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URBANIZATION AND LAND DISPUTES IN VIETNAM: COMPROMISES AND PROTESTS

Abstract. Urbanization is the modus operandi of Vietnam's integration into globalization and the "urban civilization" project is part of the expression of a new authoritarian norm.

The first part of the article discusses how the Vietnamese Party-State justifies its urbanization project.

The second part returns to the modalities of strengthening the control of the political-administrative apparatus over the urban manufacturing process by the way of compromise and arrangements between actors.

The last part focuses on the authoritarian nature of urbanization and addresses the increasingly sensitive protests of subordinates to the state domination.

The author concludes that those left behind in development policy and urbanization, through their everyday demonstrations, point to the failure of the authorities to build consent in the field of urbanization.

Key words: moral economy, urbanization, Vietnam, Party-State authoritarianism, resistances, administrative reforms, land clearance, protests

Based on the results of five-year doctoral research in geography conducted in the Red River Delta on the issue of acting in the urban factory in Hanoi, this research has been the subject of a book detailing stakeholder strategies, power relations and the resulting geography [Duchère 2019].

The objective of this communication is to make Vietnamese political economy clearer in the field of urban manufacturing¹ by identifying the techniques and strategies of the authorities to impose "urban civilization" as a new authoritarian norm and thereby strengthen their legitimacy.

The second objective proposes to underline the existence of resistance and infra-politics among subordinates.

The research uses a combination of methods including field surveys, bibliographic research and careful observation of socio-political events. The situations of domination that interest us are approached through the prism of the concept of "moral economy" [Scott 1992] and Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" [Gramsci 1971].

This paper is partly in line with the work of John Kleinen [2015], B. Kerkvliet [2014, 2015] on the "dialogical" politic, J. Ségard and M. Gibert [2015] on "negotiated authoritarianism", M. Gainsborough about the non-monolithic organization of the VCP or Marie Nguyễn Leroy Lân [2015] and Nguyễn Hồng Anh [2006] on dysfunctions or collusions between institutions of the

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¹ We mean under urban manufacturing the "process by which the interaction between urban society and the city, in its material reality, spaces and territories, produces a specific urban perpetual transformation" [Noizet 2003].

political-administrative machine. With regard to the relationship between urban civilization, authoritarian evictions and property rights, we refer to the work of E. Harms [2016], whose book, among other things, explain how land use rights crystallize democratic aspirations for the city in an illiberal context. Other Vietnamese research, without systematically being complacent towards the authorities, prefers to give land-based protest movements an economic meaning rather than question what they tell us about the deterioration of relations between the population and its management structures [Lê Hiếu 2010; Nguyễn Duy Thăng 2004; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2009].

I. Urbanization as a state project a. Urbanization and administrative reforms

The urban growth rate in Vietnam equal to 3,5 %/year since 2000 [World Bank 2015: 2] and the share of urban dwellers that raises until 35,2 % in 2017 [World Development Indicators: 15.01.2019] attest to the progress of urban transition, which is accompanied by powerful metropolitan dynamics, particularly at Hồ Chí Minh city (economic capital), Hà Nội (political capital) and Đà Nẵng (city in the center of the country benefiting from the development of coastal industrialization).

The authorities still operate on a highly centralized model governed by five-year plans, which does not necessarily make it possible to think of the city in accordance with the speed of its development. The lack of transversality of urban planning (sectoral plans) also does not favour the design of development plans and effective master plans. In any case, these plans are most often bypassed by interest groups $(nh\acute{o}m\ loi\ ich)^2$.

But the Vietnamese city is not only the result of "top-down" urban planning, the inhabitants also take part in the urban factory by sneaking between laws and regulations (*lách luật*). *In situ* urbanization, from below or endogenous urbanization, then covers the same reality: urban development that is beyond the control of the authorities and that contributes to urban sprawl and building densification.

Faced with the social, economic and environmental challenges of urban development, the Party-State undertook a decentralization process from the 1990s onwards, aimed at giving local authorities, led by the provinces, more room for manoeuvre. These changes can be analyzed as a draft of decentralization (or rather deconcentration), they can just as easily be likened to a political lure allowing the central power to maintain its hold while giving the impression of opening up³.

Political decision-making and the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by local authorities are conditioned by their connections with the central government and by their ability to modulate decisions from higher levels. It is therefore an ambivalent system based on a mixture of compromise, ideological voluntarism, trial and error and adaptation to local requirements that is being put in place.

³ About decentralization and recentralization, we refer to M. Gainsborough's book [Gainsborough 2010, chapter 3]. Nevertheless, it's important to keep in mind that localism is very developed in Vietnam.

² For TS. Lê Đăng Doanh "Interests groups in Vietnam are characterized by people who have a position, some power and relations with public servants in the budget, banking, investment, real estate, mine, forest, sea fields" [Lê Đăng Doanh 2012: 277-278). Interests groups aim private and local interest at the expense of public interest and operate in an informal and illegal space. In real estate interest groups, thanks for corruption and their relations, obtain lands and build residential area, ineffective economic exclusive zones or useless infrastructures (An Giang airport for example).

b. "Urban civilization" as a source of legitimacy

Hà Nội, or rather its metropolitan modernization, is a state project. This modernity project led by the Ministry of Construction and the Prime Minister is embodied by the slogan: "green, civilized, modern and cultural city". This leitmotiv, chanted by the supporters of a metropolis of international standing, semantically and publicly records certain popular expectations of urban modernity ($hiện \, dại$). The population and the public authorities discuss and exchange ideas around a more or less shared reference framework. Through persuasion and propaganda, the authorities forge the "common sense" of populations (such as making people believe that a civilized society is necessarily an urban society). "Urban civilization" is not only a marketing slogan which emphasizes life quality and lifestyle, it's also the conceptualization of a form of citizenship founded on exclusion [Harms 2016, chapter 2] 4 .

The urban project of the Vietnamese capital is presented by the authorities as a bearer of the modern values of a contemporary society integrated into the world economy. The legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP) is not only based on its ability to create wealth, comfort and prosperity. Its legitimacy also depends on its ability to engage in dialogue with the people and to allow a "controlled relaxation of domination in certain spheres of social life" whose purpose is to "provide an escape from the regime's control" [Grawitz, Leica 1985: tom 2]. So, we can define the authoritarianism of the Vietnamese regime as a soft and dialogical authoritarianism.

If the discourses [Cổng thông tin: 12.05.2018] praising the merits of a modern city connected to the world can be associated with an obvious process of legitimization of the central power, they can also serve to conceal political and economic mechanisms that are more or less clear and justifiable to the population.

Thus, the expansion of Hà Nội (Figures 1 and 2) in August 2008 is a striking example in several respects, in particular because it makes it possible to identify the values and semantic field mobilized both by the population and by the authorities through different media such as the press or Internet forums. The slowness with which the authorities communicated on the subject we consider as the lack of intention to discuss this project because it was hiding important political and land deals that benefited a handful of insiders and, at the same time, allowed a recentralization of the power [Labbé, Musil 2011: 34].

⁴ Văn minh đô thị (urban civilization) is derived from the chinese wenning (文明). For the regime, as there are some civilized spaces, there are some non-civilized spaces.

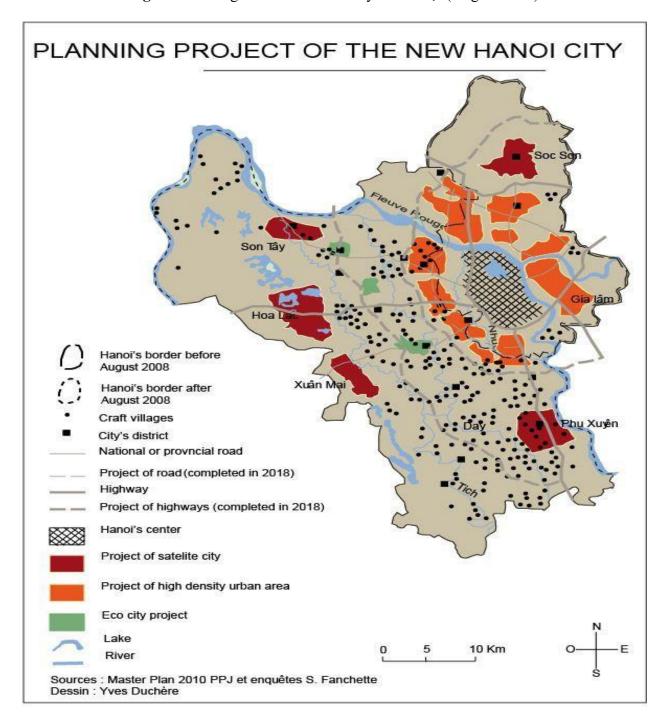


Figure 1: Enlargement of the territory of Hà Nội (August 2008)

ENLARGEMENT of HANOI'S PROVINCE (august 2008) THAI NGUYEN VINH PHUC **BAC GIANG PHU THO BAC NINH** HAI DUONG HUNG YEN HOA BINH 16km HA NAM NAM DINH Duchère. Y (2016), d'après C. Musil (2010) Communes de Yên Trung, Dông Xuân, Hanoi avant Yên Binh, Tiên Xuân, (district de Luong août 2008 Son, province de Hoa Binh) Ha Tay avant District de Me Linh août 2008 (province de Vinh Phuc)

Figure 2: Planning project of the new Hanoi city

II. Party-State corporatism and decentralization of power

a. Urban manufacturing and "Party-State corporatism": from the National Assembly to the district

The urban fabric in Việt Nam is ambivalent, revealing consultation mechanisms coupled with some kinds of authoritarianism that are themselves modulated according to the territories and their challenges. What we call corporatism, once analyzed, offers the possibility of illustrating how the political center maintains its hold on the peripheries, in particular by linking various actors to each other around political and economic interests. The aim here is therefore to analyze how the administration functions are executed more on the basis of consultation/persuasion than coercion in accordance with the "negotiated authoritarianism" [Gibert, Ségard 2016: 6].

The actors of the political-administrative machine are linked to each other by sectoral or regional interests that show how political and territorial administration is marked by entryism, corporatism⁵ and above all by the control of the center on all its peripheries. Indeed, the transfer of power from which these local authorities benefit is in fact one of the conditions for strengthening the weight and control of central power. This paradox is explained by the Vietnamese electoral process which, as Marie Lan Nguyen Leroy [Nguyễn Leroy Lân 2015: 60] points out, gives major importance to the provinces in the choice of candidates eligible for a seat as a deputy in the National Assembly (list for voting). This mechanism allows reciprocity and creates mutual dependence between the National Assembly and the provinces whose interests are essentially the same.

The proximity between high instances of the party and these same local authorities is also striking. As is the case in the provinces of Hà Nội region, there are many political executives with a seat on the Central Committee of the Communist Party and responsibilities at the local level. This accumulation creates obvious conflicts of interest which give to some provincial People's Committee presidents more power than a minister. The development of the metropolitan area of Hà Nội is in fact a patchwork of sectoral and regional interests linked to the clienteles that the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party represent.

The liberalization of the land market and the increasing involvement of market forces⁶ in the urban factory must not obscure the "fiscal socialism" [Kim 2009]. The relations between different levels of the administration are characterized by a system of constraints/incentives that systematically places the commune, district and provincial levels in a situation of dependence on the orientations desired by the central authorities.

In this system, if the districts and communes are responsible for implementing provincial guidelines but receive no incentives, they will try to solicit them from the population and construction-promotion companies. It is precisely when incentives are too low that acts of corruption seem to be most prevalent. However, other systems based on obtaining facilities, infrastructure or constructions, in exchange for building land for example, may exist.

b. "Refocusing" of the State at the communal and village level

The commune and ward level are the subject of particular attention by provincial authorities and even by the central State since it is the territory in which planning policies are tested, most often on an *ad hoc* basis, but also because it is here that representations relating to land use planning and management are the most conflictual.

In recent years the metropolization of Hà Nội has been accompanied by an expansion of urban space that has most often ignored the existing situation and has been accompanied by land conflicts as a result of the absence of private land ownership in a market oriented country. It is in this context that we observe a descent of the State at the village level as well as a confusion of roles and functions at this same level (the population can be an investor and the investor can be a public servant...).

⁶ Foreign direct investments in real estate increased from 0.3% in 2004 to 23.6% in 2008 [World Bank 2015: 23].

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⁵ However, if the entryism and verticality of power ensures that the centre has control over its peripheries, we must not believe and let believe that the political actors constitute a monolithic bloc. In reality, just as society is diverse, the regime is also affected by different currents and is mainly confronted with factional struggles.

Faced with social unrest due to land issues⁷ – the State and its agencies try to participate as actively as possible in local life, whether festive or associative. It is also, of course, a way to continue the work of persuasion and thus to participate actively in the making of "common sense". Rites, feasts and other celebrations, some of which were banned during the communist period, are central in Vietnamese villages and are reactivated from the beginning of $D\hat{o}i\ M\hat{o}i$. As Benoit de Tréglodé [2012: 95-128] reminds us, the cult of national heroes pursues a political objective since this type of cult is most often organized by the local party and proposes to unite around the tradition of the centralizing state.

While during the communist period population management structures were most often used to contain and organize village activities, the post-Đổi Mới period is characterized by the emergence of new associative actors (NGOs, clubs, "volunteer associations")⁸ that are sources of social innovations. These new village organizations are in addition to the mass associations organized under the aegis of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, which they do not compete with. Presented as independent of the public authorities, these new social structures are in fact often placed under the supervision of a ministry. Created at different levels around the defence of heritage, the promotion of crafts or the practice of a sport, art or religion, these associations are regularly invited to participate in meetings at district and provincial level. Through a process of nationalization of associations, the public authorities maintain their control over these structures, which are thought to be independent and for which the analogy with a possible counter-power is unthinkable.

Agreeing with a descent of the State into the village where it was already present, or a "refocusing"⁹, these new social spaces are nevertheless the place where social changes and innovations are promoted that allow the political-administrative machine to delegate certain missions to the local level without calling into question the major balances of power.

Finally, development and construction companies, public authorities and residents jointly participate in the urban factory. In some cases, the actors can be at the same time residents, administrators and investors. This is not without a number of conflicts of interest, particularly when local politicians are actively involved in investment projects requiring "land releases". Nevertheless, when local administrators are involved in investment projects, they are most often involved indirectly, as partners, associates or "facilitators" ¹⁰. In fact, members of the local administration try to negotiate their place in the metropolization process, taking advantage of their network of influence and their power of coercion and decision-making in municipal affairs. Thus, gradually, we are witnessing a reactivation of relations with local notabilities.

⁸ More than 700 civic organizations were created between 1986 and 2005 at Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh city [Wischermann and Vinh 2003: 4].

⁹ Recentralization means that the center tries to reassert its control on lower levels, as the village level [Gainsborough 2010, ch. 3].

¹⁰ There was registered the increase in the population's feeling of injustice and total number of land-related complaints related to expropriations carried out by the State, including 70 % related to the amount of compensation and relocation (compensation is indeed considered too low compared to "free market" prices) [Báo cáo 304/BC-CP: 26.10.2012].

⁷ Between 2008 and 2011 the number of complaints and charges about land issues increased from 187,037 to 236,466 [Báo cáo 304/BC-CP: 26.10.2012]. According to the same report, 70% of complaints and other administrative appeals filed with various public institutions related to land issues.

III. Popular response to the urbanization

a. Clearance of land or eviction?

Since the land laws of 2003 and 2014, land recuperations and the feeling of injustice has increased¹¹. The land has become a notorious lever of enrichment that allows emerging middle class¹² to accumulate capital by taking advantage of its relationships with power. The State grants land to investors, sets up a system of dual land prices, facilitates "land clearance" and creates an institutional environment that is largely beneficial to market forces¹³. The prices proposed by the administration (*giá nhà nước*) are much lower than those of the market and the land then appears to be "priceless" [Pandolfi 2009]. This situation gives rise to a feeling of injustice among the population, particularly in agricultural villages on the outskirts of urban areas where land has become one of the modern levers of capital accumulation. The method of calculating the price of land differs according to the type of land. In this system, agricultural land is significantly undervalued compared to other land.

The need to build "urban civilization" justifies what the authorities call "clearance" of land presented as essential for the modernization of the country. "Attractiveness", "competitiveness", "investment", "modernization" are all terms 14 used by public authorities to shape representations of the transition to the urban era in which "the power to evict is founded on the right to own" [Harms 2016: introduction]. Vietnamese urban civilization is built on a denial of the right to the city. The land seizures illustrate the symbolic and physical violence from which it is built. For Erik Harms, "mass evictions and emergence of property rights go hand in hand. Likewise, the production of civilized spaces of new urban living is founded on mass dispossession" [Harms 2016: 219]. The expression of this new authoritarian norm is justified in an ambivalent way by the authorities and shows the use of different, even opposing, ideological registers. The phase of justification, awareness and pedagogy borrows from the values and concepts of the market economy, while in response to popular criticism and discontent, the words of the market economy are abandoned in favour of those of nationalism, socialism and revolution.

In a classic way, we also find in the press certain recurring qualifiers that dishonor those who dared to protest, such as in the town of Đồng Tâm in April 2017, for example. Among these adjectives are reactionaries (*phản động*), traitors to the nation, extremists (*quá khích*) who are described as "disorder professionals" ("*nghề ăn nên làm ra của mấy mấy kẻ chính tri*") working for the collapse of the state, social instability and the disintegration of national unity while being financed by foreign and reactionary organizations [Nhân Dân: 11.09.2018].

¹¹ There was registered the increase in the population's feeling of injustice and total number of land-related complaints related to expropriations carried out by the State, including 70 % related to the amount of compensation and relocation (compensation is indeed considered too low compared to "free market" prices) [Báo cáo 304/BC-CP: 26.10.2012].

¹² Above 15 USD per person and per day (7.7 % of the population in 2010 and 13 % of the population in 2016) [World Bank 2018: 1, 13]. For more details on the question of middle class in Vietnam see one more [Van Nguyen Marshall et al. 2012].

¹³ It is argued that the land pricing mechanism is intentionally designed by the state to attract investment [Truong and Pereira 2011: 35].

¹⁴ We note also that the word "capitalism" still remains highly connoted and is therefore not used in this context.

b. From daily discontent to demonstration

If many peasants in the suburban area of Hà Nội appear to be victims of the modalities of land seizure, the analysis of their speeches and representations makes it possible to better define the framework of the exploitation of which they are victims and above all the limits beyond which domination is no longer, for them, "tolerable".

Concealment, cunning, the art of sneaking into the law (*lách luật*) or even the use of force (*phá rào*), are the possibilities open to the inhabitants and constitute as many material resistances. But, when the inhabitants of the peri-urban area, for example, put in place spatial strategies for the extension of housing or craft spaces, what is important to highlight is the way in which these strategies are justified. The inhabitants construct their statements from and within the framework of the dominant ideology according to which the party is the central institution to which authority legitimately belongs. Individuals involved in informal and illegal forms of urbanization on agricultural land do not hesitate to recall that these lands have been won by the struggle:

"We, the humble peasants of the Vietnamese people, had to live under Chinese rule for a thousand years and under colonial oppression for a hundred years. Today, we own the country, we live in a socialist regime, but we become "homeless" in the very place where we fought a few decades ago, in the very place where we sacrificed our lives" (letter of protest sent to Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng in 2012) [Duchère 2019: 189].

While some well-known national artists such as the singer Mai Khôi or the rappers Son Nah and Sendoh try to echo the "voiceless", it is also important to note that the villagers also produce real protest songs sung during sit-ins, occupations and other demonstrations.

Since the 1990s, the Vietnamese Party-State as demonstrated a renewed pragmatism and rethought in the light of the challenges posed by economic and social development. Exchanges, negotiations, compromises and other consultations with the people modulate the political authoritarianism of the authorities but do not protect them from demonstrations of anger on the part of the people when they believe that the public theatre of domination and injustice must stop. Generally, the public expression of the feeling of injustice occurs when, on a specific subject, here land evictions, all remedies have been exhausted and when the taboo must be broken publicly in order to engage the public responsibility of the authorities. But in Vietnam, as in other authoritarian regimes, the possibility of free popular expression is severely limited.

The expression of this anger and protest is not in fact economically determined. These violent demonstrations are moments of expression of dignity that reflect a general and increasingly obvious disavowal by the population towards its management structures. In addition to the protests in Thaí Bình in April 1997 and those in the highlands in 2001, a series of events must now be added, which agree in the sense of an ever-increasing defiance of the population towards their management structures. Thus, the case of Đoàn Văn Vươn in 2012 at Hai Phòng, the clashes and hostage-taking at Đồng Tâm (district of Mỹ Đức, Hà Nội, 2018) or the tensions surrounding the Ecopark project (Hà Nội) add to the population's long list of outbursts of anger against its administration.



Figure 3: Protests in the peripheries of Hanoi

If, according to the press reports, popular protest rallies are, for the authorities, the work of "scum" or "extremists", it must be noted that these events are multiplying, intensifying and that citizens are diversifying their modes of action, in particular by broadening the base of their demands. The events of June 2018 began with opposition to a proposed SEZ (Special Economic Zone) project in which Chinese (like any other) investors are benefiting from 99-year leases¹⁵. The risk feared by the demonstrators is that these areas will be managed autonomously by Chinese nationals, so it is a question of sovereignty that is obviously part of a historical conflict between China and Vietnam. However, beyond the land claims and national momentum observed during these events, other messages, less relegated by the Vietnamese press, were conveyed. If in the processions one could read "No land rental to China, even for a day" or "China, out of Vietnam!", other slogans openly criticized the cyber-security law adopted on June 12, 2018 or, and this is rare enough to mention, the Vietnamese Communist Party itself.

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¹⁵ From May 23 to 28, 2018 the Vietnamese Parliament met to discuss a draft Law on Administrative and Economic Units to be granted for 99 years to foreign companies located in three strategic coastal areas of the country.



Figure 4: Protests in the peripheries of Hanoi

Conclusion

With a growth rate of 7.08 % in 2018, a GDP per capita of USD 2587 [GSO: 28.12.2018] and an urban transition already well under way, Việt Nam is undoubtedly working on its development and integration into the networks of globalization. The urban and civilizational ambition of the Party-State contributes to its legitimacy but does not protect it from the increase in inequalities and, above all, from the growing sense of injustice among populations that do not all benefit from urbanization. To address the threats facing it, the CPV is monitoring and trying to anticipate the possibility of an overflow from the population. Through iterative governance, arrangements and compromises, authorities still manage to convince within its administration but faces greater difficulties with regard to a part of the population that does not benefit from the economic spin-offs of growth.

Those left behind in development policy and urbanization, through their everyday speeches and protests, point to the failure of the authorities to build consent in the field of urbanization. It is also noted that, unlike a commonplace frequently mentioned, manifestations of anger or disagreement are not only the consequence of economic situations but also have much to do with

dignity and respect for the social contract that binds, in principle, the population to its management structures.

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УРБАНИЗАЦИЯ И ЗЕМЕЛЬНЫЕ СПОРЫ ВО ВЬЕТНАМЕ: КОМПРОМИССЫ И ПРОТЕСТЫ

Аннотация. Урбанизацию автор понимает как способ интеграции Вьетнама в процесс глобализации, а проект «городской цивилизации» — как выражение новой авторитарной нормы.

В первой части статьи показано, как Партия–Государство во Вьетнаме оправдывает свой гегемонистский проект урбанизации.

Во второй части раскрыта модель усиления контроля политико-административного аппарата над происходящими в городах процессами на основе компромиссов и договоренностей между сторонами.

Последняя часть посвящена авторитарному характеру урбанизации и затрагивает все более деликатный вопрос о сопротивлении (материальном, идеологическом).

Ключевые слова: моральная экономика, урбанизация, Вьетнам, государственная партия, авторитаризм, сопротивление.

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