VIETNAM:
A VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

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Most visitors to North Vietnam return deeply impressed with the society they have seen. The Vietnamese revolutionaries seem epic in their achievements, legendary already in their moral stature. “Our struggle has a sacred significance in the revolutionary world”, an official Hanoi spokesman said in winter 1973. They invoke an optimistic philosophy about human possibilities which many Westerners would label impossibly romantic.

A REVOLUTION WHICH CLAIMS ONLY TO SPEAK FOR ITSELF

Stories - hundreds of them - of Vietnamese heroism, portray the Vietnamese as such extraordinary people that a problem of credibility arises. American travellers returning from Hanoi find the Vietnamese hard to explain even to their friends, and perhaps eventually to themselves. Some listeners begin to think that the traveller from Hanoi is so emotionally moved by the Vietnamese (or the US-spawned destruction they have viewed) to no longer have balance of mind. Therefore, the traveller’s opinions often are dismissed or taken lightly by others with anti-war views.

An abridged version of an article by a United States anti-war activist, first printed by the Indochina Peace Campaign, California.
Credibility is a historic problem with regard to the stance American radicals have taken towards revolution abroad. Political radicals have over-identified sometimes with the direction of another country, whether the Soviet Union in the 1930s or China in the 1960s, in such a way that their word and integrity are no longer credible. They are not only discredited as a result, but having over-identified with another country’s revolution, they become disillusioned when the star of that country is tarnished by internal conflict or contradictory turns of policy. In some periods this has led to even more depression on the left than that caused by the policies of the American government, and thousands of people have burned out as radicals in the process.

One must approach the question of Vietnam carefully not to repeat these patterns of the past.

It becomes difficult to entertain the idea that the Vietnamese are exemplary because one doesn’t want to imply that their institutions should be imported to the United States, nor should one’s future, personally or politically, be tied to what may happen in another country. But fortunately, Vietnam is one country that makes few claims to have the answer to anyone’s problems but their own. They do not issue Red Books, nor publish a Little Lenin Library in every language, nor do they encourage the growth of political parties following their line in other countries.

In fact, although the Vietnamese have their theories and theoreticians, much of their work remains in the Vietnamese language. Their leadership never puts forward the notion that they have the “correct line” for other countries. This may be because, while fighting a war requiring international support, the Vietnamese do not want to antagonise their various allies. But it is more than a forced modesty; it is conscious and deep.

The revolution of these “common people” (as they style themselves) is the most important at present in the world, and probably will affect much of our history in this century. It will affect the future of small nations, the future of revolutionary movements, guerrilla warfare, the role of “small nations” in the world of Great Powers. It will help answer how powerful the “spirit of the people” can be in the face of unparalleled technological power.

All these issues are universal in scope and will be defined by this revolution which claims only to speak for itself.

HOW DO VIETNAMESE VIEW AMERICA?

The Vietnamese view of human nature and the revolutionary process determined what they think of American society. Many Americans are struck by the seeming simplicity, even naivete, in what the Vietnamese say about America. Again and again the Vietnamese make a distinction between the “American people” and the American government. They do not consider the American people their enemy, but rather the bearers of a progressive tradition of democracy and national independence which the American government is violating.

After all, they understand Americans well enough to fight them, they are acquainted with racism of both the American and French varieties, they have encountered Americans of all classes on the battlefield killing Vietnamese, they have experienced betrayals on the part of their allies in the West. Their views come from experience. So when they say something about the American people and American government, it would be short-sighted to conclude that they are wrong on so fundamental a question.

But what do they mean? This is a mystery that must and will be unravelled, perhaps not for many years. Already, however, theories are appearing. For instance, it is becoming fashionable and, I think, misleading, to believe that the answer to the mystery lies essentially in Vietnamese culture. In this view, the 4000 year tradition of Vietnam has produced a unique set of values which sustain the Vietnamese resistance today. The collective labor in building the dykes, the constant struggles against foreign
invaders, the Confucian tradition of seeking order under legitimate authority ("the mandate of heaven") are described as the factors which make Vietnam "special". These historical roots are vital to understand, but they can permit a too convenient explanation for the American failure in Vietnam which goes like this: since the Vietnamese are unique, it has been impossible for any American strategies to work there. This can mean that American strategies will work elsewhere, that the Vietnam war experience is not likely to be duplicated and that there is little of universal portent to learn from Vietnam.

A STREAM OF REACTIONARY TRADITION

As an antidote to this thinking, it should be pointed out that the Vietnamese have had to struggle against a reactionary stream of culture and tradition. They are not simply inheritors of a revolutionary way of life. For example, we should note that Buddhism and Confucianism contain extremely conservative tendencies, lest we accept the notions that Buddhist monks always have immolated themselves in protest or that Ho Chi Minh was simply a latter-day Confucian elder.

Buddhism rested historically on the idea, not unfamiliar to Americans, that suffering and oppression in the present will be overcome in the hereafter. Buddhism projects the transcendence of misery. If you are poor, you have always been that way and you should accept Buddha's grace, pass on into another life and be re-incarnated, for in a later time you may be more fortunate. That fatalism of the Buddhist philosophy was convenient to many an emperor, just as similar religious attitudes prop up authoritarian rule today.

The same was true of Confucian teaching: the Vietnamese revolutionaries were confronted with a doctrine which, as it was transmitted, fixed people in their places. The Confucian code, which became state doctrine during the feudal period, included the principles that a man's first duty was to the emperor, a woman's to her husband, a child's to the family. This was hardly a philosophy designed to promote unrest or change, but one perfectly designed to ratify the status quo.

UNIVERSAL THEMES IN VIETNAMESE CULTURE

It is also true that they did not have to go entirely outside these cultural traditions to find a basis for revolution. There were progressive aspects of Buddhism and Confucianism which served to justify resistance. But this is possible in any culture, including ours. The progressive themes the Vietnamese found in their tradition were universal. The Confucian scholar and Buddhist monk had to reconcile fidelity to the state versus fidelity to the nation, charity in the hereafter with oppression in the present. Out of these contradictions grew desires to change society for the better. In Confucian doctrine, for example, was an idea of human nature that proved to be a liberating tool, one that should not be foreign to people in any country. It was the idea that the great majority of people are potentially good, the question of their self-improvement depending only on the level of education they receive about the world as it really is. They are surrounded by forces that keep information from them. At the root is a concept of virtue which appears in Vietnamese writing down through the centuries. People can become virtuous by desiring to be so, by learning to be so, by sacrificing to be so. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Vietnamese of many political backgrounds have shared this view down through the twentieth century. In the 1920s for instance, a textbook on Confucian doctrine by a scholar who would later be Vietnamese prime minister under the occupying Japanese, included this opinion:

"The overwhelming majority of people become good or bad according to the education and customs they acquire. These average people, all of them, can be educated. This applies to every sort of person, in every position of society, from every race and every country. Everyone can be educated to be good. The aim of Confucianism is to educate people so they become human and devoted."
When Ho was in prison in the 1940s, he paralleled this doctrine in many of the poems sent to his comrades in Vietnam. One of them was called "Midnight", written about the sleeping prisoners in his cell:

"Faces all have an honest look in sleep. Only when they wake up does good or evil show in them. Good and evil are not qualities born in man, More often than not they derive from our education."

MARXISM-LENINISM: THE REVOLUTIONARY WEAPON

The Vietnamese revolution was not made simply by selective interpretation from Confucian doctrine, however: marxism-leninism had to be introduced as a revolutionary weapon. The marxism-side of this doctrine essentially divides society into two blocs, a small ruling class and a great mass of the powerless who are not responsible for what is done in their society's name, and who have to be educated to their true situation. To the Confucian doctrine of innate goodness is added a new class attitude: the rulers are not expected to be or become "enlightened" but presumed to be exploitative. The Leninist theme is that the situation can be changed, virtue asserted in the world, through a dedicated organisation of people who will awaken the consciousness of everyone. Through struggle, example and education the true nature of oppression will be exposed. In revolution people will not only raise their standard of living but uplift their behaviour as a whole. They will be born again, morally improved.

The language of marxism-leninism may pose a problem for Americans concerned to avoid foreign models, but no more so than it would be for Ho and his Vietnamese comrades. A doctrine coming out of Europe would be at least as foreign to them as to ourselves, But Ho found in this doctrine what he called a "light" which would clear the way forward for Vietnam, and so it was incorporated into the Vietnamese experience.

Explaining this integration of national tradition and outside ideology, a Vietnamese minister told me in 1965 -

"Buddhism taught us charity, and communism has given us a vehicle for bringing charity from the ethical stage to that of reality where people can actually practise it."

HUMAN WILL AND MATERIAL FORCES

The Vietnamese never have adopted the mechanical notion that progress is inevitable. For all their rich tradition of struggle, they least of all claim that triumph is due to cultural circumstance. They reject the fatalism of the Buddha and the inevitability theories of certain marxists. Instead they have stressed virtue, sacrifice, personal endeavour. Not only is this drawn from their tradition, but in marxist terms it means relying more on the "subjective" rather than the "objective", more on the element of human will than that of material forces.

The Vietnamese revolution was one of the first to appear in the under-developed nations of Asia, where European marxists of the early twentieth century least expected it. Many communists expected socialism to first appear in countries like Germany with a relatively advanced level of technology. The sharing of resources and development of communal social relationships were not thought possible until the economy had transcended "primitive accumulation" and scarcity. But in Vietnam, China and other countries the reverse has happened: of necessity, people have formed "communist" social relationships before seizing state power and transforming the economy. They are used to enduring hardships and making great sacrifices together, sharing their meagre resources like brothers and sisters. Seemingly "romantic" revolutionary relationships prove to be the only method of winning, and so they naturally provide a basis for the Vietnamese outlook on how revolution is conducted. Especially required is a faith that difficult objective conditions can be overcome through will and solidarity. Thus "favourable objective conditions " are created, not simply given.

Of course, the Vietnamese do not divorce these factors. They believe that "objective conditions" are favourable to them partly due
to socialist revolutions of this century. In their estimate, the socialist countries, while lacking the technological level of the capitalist ones, still have changed the world power balance in favour of more revolution. Strength, according to Nguyen Khach Vien, lies in "not just the output of steel" but is ideological and political at its root:

"The socialist countries have an objective impact on the evolution of the world, because they have changed the relationships of production, and their very existence gives favourable conditions to further liberation movements. The "subjective" attitude of socialist countries is very important too, but even where something is wrong and the "subjective" is not revolutionary, even where there are internal difficulties, we conclude our strength is greater than the capitalist camp, although we must fight on harder.

This requires the perfect use of the "subjective", a matter of timing, strategy, organisation, summarising experience. In another of Ho's prison poems it is compared with "Learning to Play Chess":

"Eyes must look far ahead, and thoughts be deeply pondered. Be bold and unremitting in attack. Give the wrong command, and two chariots are rendered useless. Come the right moment, a pawn can give you victory."

When analysis is finished, therefore, and the right moment chosen, everything still depends on human will, initiative, readiness to take the necessary action. This has required a struggle against the whole conservative side of Vietnamese culture, a struggle American intellectuals should find familiar. It meant challenging the mandarin elite (the bureaucratic-scholar class of the Confucian state) who were applying their doctrines for the benefit of the few rather than the many. It meant telling the mandarins they were not living up to their own ideals, integrity, and standard of virtue. For a mandarin it meant changing from loyalty to the Royal Court to faith in people who were considered unlettered. Intellectuals had to break out of their roles as transmitters of a precious ruling class culture. They were caught up in studying the fine details of the master language, exchanging verses with each other, engaging in diplomatic intrigues, fighting to stay on top of the competitive heap, while 90 per cent of the people lived in misery. In fact their "official language" was so effete and stylised that it was impossible to employ in speaking to ordinary people.

The mandarins, if they were true patriots, had to decide that the vast majority of the people were not the dirt they were conditioned to assume. Intellectuals had to change from thinking they were the quintessence of Vietnamese culture to realising they were nothing but educated slaves unless they linked themselves with the people who were poor, barefoot and never had been to Court. The intellectuals had to return to their original roots in the villages. It required changing their lives. In the anti-French resistance, it is told that the Vietminh had to carry certain upper-class Vietnamese gentlemen-turned-revolutionaries into the jungle because they were too delicately conditioned to walk. There with the guerrillas they would learn how to walk on their own.

The call for personal, in fact romantic, decision was characteristic. A famous poem of the 15th century by Nguyen Trai, an intellectual who became a great military strategist, included these lines:

"Although we have been at times strong, Although we have been at times weak, At no times have we lacked heroes."

Even in the military field, Americans are likely to assume that Vietnamese are more "natural" fighters than Westerners. It is true that people's war traditions go back to the 13th century in Vietnam. But what Americans do not know is that this tradition had to be learned through overcoming great obstacles. The Vietnamese traditionally fear death without proper burial, for example. They fear the night and the jungle because of an inheritance of superstitions. They have overcome fear of superior and unknown technology through the centuries, down even to the
present time. In 1966, Pham Van Dong acknowledged to us:

"I was very anxious and concerned about what would happen when two hundred thousand American troops came .... It is more difficult to fight against the United States aggressors but the liberation movement in South Vietnam has become stronger than we expected. I personally could not have expected it .... The strength of the people is endless. Even the children are ready. This too has made me think hard ........"

Their stress on consciousness and will leads the Vietnamese to certain views of the potential of the American people, and to attempt to morally arouse world opinion. They often tell visitors that, in their position, any people would feel and react in the same way.

Early in 1966, they decided to call a War Crimes Tribunal in Europe. They were the first to raise the issue, going to Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell as individuals they considered representative of a moral consciousness in the West. Meanwhile in North Vietnam wherever something is bombed, when someone is injured or killed, there is always a War Crimes Commission representative there to record in exact detail what happened. They do this partly because they do not fear knowing about suffering. They want to know exactly what has happened so they can conquer fear. But they also collect the information because they believe there is such a thing as a court of international public opinion, a world conscience, to which these facts can be taken. They believe that if anyone in the world knew about these facts, they would judge them to be war crimes.

MEETING THE "GOOD" AMERICANS

In early November 1972, I visited a co-operative in the remote Viet-Bac region, 100 kilometres north of Hanoi, approximately 18 days after it was bombed, and where the people had never before seen any Americans. Even our interpreters wondered what the reaction would be to our presence.

We found that even here people accepted the idea of a distinction between the American people and the government. They must have been impressed, after talking so much of this distinction, to find "democratic Americans" arriving in their villages so soon after the bombing. But they showed no impatience, no hostility. We met a barefoot old lady, 73 years old, standing by a caved-in house, where she still slept on a small pile of blankets a few feet away from her pig. What do you think of Americans, she was asked. Amused, slight puzzlement showed on her face and, looking at the ground, she answered politely: "All I saw were planes in the sky, but I knew they were Americans". She hadn't grasped the proper way to express the distinctions but she wished us well.

A POTENTIAL FOR DECENCY

Do these attitudes come easily or naturally? By no means. "We cry very much, but we have learned to keep our pain to ourselves", said one cadre after taking me through hospital wards.

Not only do the Vietnamese expect others to see and condemn war crimes in their country, they try to empathise with acts of sacrifice made in their behalf by foreign friends, for this, too, demonstrates, the existence of international conscience. The clearest illustration is in their memorialising of Norman Morrison, the American Quaker who burned himself to death on the steps of the Pentagon in 1965. Many more Vietnamese know about Norman Morrison than Americans do. They not only know about him, they study him. They want to know all they can about his life. Small children in schools discuss him. The leading poets write about him. One song concludes:

"The flame which burned you will clear and lighten life,
And many new generations of people will find the horizon.
Then a day will come when the American people will rise,
For life."
What was to many Americans a "psychotic" act was a profound act of sacrifice and internationalism to the Vietnamese. They certainly don't want or expect thousands of Americans to burn themselves in protest, but in Morrison's seemingly isolated act they can see a potential for decency in all Americans, a set of troubles and contradictions that cause pangs of conscience. Nothing could be more Vietnamese in fact, than the lines left behind by Morrison when he died:

"Life is mightier than the book that reports it.
The most important thing in the world is that our faith becomes living experience."

A COMMON RESOURCE OF PRECIOUS MORAL POWER

Whether it is Nguyen Thai Binh's* actions or that of Nguyen Van Troi, Hieu's peach tree or Norman Morrison's sacrifice, the Vietnamese see a common resource of precious moral power that they try to encourage. One spokesman explained it this way in 1967:

"It is a common tendency to judge actions by their practical effect. We don't judge things simply that way. It may be out of romanticism. History is full of romantic people who rise up. They know their action will be futile but their need is to express indignation.

"When you organise a movement, you must try to succeed. But where individuals are concerned, as when a student stands before a gun, the probability is that he will be killed and he may know nothing will happen. But he must show the rulers he opposes them, and he must set an example for others. The history of our struggle is that no patriotic action is futile."

The human spirit is important not only in the revolutionary process but in the development of society after state power is won. It is a permanently important factor in the Vietnamese view of their future. They say that overcoming under-development and poverty may be an even greater problem than waging a successful resistance. In facing this problem they lay great emphasis on the rapid improvement of their scientific technique, level of technology, management and administrative skills, but also, once again, on the asset of human consciousness. As our jeep was bouncing down a rugged road in the countryside, I asked a Communist Party cadre how he thought about the problems of coping with materialist values once Vietnam was on the road of "modern development". Twenty years from now, he replied, they dream of a Vietnam where people have not only their material needs met but, he said, tapping his head for emphasis, "a happy mental and spiritual life". This, he added, is a cause of concern to them. Supposing there are some countries, he said, which have taken the revisionist or materialist path:

"Well, we don't have to march in their ruts. We already are searching for new paths, for instance in education, in love of each other. We try to promote the spirit of collective mastery instead of egoism. It's difficult but possible because mankind is always aspiring to improve. Even those who have been directed toward the bad, it's not fatal, they can be directed toward the good ......"

EVEN POWS CAN CHANGE

Their attitude towards American prisoners also stems from their convictions about human nature. Perhaps the Pentagon's greatest propaganda success of the war lay in the wide public acceptance of the torture claims by returning American POWs in March, 1973. To the extent that any of the stories are true, it would mean an understandable failure by the Vietnamese to live up to their own code when faced with Americans personally responsible for death and destruction. What would Americans do by comparison, one returned POW asked, with Vietnamese pilots caught bombing Pittsburgh? In fact, there were a few stories of Vietnamese guards actually being upset by occasions of brutality; one, told by an extremely hawkish American officer, James Mulligan, described the guards as "ashamed":

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"They were always saying how they had a 4500 year-old history of humane treatment of their enemies, and said that the policy of leniency was just misapplied in our cases."

But history is likely to show that the American POWs were the best treated in any American war (including our own civil war where, for example, 12,000 Union prisoners starved to death in Andersonville in 1864). One pilot, Norris Charles, told of a Vietnamese guard nicknamed “Thank you Uncle Ho” whose philosophy Charles felt was typical of the Vietnamese:

“They just feed you, clothe you, shelter you, and take care of your medical needs, and they try to give you games to play and stuff to read. You’ve been there seven years and they really don’t have anything against you. They feel that humans are basically good, you know, and that once they know the truth will then maybe react to it. And they don’t care if you react or not, but they feel they should (treat you that way) because they are a very humane people.”

THEIR MESSAGE SHOULD GIVE US HOPE

Vietnamese culture, history and national identity should not be mystified or seen as foreign because the kind of nationalism they exemplify is cosmopolitan and international in many respects. They are open to thinking and trends in the world, even from the culture of their invaders. They are not xenophobic. Before the Chinese invaders withdrew, the Vietnamese had taken in what they considered valuable in Chinese culture. They kept some language, some philosophy, some myths but they remained Vietnamese. They rejected what would have rejected them. They did that with the French as well. Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam early in this century, as was customary for alienated and radical young patriots, looking for a philosophy abroad that could be incorporated into Vietnamese nationalism. His generation first studied Japan because Japan was the first Asian country to defeat an occidental one (Russia) in a test of arms in 1905. He spent 30 years outside Vietnam as a nationalist, even incorporating what he could from the United States. He wrote articles about lynching in the South but he ultimately took the preamble from our Declaration of Independence for his Declaration in 1945. From French political circles he first learned about a party, an organisation, and about revolutionary strategy for national liberation movements. From the Soviet Union he learned more about strategy and method, and studied the world situation during the rich period of the Comintern. In China he served as an interpreter and learned much about revolutionary warfare. He did not come back to Vietnam to lead a nationalist movement for nearly 30 years, an unparalleled experience among successful revolutionary nationalists. Thus Vietnam is very internationalist.

In this epoch of change when the “wretched of the earth” are becoming masters of their own destiny, it is possible to say that the Vietnamese experience will make a universal contribution on the level of values and principles. During the Christmas bombing of 1972, they did not compare Hanoi to Hiroshima or Guernica but called their capital the “city of human dignity”. Just as in other historical epochs, certain peoples have defended human values for the sake of the world and future generations, and earned the later appreciation of humanity, the Vietnamese people today are the main defenders of human dignity and explorers of the human potential in the world. The winds of liberation and cultural change come no longer from Rome or London, as we in the West are accustomed to believe, but in this century from Vietnam and the Third World.

Their simple message should give us hope.