1975 remains unquestioned throughout the book, as if farmers contested collectivization but largely agreed with VCP programs themselves and, more generally, communism itself. The latter may be true and no farmers organized against the VCP or its land reforms, but Dang does not devote attention to why this was so, although everyday politics, organizing, policy making and altering are obviously linked. Conflict, in Dang's telling, is almost divested of violence. Dang mentions shirking and embezzlement and also punishment and coercion, but their realities are not discussed. Presumably, farmers' discontent must have boiled over somehow, somewhere. Nevertheless, due to its clear prose and structure, Dang's analysis is a welcome addition for any researcher of Vietnamese and, by extension, comparative agrarian reforms.

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Reference

Kerkvliet, B.J. Tria (2005). *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.