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The Myth of a Centralised Socialist State in Vietnam: What Kind of a Myth?

Martin Gainsborough

Abstract: Through a case study of Vietnam, the article explores the view that there is a tendency to overstate the degree to which there is a coherent central body, namely the state, directing the country. Exploring this myth, it argues that there is a tendency to reify the state, even in writing which is attentive to localism and the diversity of societal actors at play in Vietnamese political life. The article argues that the myth of the central state endures because there are domestic and foreign political interests that depend on it. However, more fundamentally, the myth endures because of the power of the state to colonise our minds such that even when the empirical data does not fit with the idea of the state, we make it fit. The article's findings have implications for the study of politics far beyond the Vietnamese case.

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Introduction

This article explores the view that there is a tendency in Vietnam studies to overstate the degree to which there is a coherent central body, namely the state, directing the country.¹ I argue that this is a myth that tends to surface and resurface over time. Having stated this as my point of departure, things get more complicated. Suggesting that such a myth is operating could mean many things. For instance, we might hesitate to say that there is no central body in Vietnam, not least because the formal political apparatus seems well developed. So, is it a case of the central state simply being weaker than is sometimes thought or is there something else at stake, as yet unidentified? In addition, the article's title speaks of a centralised *Socialist* state. This raises the question of how the association of the Vietnamese state with Socialism might be relevant to an understanding of the myth. Finally, it is worth noting that asserting the existence of a myth of a centralised state in Vietnam might seem counter-intuitive. If there is one thing that any self-respecting student of Vietnam politics knows, it is that localism is very important: recall the proverb 'the emperor's writ stops at the village gate' (*phép vua thua lệ làng*) and the many studies that have explored the phenomena of localism in Vietnam.² Thus, one might be forgiven for asking, 'What risk of overstating the authority of the central state here?' What is clear, therefore, is that having stated an initial position, it is necessary to proceed carefully and to establish very precisely the nature of the alleged myth. This is what the present article seeks to do.

My key research questions can be identified as follows:

1. What form does the myth of a centralised Socialist state in Vietnam take and how does it manifest itself?
2. Is it a myth that manifests itself in the same way over time or do we need to take account of change?
3. If there is evidence of a tendency to overstate the power of the central state in writing on Vietnam – in some shape or form – and this is mistaken, why does the myth endure?

The latter question clearly takes us in the direction of the politics of the myth; to get a handle on the myth, it is important to understand the politics. However, I argue – having asserted the existence of the myth understood in a particular way – that while it does indeed endure for

1 Note that, when I refer to 'the state', I am thinking of the Communist Party and government.

2 A good place to start is Kerkvliet and Marr (2004).

political reasons, its roots lie deeper, namely in the ‘statist bias’ that permeates large swathes of political science (and public life). By statist bias, I mean a tendency to take the state as a given and hence not appreciate how the state functions politically, affecting what we see and what we do not.³ Vietnam studies is, on the whole, in thrall to the statist bias, and it is about time we broke free from this.

The article proceeds as follows. I first offer a discussion of ways in which we might think about the state. I do this with reference to some of the classic literatures that seek to theorise the state beyond the case of Vietnam. Second, looking at the work of a number of key Vietnam politics scholars, notably Benedict Kerkvliet, I explore how the said myth manifests itself. This will include addressing the question of how the myth of a centralised state can be operating in respect of a country where scholars are deeply attentive to localism and a vibrant societal sphere. Next, I consider the politics of the myth, asking why it endures. I focus on three areas: elite interests, the Socialist legacy, and ideas about the statist bias; arguing that the first and the third are most important. Having done this, I propose an alternative ‘non-statist’ approach to thinking about politics in Vietnam that avoids some of the pitfalls associated with the myth. This is done with reference to work by both the author and Adam Fforde. Finally, in the conclusion, I consider the implications of my findings for contemporary actors, including the international development community.

The focus of the article is on the post-1975 period and particularly the period since the 1980s (that is, the so-called ‘reform’ years).⁴ That said, I will refer briefly to the period before 1975 where it is pertinent to do so. In terms of methodology, the article is based on a close analysis of existing Vietnam scholarship supplemented by the author’s own research on Vietnam, conducted over many years, and a reading of sections of the state theory literature.

I now turn to the first section.

3 This is to draw on post-structuralist writing on the state, which is central to understanding the argument of this chapter. See Finlayson and Martin 2006: 155–171.

4 Note that the idea of ‘reform’ (*doi moi*) lies at the heart of the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam in the period under question, so I am hesitant to invoke such language here. The relationship between ‘reform’ and the myth is discussed later in the article.

Theorising the State: Some Initial Reflections

It is not as if I am starting my investigations into the nature of the state in Vietnam entirely blind.⁵ In addition, there has been much consideration given to the state both in political science and in development politics more generally. The aim of this section is to draw on this wider ‘non-Vietnam’ literature to orientate ourselves and guide us in terms of some of the possibilities when we come to think about the Vietnamese case. The fundamental question is: how do we think about state power?

In terms of the panoply of different kinds of states that exist, writing has ranged from discussion of ‘failed states’ to neo-patrimonial and developmental states, with various other conceptualisations along the way.⁶ Writing on failed states was particularly prominent in the post-Cold War period, and while the concept of the failed state has been rightly criticised, writing in this area seeks to communicate situations of partial or total state collapse, where the functions of governance carried out by a state cease to occur (see Hehir and Robinson 2007, and Jones 2008: 180–205). I suggested in the introduction that this conceptualisation is probably not appropriate for Vietnam (there clearly is ‘something’ there). However, the idea of a failed state is useful for revealing the spectrum of what we could conceivably be talking about when we consider the myth of a centralised state – if only in this case to rule it out.

By contrast, ideas of a neo-patrimonial or developmental state are potentially much more useful when it comes to thinking about Vietnam. The neo-patrimonial state has particularly been associated with sub-Saharan Africa, so there has been some reticence to apply it to Vietnam; a standard response would be: ‘Vietnam is not as dysfunctional as some countries in sub-Saharan Africa’. However, convention aside, ideas about neo-patrimonialism are not without merit in terms of highlighting some characteristics that are in play in the Vietnamese case. The theory of the neo-patrimonial state seeks to capture situations in which a system formally laid out in ‘legal-rational’ or ‘bureaucratic’ terms is supplanted and

5 Some of the relevant literature will be discussed below, but for some of the historic texts see, for instance, Porter 1993; Thayer 1995: 39–64; Dang Phong and Beresford 1998; Gainsborough 2003; Kerkvliet and Marr 2004; Kerkvliet 2005; Gainsborough 2010a; Tai and Sidel 2013; London 2014; Vu 2017.

6 See Finlayson and Martin (2006) for further background. One could speak here in terms of ‘authoritarian’ and ‘democratic’ states as another way to think about the state in Vietnam. However, I do not find this helpful, not least because the labels ‘authoritarian’ and ‘democratic’ assume too much about the state in Vietnam (and so-called democratic states). I would argue that all states have democratic and authoritarian features.

suffused by the exercise of power on more personal grounds. Scholars writing on the neo-patrimonial state often speak of a blurring of public and private, with decision making being influenced by personal relationships and money. What follows, it is argued, is that state capacity, or ‘the ability to get thing done’, is undermined (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009: 125–156). For anyone familiar with how decision-making occurs in Vietnam, where relationships and money are key, the connections are plain to see (Gainsborough, Dang Ngoc Dinh, and Tran Thanh Phuong 2009).

While the neo-patrimonial state has tended to be associated with sub-Saharan Africa, the developmental state has been associated with East and Southeast Asia. It describes, amongst other things, situations where state capacity is regarded as high, particularly in terms of designing and implementing economic policy and nurturing internationally competitive firms (Leftwich 1995: 400–427). Developmental states, so the theory goes, have cohesive ‘developmental’ elites. Crucial here is the relationship between state and business, or state and society, with state actors needing (according to the theory) to stand sufficiently apart from societal or business actors in order to be able to ‘discipline’ and ‘direct’ them to achieve ‘developmental’ results. Peter Evans’ famously spoke about ‘embedded autonomy’, which sought to capture the way in which the state maintained autonomy in relation to, say, corporate actors (to be able to discipline them) whilst still having sufficiently close relations with them (to be able to direct them) (Evans 1995). Writers on the developmental state have made a distinction between stronger and weaker states, which again underlines the fact that we are talking about a spectrum of capacity or developmentalism (Booth 1999: 301–321).

When talking about state capacity, a distinction is sometimes made between states that may possess strong ‘coercive’ power but are weaker when it comes to ‘infrastructural’ power (McCormick 1999: 153–175). Infrastructural power is more the kind of power that developmental state theory is interested in, although a tendency towards repression is also noted as a feature of a developmental state. Recent scholarship has highlighted what appears to be a thin line between developmental and more predatory or corrupt state behaviour, and there is ongoing debate about whether states like China and Vietnam should be considered developmental (Rock and Bonnett 2004: 999–1017).

To conclude, I argue that ideas about neo-patrimonialism and developmentalism are useful – as a point of departure – as we think about how we want to characterise the state in Vietnam, and particularly as we explore the extent to which Vietnam scholarship has overstated the

power of the central state. However, both these theories have their limitations and embody assumptions about the nature of the state which are ultimately misleading. I will return to this later in the article.

I now turn to how scholars have spoken about the state in Vietnam, considering the ways in which they both align with and depart from the above framework. I start by looking at the writing of Benedict Kerkvliet, making connections with other Vietnam politics' specialists.

Pinning Down the Myth: What Kind of a Myth?

In a 1995 article in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Kerkvliet helpfully wrote that scholars had three different approaches when thinking about the state in Vietnam (Kerkvliet 1995). Kerkvliet repeated this analysis a decade later in a book-length study on agricultural collectivisation and decollectivisation (Kerkvliet 2005). Kerkvliet named the first approach the 'dominating state' approach. This approach stated (and remember that we are talking some years ago) that the key to understanding policymaking and its implementation in Vietnam is to look at what state institutions do ("the rules and programs governing Vietnam are monopolised within the state", Kerkvliet writes).⁷ Writing in 2005, Kerkvliet associated this position with scholars like Gareth Porter, Carlyle Thayer and Brantly Womack.

Kerkvliet referred to the second approach as "mobilizational corporatism". In a refinement of the 'dominating state' approach, he argued that there *is* popular influence on the state, and on policy debates, but that it occurs through authorised channels established by the Party. A good example would be the Party-controlled mass organisations that represent different social groups (such as workers, farmers, women, students). Kerkvliet associates this approach with scholars like Yeonsik Jeong, Jonathan Stromseth and William Turley (Jeong 1997: 152–171; Stromseth 1998; Turley 1993).

However, Kerkvliet was not satisfied with either approach; both, he wrote in 2005, focus on "official politics" or "the formal institutions of policymaking and implementation". Even the second approach, which incorporates a sense of 'advocacy politics', only allows for the involvement of state actors. The problem, Kerkvliet said, is that neither approach can account for what villagers (that is, the social group he was focusing on in his particular study) do *outside* official channels. Thus, neither approach can account for the difference between what the Party

7 The only exception being that some international influence is acknowledged.

or government says should happen and what villagers actually do. Nor, Kerkvliet continued, are these two approaches able to recognise that farmers may actually *influence* national politics, whether on account of unauthorised activity, corruption or incompetence. Kerkvliet also argued that this is exactly what happened, writing:

Gradually, national authorities began to look differently at deviant local arrangements [...] Between the late 1970s and 1980s, the Communist Party government incrementally adjusted its collectivisation policy to accommodate aspects of those unauthorised practices instead of trying to expunge them. (Kerkvliet 2005: 35)

Kerkvliet named this third approach to thinking about Vietnamese politics ‘dialogical’ (Kerkvliet 2005: 36). Dialogue, in the sense of communicating ideas and preferences, continues between authorities and various sectors of society, and “is an important part of the system”, he said. This ‘communication’ generally does not involve confrontation or much political organisation, Kerkvliet argued, although it can sometimes escalate into unauthorised protest. He concluded:

This dialogical interpretation of the political system recognises that the communist government’s capacity to coordinate programs and implement policies is *considerably weaker* than what a dominating state or mobilizational corporatist view would argue [italics added]. Activities not under the state’s control remain afoot and introduce discrepancies between what authorities claim and what actually occurs. Indeed, social forces and groups beyond the state can contribute to shift in policies. This interpretation also points out that authorities can adjust and change policies in the face of realities beyond their control. (Kerkvliet 2005: 36)

While Kerkvliet’s study focused narrowly on decollectivisation, it points to what is generally the dominant approach to thinking about the Vietnamese politics today, especially as the so-called ‘reform’ era has advanced. When Kerkvliet wrote his book, he identified a number of scholars he saw as writing in a similar vein to him (such as Ken Post, Kristin Pelzer, Hy Van Luong, Dara O’Rourke, Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, and Christine White).⁸ Moreover, it is easy to identify a newer generation of scholars who are also following in his footsteps (including

8 Post 1989; Pelzer 1993; Luong 1994; O’Rourke 2002; Thrift and Forbes 1986; and White 1985. Note that Kerkvliet also names Adam Fforde as writing in the dialogical approach. However, as will be explained later, we think this is mistaken.

David Koh, Thomas Sikor, and Andrew Wells-Dang) (see Koh 2000; Sikor 2004; and Wells-Dang 2014).

Kerkvliet's approach is of special interest in relation to this article, in that it could be read as pre-empting any notion of the myth of a centralised state. Is downplaying any notion of a centralised state not the very thing that Kerkvliet (and scholars like him) do? For instance, we saw in the dialogical approach how the state is *not* viewed as being as strong in contrast to the other two approaches, that activities outside the state's control are viewed as widespread, and that the state is influenced by such activities. What myth of the centralised state, indeed, one might say!

However, on closer inspection, it is evident that the situation is more complex. Looking again at the writing of Kerkvliet (and others) one can see how – paradoxically – the myth of the centralised state lives on, notwithstanding their attentiveness to localism or the activities of a wide array of societal actors. The dialogical approach does, of course, emphasise the importance of groups operating outside official channels, but at the same time, it (necessarily) assumes that the said 'official channels' exist and that it is meaningful to speak of them in this way. In other words, while emphasising the existence of social forces beyond the state's control in one breath, the dialogical approach reifies the state in another (that is, turns the state into something it is not).⁹ Thus, Kerkvliet has no problem in asserting the importance of party and state structures in Vietnam. "These institutions and organizations," he wrote, "*are indeed major players* in the story of agricultural collectivization and decollectivization". "It was national leaders," he continued, "who *decided* the country had to collectivize" (Kerkvliet 2005: 34; italics added). Such an approach can be questioned. Thus, while the dialogical approach is clearly an improvement on the other two approaches, there is still a sense in which it claims too much.

Once one is alert to what is going on, one can see the way in which the dialogical approach reifies the state at every turn. Central here is the

9 Reification implies a tendency to talk about the state as if it is unproblematic to do so, forgetting that the state is not a 'thing' but a powerful metaphysical effect, or what comes into view as a result of a series of practices through which social and political order is maintained. Thus, what we call 'the state' is, contrary to the mainstream statist view, the outcome of political practices not just a contributor to them (that is, the state does not just 'act on' society or interact with it; that it appears this way is a metaphysical effect). Note that state reification is identical to the idea of the statist bias discussed above on p. 2. These issues are explored in more depth later in the article.

way in which party and state bodies are repeatedly named unproblematically ('the state', 'the party', etc.), that state institutions are studied without sufficient attention to the political effects of studying them, and most importantly they are given agency.

Consider the following examples taken from Kerkvliet:

Through structures extending from Hanoi into most villages, *party and government agencies built* the collective cooperatives, *carried out* numerous campaigns [...] and *conducted* other programs [...] (italics added)

In the late 1970s these agencies *authorized* modest shifts [...] (italics added)

[...] the Communist Party government *stipulated* [...] Officials in party and government circles *pondered*...[and continuing into the 1980s] national authorities *look[ed] differently at* [deviant local arrangements ...] (italics added). (Kerkvliet 2005: 34–36)

Thus, as we can see, the state is taken at face value. It acts, and stating this is relatively unproblematic.¹⁰

Moreover, it is not just Kerkvliet who has a tendency to reify the state; it is ubiquitous in Vietnam studies. Carlyle Thayer, who was originally associated with the dominating state approach, with his ideas of mono-organisational socialism, continues to attribute considerable agency to the 'VCP'.¹¹ This includes repeating in quite recent writing the age-old trope of it having 'adopted' *doi moi* (reform) in 1986 (Thayer 2010: 427). Tuong Vu, meanwhile, speaks repeatedly of 'the Party' 'believing this', 'embracing that' or 'acting' in this or that way. It is not that he depicts the state as monolithic – he does not – but the language he uses repeatedly serves to reify the state, or to treat it unproblematically. Therefore, it is possible to both speak about the state as not being monolithic and still to reify it (Vu 2016: 267–289).

10 On the issue of state institutions studied without sufficient attention to the political effects of studying them, the extensive research on Vietnam's National Assembly is a case in point. See Malesky and Schuler 2008: 1–48, and Malesky, Schuler, and Anh Tran 2012: 762–786.

11 It would appear that Thayer has not entirely abandoned his attachment to mono-organisational socialism. In 2016, he spoke of a "weakening of Vietnam's mono-organisational system", implying it still has some salience, while in 2010 he said that 'political organisations' formed between 2004 and 2006 had no "official standing in Vietnam's system of mono-organisational socialism", again seemingly suggested this system is still current in his view. See Thayer 2016: 3–4; and Thayer 2010: 437.

Furthermore, even scholars who are deeply attentive to localism and/or social activism do not hesitate to talk in terms of ‘the central state’, ‘state objectives’, or what ‘the Party-state allows’, and they also frequently attribute it considerable power (see Sikor 2004; Wells-Dang 2014; and Koh 2004). For instance, Andrew Wells-Dang, writing in 2014, argued that the initiative in terms of change had shifted to “actors outside of state structures”, but he added that the Party-state still holds a “very strong position” (Wells-Dang 2014: 180). Again, the argument being made here is that scholars need to be more careful in terms of how they speak about the state. I will return to why I say this shortly, but first let me sum up in terms of the argument so far.

In light of the preceding discussion, it is possible to state more precisely the nature of the myth being explored. The myth of the central state in Vietnam is not simply a debate about whether the state is stronger or weaker in terms of its ability to do things, although this is part of it. Rather, the myth of the central state embodies the idea that even to speak of the state in the more cautious way that the dialogical approach does is to distort or mislead in terms of what is actually ‘out there’. It is (still) to perpetuate an illusion.

One way to establish what I mean by this is to ask the question of why the myth of the centralised state exists. It is to this that I now turn.

The Myth of the Centralised State: Why Does It Occur?

To answer the question of why the myth of the centralised state occurs, it is important to be clear what exactly it is we are seeking to explain. I have offered two possibilities, both of which I believe are important. The first possibility, which was mentioned in the introduction, is simply that the myth involves over-stating the degree to which there is a coherent central body directing things in Vietnam. The state is weak and even the dialogical approach, while an improvement, does not get this completely right.

The second possibility is that even to speak of a weaker state in Vietnam – a state that would do things if only it could – embodies a misunderstanding of the nature of the state. That is, even amongst those who are attentive to localism or the vibrancy of diverse social groups (the dialogical approach), a process of reification is taking place. This too is a key element of the myth that needs explaining.

So, with these two elements of the myth in mind, let us now move to the question of explanation. The discussion has three parts to it. First,

I look at the political interests served by the myth. Second, I look at the role Vietnam's socialist legacy has played in reinforcing the myth. Lastly, I consider post-structuralist ideas about the state, notably the statist bias. This third area is explored in some detail as these ideas are crucial to the argument being advanced.

Elite Interests

To explain the existence, and persistence, of the myth of the centralised state, we need to consider the interests that might be served by it. The first set of interests that are relevant here are those belonging to Vietnamese elites, particularly those who hold party or state positions, or are in some way connected to the party-state. The body that they inhabit has “self-preserving” and “self-aggrandizing” tendencies (Anderson 1983). It aids those who hold political office to be able to assert that ‘the state’ or ‘the party’ is in control, is wisely directing things, and making decisions. Doing so boosts their domestic legitimacy and their international standing. Thus, a key reason why the myth of a centralised state exists is because it serves domestic political interests. The myth is intimately bound up in the way in which the story of *doi moi* is told, namely that the party made a series of ‘wise’ decisions beginning in the 1980s to bring about change. Of course, there are various caveats or refinements in the scholarly literature relating to this controlling narrative, including in Kerkvliet’s analysis (Kerkvliet 1995). However, notwithstanding these adjustments, the narrative keeps resurfacing, as we saw above. Moreover, as the years go by, and the state’s grip on what happens weakens, there is a sense in which Vietnamese elites are needing to assert the ‘intentionality’ of *doi moi* with new vigour (Fforde 2012: 5, note 3).

Of course, it is not just about domestic interests; the myth of the central state also serves foreign interests. For instance, it is not difficult to see how Western geo-political and commercial interests associated with Vietnam drive the myth, trumping even periodically expressed misgivings about the nature of Vietnam’s politics. Such dynamics are clearly at play in respect of the international aid community; for instance, maintaining project aid even when agreed objectives are not met (Gainsborough, Dang Ngoc Dinh, and Tran Thanh Phuong 2009). Against this backdrop, it is easier – and prudent – for foreign elites to buy into the narrative of reform, which, as we have seen, incorporates the myth of the central state. In 2012, Adam Fforde wrote about how foreign embassies in Vietnam were content to go along with the idea that the Communist Party is a coherent political force because doing so aligned with the interests of their governments (Fforde 2013a: 107). Furthermore, it is

not just foreign governments, multilateral institutions or international business for whom the myth of the central state need not be questioned as they pursue their interests. Rather, it is important to be alert to the way in which foreign scholarship can also align with such interests and hence perpetuate the myth.

To sum up, I have argued that the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam persists because it serves both domestic and foreign elite interests. Indeed, I have suggested that these interests are relatively close, notwithstanding formal differences in political systems (Gainsborough 2010b: 447–460). However, while understanding the interests behind the myth is important, there is more to say.

The Legacy of Socialism

Another element to explaining the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam, which is worthy of attention, relates to the word ‘Socialist’ in this article’s title. Many would argue that Vietnam is now post-Socialist and that, regardless of what has been said officially, socialism plays very little part in Vietnam’s present (nor is it likely to play a part in its future) (Taylor 2016). That said, the country’s socialist heritage may have played a small part in explaining the myth, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Historically, Vietnam has been grouped with other Communist countries, notably the Soviet Union and China, with the implication that these countries had something in common on account of their shared socialist heritage. Thayer captured this way of thinking clearly when he wrote:

Up until the mid-1980s, it was common to analyse Vietnam’s political system in the context of comparative communism. Vietnam was compared with the Soviet Union and China because it had modelled its constitution and political institutions on these states. (Thayer 1995: 44)

It is this perspective that lies behind Thayer’s adoption of the term mono-organisational socialism – the term itself coming from a comparative communism scholar called T. H. Rigby. While Thayer seems reluctant to abandon mono-organisational socialism today, he is also clear that it applied in North Vietnam after 1954 and that the ‘model’ was ‘imposed’ on the South after 1975 (Thayer 1995: 46). Although this is beyond the scope of the present article, recent scholarship has suggested that even asserting that the dominating state approach once had salience in Vietnam is less certain (Fforde 2009b: 484–504). However, the point is that Vietnam’s ‘Socialist’ heritage may have left a legacy, such that

foreign observers projected certain expectations on Vietnamese institutions – of capacity and order – simply because they bore a passing resemblance to their counterpart institutions in other current and former Communist states.¹² That said, as outsiders have had greater access to Vietnam, notably since the 1990s, the significance of this legacy has ebbed. Moreover, we can safely say that the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam would not exist if it did not serve domestic and foreign interests.

The Statist Bias

While the above points are important, we cannot stop here in terms of explaining the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam. As I have argued, the myth is not just about a tendency to attribute too much coherence or authority to Vietnamese institutions. Even among those who offer a more nuanced picture of state capacity (in the dialogical approach, for example), there is still a process of state reification taking place, which depicts the state in a way which is misleading (and in turn perpetuates the myth).

I will look at how we might move beyond the myth in the next section. However, I first need to shed light on this alternative approach to thinking about the state. To do this, I will make a brief foray into post-structuralist writing on the state since it is this body of literature that discusses reification, or what is often referred to as ‘the statist bias’.

The notion of the statist bias involves an assertion that all is not as it seems with reference to the state, or the more usual ways it is depicted. That is, the suggestion in post-structuralist writing is that some of how we think about the state – what we think we see – is an illusion. A pioneering thinker in this regard is Timothy Mitchell, who described ‘the state’ as the “powerful, metaphysical effect” of practices that make it appear to have a real perimeter and hence distinct from society (Mitchell 1991: 77–96). The key point is that the state is not an entity with a real perimeter, like, say, a table. Rather, it is a conceptual abstraction. The statist bias involves not recognising this and hence viewing the appearance that the state stands apart from society, and intervenes in it, as unquestionably how it is. To take our understanding of the myth of the centralised state in Vietnam to a new level, it is important to understand

12 Joel Migdal, writing in 1988, described Vietnam as a ‘strong state’ alongside China, Cuba, North Korea, Israel, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea; see Migdal 1988. This is a good example of the logic of the socialist label I am discussing.

this perspective and to consider the possibilities it opens up in terms of moving beyond the myth.¹³

Post-structuralist ideas about the state do not mean suggesting that the state does not exist. This would clearly be a mistake. With reference to Vietnam, there is clearly an apparatus of some kind, with party and state bodies stretching from the capital to the village. However, a post-structuralist approach emphasises the importance of taking the elusiveness of the state-society boundary seriously, not as a point of “conceptual precision” – as so many scholars do – but as a clue to how rule occurs. Being circumspect about what the state is, and hence distinguishing between appearance and reality, enables us to acknowledge the power of the political arrangements that we call ‘the state’, while at the same time accounting for their elusiveness. Central here is not to view the distinction between state and society as a boundary between two distinct entities but rather as a “line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained” (Mitchell 1991: 78). Post-structuralist writers argue that the ability to have an internal distinction appear as though it is an external boundary between separate objects is central to how rule occurs. It also accounts, at least in part, for the state’s longevity as a political form.

While Mitchell is one of the most illuminating writers on this subject, other scholars can be seen as rejecting the statist bias as well. Alan Finlayson and James Martin, for example, refer to ‘the state’ not as a “thing” but as “a practice or ensemble of practices” (Finlayson and Martin 2006: 155). Like Mitchell, Finlayson and Martin also refer to the state as the “outcome of political activities as well as a contribution to them” (Finlayson and Martin 2006: 155). Statist writing – like that on Vietnam – tends only to see the state as contributing to political outcomes ‘as an actor’, and hence neglects the fact that ‘the state’ – what we see – is also an outcome of political activities.

Continuing some of these same themes, Richard Ashley speaks of the “figure” of the sovereign state as “nothing more and nothing less than an arbitrary political representation always in the process of being inscribed within history, through practice” (Ashley 1988: 227–262). While Ashley’s wider point is that the “orderly” national realm on which

13 While I have focused on post-structuralist notions of the state, I am also aware of Marxist-inspired perspectives on the state (e.g., Nicos Poulantzas), which also question the usual ‘statist’ positions. This simply reflects where the weight of the author’s research on the state has fallen. However, readers who wish to draw on the Marxist and post-Marxist tradition in terms of state theory may wish to see Hay 2006: 59–78; and Jessop 2015.

the “anarchic” international realm is thought to rest is not quite as orderly as people think, the key point for our purposes is, again, that our perception that ‘the state’ has clear boundaries and stands apart from ‘society’ is misleading. Put like this, it is possible to see how the dialogical approach, with its emphasis on state-society relations, has its limitations (that is, the dialogical approach does not problematise these issues at all).

Furthermore, it is worth emphasising that what post-structuralists say regarding how we understand the state and its ‘boundary’ with society is very different from the more usual ‘statist’ interpretation, which suggests that a ‘fuzzy’ boundary between state and society is a sign of a weak or neo-patrimonial state that is ‘corrected’ in ‘advanced’ or ‘developmental’ states. Therefore, both neo-patrimonial and developmental approaches to the state can be seen to fall victim to the statist bias, so a more rigorous theorisation of the state is needed if we are to go beyond them.

Alongside viewing the appearance that ‘the state’ stands apart from ‘society’ as ‘reality’, scholars have noted a similar tendency in respect of reifying the ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms; that is, taking the appearance that they are separate and distinct as how it actually is. Peter Bratsis wrote of how we often end up believing that there “truly are” two distinct modes of existence, namely public and private, when as with state and society, it is purely a conceptual distinction. Tracing the emergence of this way of perceiving the rise of the nation-state, Bratsis says that while we know that a person holding public office only has “one body”, “we act ‘as if’ we did not know”, clinging to the idea that a person can move seamlessly between ‘public’ and ‘private’, with ‘the public’ automatically “devoid” of personal or other interests. Bratsis calls this the “fetish of the public”, namely where we treat something as if it is not what it actually is (Bratsis 2006: 47). This, in effect, is the same point that Mitchell and others make about how scholars commonly view ‘the state’.

For Bratsis, the ‘public’ sphere is actually an impossibility because it can never be purged of private interests. This leads to some novel ideas regarding how we understand ‘the state’, the ‘public’ realm, and indeed ‘corruption’. For instance, on Bratsis’s reading, contemporary anti-corruption practices never really seek to purge ‘the private’ from ‘the public’, despite claims to the contrary. Instead, they aim to establish boundaries between what constitutes a “normal presence of the private within the abstract body of the public and what constitutes a pathological presence”. Bratsis continued:

The language of corruption has had the historical effect of creating a large and legally regulated series of practices that legitimise

the unavoidable and systemic presence of private interests in the 'body politic' by treating only some forms of this presence as being a subversion of the public by the private. (Bratsis 2006)

Bratsis illustrated his account with an analysis of political party donations and lobbying rules, noting the entirely arbitrary nature of the cut-offs in relation to what is permissible and what is not. For example, why must a donation to a British political party over GBP 5,000 be registered in the name of the donor, but not if it is under GBP 5,000 (as detailed in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000)? For Bratsis, it is all about appearances. He wrote:

Given the impossibility of removing 'private interests' from [...] the real bodies of public servants [...] a series of rules and practices is instituted in order to purge the realm of appearances from acts that challenge the categorization of society as divided into two mutually exclusive registers, the public and private. (Bratsis 2006: 67)

In light of the preceding analysis, it is evident that what we call 'the state', or think of as the 'public' sphere, or as 'corruption', is not as stable or self-evident as we commonly think. Echoing this point, Finlayson and Martin talked about 'the state' as having an "evolving and unpredictable character", always facing the "possibility of conflict and potential disaggregation", and continually confronting "resistance to its efforts". They noted that this often happens as a result of the state's own activities, which themselves expose the partiality and contingency of its claims (for example, officials being caught with their 'hands in the till') (Finlayson and Martin 2006: 162 and 164). Bratsis, meanwhile, wrote that the state lives with the constant threat that the "real impossibility of the public" will be exposed (Bratsis 2006: 52). Mitchell made a similar point, noting how once the state is seen as 'metaphysical effect', it no longer has the "coherence, agency, and subjectivity" that the term usually presupposes (Mitchell 1991: 90).

However, there is a considerable amount riding on the state *not* being seen as arbitrary, or the impossibility of the public sphere not being revealed. Bratsis wrote of the threat posed to "the entire conceptual framework that supports the state and capitalist productive relations" if the true nature of the public realm is exposed (Bratsis 2006: 52). Similarly, Mitchell argued that the appearance of state and society as separate things is part of the way social, political and economic order is maintained (Mitchell 1991: 90). Consequently, anything that undermines the idea of the state as a distinct and bounded entity separate from society,

or anything that interferes with the idea of the public realm being devoid of private interests, tends to be side-lined.¹⁴ This explains the relative unpopularity of post-structuralist ideas in both public and academic life. However, they are critical to understanding the myth of the centralised state, not just in Vietnam but across the world.

As citizens, scholars, officials and practitioners, we are very good at policing ourselves by, for example, not mentioning, denying, or reinterpreting practices that do not fit with a clearly demarcated ‘state’ or ‘public’ realm. However, once the statist bias is understood, it becomes obvious that empirical data on Vietnam, commonly interpreted with reference to a statist approach, fits much more easily with an approach that rejects the statist bias. Only by embracing this alternative ‘non-statist’ approach will we be able to correct for the myth of the centralised state.

Let us now look at what this alternative approach looks like.

Going beyond the Myth: Rethinking the State in Vietnam

It is not at all easy to break free of the statist bias. As we have seen, the state, by its very nature, has colonised our minds. Consequently, it requires persistent intellectual effort and commitment to step outside the old paradigm and to inhabit the new one. However, it can be done. In an attempt to tease out the precise nature of this ‘non-statist’ approach, I now consider my own work in this area and work by Adam Fforde. Having done this, I will conclude.

In my 2010 book on Vietnamese politics, I spoke of a method for studying the state that, paradoxically, involves not focusing attention directly on the state. I argued that to do so “risk[s] defining the object of our study in advance”. Instead, I said that we need to try and “surrender any preconceptions as to what the state is”, trusting that a “more authentic picture” will eventually come into view in light of our empirical work (Gainsborough 2010a: 177). While there is probably more to say about how exactly a ‘more authentic’ picture will come into view, there is immediately a sense of contingency about the state in that work. Central to my approach is a commitment to looking at ‘actors’ – whether formally inhabiting ‘the state’ or not – considering “their games, their strategies, their historical practices”, and seeing what this tells us about ‘the political’

14 A good example is the so-called MPs expenses scandal in the UK parliament in 2009, which was followed by a vigorous attempt by certain political elites to reinstate appearances that parliament was ‘clean’. See Gainsborough (2011).

and ultimately ‘the state’ (the quote here is from Hibou 2004: 21). Having often studied business as a window onto the state, I argue that this is really to ask how people act politically. Thus, my work contains an unwillingness to take the state as a given. For me, the state is unstable and I cannot be entirely sure what it is. This is very different from the dialogical or state-society approach.

I have also questioned the notion that politics is about policymaking, famously arguing in an analysis of the Tenth Communist Party National Congress in 2006 that politics was about ‘all about spoils’ (that is, who gets the jobs and in turn access to patronage and money) (Gainsborough 2007). While a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, this too sets my approach apart from the mainstream, which focuses heavily on politics as being about policy.¹⁵

A similar commitment to not taking the state for granted, and hence probing its elusiveness, can be found in Adam Fforde’s work. Fforde is best known for his work on the transition from the planned to the market economy. In particular, he popularised the Vietnamese term translated as ‘fence-breaking’ (*pha rao*) to capture the way in which the emergence of the market economy was primarily driven by spontaneous marketisation or ‘bottom-up’ processes whereby farmers or state enterprises took it upon themselves to operate outside of the planned economy. This, Fforde says, dates back to North Vietnam in the 1960s (that is, well before so-called ‘reforms’ or *doi moi* in 1986, and hence rejecting the idea that Vietnam was ever a centralised state). This leads Fforde to emphasise what he calls ‘endogenous’ drivers of change as distinct from ‘policy’, the importance of which he, like myself, also downplays. Policy is not unimportant for Fforde but he argues that it is frequently reactive to events rather than determining of them. Summing up his position, he says that his account seeks to break free from one that privileges the Vietnamese Communist Party as the author of change in favour of a “wide range of diverse independent actors” (Fforde 2009b: 484). Thus, Fforde says that Vietnam’s economy was, in effect, ‘auto-reformed’.¹⁶

It would be easy to mistake Fforde’s approach as being identical to the dialogical approach, and a number of scholars have invoked him in this way (see Kerkvliet 2005: 36, and Sikor 2004: 168). However, while

15 I saw this with reference to Kerkvliet’s dialogical approach. See also Malesky and Schuler 2008 and Malesky, Schuler, and Tran 2012 for a heavy focus on politics as being about policy.

16 Fforde 2009c: 674. Note that Fforde eschews the notion of ‘correct’ policy, preferring the question of whether it works, where ‘it’ might be policy-related but may be more spontaneous.

there may be some overlap, the dialogical approach does not talk about ‘auto-reform’.¹⁷ Moreover, Fforde, like Gainsborough, is much more circumspect about what ‘the state’ is compared to mainstream approaches. Writing in 2011, Fforde argued that there is a crisis of the “meaning of political authority” in Vietnam, which he saw as having become progressively worse since the mid-1990s (Fforde 2011: 167–168). He questioned the grounds upon which the party-state rules and to what ends, and he finds senior Vietnamese asking similar questions too (Fforde 2013b: 19). Moreover, he continued, if anyone was to ask how to understand the “very nature of the state [in Vietnam] – its ontology”, they would not “receive a satisfactory answer” (Fforde 2011: 168). Again, this puts clear blue water between Fforde and the dialogical approach.

Until around 1997, Fforde argued that there was still enough “residual authority” in the system for the party-state to be able to exercise power in the event of a crisis. However, 10 years later even this could not be guaranteed. By the mid-2000s, the party-state was “far from the people”, he said, and highly corrupt (Fforde 2011: 166). Indeed, echoing my own arguments, Fforde argued that the party-state was increasingly just a vehicle for powerful people to pursue their interests, adding that the party-state exhibits no clear developmental rationale for its activities, much less follow-through. As Fforde said, “the higher levels instruct, the lower levels don’t listen” (*tren bao duoi khong nghe*) (Fforde 2009a: 74). While those who follow the dialogical approach may say that they know this, there is still a qualitative difference between Fforde’s account and theirs.

Once one takes Fforde’s and my ideas on board, it is striking how ‘rather awkward’ empirical data found in so many accounts of Vietnamese politics, which has been shoe-horned into a statist approach, can be seen to fit much more easily with a non-statist approach. As Bratsis said, the private cannot be purged from the public. Rather, it is about maintaining rules and practices that purge the realm of appearances of acts that challenge the categorisation of society as divided into ‘public’ and ‘private’. The point is that the state in Vietnam is not doing this very well and that it has become worse since the late 1990s.¹⁸

17 Recall how Kerkvliet emphasised ‘state decisions’, societal activity notwithstanding.

18 Candidates for this kind of rethinking include Kerkvliet’s work but also that of Wells-Dang 2014 and many of the chapters in Kerkvliet and Marr’s (2004) edited book *Beyond Hanoi*. However, this is work still to be done. This article merely seeks to point the way to a fourth ‘non-statist’ approach to studying politics in contrast to the dialogical one.

Conclusion

I began this article with three questions. First, I asked about the nature of the myth of a centralised Socialist state in Vietnam and how it manifests itself; second, I asked if the myth changes over time; and lastly, I asked why the myth endures. In light of the findings of this chapter, it is now possible to offer a more comprehensive answer to all three questions. Having done this, I will consider the implications of my findings for contemporary actors, including the international development community.

In terms of the nature of the myth and the way in which it manifests itself, I have argued that there is a tendency to reify the state, even in writing which is attentive to localism and the diversity of societal actors at play in Vietnamese political life. Thus, even the dialogical approach to thinking about politics overstates the power of the state because it takes the state too much for granted and is not sufficiently alert to the way in which, at a certain level, the state is an illusion. It is not that we cannot or should not have debates about state capacity; both Fforde's approach and my own allow for this. However, we will understand 'the state' much better if we remember that it is, by definition, ontologically unstable.

On the question of whether the myth changes over time, we can say that the myth itself does not change very much. What may change (a little) is how scholars talk about the state. However, this article has shown how even the dialogical approach, while an improvement on the dominating state approach, still falls victim to the statist bias and is therefore distorting. Specifically, in contrast to Fforde's and my non-statist approach, the dialogical approach does not offer scope to raise questions about whether, in certain circumstances, it is meaningful to speak about 'the state' at all.

I have argued that the myth of the central state endures because there are domestic and foreign political interests that depend on it, both for reasons of legitimacy and because of commercial and geo-political interests. There is a lot riding on the myth. However, more fundamentally, the myth endures because of the power of the state to colonise our minds such that even when the empirical data does not fit with the idea of the state, we make it fit.

The remaining issue is for us to explore the implications of these findings, both for academics and for practitioners, notably those in the international development community. Starting with the academic community, I have argued that nearly all writing on politics in Vietnam suffers from the statist bias, and this includes the dialogical approach as well

as neo-patrimonial and developmental state approaches. Therefore, there is huge scope for scholars to revisit the way in which they write about politics and development and to engage seriously with post-structural ideas about the state. To date, there has been a notable lacuna in this respect, and it is time we filled it. Further refinement of a non-statist approach to thinking about politics is the way forward.

For practitioners, including those in the international development community, it would be to their advantage if they could be attentive to non-statist approaches to thinking about politics. However, there is a lot riding on the statist paradigm being maintained, as I have discussed. Moreover, it is quite difficult for practitioners to operate successfully if they do not fall in line with the arbitrary political representations around which we order our lives. (All of us must do this to some extent.) Instead, the issue is more one of how, given the analysis contained in this article, practitioners might approach engaging with the different actors and institutions they encounter in Vietnam. This is clearly a vast subject, which would merit further discussion. However, the following points seem worth bearing in mind. First, there is the issue of institutional particularism. That is, what comprises ‘the state’ in Vietnam rarely moves in the same direction, rarely works together, and rarely sings from the same hymn sheet. Moreover, no one in Vietnam – however elevated – ever has it all sewn up; that is, there is always someone who may potentially stand in your way. Second, things are rarely as they seem. While elites may talk about ‘policy’ or ‘development’ or ‘inclusive growth’, it is (at present) fundamentally about spoils (money, patronage and relationships) and all interactions are conducted with an eye to this. It is essential to be aware of this point. Moreover, as Fforde says, it is increasingly unclear in Vietnam what political power is for, and the lack of clarity cannot last for ever. Finally, any notion that there is order or coherence in Vietnam because it is a one-party *Communist* state is about as wrong as it could be.

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