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VIETNAM
A CASE OF SOCIAL ALIENATION

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Among the complaints registered against the Vietnamese Army by the men who know it best - - the American advisers who serve with it at corps division, regiment and battalion level - - are the following: poor leadership, harshness toward the civilian population, corruption, lack of aggressiveness. Thus could one read in a dispatch to the New York Times from Saigon.¹ The author of dispatch, R.W. Apple, Jr., also reported that 13 per cent of the men deserted in 1966, and that five of the 10 Vietnamese Army divisions are 'combat - ineffective', meaning that they cannot or will not fight well, two are marginal, and only three are considered potent fighting unit, and further, that an 'intelligent' young company commander, when asked to explain the disinclination of the troops to fight, replied that the most important thing in war is to keep all of your troops alive'

In addition to the 700,000 men of the Armed forces, there are 200,000 government officials (of whom 40,000 are 'Revolutionary Development' or Rural Development cadres) and 150,000 employees of the American Mission in Vietnam. Those are the men who, directly or indirectly, are paid by the United States and who are involved in the fight for the defeat of the communist insurgents. Directly or indirectly, too, they are caught up in the corruption surrounding them. South Vietnamese officials and trading firms are riddled with corruption, wrote a well-known American weekly. Most American businessmen who survive are also caught up in it. It has been suggested that corruption could be halved by putting the big nightspots 'off limits' and forcing Americans to do business in their offices. 'However, it is believed that Government and police officials in Vietnam would not stand for changes. Why? Either they or their superiors are closely tied to Chinese and French capital, with a grip of on the rest. More honest Vietnamese calculate it would take the ordinary government Clerk centuries to save the sums it is said some military leaders can wager in exclusive poker games'²

Thus, three years after the overthrow, murder and post mortem denunciation of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu, the situation had not basically altered. If anything, it had become worse. When one recalls that much the same had been written four or five years earlier, when the Americans were supporting and advising the earnest and strong-willed Mr. Diem, or 16 years earlier still, when the French were supporting and advising the pleasure - loving and pliable Emperor Bao Dai, then one must conclude that something is basically wrong something that had little to do with Diem and Bao Dai themselves or with the generals who had helped Mr. Diem depose Bao Dai and who had then overthrown and killed Mr. Diem to rule in his stead.

What is basically wrong goes back not 10 or 15, but almost 100 years, when, with the establishment of foreign rule, the Vietnamese ruling elite became progressively alienated from

¹ 'Saigon 'Army: A.U.S. Challenge' New York Times, December 12, 1966.

² 'Vietnam: Corruption', U.S. News and World Report, December 19, 1966.

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the Vietnamese people. Or one may choose to look at it from the other end, and say that the Vietnamese people became progressively alienated from the ruling elite. This second approach is perhaps more meaningful. In any case, what has happened is that a new 'elite' (or, if one prefers, a new 'ruling class'), drawing its wealth and values from the foreigners and living under the latter's protection in the elites, with the support and avoid of these foreigners, has sought to impose its rule on a country where 80 per cent of the population live in the rural areas, practice subsistence but self sufficient farming follow traditions, and are practically independent of the outside world. This process had gathered momentum under French predominance. Today, under American predominance, it has reached a considerably higher level, and a cute form. To understand this process, one should look back to the situation prevailing before the intrusion of France upon the Vietnamese scene, and during the period of French predominance.

When Emperor Gia Lon, the ancestor of Bao Dai, unified Vietnam in 1802 after defeating his enemies in the North and in the South he restored to it a political and administrative system which had been known in Vietnam for centuries. Two of the main features of this system were: (1) the systematic elimination of his own family from public affairs: princes and princesses were allowed to indulge in poetry, literature of flirtation, but little else; (2) the election of the country's ruling elite, the mandarins, through triennial competitive examinations. This system was to be preserved by his successors, until it was abolished by the French.

The system, based on the teachings of Confucius, had its strong and weak points. But from the point of view of leadership, it maintained the channels of communications fully open between the top and the bottom, the rulers and the peasants, town and country. Because the highest positions were open to all through competitive examinations, and because the studies called for no elaborate and expensive schooling system (any peasant could pursue them at home, or from his village), the rulers and the ruled came practically to form the same social milieu. In other words, there was no social differentiation resulting from birth or wealth, and social vertical mobility was great. As the Confucian system required that to fulfill his duties towards his ancestors and his relatives, every one, including the highest officials, was in touch with rural realities. This system, applied throughout the nation, also gave a national cultural unity. Mandarins and peasants were the products of a cultural standardization process, so to speak. Their *Weltans chauung* and their ethics were the same. So were their motivations and ambitions. There was thus an osmosis between leaders and ruled, between court and village, town and country. This pattern was to be broken up by foreign intrusion.

The official reason for French intervention in Vietnamese was the Catholics by the Vietnamese Emperors, beginning with the reign of Minh Mang, who succeeded Gia Long in 1820. But from the point of view of the Vietnamese Court at the time, the foreign priests were telling the Emperor's subjects that it was wrong to place the allegiance to Emperor above that to God - - and a western God not worshipped by the Emperor Himself - - to worship one's ancestors, or to have more than one wife, and many other such things. They were snapping the basis of Vietnam's social order and stability. In fact, the Imperial Edict forbidding the propagation of the catholic religion spoke of this religion as to Dao (the wrong path). From the ideological point of view, as we would say today, the Emperor was right. The foreign priests were engaging in sub-version - - to use present-day terminology; they were threatening to destroy the ideological unity of the nation and shaking the foundations of the state by alienating more and more people from their government.

From the point of view of the foreign priests. As explained in their letters home, what was being undertaken at serious risks to themselves was no less than the salvation of the eastern heathen. It so happened that the undertaking took place in the reign of Napoleon III, who needed the backing of the French Catholics to maintain the stability of his own government at home. The French Emperor took up the cause of the catholic missionaries. Soon a religious conflict developed and this inevitably led to an armed conflict in which, in the reign of Emperor Tu Duc (1848-83), Vietnam had to yield and open its doors to a foreign religion. Their position of foreign rule was to follow. Republican France, under the government of Jules Ferry, completed the work of Imperial France, and put its seal on Vietnam with the imposition of the protectorate treaty in 1884.

It is natural that, in becoming a French colony, Vietnam also became a field for French cultural expansion. Ideas or ideology allowed the flag. And much else, too: the eventual destruction of Vietnam's cultural unity, and the alienation of the Vietnamese people for their government; the channels of communications between the peasantry and the ruling elite, between village and court, between the two ways to cause functioning.

Under foreign rule the country came to be ruled from the town, by a new class which was to identify itself more and more with the interests of the foreign nation, to depend on the latter for wealth, protection, and the necessary power to impose its rule. The peasants, for their part, were to cease to look upon the government, because both instinct and experience told them that government now existed primarily to serve foreign interests rather than those of the majority of the population, the peasantry. To join the new class, especially its higher echelons, a man had to undergo a special and expensive education in the cities, or beyond, in the foreign metropolis. More than that, he had to exchange his mode of life for a new one. This meant that recruitment was restricted to the urban population. The peasants, conservative and in any case lacking means, could not or would not leave their villages, so were barred. And the new elite, brought up in foreign ways, according to foreign standards, living in the cities where the comfort they had learned to love was to be found, lost touch with the peasantry and rural realities. It became not only a new class, but a class apart, cutting itself off from the majority of the nation, and rejected by it.

The change described above was naturally slow, and did not become apparent until a several decades had elapsed. Nor was it a direct reflection of French policy, but only a by-product of French rule. After seizing control of the southern, richest and most important part of Vietnam from the strategic point of view, France turned it into a full colony placed under French direct rule. It was also the newest part of the country, recently carved out of Cambodia, and which the Emperor, sitting in Hue, had not fully brought into the Vietnamese administrative and cultural fold. For that reason, when the best Vietnamese mandarins, out of loyalty to the Emperor, chose to move north instead of studying with an administrative vacuum. In other words there was a problem of leadership.

To deal with this problem, France started training new elite. To induce the Vietnamese to serve, the French colonial administration offered them special privileges, including a generous, or rather overgenerous, grant of land – part of which was seized from the peasants - -and a status close to that of French nationals. Some of the holdings were so large were so large that they were referred to in popular parlance as 'land over which the stork can fly endlessly without encountering obstacles' (guong co bay thang can). It was from this source that the new class was to derive its immense wealth. This inevitably alienated it from the rural population, partly because of the income gap separating the one from the other, partly because the rural inhabitants looked upon the new class as despoilers. Moreover, the new elite acquired new ways which made them feel closer to the French than to their compatriots, and this further widened the gulf between them and the peasants.

In central and Northern Vietnam, the French encountered a different problem. There the Imperial Administrator was well entrenched. The problem for the French authorities was how to use it to the best advantage of France. The solution was to control the Vietnamese administration through the Emperor. The hard-headed royal candidates for the throne were exiled and men willing to serve the French colonial government replaced them. This was easily accomplished: Vietnam had no means of resisting the French will, for several attempts an armed rebellion had been crushed. Thus the Imperial administration was maintained, but oriented towards the serving of French interests. As in the South, but in a different way, the Vietnamese Mandarins became officials serving France rather than Vietnam, although, superficially, they were appointed by the and were the servants of the Imperial Court. In 1886, a number of big cities, Hanoi, Haiphong, Tourane (today Danang), became French concessions, and were replaced under the direct French rule.

Social stability was preserved outwardly, but was in fact being inexorably eroded, because it was plain where real power lay. No important position could be attained by a Vietnamese official without the approval of the French colonial government. On the other hand, the system of selection of officials through competitive examinations was no longer fully operative. The

French also created a parallel administration, from which a man could be shifted to the Imperial administration without having to pass the traditional tests at the triennial examinations. In 1920, these examinations were abolished altogether, and in 1925 the administration of North Vietnam passed directly into the hands of the French Resident – General who assumed the powers of a viceroy, including those of appointing officials ‘on behalf of the Emperor’.

It was from the cities that the new officials were to be recruited. To qualify for high government positions, new diplomas were required, and these could be gained only through a long and expensive period of schooling obtainable only in the cities. The peasants were therefore excluded from the high, as well as from the middle positions. A new spirit also prevailed. Instead of the Confucian training of officials to serve as leaders of the people, the new system aimed principally at serving the interests, first of the colonial powers, and second of the Imperial Government, which was itself a servant of that power.

A process of alienation set in. Alienation worked both ways. The new officials ceased to regard themselves as trustees by the people, and the people ceased to look upon the new officials as the leaders, as men from their social milieu, serving their interests and into whose ranks they could hope to enter. Social differentiation based on privileges appeared, and vertical social mobility was blocked. Since the new ruling class chose to live in the towns, the channels of communications with the villages also broke down, and thus contact with rural, that is, with national realities. The new elite became a class living in what were in fact international settlements, on the pattern of Shanghai, with their backs turned away from their own country and their eyes towards the seas across which lay the colonial metropolis, the source of their wealth and power. Where there had been one Vietnam, there now were two, existing side by side physically, but foreign to each other psychologically, with two different sets of motivation and aspirations, standards and modes of life, social backgrounds and political loyalties. Or rather, the urban class knew where its loyalty lay: to the colonial power across the sea; but the peasants were not sure whether their loyalties should be directed.

True, partly as a result of inertia, partly out of sheer habit the peasants still looked for leadership to the Emperor and his representatives, the mandarins. In fact the first national rebellions were led by mandarins in the name of the Emperor (Can Vuong movement), and even in 1945 the Viet Minh government found it necessary to receive the symbols of power - the sword and the seal from the hands of Bao Dai himself. But the psychological thread binding the peasants to the traditional ruler was then, and it would take little to cause it to snap. And it did snap when the communists began to offer themselves as an alternative, with a complete Weltanschauung, and especially, with new aspirations. Which happened to coincide with those of the peasants. The communist also offered leadership, an organization, a new technique, and a faith for the achievement of those aspirations. To the peasants who had lost faith in the old world, the communist brought a new faith in a new world, backed up by the solid historical evidence - the experiment of the Soviet Union. That there was much that was questionable in that experiment and in the communist formula was not immediately apparent. (Soviet Russia's shift back to a more bourgeois outlook, the Sino Soviet conflict, harshness of the Vietnamese communists and civil war among communists in China were still far away). In the first flush of enthusiasm, it did not matter anyway. The Emperor and his mandarins had failed to defend the country's independence and sovereignty - and so had lost their mandate from Heaven. There was a new group of men claiming this mandate, and appearing to have the chances of exercising it.

Against a background of disappointment, frustration and despair, and hope for something better and closer in their hearts, the peasants were receptive to the communist message. The first communist-led demonstrations took place in 1930; but although they were suppressed by the French colonial authorities, the results were not altogether unsatisfactory. Henceforth, the communist leaders were to press on with their work, extend their influence, and wait for better opportunities. These, it is now well known, came with the war, with their work, extend their influence, and wait for better opportunities. These, it is now well known, came with the war, with the mistakes of France in 1945 – 63, and since 1963, with those of the United States.

From 1939 the breach between town and country widened rapidly. The occupation of Vietnam by Japan added to the burden of the country, a burden largely borne by the peasantry. The French

Vichy Government made a deal with the Japanese government for the preservation of a token French sovereignty over Vietnam in return for special privileges accorded to the Japanese. On the other hand, to maintain French rule, the Governor, Admiral Decoux, sought to tie the local ruling elite more closely to France by giving it more economic and financial privileges and an improved status.

With the return of peace in 1945, that policy was developed still further. To economic and financial privileges were added political privileges: the creation of a Republic of Cochinchina in 1946 for the benefit of the southern Frenchified elite. This was followed in 1950 by the creation of the state of Vietnam, which added the ruling elite of central Vietnam (with Emperor Bao Dai at their head) to the southern elite. The installation of Mr. Diem as prime Minister in 1954 did not alter the situation basically. On the contrary: it brought in the French-trained ruling elite of Northern Vietnam as well, since Mr. Diem threw the doors of his administration wide open to the stream of refugees from the North.

With the elimination of Mr. Diem, and the practical disintegration of the South Vietnam administration and armed forces in 1964-65, the United States took over. This was not surprising as the American forces increased from 12,000 to 500,000, or twice the size of the Vietnamese regular Armed Forces, while the American Mission employed directly 150,000 people compared with the 200,000 strong Vietnamese civil service. They also paid them better. In addition, the urban population, confined in the cities, depended on the United States not only for protection and income, but also for its food (556,000 tons of rice in 1965-66, not to mention pork and much else including chicken). In return, they provided all kinds of services. There were also a million refugees from the countryside. It is from this urban population that the majority of the cadres, both military and civilian, were drawn to pacify the country side - that is to restore government authority over it. In the absence of real popular support for the government, these cadres had to be imposed on the rural population by force, in practical terms by American force, the force of the South Vietnamese government being only fictional - the arms, the money, the supplies, as well as the combat troops being essentially provided by the United States.

While the South Vietnamese officials, civilian and military, only made temporary sallies into the countryside from their bases in the cities, the communists did the opposite from the countryside, where they were all but free to organize the peasantry. In this they were favored by two major advantages: their cadres were drawn mostly from the peasant milieu and they lived and worked in the country-side. One may disapprove of the rule that to become a high official a man must belong to a communist cadre, that for this he must forsake his past if he is a bourgeois, and that, even then, no high position in the communist hierarchy was to be conferred on people with less than three generations of peasant ancestors behind them. But the rule makes sense against background of struggle between town and country for the control of Vietnam. It wiped out the social differentiation between rulers and ruled: it insured smooth vertical mobility for the peasants, and it kept open the channels of communication between government and people. The communist cadres were constantly reminded that they must stay close to the people and live and work among them. Another habit instilled into the communist cadres was that they must keep away from the corrupting influence of the cities (in communist jargon: avoid falling mentality). In a sense, the communist leaders and cadres had replaced the Confucian mandarins and offered the peasants - or rather promised them - world in which the latter felt more at home than the one offered by the urban ruling elite and their foreign supporters.

Against this background, one can see the danger of the current policy, or practice - it all amounts to the same thing in so far as the consequences are concerned. The military enclaves and the economic enclaves (the cities), supported economically, financially and technically, and protected militarily, by the United States, will isolate the Urban population - and the leaders further from the peasantry. Most of the more than a thousand million dollars poured into South Vietnam yearly have found their way into the pockets of this urban population in the form of buildings, bare, restaurants, night clubs, shops, and supplies of services of all kinds (in economic parlance: the tertiary sector), or are transferred back to the United States in the form of payments for American imports, or elsewhere abroad as refugee capital. The more aid Vietnam gets, the faster and deeper the process of social differentiation blocks vertical mobility, and alienation of town and city will become widening the gap between people and government and making the struggle against viable Vietnam more difficult.

What, then, is to be done? What is the solution to the problems created by the communist attack on and in Vietnam? How can it be effectively defeated? Taking into account both the distant and the immediate future? The analysis presented above suggests the solution. This solution calls for an end to the alienation between town and country, for elimination of the social differentiation between rulers and ruled, for restoration of vertical social mobility, for reopening of the channels of communications between people and government. It means that the leaders of Vietnam must identify themselves with the aspirations of the majority of the population, which is the peasantry, rather than with those of the minority, the urban population and, beyond them, those of foreign countries. This will make it possible for the peasants to identify themselves with the government. It means also that the ranks of the ruling elite and the road to positions of leadership must be opened to the peasantry. But how can these things be done?

Since schooling is an important factor in admission into the ranks of the ruling elite, it would be necessary to make it accessible to everyone, rich and poor, urban or rural children. This means that (1) each of South Vietnam's 2,200 villages should have a primary school; (2) each of the 243 districts should have a junior high school to make it possible for those who finish elementary school to continue their studies without leaving their villages; (3) each of the 43 provinces should have a senior high school. To enable the bright but poor children to continue beyond junior high schools, scholarships should be provided to all those who reach a specified standard. Those who are exceptionally clever should also be provided with the means to go to the universities abroad. All this is certainly not beyond the means of the Vietnamese government or of USAID within three to five years, or even less.

Closely connected with the problem of schoolings is that of ensuring that the graduates return to serve their people. The problem could be solved by making local offices elective and open only to the local population. At the national level, officials of the central government should be required to have served for a period of years in local government, to ensure that they are familiar with rural and local problems. No official should be allowed to get his first assignment in the capital, or to stay in his job there more than a specified number of years. Periodic rotation must be made into an iron rule. Since housing is the principal reason for officials to stay in the capital or the cities, this problem should be given special attention by the government to ensure fairness, which is itself a condition of efficiency.

Another problem is to ensure that those who are promising should be propelled upwards. Procedures should be worked out for spotting talent, and facilities accorded to those selected to improve themselves (special school, training course, study trips and so on). However, care should be taken to ensure that favoritism is not the basis for selection. The creation of boards of selection, publication of the names of those selected and rejected, and the reasons for selection or rejection, would help in this respect. Representatives of villages, districts and provinces should be included on such boards.

These principles should apply to the selection of both civilian and military cadres. Alienation between town and country has inflicted on the Vietnamese armed forces a problem of morale. The troops are known to be tough, courageous, and to fight well, but their collective performance has been poor because of poor leadership. This is not surprising, because the officer corps are composed mostly of high school graduates, that is, the urban and bourgeois section of the population. To send these officers out into the field is to ask them to undergo hardship, perhaps to die, for what, in their eyes, is not really in their interests. It was pointed out earlier that their interests lie in the cities and across the seas. They owe nothing to the villages, so why should they be asked to die defending them? Further, they feel completely lost in a milieu and a life which they have become foreign.

From the point of view of the peasants, the question is why should they die to preserve the comfort and property of the urban ruling elite whose representatives are their commanders, rarely seen at the heads of the columns, or among them in dangerous and critical situations? What chances have they of joining the elite where the death rate would be low and privileges many? What is the use of being a member of that elite if it exists essentially to serve a foreign power?

Nevertheless, the interests of the urban population should not be wholly sacrificed to those of the peasants. Channels of communication must be re-opened between the two sections of the population. The one way of doing this would be to build an extensive network of roads into every village from the cities and make available cheap means of transport, so that between town and country, villages and cities, people can travel freely and learn from each other. Thus while the peasants will be introduced to modern urban life, the townsfolk will maintain a link with rural traditions. If the peasants are to change, it is better that they should be left free to choose the areas and the pace of change. Cheap and fast transport will enable them to visit the cities, look, see and choose. For their part, the people of the cities will be able to make frequent visits to their villages and be reminded of the country's roots, of its realities and traditions, which are part of its strength.

But the biggest question is what to do with the existing army and a civil service, which are well-nigh beyond reform? The answer would be to by-pass them and create a new army and a new civil service. These would have to be built up in the field, away from the capital and the cities, around a nucleus of revolutionary men who themselves would go to the country, live simply among the peasants, whose lot they will make it their business to improve by working among them and leading them. A special area might be selected for this experiment. It could be expanded as the new army and civil service grew larger, gained more experience, and won the confidence of the peasants. There are many details to work out (security, economic viability, internal and external communication, and so on); but once the idea had been adopted, and the men found, the rest would follow. One may ask: what would happen to the present army and civil service? The answer would be that they should be allowed to wither away, after their best elements had been accepted as volunteers into the new ones.

This is not such a hare-brained scheme as it might appear. There are in the present army and civil service many men and women who do not make the existing situation, but who, for lack of an alternative, just stay on and do a bad job with a heavy heart and a distressed mind. They would surely welcome new opportunities offered them to fight and serve. Many other Vietnamese have also been clamouring for a real revolution. Here is an opportunity for them to have it. Of course these changes could not be accomplished overnight. But if a start were made now, sometime in the future, and, who know, in a near future, we should have something with which to build a new and viable Vietnam capable of being a workable answer to communism.

Some may find these ideas too radical. A less radical alternative exists. It would consist in selecting a few provinces, perhaps one for each crops area, and asking volunteers from the Armed forces, the civil service, the Students, the labour organizations to go and work there in the conditions described. Needless to say, the selection would need to be made very carefully, for a false initial step would mean wrecking the whole experiment. Further, the volunteers would have to promise not to leave the area for a number of years unless in exceptional circumstances. Indeed, it would be so much better if they could bring their families there. On the other hand, these provinces should be all but cut off from the rest of the country to avoid the corrupting influence of the cities. As the experiment proved successful, and the cadre became experienced and hardened, the surrounding provinces could be added to the nuclei.

However, all the effects of the solution proposed may be cancelled out by an erroneous aid policy, both in regard to volume and direction. While some aid is desirable or even necessary too much will be harmful. Aid is like medicine. The injection of a correct dose in the right place will cure, but an overdose injected in the wrong place will kill. Excessive and prolonged aid will have the effect of making the cities independent of the countryside, and dependant on the donor country. It will sap the country's physical as well as moral strength and render it powerless in the face of an internal threat to its social structure—such as communist subversion.

Under the present aid procedure, aid is channeled into Vietnam commercially through Saigon and the big cities. This gives yet more prosperity to the urban areas at the expense of the countryside. So widening the gap between the two and reinforcing the tendencies towards alienation between the urban ruling elite and the rule peasantry. It depends the parasitism of the cities and places them in dangerous situation; while the rural areas can continue to live without aid—although at a lower level—the urban areas will surely collapse the moment when, for some reason or other, aid—that is, foreign support—is removed. This was precisely the case in 1940

when, deprived of the protection of France, Vietnam was left practically to itself, and the urban population was powerless, without support of French army and money, either to oppose Japanese invasion or to impose its rule on a peasantry intensely worked upon by the communists.

It is therefore absolutely necessary that the situation should be fundamentally altered. This can be accomplished only if the Allied countries, and especially the United States change course and reduce their aid instead of continually increasing it. The thousands of millions of dollars, and the thousands (or is tens of thousands?) of aid officials, technical, administrative, and others pledged by President Johnson to Vietnam may well be the worst gifts ever given this country, for it would mean the eventual destruction of its live forces.

Physically and morally, as well as its capacity to think, plan and execute, and its will to work and struggle—that is, its will to live. A donation, or better, a loan of two to three hundred million dollars per year for three to five years would do much more good. Used for the building of schools and roads and other means of communications instead of paying for officials' higher salaries, bars, buildings, luxury goods of all kinds, it would mean the salvation of Vietnam. One thousand million and more per year, especially after the return of peace, used as it has been in the past few years would spell death or eternal bondage to Vietnam.

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