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Post-Cold War Vietnam: stay low, learn, adapt and try to have fun – but what about the party?[†]

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The paper compares political ideas and acts in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and in Communist Vietnam. It argues that the Gorbachev group, committed to progressive change, concluded that power granted to them by their position in the Soviet system needed to be eliminated, creating a 'boot strap' problem. To secure progressive change they had first to destroy their own power base. By contrast, the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) attempted, in the two decades after the emergence of a market economy in 1989–1991, to rule an increasingly open society through Soviet political institutions. By the late 'noughties' Vietnam faced a crisis of domestic sovereignty, with politics largely a matter of spoils, with policy largely irrelevant and unimplementable, and usually blocked by powerful interests. The paper argues that Hinsley's notion of the sovereignty issue makes this situation far easier to analyse. It argues that the Gorbachev group's analysis would have led to them predicting that the VCP's attempt to use Soviet institutions to rule over a globalising and increasingly open society with a market economy would lead to a crisis of political authority, and that they would have been correct. This leads to the counter-intuitive position that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a success – in that it managed to solve a serious political problem, i.e. how to create the preconditions for a political system suited to a market economy in a relatively open society – and the VCP a failure.

Key words: Vietnam; Asia; Cold War; political reform; regime change; Communism; domestic sovereignty; Soviet politics

At any point in time, the range of opinion within a ruling Communist Party is at least as great as that within the general population, and, at times of crisis, certainly greater. (Suzanne H. Paine, ca 1980, Maoist Cambridge Don, oral communication to one of her PhD students – the present author)

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Introduction

The issues

Vietnamese politics are in many ways *sui generis*, and at the least require considerable specialised knowledge for a decent understanding. One reason is that the secondary literature is unusually large, reflecting Western interest because of the Vietnam Wars. Another is the range of study areas that engage with Vietnam, as a Southeast Asian Country whose major external cultural influence is China, a country that after the end of the Cold War remains ruled by a CP, as a developing country with rapid economic growth situated in East Asia, as a country in transition from traditional Communist social and economic norms to one with a market-oriented economy, and as a country that has integrated strongly into patterns of globalisation. Others could be mentioned, such as comparative East Asian cultures (Woodside 2007). To this may be added the observation that the country appears to generate a plethora of information: for example, the voluminous Official Gazette (the *Cong Bao*) that publishes decisions of the Hanoi government and its Ministries has been available to researchers since the 1980s. This has enabled policy to be tracked in considerable detail.

Whilst experts on other countries may quite reasonably cry that this is to over-sell Vietnam as a country of interest, this paper argues that Vietnamese politics in recent decades deserves wider attention. It argues that this is for two reasons.

First, recent Vietnamese political history suggests to some that there are major problems of eroded domestic sovereignty – Vietnam has become a 'land without a King' (Fforde 2011, 2012, 2013). If this is true, then Hinsley's approach to issues of sovereignty (Hinsley 1986) is valuable precisely because it permits treatments of situations where a key element of politics are concerns on the part of relevant political actors about the *absence* of domestic sovereignty.[1]

Second, this illuminates reflection on just how and why power may be 'given away', reminiscent of Shakespeare's King Lear and evoking comparison of the push by Gorbachev and his supporters to do precisely that in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s. The counter-intuitive argument of the paper is that the Gorbachev group within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had come to a crucial and fundamental conclusion – that the 'techniques of rule' of the Soviet system whose peak positions they occupied were inconsistent with an open society without central-planning. Acting consistently with this view, they then had to cope with the boot strap problem of how to destroy the power – the mechanisms – supporting what agency they possessed. Further, if the argument followed here is correct, and there has indeed arisen a major crisis of domestic sovereignty in Vietnam, the Vietnamese experience suggests that the Gorbachev group was right. The attempt by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to continue with Soviet 'techniques of rule' after the end of central-planning and social opening of the late 1980s and early 1990s had by the mid 'noughties'[2] effectively destroyed the VCP's capacity to govern; in a political culture with deep monarchical traditions, a sense arose that Vietnam had become a 'land without a King'.[3] In a wider context, if true this means that recent Vietnamese political history adds to the range of case studies available to improve our understanding of how political power may be created and lost, a prerequisite to its being transferred or subject to competition.

This interpretation of Vietnamese politics is not the orthodox position. To generalise, much if not most of the relevant literature is founded upon assuming that the VCP has had and retains considerable agency, and that this agency relies upon 'techniques of rule' that amount to a maintained domestic sovereignty: that the VCP embodies an authority that stands above all others. This is, like Hinsley, to see both power and authority as aspects of relations between rulers and ruled:

> Men do not wield or submit to sovereignty. They wield or submit to authority or power. (Hinsley 1986, p. 1)

Hinsley differentiates power and authority in what seems a familiar manner: the latter implies the former, but not vice-versa; in that authority refers to the idea of habitual or chosen obedience, whilst power need not, 'you can have power without authority but you cannot have authority without power'.[4] Thus, in his closing lines, Hinsley says:

> In that area that gave rise to most of the world's worst wars, the years since 1945 have seen the evolution of the European Communities [*sic*]. ... The rivalries of the states are no less continuous and intense than they were ... But this can be so because they are predicated on and controlled by the presumptions that they will not be resolved by the resort to force and war (1986, pp. 234–235)

So what do scholars see as having determined Vietnamese history since reunification in 1975–1976? Orthodox views generally accept the idea that change has largely been driven by the VCP through changes in policy, and that this pattern continues. A useful indicator of such assumptions is repetition of narratives of change that stress the over-riding importance of a historical break at the Sixth Party Congress in late 1986, when, it is reported, the VCP as a political institution had come to believe in the need for an end to central-planning and an opening up of society, and so introduced *doi moi*[5] as an expression of political intent and direction – that is, agency continued, but was now directed in a different direction.

There are problems with this view. First is evidence from students of the Soviet Union that agency there was actually very limited, as the system was deeply conservative, and, in its post-Stalinist institutions, actually designed to inhibit concentration of discretionary power (McAuley 1977). How then may one understand intentional radical change in such a political system? Second is its lack of congruence with certain histories of VCP-ruled Vietnam, which both show how policy was usually reactive and also command agreement from Vietnamese participants.[6]

A discussion of the literature requires some history, and so in the next section the paper presents a rapid overview and some relevant facts, and then in the section following discusses various mainstream views. A section then looks at the issue of how power may or may not be given up in traditional Communist systems. The paper then illustrates its core argument by discussing aspects of recent Vietnamese politics in more detail before concluding.

Some history

State-based Communist rule formally existed in the so-called 'north'[7] of Vietnam from 1954, under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and then after national reunification in 1975 throughout the whole country under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Vietnamese Communists had played a major role in the Viet Minh in defeating the French, and in 1976 they emerged to merge the DRV's Viet Nam Workers' Party with southern elements to form the VCP at the so-called Fourth National Congress in 1976. Vietnam emerged from the US war in 1975 facing major problems in implementing the Soviet development model that the VCP had adopted. The heterodox history already mentioned argues that these problems were at root to do with a weakening of the rigours of Stalinist logics of rule through various accommodations – with the free market, with collectivised farmers, with State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) over-interested in free market operations and so on. The attempt to implement rigorous central-planning modalities in the second half of the 1970s therefore lacked Stalinist prerequisites, and was already in trouble when Chinese and Western aid cuts hammered the incentives to follow planners' orders. Out of this came powerful processes of commercialisation that drove a transition from plan to market, and to which the VCP reacted through a series of tactical concessions

that followed rather than led events. One of these was the Sixth Party Congress of 1986, which labelled what was happening already as *doi moi*. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991 saw the large Soviet bloc aid programme vanish, and, without the resources to support it, central-planning terminated.

After the final emergence of a market economy in 1989–1991 informed studies suggested that the Vietnamese have emerged onto the world scene with the vigour expected from a nation part of which had defeated the USA, and which despite adopting many 'North East Asian' cultural elements from China in many ways remained resolutely Southeast Asian in cultures and attitudes (Hayton 2010). Drawing upon lessons learnt in the chaos of the 1980s, the population had learnt to stay low, learn, adapt and seek improved material wellbeing, helped by trend rates of GDP growth near 8% (at least until around 2008), a flexible national labour market, good food and access to global cultural diversity. Surveys showed that the population said they were happy (Pham and Pham 2006, Migheli 2012) and liked their market economy, although increasingly discontented with the VCP and macroeconomic instability, apparently incorrigible corruption and fears of Chinese penetration of their ruling elites (Fforde 2012, 2013).

A number of opinion surveys support such accounts. For example, Goertzel (2006), based upon the Pew Global Attitudes Project, reports that:

> . . . agreeing that 'most people are better off in a free market economy, even though some people are rich and some are poor' {are} a remarkable 95.4% in Vietnam. (pp. 4–5)

More recent data (from Pew) reported a 71% favourable attitude to the USA amongst Vietnamese (PEW 2012). Recent press reports argue that in globalised sectors such as garments, that in many other countries are facing a 'race to the bottom', workers report major increases in incomes over the two decades since the emergence of a market economy (Barton 2013). But this poses the question of causality: did this 'just happen' or was it the result of policy and government?

de Vylder and Fforde (1996) drew upon Fforde and Paine (1987), and a wide range of Vietnamese studies, to argue that the origins of the market economy were powerful 'endogenous' pressures for commercialisation that, at any point in time, led to a balance between plan and market influenced by a range of factors that operated through the relative attraction of incentives to supply resources to the plan or the market. This was evident in collectivised agriculture, for instance, before 1975 in the 'north' (Fforde 1989). In such an explanatory framework increased levels of commercialisation would happen if the resources available to planners declined, for example, because of reductions in aid, or bad harvests that reduced food supplies to state workers. If increased commercialisation was then accepted retroactively by the VCP such policies would not be driving change. However, if the analysis assumed, wrongly, that the VCP was the key actor, such policies could be cited as evidence for 'reform'. In terms of competing accounts, this then shows the crucial importance of the different levels of significance attached to the 1986 Sixth Party Congress, which announced *doi moi*.

After 1975 and the end of the war, Vietnam was highly aid dependent and once Soviet bloc aid had largely replaced the lost Chinese and Western assistance in the early 1980s it remained so until the end of the decade (Fforde 1985). Food rationing, largely dependent upon imports paid for by aid, continued until the very late 1980s, if not a little later. Compared with China, the starting-point of economic commercialisation was one of very limited domestic resource mobilisation into the planning system (Fforde 1999). Vietnamese central planners up until the end were more concerned with sharing out aid-financed imports than allocating increasing volumes of investable resources drawn from the 'expanded production of means of production'. The first signs of spontaneous commercialisation occurred in the north during the first Five Year

Plan of 1961–1965. In the early 1960s, SOEs were criticised, as free market prices rose well above state prices, for 'running to the market' (*di chay hang sen*) (Fforde 2007). The detailed policy record relating to SOEs shows policy accepting their involvement in markets in early 1981, after they had already greatly increased their commercial activities in response to Chinese and Western aid cuts in the late 1970s. Attempts to reverse this can be seen in policy through the next three years but in 1985 policy returned to supporting commercialisation some 18 months before the 1986 Sixth Congress (Fforde 2007).

What emerges is a picture that profoundly undermines the idea that policy, and so VCP agency, was the driver of change. By contrast, mainstream views stress the importance of the 1986 Sixth Congress and *doi moi* as an expression of VCP direction. Politically, whilst clearly exercising considerable power in certain areas, overall the VCP's powers should not be over-estimated. The VCP had not been the key driver of the transition from plan to market. Due to its internal 'structural' (*co cau*) institutional practices,[8] major insider interest groups were meant to be able to prevent change that they did not want, limiting the discretionary power of peak leaders. In practical terms, this meant that insider business interests, articulating the interests of commercialising SOEs, had representation in key Party institutions, and the money to back this up (Fforde 1993, 2007). The picture that emerges is not one of 'bottom-up' pressure for reform, but of changing power relations within the VCP itself.

Analysing Vietnamese politics – literature

This section offers a necessarily rapid overview. The paper focusses upon studies after 2000 as by that time around a decade had passed since the emergence of a market economy and analyses are not too coloured by the pre-1989–1991 situation – for examples of mainstream studies of the 1990s and earlier see the extensive work by Elliott, Turley, Thayer or Porter.

A good entry point here is Kerkvliet (2005):

> Everyday politics matters ... It can have a huge impact on national policy. (p. 234)
>
> In Vietnam ... significant policy changes ... resulted in part from the Communist Party government's decision to alter its rules and regulations so as to conform with what people wanted and needed ... (p. 238)

The focus is upon how and why policies change, assuming that policy change is needed for progress, and so central to historical analysis. The key issue in Kerkvliet (2005) is not whether 'there is a King', but to argue that progress happens 'when the King listens', and that it is through 'everyday politics' that this can happen. VCP authority is assumed: the key analytical issue is then to explain policy.

In a similar vein, Kerkvliet (2001) suggests that there are only three valid ways of explaining state−society relations in Vietnam's political life. Two 'argue that the state and its various organizations in society run the political show' (p. 238) and the third, as in Kerkvliet (2005), argues that there is a 'dialogue' that there can be 'negotiation between various components of the state and interests in society' (pp. 244–245). Again, especially in this third way of explaining politics, it is assumed that there is something to negotiate with – that policy as an outcome of such negotiations plays a crucial role. Domestic sovereignty is part of beliefs about relations between rulers and ruled so that both trust that negotiated outcomes are real: again, that policy matters. Clearly, much is being assumed here if we look at this from a Gorbachevian perspective (see below), within which a core issue is how suitable power can be created so as to ensure that certain types of policy (such as an authentic democratisation) can be made to matter, for, in a Gorbachevian perspective under a Soviet political system this is impossible – that sort of power is lacking and must be created.

Similarly, Beresford and Tran 2004 argue that 'the continuing strength of the Vietnamese Communist Party-state has been exhibited by its ability to retain power . . .' (p. 7). They support this position by citing Dang Phong, who argues that grass-roots activities had to be sanctioned by higher levels of authority, and that important senior leaders were often the initiators of 'experiments' (p. 7). Such arguments again paint a picture of agency, of a VCP with political authority that means that 'policy matters', and they conclude:

> This capacity of the state apparatus to manage the transformation helps to explain . . . why the Communist Party has remained firmly in power in the post central-planning era . . . (pp. 7–8)

Vuving (2010) seeks to identify the 'key players' of Vietnamese politics, understood in relation to an authoritative government:

> This essay suggests that the politics of Vietnam can be imagined as a game between four key players. If the government is defined as the central authoritative locus of politics in a country, then the Vietnamese Government is caught primarily between regime conservatives, modernizers, rent-seekers and China (p. 367)

This analytical framework assumes that state power exists in a form that suits policy, and is subject to competition between the actors mentioned. This then explains policy, so that (for example) 'a tacit alliance of regime conservatives and rent-seekers are keeping reform at bay' (p. 386). This implies that were this situation to change, implementation of a different policy would then not be an issue, as the government is 'authoritative'. Again, the Gorbachevian question is not answered.

Similar assumptions can be found in Vasavakul (2003) and the extensive writings by Thayer. Thayer (2009) argues:

> . . . there is no discernible evidence that the pro-democracy movement is gaining traction or coalescing into a significant force able to mount a major challenge to Vietnam's one-party state. (p. 18)

And:

> . . . political change in Vietnam will be significantly determined by how Vietnam's one-party state manages the challenges posed by political civil society. Among the five scenarios mapped out, only two appear plausible. One possibility is transplacement, that is, joint action by members of the ruling elite acting in concert with elements of political civil society in the long term. The most likely scenario is transformation, that is, elements within the VCP leadership take the lead in initiating political change. (p. 23)

Thayer is an immensely experienced observer of Vietnamese politics. It is not clear what he means by his last sentence. Given the historical importance of the CPSU example, what could one expect from senior VCP politicians? The Gorbachevian position as argued here was that the core issue in changing such a system is that of securing new powers that are initially unavailable to political actors – a boot strap problem. Further, if arguments about the erosion of domestic sovereignty are given credence, it would presumably be even harder for the VCP than it was for the CPSU to 'give up power'. There is no discussion of this in the article, and this questions just how elements within the VCP leadership might take the lead – what actually could they do?

Finally, consider Gainsborough (2007). The argument here is that policy contestation by the mid 'noughties' was irrelevant to Vietnamese politics, then simply about spoils. This was a seminal contribution to the literature. Gainsborough (2010) reflects in greater depth (see especially Chapter 7). He concludes that how people acted politically in Vietnam had, by the late 'noughties', first of all to be understood through the sense that the situation was not chaotic. There was a political order – above all people acted politically through systems of networks that gave them 'a place in the system' (p. 179). Yet there was no domestic sovereignty, for there was 'always someone who can potentially stand in your way' (p. 179). Gainsborough is saying that any office holder can be blocked from implementing policy – all find that

someone can 'stand in their way' so there is no domestic sovereignty in Hinsley's sense. This implies, though, that apparently regime-defending policies are not necessarily implementable, readily observable in areas crucial to the population's opinion of their rulers, such as corruption, public health and education, and, two litmus tests, policies towards China and reform of the banking system. So what, for Gainsborough, is the state? It is:

> . . . little more than a disparate group of actors with a weak notion of 'the public good' . . . {but} when this 'collectivity' of institutions and actors feels its core interests threatened, it is able to mobilize fairly robustly in order to clamp down on people or activities deemed to threaten the 'whole show' (p. 182)

This conclusion is surely contradictory. On the one hand, use of state power coherently to protect the common interests of the 'collectivity' requires policy. Yet, Gainsborough's analysis argues that politics is not about policy, but about spoils. To argue more concretely, striking workers enraged by failure of government to deploy state power to deal with economic restructuring are interested in political response as policy: in the reasonably certain implementation of political decisions taken – that subsidies will be forthcoming, those responsible for violence against them brought to justice and so on. Defence of the core interests of the 'collectivity' thus arguably requires policy capacity, which in turn requires domestic sovereignty – that in general people assume that in their society there is a 'final and absolute authority' so that, when it is thought to matter, a phone call cannot divert the course of justice or redirect subsidies into other channels. Looked at this way, it is clear that the 'imagined authority above all' is as much about hierarchy within the administrative apparatus and its relationship with politicians as it is to do with the authority of government over the population.

The sources examined suggest reflection – should the CPSU, contrary to what might seem obvious, in fact be seen as successful? The collapse of the Soviet Union provokes consideration of the issue explored by Shakespeare in King Lear, which is the question of just how a conservative political institution with limits to its agency may give away powers in a justifiable search for a different political order where those powers will no longer exist.

The issue – what power is deployed in the giving up of power?

Power to transfer power

In many contemporary democracies, as in the regularised monarchies that preceded them, power is deployed as power is given up and transferred. Thus the phrase 'the king is dead, long live the king' shows political culture and institutions arguing for (and enforcing if they can) the indefeasible nature of the monarch's position, which, as in England after the regicide of the civil wars, could be rhetorically challenging (Clark 2000). The point, though, stands: changes of government in contemporary electoral democracies require that power be deployed to ensure that power can be transferred from the old government to the new. These powers are formidable, and permit, mediated through the electoral process, a new government to exercise considerable discretion and, through authoritative legislation, to secure radical change that may well overcome the opposition of important interest groups. Viewed from this perspective, the power of ruling Communist Parties whose institutions are similar to those of the Soviet Union is strikingly limited, giving very little room for manoeuvre to those seeking radical change.[9]

Consider Gorbachev (2002, cited in Gorbachev and Mlynar 2002):

> . . . the slogan **adopted at the beginning by the entire party** (both as a social organism and as a mechanism of power), namely, that the initiating and driving force of perestroika was and must be the Communists and their power, was in practice carried out inconsistently, although millions of Communists, despite the mechanism of power, were in favour of the new policy. They often

> did not know how to carry it out and besides without the party structure, the apparatus and the *nomenklatura*, they were, strictly speaking, powerless. The party itself as a mechanism of power, and a large part of the *nomenklatura*, became a barrier, an obstruction on the road of reform. (p. 104, stress added)

This poses the central question of this paper: should a CP that managed to stay in power after 1991 be judged successful? This is debatable and the answer here is no. The removal of the CPSU from power was in large part intentional and carried out by Communist leaders themselves, crucially Gorbachev and his group within the Party itself. Further, this Lear-like act was done, as Gorbachev tells us, precisely in order to destroy the power – rather, the particular powers – that were keeping the CPSU 'on the throne', *because that power was seen as inconsistent with progress*. The CPSU and Gorbachev's group did not have any obvious way of drawing upon power that could be deployed to change the basis for rule. In this sense the position of the CPSU in the late 1980s, viewed here through curiosity about what happened to the VCP, poses the question of sovereignty: why was there no imagined authority 'above' those in power that political actors could exploit to bring about progress as they saw it? The answer, when the question is put this way, is obvious: the founding logic behind the political culture of that time and place was uninterested in any such challenge to Party rule. The CPSU had, of its own self-definition, to be above the law.

Getting rid of the system – the sovereignty issue and King Lear in traditional Communist systems

If the problems of the VCP, and Vietnam, since 1989–1991 and increasingly through the 'noughties' have been to do with the fundamentally *political* challenges of how to govern, and be governed, in a globalising market economy, then these have at their core the question of domestic sovereignty. By this, the paper follows Hinsley (1986) and means an idea, possibly but not necessarily embodied in political practices and institutions, which forms historically under similar but different circumstances:

> If we wish to explain why men have thought of power in terms of sovereignty we have but to explain why they have assumed that there was a final and absolute authority in their society – and why they have not always done so . . . (p. 1)

This perspective gains from the argument that, in Gorbachev's eyes, it was the CPSU's failure to respond properly to his reformist leadership that led him to take steps to remove it from power.[10] This takes us back to interesting ideas about the nature of political power in Soviet regimes. Here we may recall analyses that matched the sense that in many ways this power is enormous with the idea that, for all that, they contained powerfully conservative forces, which limited the discretionary power of the leadership and so the CPSU as a reformist, or radical, force (e.g. McAuley 1977). In another register, the Soviet system was set up to preserve Party rule, and 'build steel mills', so doing anything radically different was a very big ask. The experiences of the VCP and the Vietnamese since 1989–1991 support such analyses. It is quite possible to appreciate how members of the CPSU should have wanted to see the end of the existing Soviet system, even if what was to follow it was far from clear.

Therefore, we need to ask whether and in what sense other ruling Communists may actually have *wanted* to 'prevent the demise of their own regime'. What is the point of holding power if you cannot use it to do what you want to do? If we consider change processes and seek for how these may be said (by participants as well as the outside analysts) to contain intentionality, then the dominant ideas of the late 1980s CPSU 'project' are clarified by considering Mlynar, a leading thinker of the reform Communism of the 1968 Prague Spring that culminated in military

intervention under the Brezhnev Doctrine and was a key element to political experience in the Soviet bloc (and had occurred about a decade before the death of Brezhnev).

Mlynar was too young to have seen much fighting in World War II, was a young Communist and a believer, and was a member of the first groups of young cadres from the People's Democracies of Easter Europe to study in Moscow in the late 1940s. His account of his experiences reveals much about the nuts and bolts of what it meant to learn how to build Soviet-style institutions – the basis for the regime. There he met Gorbachev, which was important, for, many years later, after Mlynar had left Czechoslovakia, after spending years after the Prague Spring in menial jobs, becoming part of the Charter 77 Movement and then encouraged to leave for Austria, he was one of the very few people Western politicians such as Margaret Thatcher could use to find out about Gorbachev and what made him 'tick'. Mlynar returned from Moscow in the early 1950s to discover that the young believers of his generation could see how political leaders in Communist Czechoslovakia had become entrenched and self-serving in jobs, corporate bureaucratic positions and politics. What he had learnt in Moscow was the pragmatic set of prescriptions and proscriptions that allowed Soviet institutions to run and to rule. Soviet Law, like Chinese Legalism, was to do with order and instruction of and to its citizens. With the corporatist structures of the Mass Organisations, the developmental power of central planning and the coercive practices of the KGB or its local equivalent, this could – and, up to certain limits did – 'construct socialism'.

Mlynar (1980) is illuminating on this:

> . . . Soviet law schools . . . out 'legal specialists', people who know what regulations the authorities have laid down for given cases . . . In effect, Soviet law schools produced qualified bureaucrats.
>
> In the five years it took me to become a 'legal specialist', that is, a qualified, Soviet-style bureaucrat, {the experience provided me} with a concrete idea of how Soviet bureaucracy administers society.
>
> . . .
>
> Everything was relatively well thought-out and, above all, regulated in great detail. Many of the questions I brought with me to Moscow – about how, practically speaking, this or that problem in everyday life would be dealt with under socialism, how the work process, and other processes, would be regulated (things that neither Lenin nor Stalin ever write concretely about) – seemed to receive answers here (pp. 18–19)

It is clear that, for Mlynar, at the time a believer in Marxism-Leninism, this bureaucratic conservativism had strongly negative aspects.

> . . . the essential problem was . . . the insolence of Soviet bureaucrats . . . their undisguised content for the petitioners in line for the required 'bumazhky' or rubber stamps – their crudeness, incompetence and arrogance . . . (p. 19)

Whether one reads Mlynar's excellent autobiography (in English *Nightfrost in Prague*) or the 2002 conversations with Gorbachev he is best viewed as a radical – a reform Communist, seeking to use Party power to reform socialism so as to make it, in a word, democratic. He believes that the population would, if offered democracy, support socialism. Thus we can find important opinions driving political thinking in the USSR in the second half of the 1980s *not* solely concerned with the preservation of CPSU rule. At the 27th CPSU Congress, held in February 1986, Gorbachev and his supporters were already in position, and the quote from Gorbachev above refers to the *constitutional* decisions taken then, with due reference to CPSU process. From then on this direction is expressed in the famous terms *perestroika* (restructuring, mainly referring to decentralisation of economic and political power), *glasnost* (openness, mainly referring to government open to popular view and criticism) and *demokratizatsiya* (democratisation, mainly referring to the introduction of democratic elements into the Soviet political structures, such as multi-candidate inner-Party elections).

By the 28th Congress in 1990, the Gorbachev group had become far more dominant within the Party and far less interested in continuing to bring conservatives with it. Thus, at the First Plenum held in July of that year, the new Central Committee replaced the entire Politburo apart from Gorbachev. Following the logic of the programme, through 1990 we find the Gorbachev group increasing its authority both through its position within the apparat and by gaining increased popular support. As a result, by the time of the coup in 1991 the conservative opposition did not have enough power to overcome Yeltsin's authority, as, being the recently democratically elected President of the Russian Supreme Soviet, he was able to lead forces opposed to the coup.

The point here is that, as Gorbachev says, this is a relatively coherent political project pushed by people, like earlier radical 'reform Communists' such as Mlynar, whose own progressive politics sought effective popular support through various means, within which some form of *political* change with that goal in mind was central. The aim was to profoundly alter the nature of Communist power and to attain popular authority through a democratic process. This of course poses the question as to whether what was envisaged was political reform without regime change, which in turn poses the question of just what the former may destroy as the latter preserves. Here much will clearly turn on how the terms are used, and these allow political actors scope for manoeuvre. Gorbachev's clear hostility, for example, towards many of the leaders of the East European ruling Parties suggests that his group's view of regime change would have been very different from theirs': whatever was left standing after political reform would not include comfortable positions for them and their ilk, such as the Deutsche Demokratische Republik leadership. The tangles here are intriguing and were often the stuff of political calculation as events proceeded. But here the value of Hinsley's analytical stance is clear. His focus upon sovereignty as an assumption, which may or not be held, and so may or may not underpin political order and authority, points us away from the assumption that power exists and can thus be readily used, and towards a better understanding of what may happen when requisite power is lacking. This permits us to see better the importance of the fact that such powers, had they been comparable to those in contemporary democracies, would have been deployable to attain political reform and regime adjustment, but this was not the case: the nature of power matters. Like Andropov, Gorbachev found that, to speak metaphorically, levers in his hands were not actually connected to anything relevant. Having been close to Andropov, he probably knew this at least in part before he started. The Soviet political system was not designed to deploy power to secure radical change of the sort envisaged by Gorbachev and his group within the CPSU. It therefore, many came to conclude, had to be destroyed, in the hope that whatever would come after it would be better (though, as Lear found, with, of necessity, almost no power to influence events). This tangled attempts to manage change, as political reform and regime survival blurred. Yet, from this perspective, the vigour brought into play by the Gorbachev group is striking: like Lear, they were big men.

The VCP from a Gorbachevian perspective

Two issues thus come together in looking at the VCP from a Gorbachevian perspective. These are, first, whether change prior to 1989–1991 is indeed best seen as a Party-driven reform process and, second, whether the Vietnamese comrades understood that a shift to an open society with a market economy was consistent with conservative politics, and if so which sort of conservative politics. From the point of view of Western advisers, familiar with the authoritarian developmentalism of, for example, Suharto's New Order Indonesia, the possible answers were rather clear – development and authoritarianism could co-exist (Dapice 1991). This of course raises the moot question as to what sort of authoritarianism could have been

constructed on the wreckage of the VCP's political institutions if they had collapsed in the early 1990s, not to mention whether life would have been better or worse than what actually happened.

Through the 1990s top VCP leaders such as Do Muoi and Vo van Kiet were still individually authoritative, but of lower rank than the wartime top leadership.[11] It was not until Le Kha Phieu became General Secretary in 1997 that wartime prestige starts to become far less important and political leaders increasingly clearly creatures of the networks and systems for dividing up the spoils.

If we use the pithy Vietnamese expression for structural insubordination (*tren bao duoi khong nghe* – literally – 'the superior level instructs but the lower level does not listen'),[12] and consider that it is one meaning of sovereignty that, when it matters, the lower level both must and will also tend to listen, then the issue is perhaps clearer. The issue here is the notion of *intentionality* – the assumption that change in Vietnam is a process of reform and the way such an assumption blinds us to the fundamental political issues at stake. It is possible, through research, to examine change processes so as to see whether coherent links between policy and outcomes exist.

The paper now considers examples of how these issues played themselves out. The paper first examines the state sector, the second compares three crises, arguing that they reveal the process of erosion of domestic sovereignty in Vietnam. What we lack here in terms of research is clear, given the assumptions the paper has already argued are normal in many political studies of the period: assessment of the evolving coherence and authority of political power in the two decades after the emergence of a market economy in 1989–1991.[13]

Case studies

The state sector

The official data tell us that the reported share of the state sector in Vietnamese GDP has, since 1989–1991, at times grown and by the late 'noughties' still remained significant. This, when combined with macroeconomic stability, is a strange situation given common experiences elsewhere. Large state sectors tend to destabilise macroeconomies. An explanation is that 'what you see is not what you get' – in other words, that SOEs are not, in Vietnam, best seen as the 'bureaucrats in business' much criticised by mainstream economists. It is their relative independence from their nominal owner – the state – that is arguably central to much contemporary Vietnamese history. By the late 'noughties' bodies formally charged with their monitoring and control were reporting that the most basic information, such as on activities, profits and assets, was simply lacking – yet they produced near half of GDP (Fforde 2009a).

Fforde 2007 drew upon detailed case studies (Fforde 2004a, 2004b) to view SOEs as 'virtual share companies'. The argument here is that the powerful forces of commercialisation within the Vietnamese state sector had always been strong and tended to respond to incentives. Thus, as free market prices rose above state prices in the early 1960s in the DRV, SOEs pushed into markets, violating basic Soviet norms. In the late 1970s as Chinese and Western aid cuts reduced the value of delivering output to the plan, SOEs pushed into markets (here referred to as 'fence-breaking' – *pha rao*);[14] and such processes were simply legalised by the partial reforms of 1981. Arguably such forces had the power of cash to push politicians, and did so, as in a recognisable 'state business interest' (Fforde 1993) that, in part through its position in the internal structures (*co cau*) of neo-Stalinist institutions, could and did ensure a profitable improvement in economic efficiency through the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s this 'objective process' was clearly articulated in largely non-political ways by inner Party figures and their advisers (Fforde 2009b), showing that commercialisation made sense and could occur without *necessarily* requiring major political change, whatever that may have meant. In addition, of

course at that time senior political figures in the VCP were men with their own personal authority as wartime leaders.

The research in Fforde (2004a) showed that managers of SOEs had experienced, after 1989–1991, a reversal of earlier trajectories in 'real' ownership rights – answers to the questions 'who decides, who benefits'. The shift reported by SOE managers was that whilst in the 1980s real property rights had tended to shift *downwards* – to SOEs – after 1989–1991 they shifted back *upwards*, to officials. SOEs had been crucial in powering the 'state business interest' of the 1980s (Fforde 1993, 2007). Yet after the emergence of a market economy in 1989–1991 SOEs were increasingly loosing their relative independence and becoming subject to officials.[15]

It is possible to think that this was part of a historical process – the emergence of a Vietnamese capitalism. Work to date suggests that, especially when we consider that labour markets were quite normal by the early 1990s, the basic preconditions for this had formed rather early. The real estate boom of the mid-1990s saw various social groups invest heavily in housing as land was privatised, and these funds already existed. A part, albeit temporary, of this process was *appropriation* – the acquisition of assets by the forming capitalist groups. Such processes depended greatly upon social position, with those close to or within the apparat far more capable of participating than others, whilst relationships with those in key positions offered access to particularly highly valued assets. Thus it quickly became commonplace to hear that business people were the children or nephews (*con*, *chau*) of those in high places. Appropriation processes, the creation of propertied groups, are essentially temporary. The macroeconomic stability of the period 1992–2007 suggests, though, that during this period whilst acquisition of assets benefited from preference, *generating a profit from them was then subject to a reasonably flat playing field*. That is, that a characteristic of relations between politics and business in this period (1992–2007) was that they tended to be focussed upon appropriation and the creation of specific class structures, rather than upon the use of state power to create rents and so benefit particular business groups. This suggests that the trend to reduce the autonomy of SOEs from early 1990s reported in Fforde (2007) was creating the *potential* for macroeconomic instability and state incoherence in policy terms (Gainsborough 2007), a hollowing-out of domestic sovereignty, but as yet this did not matter so much. Thus, 2007 marks the end of an important period of transition.

Given the position of SOEs within the political economy of Communist Vietnam, and the powerful role they have played in change, their history and their relationships with government and politicians provide a valuable entry to understanding political history. They were probably the most powerful of various forces undermining the power of Soviet institutions, from within.

Three crises

We may examine the erosion of domestic sovereignty in more detail by looking at three periods of crisis. First, 1989–1991, with the final emergence of a market economy with no significant remnants of central-planning; second, 1997, which coincided with the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC); and the current one, which started with the return of macroeconomic instability in 2007 and which also coincided with a global financial crisis. All were of sufficient potential strength to threaten the 'collectivity' (to use Gainsborough's phrase), and so what happened is revealing.

The first crisis – 1989–1991

By 1989–1991 commercialisation processes in the state sector were mature and most SOEs now knew how to operate in markets (de Vylder and Fforde 1996, Fforde 2007). In 1989–1991, Soviet bloc aid pretty much vanished. In the early 1990s, there was the start to a period of

rapid economic growth, reductions in poverty levels and the restoration of a tax base suited to a market economy.

The basic political economy on the production side was one of SOEs and largely decollectivised or uncollectivised farmers. Trade (domestic and foreign) was a mixture of private and state commerce (mainly the latter in the foreign sector). There were no clear factor markets, and no clear classes suited to a market economy. Labour in industry was relatively immobile, largely made up of state workers (many were dismissed, though, moving to find local jobs in petty services). Capital flowed to investment opportunities through rather sophisticated informal capital markets. Families invested in or within SOEs; state banks had 'soft' plans for commercial investment besides the 'hard' plans that required them to allocate credits to SOEs. Land was still barely tradable, though this was starting to change rather fast.

VCP thinking at this time was 'transitional', with a strong focus on the shift 'from plan to market', having managed rather well a series of tactical retreats from central-planning. Ideas were robust, Vietnamese and linked to Vietnamese politicians with authority, not least as they were the wartime generation and its immediate 'young uncles' – Do Muoi, Vo Van Kiet, with their advisors. Led by SOEs, the Vietnamese economy was showing strong signs of ability to compete globally, to generate growth and rebuild a tax base.

Vietnamese society had only recently been de-Stalinised in a non-technical sense. It was still very 'shut-in', cut off from global ideas and culture. The bruises and scars from the attempts to impose northern – neo-Stalinist – systems on the south and south-centre after 1975 were still very sensitive.

Under such conditions is not at all surprising that the outcome of the crisis was a VCP decision to leave the formal political system unchanged. This was the 'program' (*cuong linh*) of the 1991 Seventh Congress. In the early 1990s Vietnam transitioned to a state of rapid economic growth, a fast opening-up (people became used to simply getting a tourist visa to visit, say, Thailand) and the rapid emergence of capitalist classes, a national labour market, etc. One may conclude that the key elements of the 1989–1991 crisis were the apparent success of the VCP in securing a transition to rapid market economy-based economic growth and the lack of formal plans for political change. This suggests that at this time domestic sovereignty was relatively strong: we may note that peak authority was sufficient to impose costs upon important actors, who could not 'stand in the way'.

The second crisis – 1997

In the run-up to 1997, we find that capital does NOT go into the expected areas – there is very little investment in light manufactures with high employment creation. There is also increasing corruption, and rural unrest in 1997 is attributed to officials' extracting high levels of gouge from various public projects.

The AFC presents various political problems, mainly economic in origin. In a clear example of the use of state power, the State Bank took firm action, based upon a viable policy logic, to prioritise use of hard currency and credits and actively seek new export markets to replace those lost due to the AFC.[16]

The context was grist to the mill for institutions such as the World Bank, whose policy advice requires coherent use of state power. There are falls in inward FDI, an export slow-down and, crucially, evidence that technocrats with political support manage the impact relatively coherently.[17] Macroeconomic stability is preserved, with no rent creation, whilst SOEs are forced to bring dollars home from their overseas accounts and submit to rational programmes of credit allocation. There is also purposeful action to attain social stabilisation through a shift

of development resources to the rural areas. In terms of 'success', we see that the economy returns to fast growth rather quickly.

But it is also likely that the way the crisis played out also showed the weakness of political authority compared to the situation, say, a decade earlier. However, there is little evidence for much concern with this. One may conclude that the 1997 crisis showed that there was still enough residual authority in the system to exercise state power when a crisis demanded it. By the early 'noughties', the trend to ungovernability was apparent, but there remained some domestic sovereignty in the system (Fforde 2004c, 2005).

The third crisis – 2007–?

In the run-up to this crisis, we can see various interesting developments. Unlike the 1990s, a Vietnamese private sector has now emerged, as has a private foreign sector, now increasingly investing in what was expected – light manufactures. Vietnamese society 'opens up' powerfully, with international travel, a dynamic domestic national labour market and great sense of mobility and change. There are also big – as time goes on, very big – problems with corruption and low-quality public goods production (education, health, etc.) where the state seems as much a cause as a solution to the situation. As Vietnam gets closer to middle-income status, there are increasing concerns that these issues will, as arguably in many other countries, put Vietnam into the 'middle-income trap' (Gill and Kharas 2007). There new challenges will emerge if the country appears unable to generate the competitive ability to continue to grow as higher labour costs push the economy into competing in new areas requiring higher-quality, better public goods production, etc.

These political concerns are aggravated as economic and commercial pressure from China increasingly brings into play deep historical and cultural reflexes. Most Vietnamese are well aware of histories of their country that require the domestic house to be 'put in order' before an effective national leadership can lead the struggle to preserve national independence. Yet as corruption mounts, the VCP takes no real steps towards democratisation in terms that would be recognisable to the Gorbachevists – no politically credible political reform programme emerges to secure the regime. Inner-Party elections are not democratised, and the VCP excludes authentic non-Party candidates from elections. The 2007 elections to the National Assembly and local People's Councils bow towards such changes but the population sees that the VCP is not serious, which is consistent with the VCP's lack of a political reform programme. Nguyen Phu Trong, appointed VCP General Secretary at the 2010 11th Party Congress, was earlier Chairman of the National Assembly. He came from the ideological bloc of the Party apparatus (though he spent 2000–2006 as Secretary of the Hanoi Party organisation). He is not seen as a reformist.

Socio-economic gaps continued to widen, often spectacularly. Poverty researchers found that it is social position rather than anything else that increasingly explained the persistent poverty in groups such as ethnic minorities. Fforde (2011) offers some relevant details, including the gathering sense of the need for policy-driven institutional change to allow development to continue. To quote the World Bank:

> 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 2006, p. vii)

Politics not only continued to become increasingly corrupt and faction-ridden, but opinion became increasingly concerned with systemic issues. It makes increasing sense to talk of Vietnam as a 'land without a King'. Concerned with these big picture questions over policy implementability, the IMF, World Bank and other donors start to talk a lot about problems of 'transition to middle-income status' (Gill and Kharas 2007). Such problems permit donors to talk about broad issues of government, about which they are starting to become very concerned.[18]

The issue, as Gainsborough tellingly puts it, of everybody being 'blockable', in 2007 destroys macroeconomic stability and creates far larger economic rents than before. Large external capital inflows lead to increase in reserves and domestic liquidity that should be sterilised by sales of bonds etc. as part of monetary management but this does not happen; the State Bank of Vietnam – the central bank – is stopped from doing so (Fforde 2009a). This marks a major shift in the use of state power to support particular interests, a fundamental change away from the basic political economy rules that have been in place since broadly 1992. In terms of regime survival, it attacks legitimacy (Fforde 2012, 2013). Big fish (usually very large SOEs with political connections) start to use state power to support their interests, often pushed by Chinese business interests who, revealingly and with great political significance, gain a toehold in a large bauxite project in central Vietnam that is strongly opposed by organised opinion, both public and establishment. We see increasing macroeconomic instability – creation of cheap credits, cheap dollars, etc. – leading to inflation which by 2011 is running near 20% and hitting mass living standards hard as growth slows to 5% or below. A major scandal saw a large SOE with top political connections lose billions of dollars. The VCP then reappointed these politicians at the 2011 11th Party Congress. The erosion of domestic sovereignty has now come into full view.

Reflections on the crises

This rapid outline suggests that, lacking both a technocratic base in some new developmentalism and a popular base in some democratisation process, the Vietnamese state had by the second half of the 'noughties' become a medium for the creation of rents for politically powerful groups. It had little capacity to develop or implement policy that could protect the regime. Corruption and problems in delivery of public goods such as health, education and urban infrastructure all questioned the capacity of the VCP to act as an effective and suitable political institution. Comments from the IMF and World Bank may be read as reflecting considerable scepticism that policies to change the situation had any power behind them – by 2011 the macroeconomic instability had been present for five years (Fforde 2012). Erosion of domestic sovereignty was clear – key actors could not be stopped from standing in the way of policy or due political action. The VCP could not follow its own Constitution, and the Party General Secretary and the Politburo could not discipline politicians, as senior as the Premier, although they were reported publicly as declaring that they wanted to (Fforde 2012, 2013). In terms of political realities, the wise assumption now was that Vietnam was 'a land without a King'. There was no clear political activity that seemed capable of resolving the issue.

Looked at as a historical series, the three crises suggest a growing awareness within Vietnam of the importance of political authority as the question of domestic sovereignty evolved and became increasingly edgy. It 'became a problem'. Let us return to the insights of Hinsley (1986). He argues as follows about sovereignty:

> The concept has been formulated when conditions have been emphasizing the interdependence between the political society and the more precise phenomenon of its government. It has been the source of greatest preoccupation and contention *when conditions have been producing rapid changes in the scope of government or in the nature of society or in both*. It has been resisted or reviled – it could not be overlooked – when conditions, by producing a close integration between society and government or else by producing a gap between society and government, have inclined men to assume that government and community are identical or else to insist that they ought to be. In a word, *the origin and history of the concept of sovereignty are closely linked with the nature, the origin and the history of the state*. (p. 2, stress added)

Under traditional socialism, the idea of the vanguard CP made sense only if it also made sense that the combination of Soviet institutions and Vietnamese practice *was*, necessarily and irrefutably, progress. Whilst it is seductively easy to read into this agency, so that this maps easily to Western ideas of conscious 'development', this is actually a very large step, and perhaps an impossibly long one. To repeat the views of one of the very eminent participants at a workshop held in late 2010 to discuss (and they did so very critically) the VSP Congress documents:

> We say that the Party holds power – but how does it do this? Whose power does it hold? And who gives that power to the Party? (Quoted in Fforde 2012, p. 180)

Such questions are illuminated by Hinsley: the question of sovereignty comes to the fore as people are inclined to ponder relations between society and government. In Vietnam such considerations may draw upon a rich variety of sources.[19] It is not yet clear how these questions will be answered.

Whilst nowadays of only historical importance to Soviet and Central European reformists such as Gorbachev or Mlynar, for they are not very relevant in Russia or the other countries of the Soviet Union and its direct area of influence, these questions go to the heart of the domestic sovereignty issue. In the two decades since the end of the Cold War, it is certainly easy to say that there has been rapid change in Vietnamese society, much of it welcomed by the Vietnamese. However, the scope of government has yet to be redefined in ways that decide upon Vietnam's answer to the question of domestic sovereignty, the idea that allows a politics where people 'have assumed that there {is} a final and absolute authority in their society'.

We may now see what is interesting about the contemporary contrast between Russia and Vietnam. With none of the political institutions of the Soviet era intact, political authority and sovereignty in Russia evolve in ways that reflect the exercise of state power and social responses to this. Many commentators may justifiably neither appreciate nor like this point, given just how the country is ruled, but few would argue that this is a 'Land without a King'. It makes sense to believe that Russia's politics allows for the current rulers to be replaced peacefully. By contrast, as the Gorbachev reformers of the late 1980s would have predicted, the effects of a market economy and an open society in Vietnam to create deep concerns about sovereignty in Hinsley's sense, with tensions focussing upon relations between rulers and ruled that, with no accepted 'authority above all', are difficult to resolve precisely because policy has to be made to matter, and, with hierarchy incoherent, it usually does not. This adds to our understanding of the possible relationships between political reform and regime change, for the question of whether the VCP could, perhaps in the 1990s, have introduced political reform that preserved the regime is moot: it did not happen, but perhaps it could have done. This would have required, though, confrontation with what presumably the Vietnamese had been told by their CPSU comrades, which was that political change was essential – just what change, though, history cannot tell us.

Conclusions – 'learning from the Soviet Union is learning to win?'

The main conclusions to reach from reflection on Vietnam since the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989–1991 are, above all, the importance of asking very fundamental political questions: what is power in a particular context, what can be done with it, and in consequence what cannot be done, and how new forms of power are created and maintained. In this sense, the lesson for the VCP and for Vietnamese generally from the experiences of the CPSU and the USSR remains *political*. Gorbachev had realised that Soviet institutions conveyed limited power: they had been, in caricature, set up to do but two things – to defend the Party and construct Soviet socialism. Therefore, the political authority they conferred upon him as leader was structurally limited, so in some way that system had to depart if there was to be, for him, progress. Unlike other political systems, the Soviet system lacked the power to change itself. But he and his group found that they could destroy that system, giving away that sort of power.

The Vietnamese found through the two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union that the VCP's variant of Soviet institution lost authority over a society with a market economy that was powerfully globalising. Gorbachev was proven correct. By the second half of the 'noughties' domestic sovereignty had collapsed, leaving behind very little. If true, political reform driven by conscious policy was no longer possible, for any measure could be blocked by someone. There is no clear response, as yet, to Hinsley's question, as posed by the Vietnamese – how there may be 'a final and absolute authority' in Vietnamese society.

In terms of further research, much remains to be done. If the arguments in this paper are correct, the political evolution of Vietnam after 1989–1991 is a fascinating case study of the loss of domestic sovereignty, as yet unresolved. It also encourages the view that one test of the power within a political system is its (perhaps latent and unused) capacity to change direction. Perhaps, then, one lesson from the Soviet Union is – surprisingly – that political convergence between ruling parties in liberal democracies reduces systemic authority.

Notes

1. Hinsley's position is discussed below. 'Sovereignty' here is treated as an *assumption* held within society that 'there was a final and absolute authority' (Hinsley 1986, p. 1). The paper deliberately does not say much about possible relationships between domestic and external sovereignty, though possibilities here are fascinating. Whilst the latter is in the modern world surely largely something granted by other states (manifest, for example, in a seat at the UN), domestic sovereignty, if we follow Hinsley, arises from local political assumptions about relations between rulers and ruled. Links between the two are thus well worth thinking about, not least as one can often find people failing to distinguish between the two. In Vietnamese, the term used is *chu quyen*, derived from Chinese, and implying that there is a 'power' (*quyen*) that has an agency, and only one agency (*chu*) attached to it (the noun-adjective order thus follows Chinese rather than Vietnamese rules). This is perhaps a better, at least more easily glossed, term than 'sovereignty'.
2. That is, the first decade of the new century and new millennium.
3. Woodside's classic work comparing Chinese and Vietnamese versions of mandarinal governance shows how the Vietnamese Emperor was also both 'Monarch' (*Vuong)*, and in popular contemporary usage, 'King' (*Vua*) (Woodside 1971). Thus the phrase 'land without a King' renders into modern Vietnamese easily, as *dat khong co Vua*.
4. The present author was told this expression derives from Lord Acton, but has never been able to find a reference.
5. In most accounts in English this Vietnamese term is retained, and then glossed in various ways. Given the position taken in this paper it is better to retain the Vietnamese term, which is a compound formed from *doi* – to change – and *moi* – new. Neither of these words alone has any great political significance.
6. For SOEs, see Fforde (2007); for a more general history, see de Vylder and Fforde (1996); for a Vietnamese view see Le Duc Thuy (1993). Thuy was a personal assistant to one of the VCP Party General-Secretaries in the 1990s, Do Muoi, and then had a career in the Vietnamese central bank. See also Dang

Phong (2008), which this paper argues attempts the political task of encouraging belief that 'there is a King'. For a distant but intriguing comparison see the discussion in Carpenter (1997), who argues that when Henry VI of England and others refused to act as a monarch should, his courtiers pretended that he did, which worked for a while.

7. It is the 'so-called' north because Vietnamese practice refers to north, centre and south and what is commonly called the north in the West is in Vietnamese called the north and north-centre.
8. These meant that relevant committees of the Party/State had quotas for representation in them of the constituent elements of the Party/State.
9. Consider the fate of CPSU General Secretary Andropov, ex KGB, who sought radical conservative change in the USSR during the early 1980s, and failed.
10. Here and what follows draws upon Ed. Ellman and Kontorovich (1998), largely made up of histories written by senior (but not peak level) CPSU officials. One strong opinion there is that the Gorbachev group grew impatient with the inertia offered by the system and failed to realise that gradual change could allow the economy to reform itself and so preserve the regime – the Vietnamese pathway (Fforde 2009b). The analysis here argues that this misunderstands the political ambitions of the Gorbachev group, whose goals went well beyond the economic.
11. Further research, perhaps drawing upon the growing range of autobiographies, is needed to provide a decent secondary literature on patterns of authority at this time; for example, as Premier Do Muoi was able to push through policy based upon advice from his senior technocrats that led to establishment of a state Treasury system in Vietnam in the 1990s some years before China. This policy had run into opposition from local governments keen to retain control over state funds, but this was overcome. Personal observation.
12. The author first heard this expression in a consultancy study of the implementation of the Law on Cadres and Public Servants carried out in the late 'noughties'. Consider Rama (2010):

> . . . rapid economic and social change are not incompatible with a resilience of political power and culture. He {Gainsborough} convincingly argues that scholarly language about 'reforms' misses the point, because what is at play is a continuous reworking of existing power structures. (Martin Rama, endorsement to Gainsborough 2010)

13. The present author, whilst continuing academic research and publication throughout this period, was involved in a number of consultancies in Vietnam which permitted a series of 'participatory observations' of the realities of policy development and implementation.
14. The earliest reference the present author knows to this phrase is Dam van Nhue and Nguyen Si Thiep (1981).
15. By the late 1990s, we may note the following. An interview with the Deputy Manager of the Bank for Investment and Development in *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Viet nam* 15/7/98:3 provided a clear outline of the way in which neither the bank nor its customers bore business risk. 'In reality, in all localities, no Bank Manager would dare reject a project that has been approved by the Party Committee, and the People's Committee'. For central projects, 'For credits to General Companies that lie within the plan the Bank has to lend . . .' If debtors could not pay, then the solution was to extend the payment period.
16. See the analysis and policy actions presented at the national conference of State Bank managers in January 1998 (*Tuoi Tre* 17/2/98:11).
17. The information available to Vietnamese was by now of good quality. For example, The Hai (*Thuong Mai* 27/5/98:8) reported the steep falls in commodity export prices (crude oil – 21%; rubber – 42.5%, etc.) and, in the first quarter, the steep falls in exports – to ASEAN, 48%; to China, 20% and to South Korea, 60%. The Vietnamese business community was well informed as to what was happening; numbers of government missions went abroad to investigate key branches (e.g. garments, where product was diverted to the EU to compensate for loss of demand in non-quota countries). They advised businesses to accept re-badging of Vietnamese products as well as to pay enough to insure against trade risk (Vu Trong Hai *Nhan Dan* 27/4/98:5).
18. See references to donor positions in Fforde (2012).
19. Thus Woodside (1971, 2007) on historical ideas; apart from Vietnamese direct experiences, and those of the Soviet Union, Vietnamese thinkers are also, of course, aware of interactions with French and American ideas before 1975, as well as Eastern Europe before 1989–1991 and a wide range of contacts since the country opened up. Here it is worth stressing that the ideas of transition of 1980s were, unusually, largely home-grown (Fforde 2009b). See also Marr's classic writings on the late nineteenth century and the colonial period.

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