The Unimplementability of Policy and the Notion of Law in Vietnamese Communist Thought*

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Introduction

"Planned Economic and Social Development" is a frequent goal of third world states, and Vietnam is no exception. As an economist attempting to analyse the political economy of Vietnamese industrial organisation, the present writer has often found himself struck both by the intensity with which many Vietnamese writers assert the validity of their particular "world-outlook" and the wide gap that often exists in practice between policy prescription and policy implementation. How is this apparent dichotomy accepted? The question is of prime importance, because the relationship between plans and their implementation is at the heart of any attempt at conscious social activity along the lines of "Planned Economic and Social Development".

The Vietnamese Socialist Revolution is a phrase that has a number of meanings. In official Vietnamese pronouncements, it refers to the way in which the Vietnamese people are carrying out their historical task of the Construction of Socialism. This notion of revolution is elaborated in terms of the implementation of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Line, which is said to be based on the Party's grasp of Marxism-Leninism and its position as the Party of the vanguard ruling class, the proletariat. Implementation of the Line, in this official conception, relies upon the State's functions in economic and social management. (Much of the foregoing vocabulary should be familiar to those readers who have studied contemporary Communist theory.) Alternatively, the phrase may refer to changes occurring in contemporary Vietnamese society — for example, the Socialist Transformation of social relations and the progressive construction of the material-technical basis for high labour productivity: a grossly over-simplified distinction between these two meanings might be that of "ideology" and "reality". This distinction, however, is too confusing, since there is nothing "unreal" about the Party's notions, and nothing necessarily "ideological"

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about contemporary social and economic change in the Socialist Republic. In addition, it should be stressed that these terms have other meanings to other people whose right to hold them is not questioned here.

The Vietnamese leadership presents official notions of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution in readily accessible form through the vernacular press, in broadcasts and in official translations of speeches and writings. These tend to view what they are doing "idealistically", in the sense that they are trying to implement an ideal which exists in thought before it is "realised" (thuc hien). For Westerners, this tendency might recall the idealism behind notions of "Development" familiar throughout the developing world at least since decolonisation: such notions present some vision of how life will change from its present (unsatisfactory) state to some future (better) one. Again, one might then naturally look for a "means-ends" dichotomy that would allow for rational choice between alternative value-free ways of attaining the desired goal. But it is rapidly obvious that the official notion of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution refers to such a wide conception of social change that no simple means-ends dichotomy arises. To take one clear example: when Socialist Production Relations and the New Socialist Man are goals of the Revolution just as much as increases in social output, institutional change cannot possibly be viewed solely as a means to the end of better economic management. Thus:

The technical revolution is closely bound to the revolution in production relations, and the two exert reciprocal influence in a dialectical way. The latter paves the way for the former and creates socio-economic premises for pushing it forward; conversely, the former consolidates the fruits of the latter and creates material-technical premises for ceaselessly perfecting socialist production relations.

(Le Duan 1977, p. 238)

This statement refers to the orthodox "Three Revolutions" conceptualisation of the content of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution: the Revolution in the Relations of Production, the Ideological and Cultural Revolution and the Technical and Scientific Revolution. The last is referred to as the "key" (then chot) to the others, but, as the above quote shows, this does not mean that it is a value-free "means" to carrying out the other two.

It does not necessarily follow from this organic inter-relationship between the three basic elements of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution that rational choice is impossible, but it does present particularly interesting questions when failure arises. Without a means-ends dichotomy, explanation for non-implementability cannot refer to incorrect choice between alternative strategies that are, in themselves, value-free. Something else must be found.

Notions of Planning and Socialist Construction

Some form of "mechanism" for realising the Party Line is an accepted part of the official notion of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution. This is the State, whose "main function ... is transforming the old, creating the new, organising and managing the economy and culture, ensuring the smooth advance and high tempo of socialist