

From ‘Constructing Socialism’ to a ‘Socialist-oriented Market Economy’ in Contemporary Vietnam: A Critique of Ideologies

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Abstract

In power, the Vietnamese Communist Party has experienced three ‘moments’ of growth, each with some differences of detail and of meanings: ‘traditional communism’; the transition from a planned to a market economy in the 1980s; and, since 1992, a ‘socialist-oriented market economy’. For each, the article discusses the ideologically defined nature of change; intentionality—‘how growth was to happen’; and the quantitative data used. It suggests that critiques throughout the period have engaged with the intentionality issue: in the first moment, by isolating the socialist relations of production within socialist construction as the cause of difficulties; more recently, by engaging with the lack of effective policy despite contemporary ideology’s unreliable belief in policy as key to growth.

WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF CRITIQUE? HOW CAN CRITICAL ANALYSIS engage with ideological doctrine, and what do such doctrines have to say about reality? Mitchell (1991) has argued that ‘the state’ is not something in itself but epiphenomenal: if the term is used, it refers to the effects of other more profound processes and activities. Later, Mitchell extended this argument to the economy, arguing that it too was ‘an effect’ (Mitchell 2014). He uses the term ‘economy’ to refer to practices, including economic ideas, that despite this, treat ‘the economy’ as a well-bounded entity governed by knowable laws.

Such language can be confusing, especially if it is assumed that policy, guided by economic research, models and influences an economy as though it were, for example, a clock. Much of Mitchell’s argument originally relied upon two points: first, the somewhat positivist one that the boundaries of ‘states’ are blurred (1991, p. 78); and second, the political one, that the ‘ability to have an internal distinction appear as though it were the external boundary between separate objects is the distinctive technique of the modern political order’ (1991, p. 78). When applying a similar framing to his discussion of ‘the economy’, he writes ‘by an effect, I mean the product of an iterative process of reference.

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The iteration was repetitive enough to create an appearance of permanence, but in its repetition it is also open to instability' (Mitchell 2014, p. 484).

It appears through relevant data, such as GDP, that 'an economy' exists, as we possess measurements integrated into accounts, theories and their application. And, as we shall see, for each of the three Vietnamese historical 'moments',¹ we find very different data integrated into very different accounts, yet all referring, usually, to changes in some 'total' that can be related to propositions, for example, about success, failure, performance and comparisons. The three moments are: first, the Vietnamese interpretation of post-Stalinist Soviet ideas and practices in the North from the late 1950s and in the reunited country after 1975 until the late 1970s; second, the largely indigenous ideas and practices that emerged and developed with the 1980s transition from planned to market economy; and third, the blend of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) ideas with Western market-oriented economics that emerged from the early and mid-1990s. In the current 'moment', discussions are about economic growth, understood to mean changes in GDP, as part of a 'socialist-oriented market economy', but in the earlier moments, they were about the Soviet-style construction of socialism, and in the 1980s, increasingly about the transition from a planned to a market economy.

Though these are very different, two things may be missed here: first, the specific and contextual nature of a discussion that presents itself as general and natural—'we all know what economic growth is'. And second, just because measurements exist does not mean that what they appear to refer to exists of itself: an average is a statistic, an abstraction, not what it refers to. Whether a number is taken to refer to something depends upon how meaning is given to it: there has to be some 'observation theory' (Lakatos 1970; McCloskey 1985), and how meanings are constructed depends upon which observation theory is used, and this of course can vary. Thus, for each of the three 'moments' there are tables labelled 'industrial production', but this does not necessarily mean that they refer to the same thing, and therefore can be compared without risk of anachronism. This comes down to a debate about whether we are comparing like with like, or not, and this is confused by assertions, such as that by Mitchell, that things deemed to be 'economies' are simply the effects of other things, with no ontological stability.² If we were to agree with Mitchell, we should believe that what we see as economies are simply the consequence of how we frame phenomena: that is, that economies are to be tracked through the ideologies that give their data meaning: in shorthand, through the ideas of their economists rather than the economy itself. This goes too far, but is useful, especially when the prevailing ideas and related data differ, as in the three 'moments' here.

Shonfield stressed how the expansion of peacetime state activities in richer countries in the early post-World War II period could be understood as an attempt to tame capitalism, with

¹I use the term 'moment' rather than potential alternatives such as 'period' because the latter requires clear stipulation of starting and end points, which is not only not needed but confusing. The article argues that ideas and practices change as processes, not as discrete events, at least in the Vietnamese context.

²It must be noted that Mitchell sidesteps his 1991 position in his 2014 paper. Compare: 'the statist approach always begins from the assumption that the state is a distinct entity' (Mitchell 1991, p. 89) with 'the term social construction gets us caught in ontological and historical claims and counterclaims about what existed before the economy. It is easier to talk about the economy as an effect' (Mitchell 2014, p. 484).

economists in increasing demand to analyse and articulate policy rationalities that sought, through such devices as formal modelling, to treat policy as, essentially, something that generated known causes that would create, *ex ante* and *ex post*, predictively known effects (Shonfield 1976; Fforde 2017a). Such an approach encourages the view that powerful rulers characteristically have the authority and power to deploy policy. This may or may not be a reasonable belief, and for contemporary Vietnam there is a strong argument that it is not: the Party may rule, but it does not govern. Given Vietnam's rapid economic growth, this article argues that those who nowadays wish to provide a critique of the situation in Vietnam must confront the powerful mainstream ideology that policy is the core growth-driver. Leung (2015) argues that the issue is one of lack of political will to deploy correct policy.

These two approaches—epitomised here by Mitchell and Shonfield—are contradictory. The former denies ontological stability to anything that could be pointed to as 'the economy', a separate thing with clear boundaries, whilst the latter assumes that 'the economy exists' as a knowable and modellable black box: policy acts upon the economy, and so exists outside it, conceptually. Shonfield's approach is currently (and in the West) the mainstream conventional position, focussing upon how governments 'get policy right' as the main driver of growth. This becomes confusing if rapid growth is not accompanied by a convincing causative narrative. This, I argue, is the case in Vietnam.

Intriguingly, this is probably not just the case for Vietnam alone, but as a general issue. Assumptions of ontological and epistemological stability across varying contexts (Kenny & Williams 2001), if projected into a search for stable relations between policy and economic growth outcomes globally in post-World War II datasets, lead to a lack of convergence amongst studies and no evidence of robust relationships, in a technical sense (Levine & Zervos 1993). This does not suggest, though, that economies do not exist as well-bounded entities, simply that the data associated with them do not exhibit hoped-for regularities. Further evidence suggests that the classic policy rationalities that Shonfield describes led to a situation where beliefs were strong. Again, though, this suggests that the issue was not whether economies exist as stable rule-governed entities, simply that beliefs about them are strong, and probably mistaken.

Before World War II what we now call 'economists' were extremely rare in public service in Western societies. The US New Deal boosted their recruitment. Mitchell (2014) discusses this as a part of his 'economentality'. In his framing, critique will have to engage with such fundamental positions, and his critique can also be seen in this way. At the same time, however, during the 1930s, in the United States the parallel creation of data analysis techniques and data itself, the analysis of which could underpin quantitative research to buttress policy advice and policy parameter choice, led to a sharp debate between neoclassical (still technically reliant upon graphical methods) and institutional economists, with the latter seeking a re-examination of theory as it confronted evidence, and the former resisting it (Yonay 1998). Both approaches, Yonay argues, were eclipsed after World War II by the mathematicisation of economics that owed much to the work of Paul Samuelson (Samuelson 1947). Yonay gives us considerable insight into how the internal logics of schools of economic analysis manage the confrontation with, and the creation of, data.

Such considerations suggest that what is meant by economics, how economists (if they exist) see things and how this relates to local leaders' perceptions of success are not only unstable over time but also seem often over-confident. Put differently, a critique can engage by exposing such over-confidence. The analytical question is how important ideology actually is. If it is judged important then by implication historical accounts should stress ideological change and so discontinuity; for example, the importance of the introduction of renovation—*doi moi*—at the Sixth VCP Congress in 1986. What this article argues, however, is that the evidence suggests the contrary: that there is more continuity, amounting, I argue, to a tradition of critique that has had now twice to address issues of: data in each of the three 'moments' considered here were often re-interpreted and challenged, as critiques have exposed mismatches between ideology—mainstream beliefs—and evidence. This then shifts our research focus to how one 'moment' replaced another. I think that critiques show a shared but evolving interest in all three moments in possible changes in material and spiritual welfare, suggesting that, to the extent that Vietnamese critical economists have been sharing a field of enquiry this is it.

My core argument is that the mainstream ideology of the first moment did not entail the idea that 'an economy' existed independently, acted upon through policy—rather, the 'construction of socialism' treated intentionality as interior to the change process. What 'fine-tuning' took place was intended to be of a secondary conceptual order. However, a radical challenge to this arose, centred essentially upon the developing view that institutions—'socialist relations of production'—were, far from encouraging progressive change, but inhibiting it. This entailed a rethinking of the causality issue, and prepared the ground for a positioning of policy as something that could act upon an economy. Luckily, such reflections provided much to consider when Chinese and Western aid cuts of the late 1970s saw state-owned enterprises (SOEs) autonomously set about their own commercialisation by 'jumping fences',³ and replacing the plan relationship by markets. In the early 1980s, Soviet-bloc aid largely replaced that lost in the late 1970s and Soviet technical assistance naturally asserted the value of Soviet institutions.⁴ Nevertheless, from early 1981 all Vietnamese SOEs had secured legality for their non-plan activities (Fforde 2007).

In the second moment, the 1980s transition, whilst 'the economy' was increasingly conceptualised as having an independent existence and operating according to knowable 'laws' (*quy luật*) to which VCP rule and policy were exterior, the core historical task of transition was to allow the plan to retreat and allow these laws to operate and to sanction the expansion of the market. Increasingly, policy supported and legitimised processes that, rather than 'getting prices right', 'made prices matter'. The policy stance was, however, more reactive than proactive. This is a nice contradiction: the emerging policy rationality largely explains not policy but a reality that the VCP needed to accept.

In the third moment, once political stability and the interests of dominant groups appeared secure following the fall of the Soviet Union, as I will discuss below, policy ceased to be an important influence on the change process. Even so, policy rhetoric, with

³A term, so far as I know, coined by two Vietnamese economists, Dam and Le (1981).

⁴We know too little about Soviet-bloc advice in terms of such issues as the Kosygin reforms and the use of market forces in SOEs. See Fforde and Mazyrin (2018).

economists increasingly trained and primed to act on ‘the economy’, prevailed. Rhetorically, the issue was not to ‘make policy matter’, but to ‘get policy right’—state capacity in a policy sense was assumed. The VCP’s core ideological slogan was ‘modernisation and industrialisation’ as part of the ‘socialist-oriented market economy’ (Fforde 2016). Becoming part of the theatre of political conflicts, policy statements once again became more interior to the change process than external to it, and so Western-trained economists lacked the political prerequisites required for them to do what they had been trained to do. This stood in sharp contrast to the assumptions of the mainstream where, for example, donor beliefs often aligned with the VCP’s ideological positioning and stressed the conventional view that change was driven by policy (the World Bank is a good example). This perpetuated the ‘myth of the 1986 VIth Congress’ (Fforde 2018), attributing major changes to a programme of reform introduced then. Yet, like their predecessors, trained in Soviet doctrines, tensions caused by ideology and doctrine would lead Vietnamese to develop a critique of what they were experiencing.

Such observations, I think, are crucial to securing better understanding of the intellectual environment within which Vietnamese politics and government has been happening; for example, the changing nature of ideas, and so suggestions, about what should be done before 1975 and reunification, and the way in which the Party coped with the massive transition from plan to market in the 1980s; the renewed commitment to industrialisation as a strategic target in the early 1990s and the apparent lack of political concern over the fact that the main structural change of the Vietnamese ‘economic miracle’ was not a shift from farming to industry, as the slogan had it, but a shift to a service economy (Fforde 2016). It was not just the VCP but many donors who supported the idea that industrialisation was a necessary part of development, a common belief to this day.⁵

Vietnam’s changing economy—some facts

After the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, in North Vietnam, the VCP (then called the Vietnamese Workers’ Party) ruled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and initiated social change, labelled by the local communist rulers ‘socialist construction’, that benefited from large material and technical support from the Soviet bloc. Chinese aid continued separately after the Sino–Soviet split. After the defeat of the regime in South Vietnam (the Republic of Vietnam) in 1975 and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), the VCP appeared to attempt a similar project of ‘socialist construction’ until the late 1970s and very early 1980s, when the spontaneous commercialisation of the state sector, in part due to the loss of Chinese and almost all Western aid as a result of the Cambodia crisis, was legalised in various ways. In 1986 the Sixth Party Congress gained much international publicity through its commitment to ‘renovation’ (*doi moi*). As the Soviet Union, and thus its aid programme, collapsed in the late 1980s, something like a market economy emerged.

In 1954 North Vietnam was very poor. The division of the country into two during the period 1954–1975 meant that the VCP then ruled the north and north-centre from Hanoi, losing thus the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands, areas from which agricultural commodities had been

⁵For further discussion, see Fforde (2017c).

produced for export to global markets. A lack of actual and potential agrarian economic vitality in the area ruled by the VCP through DRV political structures until national reunification in 1975–1976 appears important to much of what was to follow (Fforde & Paine 1987).

Three moments

Central to this summary are, clearly, three changing interrelated aspects of the puzzle. For each moment we can ask the same questions. First, how is change defined conceptually by the ideology of the time? This fundamental issue then links in turn to the following two questions. Second, what, ideologically, is success and what is failure, and how is this linked to intentionality? Third, what data were conventionally used to measure economic indicators? Ideological positions in all three moments were recorded. Authoritative positions can thus be found, as well, for the first and last, in foreign-language texts produced by aid donors.

First moment: 'socialist construction'

The early 1960s saw the first Five Year Plan (FYP) (1961–1965) in North Vietnam. The large Soviet and Chinese aid programmes supported the construction of socialism through the use of Soviet institutions (Fforde & Paine 1987). Trade was largely replaced by administrative controls that allowed planners to physically 'balance' inputs and outputs for SOEs, though large parts of production and distribution remained unplanned. Farmers were generally pressured to join producer cooperatives. As accumulation pressures mounted in the middle of the first FYP, Soviet-bloc aid shifted to consumer goods and so eased pressures to secure rice from the rural areas through high and forced procurement (Fforde & Paine 1987; Fforde & Mazyrin 2018). Indeed, in the DRV the reality of central planning's capacity to move resources out of consumption and into investment seems to have been relatively benign; by the early 1970s local accounts reported severe problems in industrial organisation (Nguyen 1972).

Part of this aid programme was technical support to a data-creating apparatus that produced statistics similar to those in other regions using Soviet techniques, which stressed the importance of physical output. In following a clear and holistic model, various patterns of change and their meanings initially emerged. The core structural disaggregation of data—how data were organised and broken down—reflected how growth was conceptualised: focussing first upon output and then upon the sites of output as, first, sectors such as industry and agriculture, and, second, forms of property—state, collective and private, with the first seen as the most socialist and therefore advanced, and the second in an intermediate position. Data were tabulated under these headings. Higher output and a higher share of the state sector both meant positive change. The Western system of National Income Accounting (NIA) and the Soviet system of macroeconomic measurement were based upon very different underlying views of the correct way to define the core structural division in the economy. The NIA system structurally divides the economy on the distinction between factors of production (labour and capital) so that national income is the sum of rewards to them. Industrial output is then the sum or factor incomes generated in industry in a given time period. This could be called a division based upon class. By comparison, the Soviet system focussed instead on property-forms—state, collective and private—so that industrial output data are divided under those headings.

The ideological conceptualisation of change: what was 'socialist construction'?

For definitions of socialist construction, as the VCP sought to define it, it is useful to consider key textbooks.⁶ For example, according to Nguyen and Ho, the Party stipulated that the country had the necessary conditions 'for advancing to socialism ... and the only way to do this was through a path of socialist industrialisation ... in order to construct the material and technical basis of socialism'. Socialist construction took place, they maintain, and attained clear results first in the period of economic reconstruction (1954–1957), and then in 'the period of economic reformation (*cai tao*)⁷ and development (1958–1960)', which witnessed 'the construction of many state enterprises ...' (Nguyen & Ho 1979, pp. 26–7). Socialist industry, they argue, 'has characteristics that show its total superiority over other earlier forms of industry', principally since it 'is constructed on the basis of socialist production relations ... realises the new style of social division of labour ... rapidly uses the results of scientific and technological advance ... and possesses an advanced management organisation that is ceaselessly perfected ...' (Nguyen & Ho 1979, pp. 51–2).

This shows two things: first, the view that socialist industry, and by extension Vietnam's socialist system, is viewed essentially, as a totality, necessarily accompanying rapid and progressive change. Socialist production relations, within which the student using the textbook themselves are likely to sit—the system of SOEs, planning—stem from the foundational choice of the Party to choose 'that path', and embody both cause and effect. Consequently, no more than fine-tuning is required.

This appears often puzzling to analysts whose framework is dominated by the distinction between exogenous and endogenous variables that treats the economy as a modellable and separate entity. Consider the following:

From a social point of view, waterworks are a defining factor in reinforcing socialist relations of production in agriculture. This is because, in reality, the problem of waterworks in our country can only be fundamentally solved through large-scale projects. The construction of a rational water system requires the contributions of a large number of workers, and the organisation of a large-scale agricultural production unit. Both the construction and use of waterworks projects requires a high degree of socialisation. An integrated waterworks project constructed through the efforts of members of cooperatives ... equipped with modern machines and equipment, constructed by the state, serving fields that have been improved and reorganised for intensive cultivation, will truly become a factor binding farmers to their cooperatives, binding agriculture to industry, and binding the collective economy to the state economy. (Nguyen 1983, pp. 276–77)

In Mitchell's world of 'economymentality', Nguyen Huy confuses cause and effect; yet in the VCP ideology of the 'first moment', it does not. Conceptually, there is no bounded entity

⁶Variation in these over time is interesting but not dealt with here. The copies in my possession were used at a number of teaching institutions, especially the Economics and Planning University, which eventually became the National Economics University, Hanoi. From the way they read, I doubt very much if they are translations, and there is a valuable piece of research to be done on the extent to which they map changing Soviet advice. For example, Tran (1968) is the third edition (the other two being for 1960 and 1965), and differences between these deserve research. By contrast, many documents from the third moment (such as, sectoral master plans) are often far less 'Vietnamese' in their content, perhaps as they were prepared with foreign consultants.

⁷The term is political and was also used to refer to the 'reformation' of southern officers and other elements viewed with hostility by the Party after 1975.

upon which policy operates. This situation can be understood in terms of the political origins of ‘socialist production relations’, and their function in permitting the ‘direct leading role’ of the Party. SOEs, planning and agricultural cooperatives arguably allow for increases in material production to be associated with social change without the emergence of groups hostile to Party rule, as they are directly controlled by the Party.⁸ Whether they actually allow for output gains is a separate matter.

What is success and what is failure

At its simplest, according to the ideology, success was guaranteed simply by the Party’s decision to commit to socialist construction. This, then, was definitionally progressive, and would accompany advances in material and spiritual welfare as both cause and effect. The extent to which this success was apparent can be seen, Vietnamese analyses point out, in both higher output levels and the consolation and refinement of socialist relations of production: as in the quote above, cause and effect are both interior to the change process. However, debates arose about the extent to which production might increase if ‘lower’ forms of socialist production relations were accepted; for example, a softer attitude to farmers’ private plots or to the collectivisation of small-scale industrial workers (artisans). But because of the view of the change process these could always be met by arguments that more socialist construction would come from a hard-line approach, pushing socialist relations of production. These could be met by arguments that a softer approach would work better, improving incentives: the classic hard-line/soft-line, voluntarist/pragmatic divisions of ruling communist parties.

Although such debates were fine-tuning, not providing a critique of the basic ideological position, there is a natural logic to how critique emerged: by stressing material production over the socialist relations of production. Here one should recall the deep poverty of the north, its aid dependency, and the passions involved in anti-colonial and anti-imperialist fighting. Critique can be found in studies such as Nguyen (1972) on state industry and Dinh (1977) on collectivised agriculture. This focus on material production started to create a critique of socialist construction that treated socialist relations of production, the political foundation of Party rule, as what would now be called ‘growth drivers’, separating out conceptually something upon which they operated and were starting to build a platform for an attack upon them.⁹

⁸Thus Bray (1983) argues that rice production, unlike wheat, usually lacked the returns to scale that agricultural cooperatives sought to exploit—scale without landlords.

⁹This was gradual and evidently cautious: ‘on the basis of our discussions with Vietnamese who were involved in the reform process it is perhaps possible to identify two sets of principles on which their understanding of the traditional socialist model was based. One of these we could call *definitional*, the other *operational*. The first and most fundamental set, related to the traditional *definition* of socialism, comprised three principles: public ownership of the means of production, operational central planning, and distribution according to labour productivity. The second set was of secondary importance and comprised essentially principles’ (Beresford & Fforde 1997, p. 112). The discussions reported by Beresford and Fforde (1997) appear to ignore the political implications—Mitchell’s ‘distinctive technique of the modern political order’ surely requires policy to matter, and in the third moment, for the VCP to govern through policy, framed in terms of economenality, rather than just ruling.

Quantitative data; how growth happened

Data were created to show how, in reality, socialist construction was happening. Mainly, this followed standard Soviet principles and practices, taught to Vietnamese as part of Soviet-bloc technical assistance.¹⁰ These data allowed local knowledge to identify and explain evident difficulties in implementing Soviet norms. Beside (and within) the textbooks mentioned, we therefore start to find analyses that, within the overall ideological framing, offer a range of explanations for problems. On the one hand, textbooks offered images of socialist construction; on the other, studies and reports grappled with apparent departures from socialist norms (Vu & Dinh 1960; Doan 1965; To 1969; Ngo 1972; Nguyen 1972; Vu & Vu 1974; Vu 1985).

Growth slowed abruptly in 1963, before the onset of US bombing (see Figure 1).

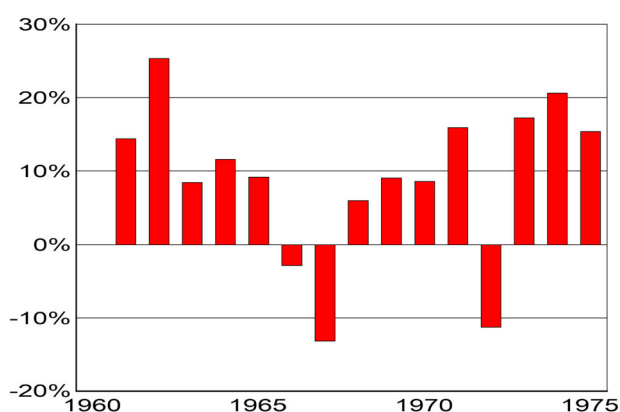


FIGURE 1. INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT GROWTH IN THE DRV—NORTH VIETNAM, 1960–1975
 Source: Fforde and Paine (1987, Table 30, p. 157).

Discussion

Let us reconsider the three questions and the answers to them: how change happened; how intentionality was manifest; and how change was measured. I frame this within the contemporary analyses mentioned already. Few of these were produced by researchers fully trained before the departure of the French, and the arguments often read as an internal critique. These analyses are in sum a profound questioning of ‘socialist production relations’ (through which the VCP ruled) pointing to constraints upon improvements in material and spiritual welfare. Some asserted that this was because the socialist relations of production were not properly realised in DRV conditions, others that they were essentially problematic—though this was risky. For example, Nguyen Manh Huan (1980) mounted a strong critique of a ‘model cooperative’,

¹⁰See Fforde and Paine (1987). The standard collections are the yearly *So lieu Thong ke* (statistical data), for example, GSO (1991).

attacking the socialist relations of production by arguing that success had relied upon preferential resource supplies.¹¹

The textbook—ideological—image of socialist construction focussed upon industrial SOEs, with the proviso that since autarkic development was impossible, aid was essential. Growth was to be achieved by following the socialist model. In this ideology there was little intentionality in terms of economentality—as Mitchell puts it, a conceptual distinction and empirical boundary around ‘the economy’ as an object of policy. Soviet norms, thus, offered ‘answers for everything’: limiting, conditioning and defining intentionality within the formal system. This was well explained by Zdenek Mlynar, a Czechoslovakian Communist Party member who studied in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s:

... Soviet law schools produced qualified bureaucrats. In the five years it took me to become a ‘legal specialist’, that is, a qualified, Soviet-style bureaucrat, [the experience provided me] with a concrete idea of how Soviet bureaucracy administers society.

...

Everything was relatively well thought-out and, above all, regulated in great detail. Many of the questions I brought with me to Moscow—about how, practically speaking, this or that problem in everyday life would be dealt with under socialism, how the work process, and other processes, would be regulated (things that neither Lenin nor Stalin ever write concretely about)—seemed to receive answers here. (Mlynar 1980, pp. 18–9)

This was a complete model, within which growth was simply and definitionally an inherent part of socialist construction, albeit to happen under local conditions.

As the first FYP proceeded, prices on the free market rose, exerting pressure for diversion of goods and services to the free market. As shown in [Figure 1](#), in 1963 growth slowed sharply. The direction fine-tuning took, however, meant that this was tolerated, on the whole. There is evidence that SOEs ‘ran to the market’—that is, avoided producing for the plan in favour of buying and selling on markets; that food supplies on the free market rose; and the balance between consumer goods (and inputs to factories making consumer goods) and capital equipment in the aid programme shifted towards consumer goods (Fforde & Paine 1987; Fforde & Mazyrin 2018). Thus the Party’s slogan was adapted, becoming ‘priority development of heavy industry in a rational way’.¹² At the time this situation had two basic interpretations.

The radical one was that there was an essential problem. The search to isolate and identify causes of slow output growth ended up in a discussion of socialist production relations. Two influential texts already mentioned show the positions being taken by specialists. The first, a study of SOEs, reported conflict and chaos caused by methods of organisation—the socialist relations of production (Nguyen 1972). The second, the article by the historian Dinh Thu

¹¹The author, real name Nguyen Dinh Huan, as a young researcher had the vivid experience of presenting the results directly to the top VCP leadership (personal communication).

¹²‘Đường lối công nghiệp hóa của Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam’, in *Đường lối cách mạng của Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*, available at: https://tusach.thuvienkhoahoc.com/wiki/%C4%90%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng_1%E1%BB%91i_c%C3%B4ng_nghi%E1%BB%87p_h%C3%B3a_c%E1%BB%A7a_%C4%90%E1%BA%A3ng_C%E1%BB%99ng_s%E1%BA%A3n_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam, accessed 23 November 2018.

Cuc, reported a large decline in the cultivated rice area in a collectivised area—the Red River Delta (Dinh 1977). These two studies pointed to emerging ‘economicality’ and a division of the totalistic vision of socialist construction into ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ that would end up, not surprisingly, blaming socialist relations of production—the political basis of the VCP.

The shared point of both these studies is the focus upon production: agricultural cooperatives and SOEs were, as we have seen, core parts of what was called the socialist relations of production, and central to the alleged capacity to construct socialism. Focussing upon production meant that the socialist relations of production could be assigned causality, separating them out from the totality and making them subject to analysis and critique. Something could then be constructed, conceptually and empirically, as the bounded entity upon which intentionality operated.

The conservative interpretation was that, as was also taught in Party schools, such deviations were not indications of anything essential; rather, they were, perhaps as evil for a Christian theologian, ever-present and an inherent part of socialist construction.

Official data offered insights into these tensions. Data on cooperative farmers’ income showed that this increasingly came from the free market, from the quite legal ‘private plots’; data on state workers’ spending showed how they also increasingly relied on the free market; data on industrial output showed how, despite wartime bombing, growth continued as aid propped up SOEs (Fforde & Paine 1987). The meanings of growth were thus reflected in tensions between the premises behind official data (‘socialist construction’) and ‘reality’.

Second moment: from plan to market

Basics

In the late 1970s Chinese and Western aid was almost completely cut, as Vietnam came to ally itself closely with the USSR, occupied Cambodia and suffered Chinese attacks on its northern borders (de Vylder & Fforde 1996). Out of the turmoil, came a quite new pattern of growth. Soviet-bloc aid rapidly replaced lost Chinese and Western aid. As seen in Figure 2, in the early 1980s, data showed significant growth.

What was this transition?

Whilst at the overall ideological level much has been made of the Sixth VCP Congress in 1986, which announced *doi moi* (renovation),¹³ two key documents of early 1981 (Decree 25-CP and Order CT-100, see below) show just how far internal thinking had come since the early 1960s. Both greatly extended the legitimate scope of market relations, and both applied to fundamental elements of the socialist relations of production: they were about agricultural cooperatives and SOEs. Both drew upon the political position taken at the

¹³This Congress is the subject of a wide range of cribs and sources of information for Vietnamese students, see for example: ‘Đại hội Đảng toàn quốc lần thứ sáu’, Vietnam Youth Union, Historical Events, available at: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/dai-hoi-dang-toan-quoc-lan-thu-sau-498588.html>, accessed 23 November 2018.

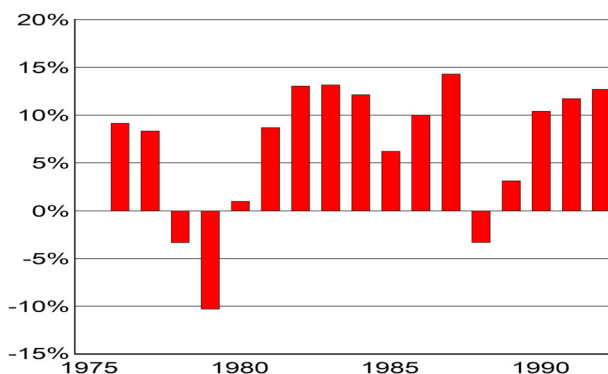


FIGURE 2. INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT GROWTH IN THE SRV, 1977–1993

Sources: GSO (1981, Table 55 (for years 1976–1980, at 1970 prices), 1990, Table 56 (for years 1980–1985, at 1982 prices), 1997, Table 69 (for years 1986–1993, at 1989 prices)).

Sixth Plenum of the VCP held in 1979, which had declared that the response to the crisis was not to be a hard-line reinforcement of the basis of VCP rule—the socialist relations of production—but in doing whatever it took to secure major output increases. We see here a structural equivalent to Mitchell’s economentality, for these measures were, from their own internal logic, designed to act upon something. Gone were the attempts to exhort greater alignment with the norms of Soviet institutions, with cause and effect muddled; in their stead we find policy, and an economentality, creating as a social construct an economy upon which policy would and should operate to cement policy as the core growth-driver.

Decree 25-CP¹⁴

This decree was technically a legal instrument, passed by the Government Council in January 1981 (HDCP 1981). It offered the rhetorical master stroke of defining commercial activities by SOEs as planned—by them, and so introduced measures to create flexible and ‘motorised’ (*cơ động*) conditions needed for SOEs to be able to stimulate production and profitable business (HDCP 1981, p. 1). Though the decree expresses respect for the plan, it refers to the Sixth Plenum (focussed upon production), the Ninth Plenum and Politburo Resolution No. 26 that ‘sought a powerful development of the autonomy of SOEs regarding production and business, and finance’ (HDCP 1981, p. 1). I read this as an ‘economentality’, with the cognitive establishment of a notion of a bounded ‘economy’ *vis-à-vis* ‘policy’ reinforced by the attention paid to SOE autonomy. It is worth noting that it applied to all SOEs, allowing them to sell ‘list’ goods (those they were to deliver to the plan) on the free market if they had directly—rather than through the plan—acquired them. This predates in scope and extent anything visible at the time in China.

¹⁴For a more detailed discussion of these two documents, see Fforde (2017b).

Order #100

The second key document, Order #100, was a Party instrument, issued by the VCP Secretariat (BBT 1981). It is firmly based upon actual practice:

Because of the need to stimulate production, guarantee livelihoods (*doi song*) and raise economic efficiency, recently many cooperatives (including advanced and outstanding ones) have used the form of ‘output contracts with groups of workers and individual workers’ with many different crops (including rice), for livestock and other lines of production. This new form of contracting has led to an initial step forward that is positive. However, because there is no united leadership (*chi dao*) and direction, some cooperatives have made mistakes in implementation.

The Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee (December 1980) decided to ‘expand implementation and improvement of output contracting forms in agriculture’. (BBT 1981, p. 1)

The decree in fact seems to have reined in the spontaneous dissolution of the cooperatives and in this vein we can appreciate its focus on use of such contracts within cooperatives. The decree maintains the view that socialist relations of production are superior, part of the construction of socialism, but can readily be interpreted as arguing that the point was to get more output through less socialism.

What is success and what is failure?

In this second ‘moment’, with its powerful transition, we see two parallel ways of answering this question. Those arguing in terms of the emerging economentality argued that policy, by its very nature, should operate as a cause of better economic performance—that is, production. A wide range of articles in the VCP press pursued this argument, showing how increased commercial activities benefited SOE workers through improved real incomes, as well as consumers and other producers with better and cheaper inputs obtained from SOEs. Others showed how they violated socialist norms. In general, the former position won the intellectual debate as it deployed more powerful arguments; it won the political battle in part through bribes.¹⁵

Quantitative data: how growth happened

Official statistics continued to follow the same norms as before, focussing upon output and the division of the economy according to property forms. However, alongside these official data, new data based on surveys and their interpretation gained validity as new economic thinking (de Vylder & Fforde 1996, p. 213). Central was a view of growth as including commercialisation as SOEs engaged in additional activities besides those of the plan. This view generated data to suit, such as on the degree of self-balancing by SOEs—that is, the extent to which they did not ‘balance inputs and outputs—of the inputs required to produce given planned outputs’ not through the planning system, but through markets or

¹⁵For further details of these articles in the VCP press, see Fforde (2007).

market-like relationships, which by the late 1980s had reached very high levels (de Vylder & Fforde 1996).

This new economic thinking gained authority and coherence as the decade progressed. There are many particularly interesting studies, such as those by Phan Van Tiem (1990, 1992, nd), whose approach clearly articulated a thought-through informal modelling of the transitional Vietnamese mixed plan-market economy with particular attention to monetary phenomena.

As far as this growth was concerned, primacy was now increasingly given to these new economic ideas, at root a process that saw planners, placed under socialist construction in opposition to markets, move back from this opposition in ways that saw space arise for commerce and economic activity aimed at trade. Intentionality thus conceptually shifted from the ‘we are but part of the model’ characteristic of socialist construction ideology, to viewing change and growth as highly dependent upon acts of policy: policy geared towards the commercialisation of SOEs, the participation of members of cooperatives in markets and the ‘cooperativisation’ of agriculture. At this time the VCP retained considerable political authority and cohesiveness, not least because until the late 1990s, respected wartime leaders remained in office.

This growth, like that in the first moment, includes a considerable ‘policy history’, such as decrees about SOEs and cooperatives published and disseminated in the *Official Gazette (Cong Bao)*. As such, an economic logic is deployed to validate laws emerging in parallel with the development of policy suited to economic activity. Development now exhibits, thus, a strongly economic flavour, with references to socialist relations of production as a necessary part of development downplayed: ‘the economy’, as counterpoint to ‘policy’, starts to emerge.

Discussion: core meanings of growth during the transitional moment

I now consider the questions of how this growth was achieved, how intentionality was manifested, and how it was regulated and moderated.

The main aspect of this growth was contestation over various aspects of the commercialisation of the economy. A good and central example of this was policy towards SOEs (Fforde 2007, 2014). We can track this through policy documents, numbered and formally passed by apparently authoritative bodies. After the January 1981 Decree 25-CP already mentioned, two decrees then attempted to rein in these activities before, in early 1986, a so-called ‘draft’ text or document of Party decree (BBT-306) reverted to a policy of encouraging market activity. This happened before the Sixth Party Congress of December 1986, which announced the policy of *doi moi*, and was followed by other decrees of similar tone before the effective extinction of central planning in 1989–1991 as the Soviet-bloc aid programme collapsed. Notably, there is no formal policy document I know of that terminated central planning.

A qualitatively different rationality of rule, entailing a conceptualisation of the economy and a new and associated policy rationality thus arose through the 1980s that explained and justified policy that supported the commercialisation of the state sector, amongst other things (Fforde 2009b). Thus ‘socialist construction’ as a concept was abandoned, even if surviving

in propaganda terms. Moreover, there is little evidence that this policy was an imported foreign model; it appears a local construction.¹⁶

The growth of this second moment thus appears as transitional, in two very different senses. First, it showed the crucial emergence of policy as a category for describing how a national agency, here the VCP, acted upon the economy, construed implicitly as an independent entity changing according to patterns knowable through ‘policy logic’ or rationality. The political implications of this were not thought through. This was reflected in the emergence of new forms of data, besides the official statistics, that measured the extent of commercialisation, expressed as the degree and nature of ‘self-balancing’—‘autonomous’ activities, especially of SOEs.¹⁷

Such processes, most clear in the emergence of new terms and new measurements, such as the extent to which SOEs paid workers from funds they secured from their market rather than their plan activities, which arguably entail a reconfiguration of relations between rulers and ruled that transform ideas and thus practices of national agency, or ‘domestic sovereignty’, seem to point towards political change. However, with political authority not really an issue because the VCP was exercising a series of tactical retreats, political change lagged behind, failing to create the political prerequisites for policy, that is, the protection and reinforcement of domestic sovereignty. Social change and growth thus had a peculiarly economic twist: the economy, conceptually, seemed more prominent whilst the political prerequisites for its regulation and management through some equivalent to Mitchell’s economentality were hazy.

This second moment appeared transitional in the sense that the situation where plan and market relations co-existed, if subject to commercialisation processes, could not continue forever: at some point, growth of the market had to end up in a market economy of some sort. This happened at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s as Soviet-bloc aid was lost. As can be seen from [Figure 3](#), growth accelerated from 1992 and initiated a Vietnamese ‘economic miracle’; from around 2009 the country entered ‘middle income’ status.¹⁸

Third moment: market economy with a socialist orientation

This third moment is ongoing. Compared with the first moment, it seems that it has taken longer for a critique of it to appear. This is likely to be for three reasons. First, despite the apparent absence of a clear narrative linking policy to outcomes,¹⁹ growth has been rapid and poverty reduction impressive, an apparent success. Second, the ideological position of the Party and its fears for regime survival after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the strong

¹⁶Thus, Dam and Le (1981) so far as I know are the first in print to refer to ‘fence-breaking’—a term that has become rather widely-used to refer to SOEs’ behaviour in getting around prohibitions on direct market-based relationships with other SOEs as well as various sources of supplies and market outlets.

¹⁷A good example can be found in the table in de Vylder and Fforde (1996, p. 213).

¹⁸See, for example, ‘Vietnam: Achieving Success as a Middle-income Country’, World Bank, 12 April 2013, available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/04/12/vietnam-achieving-success-as-a-middle-income-country>, accessed 23 November 2018.

¹⁹See the above-mentioned studies by Pham *et al.* (2008) and Giesecke and Tran (2008) in which quantitative work shows little policy influence.

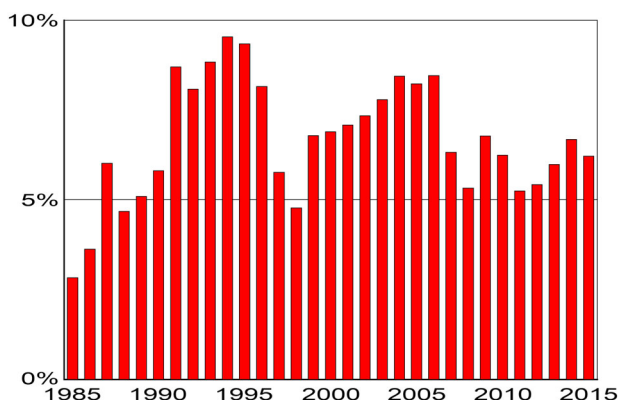


FIGURE 3. GDP GROWTH, VIETNAM, 1985–2015 (CONSTANT PRICES)

Sources: GSO (2000 (for years 1985–1999, at 1994 prices), 2008 (for years 2000–2007, at 1994 prices), 2011 (for years, 2008–2010, at 1994 prices), 2016 (for years, 2010–2016, at 2010 prices)).

beliefs underpinning Western economics training, make it hard to develop a critical analysis. Third, and related to the second point, the diminishing but initially very great monetary importance of donors in financing research has served to inhibit the development of a critical perspective.

Some donors who aligned closely with evolving VCP ideology,²⁰ relying on a reform narrative that asserted the historical break in 1986 at the Sixth Congress, saw policy as the cause of change. This was ultimately rooted in the belief in *doi moi*, and thus in the Party, as the author of change, a belief supported in a wide range of texts by Vietnamese local researchers and foreign consultants, and again Gencer *et al.* (2011) is revealing as, because this is a sectoral ‘lower-level’ report, it shows accepted beliefs deployed ‘lower down’:

The *Doi Moi*, a programme of economic renovation, was launched by the Government of Vietnam in 1986. The reform program involved a set of measures to gradually move from central planning to market mechanisms and an opening up of the economy to trade and foreign investment. (Gencer *et al.* 2011, p. 9).

Thus:

Comprehensive policy reforms introduced over the past decade have succeeded in strengthening Vietnam’s public financial management and encouraging the participation of private firms in most sectors. (Gencer *et al.* 2011, p. 2)

Agricultural sector reform under *Doi Moi*, coupled with policies supporting trade, led to a boom in farm exports and a dramatic reduction in rural poverty. (Gencer *et al.* 2011, p. 8)

²⁰See, for example, the World Bank and other bilateral donors’ support for the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy put together in the late 1990s. The Final report is available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTVIETNAM/Overview/20270134/cprgs_finalreport_Nov03.pdf, accessed 23 November 2018.

These statements are clearly not simply mistakes, though their fragility can be seen from beliefs driving sources such as Gencer *et al.* (2011). De Vylder and Fforde (1988), as already mentioned, was available to donors as they briefed themselves for a return to the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These statements are also consistent with Mitchell's 'distinctive technique of the modern political order': attributing change causally to policy. Donors believed their own ideology, not surprisingly, which allowed them to validate and give meaning to their activities.

Donor counterparts here and elsewhere were VCP-controlled bodies—but what was meant by control?²¹ Arguably, as we find in the analysis of Gainsborough, political conflicts did not have that much to do with differences in policy, but depended upon other mechanisms, such as the purchase through bribes of what had been *nomenklatura* positions (Gainsborough 2007). Consider the following, from a report to the National Assembly (clearly driven by a critical perspective):

The division of tasks and responsibilities that realise the rights and duties of the state as owner, regarding Groups and General Companies,²² are scattered and divided. This leads to a situation where there is no organisation that bears principal responsibility for the management of capital and assets Ministries and People's Committees do not adequately grasp information on the activities of these units. The Ministry of Finance carries out state financial management but only participates indirectly in the management of capital and assets *via* the reports of the Ministries and People's Committees and of the units themselves.²³

If there are no reliable data it is problematic to treat the situation as one where the economy has clear knowable boundaries and policy is the main driver of change. Yet, this was what we find driving donor strategy. For example, the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) (GoV 2002), prepared with substantial Vietnamese and foreign consultant inputs, supported a Government of Vietnam-donor agreement (including many bilateral agreements) to a large World Bank lending programme, and public agreement between the Bank and the VCP on development strategy. Preparation for this was premised on VCP positions developed after the fall of the Soviet Union, which articulated the 'socialist-oriented market economy' as the core ideological slogan of this moment, expressed as 'modernisation and industrialisation'. Thus, in a statement from the Party's newspaper *Nhan Dan* on its application to university education dated 19 August 2015,²⁴ we find (after a statement about the slogan's alleged universal meaning):

In Vietnam, the 7th Plenum of the VIIIth Party Central Committee (7/1994) approved the line of industrialising and modernising the country. Our Party laid down: in the process of development

²¹Some INGOs also aligned with this strategy. The view of a leading INGO Vietnam country director, that formal structures—state as well as mass organisations such as the Women's Union—were the correct development partners for INGOs in Vietnam is reflected in McCall (1998).

²²These were bodies that grouped individual SOEs in various ways.

²³*Bao cao ket qua giam sat 'Viec thuc hien chinh sach ... tai cac tap doan, tong cong ty nha nuoc'* (Hanoi, National Assembly, 2009, p. 20).

²⁴'Công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa và yêu cầu đối với giáo dục đại học hiện nay', *Nhan Dan Dien Tu*, 2015, available at: <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/giaoduc/dien-dan/item/27199202-cong-nghiep-hoa-hien-dai-hoa-va-yeu-cau-doi-voi-giao-duc-dai-hoc-hien-nay.html> , accessed 9 March 2016.

of our country in accordance with a socialist direction, industrialisation and modernisation are means and formula to attain the goal of a prosperous life that is daily better and better, for the liberation and all-round popular development. [Section 1]²⁵

Following the same line of research, what is clearly an online crib for examinations replies to the question ‘what is the theory (*ly luan*) of industrialisation and modernisation’ as follows:

The success of industrialisation and modernisation of the national economy is the definitive factor in the success of the road to socialism that the Party and our people have chosen. Mainly because of this, industrialisation and modernisation of the national economy is viewed as the central task of the entire period of transition to socialism in our country ...

So what is industrialisation and modernisation?

The 7th plenum of the VIIth Central Committee issued the conception: ‘Industrialisation and modernisation is a process of fundamental and all-rounded change of production, business, services and social and economic management from the predominant use of artisanal labour to a predominant use of labour power with technology, methods and ways of working that are advanced, modern and rely upon the development of industry and scientific–technical progress to create high labour productivity’.

So from a theoretical and practical view industrialisation and modernisation are a necessary historical process that Vietnam must go through change our country into an industrial country ...²⁶

The World Bank and the CPRGS aligned with this. To quote the CPRGS:

The overall objective of Vietnam for the 2001–2010 period is to bring about a significant improvement in the people’s material, cultural and spiritual life, lay the foundations for the country’s industrialisation and modernisation, build a prosperous people, strong country and a just, equal, democratic and civilised society, and establish the institutions of a socialist-oriented market economy, protect and preserve the country’s natural resources and national culture for future generations. (GoV 2002, p. 6)

However, the hoped-for industrialisation of the economy did not happen: industrial output grew fast, but services grew faster. Structural change was quite different from that envisaged by the VCP slogan of ‘modernisation and industrialisation’. Rather:

[the] services GDP share *rose*, from 38% in 1992 to 43% in 2013. In addition, whilst the share of the broad category ‘industry’ over the same period rose from 23% to 29%, this growth was largely due to increased mining output. In 2013 mining—included in the industry statistical definition—was 12% of GDP yet under 5% in the early 1990s, so that the non-mining ‘industry’ share of GDP *fell* from

²⁵‘Công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa và yêu cầu đối với giáo dục đại học hiện nay’, *Nhan Dan Dien Tu*, 2015, available at: <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/giaoduc/dien-dan/item/27199202-cong-nghiep-hoa-hien-dai-hoa-va-yeu-cau-doi-voi-giao-duc-dai-hoc-hien-nay.html>, accessed 9 March 2016.

²⁶‘Lý luận về công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa ... gắn với kinh tế trí thức’, *Wattpad*, p. 1, available at: <https://www.wattpad.com/2927500-1%C3%BD-lu%E1%BA%ADn-v%E1%BB%81-c%C3%B4ng-nghi%E1%BB%87p-h%C3%B3a-hi%E1%BB%87n-%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i-h%C3%B3a-g%E1%BA%AFn-v%E1%BB%9Bi>, accessed 9 March 2016.

around 18% in the early 1990s to around 17% in 2013 (GSO 1993 Table 18 and GSO 2014 Tables 66 and 68). If one cares not to believe this data then the point to bear in mind is that it is the public face of quantified economic change. If a speech is made in terms of successful ‘industrialisation’ implying that this was the core, central driver of change, then it has either to argue that the fall in agriculture’s share and the rise of services’ share were dependent upon industry, likely avoiding the issue that industry only grows as a share of GDP if you include mining, or find some other way to argue the point. (Fforde 2016, p. 12)

The view that change was brought about by policy developed and implemented effectively by the Party and the ‘myth of the Sixth Congress’ as setting off the transformational process of marketisation, was and remains central to mainstream ideology and accounts of the Vietnamese ‘economic miracle’.²⁷ It clearly aligns with the view that attributes causality to policy, and usually ignores evidence (like that discussed above) to the contrary. The literature takes an uncritical approach to this myth, managing anomalies by ignoring them. It also implies that Vietnamese researchers either kept quiet or were ignored.²⁸ I conclude therefore that the basic ideological position was that the VCP, through policy, was the author of the rapid economic growth that was occurring, and donors such as the World Bank were co-authors.

Quantitative data; how growth happened

Through the 1990s Vietnamese economic data shifted from Soviet to Western norms as NIA was adopted (see Figures 3 and 4). It is not too hard to argue that the new NIA system and the old Soviet system, so long as GDP was largely viewed as an output concept rather than inflation-adjusted factor incomes,²⁹ are not so far apart. However, this is problematic as GDP is not actually an output measure. Unlike the Soviet statistics, themselves embedded in the notion of ‘socialist construction’, the basis for NIA is not production or property-forms, but rewards paid for factors of production—labour and capital—which is why it is called National Income. GDP rises and falls as these rise or fall, no matter what happens to actual inputs of land, labour and capital. However, it is normal to finesse this by (as all contemporary economists know) assuming some distributional arrangement linked to real factor productivity so as to treat GDP conceptually as an output measure. This is then easily coupled with the concept of the Incremental Capital Output Ratio (measuring the ratio between investment—conceptualised as the increase in the stock of capital available—and increases in GDP) to permit discussion of the efficiency of an economic growth.

Conceptualising growth as increases in GDP that come about through increases in factor inputs, used in more or less efficient ways to secure increases in GDP, is coherent. However, arguments about causality are problematic. The rhetorical refocussing demonstrated above—the ideology of this moment—assumes state capacity to govern and thereby policy effectiveness, and comes down in many ways to the deployment of policy to improve the

²⁷Compare Kornai (1985).

²⁸Zink (2013) is a valuable study of the realities of research activities in Vietnam.

²⁹National Income Accounting, the basis of GDP, sums incomes of labour and capital (‘factor incomes’) to produce a measure of national income, which is therefore not a measure of ‘output’.

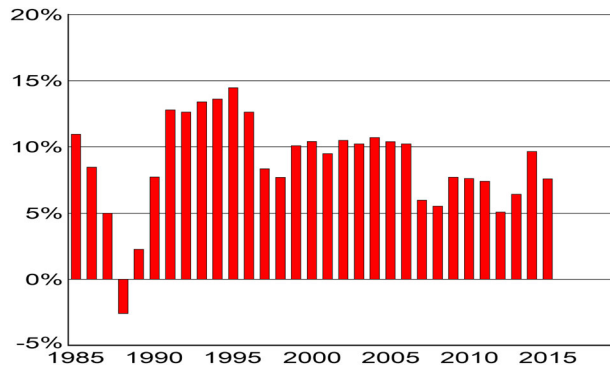


FIGURE 4. INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT GROWTH, GDP BASIS, VIETNAM, 1985–2015
 Sources: GSO (2000 (for years 1985–1999, at 1994 prices), 2008 (for years 2000–2007, at 1994 prices), 2011 (for years, 2008–2010, at 1994 prices), 2016 (for years, 2010–2016, at 2010 prices)).

efficiency of input use. The role of policy is then to support the development of institutions and policy settings that will act on the economy to maintain and improve efficiency. This is underpinned by the microeconomics premise that, in the absence of market failure, markets will allocate resources efficiently to competing ends. Policy should then seek to remove obstacles to the free operation of markets when there is no market failure, and deal with market failures as they arise. This quite coherent picture is premised on state capacity to formulate and enact policy and undertake policy analysis with predictive power, so that policy can measurably do what it is meant to do. Whilst it can be argued that policy analysis is not actually designed to produce predictive knowledge (its procedures usually contain no such criterion) (Fforde 2017a), the argument about Vietnam is the prior one, that state capacity was absent—the VCP ruled, investing heavily, for example, in its domestic security services, but it did not govern.

A prerequisite of this view of how growth is achieved is therefore that policy actually and normally matters: that is, political conditions are such that technical arguments about, for example, market failures lead to policy recommendations that lead to changes in reality. There is a need for reformists: for those in power to implement good policy based upon good policy advice. Whilst the donor-supported ideology echoed Mitchell’s position, arguments were from the start present that implied that this prerequisite was absent, not least the position that the 1986 Sixth Congress was not the starting point of a reform process but part of the 1980s transition.

Discussion: core meanings of growth—metaphors

If we consider ideological answers to the three questions—how this economic growth was brought about, how intentionality was manifested, and how growth was to be regulated and moderated—much of the new ideology was and is clearly a façade, hiding important historical forces (such as the commercial power of SOEs that had grown so much in the 1980s, especially before the Sixth Congress of 1986. Preservation of this façade had to

ignore much contemporary history. Donors and the VCP developed a public position based on the assertion that policy was the key growth driver. The keystone of this edifice was the idea that the VCP ‘did policy’, and so change was at root driven by reform.

Causality, as in the first ‘moment’, was once again central to critique. As noted above, the two quantitative studies already mentioned found no links between policy and change (Giesecke & Tran 2008; Pham *et al.* 2008). These are studies at a high level of technical competence. It is likely that econometricians and others close to the emerging Vietnamese data (and there are a large number of surveys for them to analyse) realised early that whilst causality could be reported through the usual techniques of data-mining, there was no robust story of policy-driven growth, reminiscent of the lack of robust regularities in global datasets reported by Levine and Zervos (1993) and discussed in Fforde (2005). The ‘nettle’ that needed to be grasped, for critique to develop, was clearly the nature of the Vietnamese political community, the SRV state and the nature of the VCP, and how this could be fitted into some economic rationality. Whilst as politically risky as the earlier critique of socialist production relations, rapid growth and a far more open society changed the stakes: critique was safer, and mattered less.

Emergence of critique

The issue of corruption and the nature of VCP rule was clear to many very early, but a seminal critical work was produced by Huy (2012)—an ‘insider’ as an ex-army officer and well-connected journalist—who talked of the ‘theft’ of the local state after the fall of the Saigon regime, and offered a wide range of information about political conflicts within the VCP.³⁰ This was followed by Tran (2013) who provided a history of the gathering disenchantment of workers in the 2000s as they learnt that policies would not be reliably implemented, and Greenfield (1994) who reported rampant manager appropriation of SOEs.³¹ These sorts of accounts reflect the realities that millions of Vietnamese lived through.

These were followed by two critical breakthrough works, one arguing that policy was largely irrelevant as such to political behaviour, the second arguing that endemic corruption was, in effect, a reflection of the very broad—and perhaps unique to Vietnam—ownership rights of officials. In a nice contradiction, this meant that whilst the dominant ideology, shared by donors and the VCP, was that policy was driving change, critique of it would have to argue that state actions themselves fundamentally reflected not a pro-change policy logic but the structured interests of those occupying Party and state positions. Most donor reports, placing policy and the VCP as authors of the change process, which they identified as ‘reform’, thus created, like the VCP ideology of a Party-led process of modernisation and industrialisation, an ideology that sought to offer a persuasive account of an application of Mitchell’s ‘distinctive technique of the modern political’, where change was driven by policy.

³⁰Huy’s book (2012) was only published overseas but the e-book and pdf copies were easily available in Viet Nam.

³¹Fluent in Vietnamese and half-Vietnamese, Greenfield had unprecedented access to the political economy of the state in the very early 1990s.

The first breakthrough work was the seminal paper by Gainsborough (2007), which was based upon close ‘quasi-participatory observation’ in the run-up to the VCP Congress. A Vietnamese-speaking foreigner, Gainsborough argued that political activity was focussed on harvesting spoils rather than developing and implementing effective policy. Thus, policy was not as such important to political activities.

Far more significantly, a second seminal paper emerged a decade later, with profound implications for the nature of VCP rule. The issue here was the nature of corruption. Nguyen *et al.* (2016) reported that Vietnamese SMEs made ‘informal’³² payments equivalent in value to their recorded profits. For businesses, such payments confer the right to do business, and have very little effect, that right having been bought, upon how well a business performs:

From 2009 to 2011, each firm in the sample paid on average from 460 to 600 million VND in informal costs per year (between USD 20,000 to USD 30,000), yet still made 512 to 646 million VND in profit before tax each year (between USD 24,000 and 30,000). The informal payments were equivalent to 78%–107% of the firm’s PBT (Profits Before Tax) ... to make 100,000 VND in profit, a firm has to pay between 70,000 and 100,000 VND in informal cost. (Nguyen *et al.* 2016, p. 9)

In such volumes, simple economic analysis would suggest the following questions: first, treated as a flow, over time such payments must lead to a considerable stock of assets, of the same order of magnitude as the value of the SME sector. How are these assets held? Second, given their order of magnitude, arguments about transaction costs would suggest that collection of such payments would have to be organised, but if so, how was this done? Third, through what intermediation channels do the funds find profitable investments?

Informal discussion with Vietnamese colleagues in Ho Chi Minh City shortly after the article was published suggested that officials indeed usually formed ‘funds’ (*quy*) to manage collection, that the intermediation channels were primarily the banks, and that these funds were often reinvested in SMEs. To put this in another register, and to take the example of the World Bank rural electrification study by Gencer *et al.* (2011), it suggests that officials are not widely viewed as part of a policy logic; rather, they are part of structures that, in effect, are 50% owners of SMEs, who are organised to channel their profit shares through banks. Such structures are therefore not best seen as sources of ‘efforts [that] ... addressed a wide array of challenges along the way and successfully balanced the sometimes-competing interests of local, provincial, and central governments’ (Gencer *et al.* 2011, p. xi).

Nguyen *et al.* (2016) puts forward two conclusions: first, that the ruling VCP and the SRV state are not best seen as a source of policy-making, as the dominant ideology would suggest; second, that Vietnam’s rapid growth should be understood through an appreciation of how business ownership actually happens. Furthermore, the latter requires acceptance of the former. It remains to make the point that the Vietnamese have enjoyed an economic miracle and are reportedly very happy with their market economy.³³

³²It is not easy analytically to find a suitable term, because whilst they appear in part simply as bribes, they are also, arguably, and because they are so large, a reflection of some form of informal ownership right.

³³Or they were happy just over a decade ago. Goertzel (2006) reports, based upon the Pew Global Attitudes Project, that 95.4% of Vietnamese agreed that ‘most people are better off in a free market economy, even though some people are rich and some are poor’, compared for example to 72.1% in the United States (Goertzel 2006, pp. 4–5).

Conclusions

Change was—as a concept with an empirical basis—socially constructed in very different ways. These ways entailed use of different quantitative data to measure growth; different accounts of ‘how growth happened’; and different core meanings of growth. These differences are related to different political, social and cultural contexts. This suggests that an examination of the different ways in which economic growth is socially constructed means an examination of how economics is treated as part of ways of explaining social change, and its problems as therefore having wider significance, especially political, at root to do with the intentionality issue. This appears as the core of the problem and opportunity facing a critique of the ideologies discussed above: it is not just about economics.

More can be made of this point, and how we address different socially constructed economic growth, by returning to Mitchell’s starting point—the state. To quote Dunn:

Each of these two conceptions (the state as sociological fact and the state as normative political proposal) must relate in some way to most of the entities which we now call states, but neither makes quite clear how to apply it in practice. (Dunn 2000, p. 69)


If we try to clarify what is going on, and examine the idea that an economy may be both fact and normative proposition, what has become apparent during the third moment, and is quite clear from the literature, is the centrality of the causality issue. On the one hand, as epitomised by the extended quotes from Gencer *et al.* (2011) above, which fit perfectly with Shonfield’s account of the ‘taming of capitalism’ after World War II, Mitchell is right in that the ‘distinctive technique of the modern political order’ is a technique that is grounded on deployment of policy. Equally, as Gainsborough (2007) and Nguyen *et al.* (2016) suggest, such views are subject to a critique arguing that policy does not matter, but that it needs to. Leung (2015), stressing political will, poses a similar question, but assumes that if that will is present, powers can be deployed to devise and implement policy. Growth is then usefully seen as a concept that is both ‘sociological fact and ... normative political proposal’ (Dunn 2000, p. 69). As we have seen, each of the moments entailed meaning-giving that included normative aspects, and which were contested through critique. What is striking, if we follow Gainsborough, is that, as is logically quite possible, meaning-giving can fail to happen.

As already mentioned, attributing too much weight to the social construction of change can go too far. Thus, examination of the data, for all that they refer to different things and use different ‘observation theories’, points up various facts that are often ignored. First, in the DRV we see rather rapid change in the early 1960s, 1969–1971 and then 1973–1975 (see Figure 1). Whilst the first period was one of relative peace and high levels of foreign aid, the second and third were during wartime, and perhaps show, like the first, that the DRV was an area of rapid industrial output growth: it was not ‘bombed back to the Stone Age’, and so we find the debates on how to improve welfare. There are many texts of the period that are about far more than wartime issues.

Second, after 1975, the reductions in industrial output in 1978–1979 can be taken to show just how great dependence on aid was, for this is when Chinese and most Western aid was cut. Had aid not been shifted to consumer goods in the middle of the first FYP and rice production

forced out of the cooperatives, perhaps the DRV and then the SRV would have been far less aid-dependent. After that, change occurred rather rapidly in the early 1980s, as Soviet-bloc aid replaced what had been lost, and then again in 1986–1987. There is no simple picture of stagnation and then response to policy changes in 1986 (with the Sixth Party Congress—the *doi moi* Congress) (see Figure 2). Finally, looking at the pattern of GDP growth (see Figure 3), growth was rapid from about 1992, and dipped in 1997 (the Asian Financial Crisis) and 2008 (the Global Financial Crisis).

The Vietnamese experience, in the three moments studied, suggests that knowledge productions associated with different change processes are conceptually provocative: whilst all were scientific (part of structured knowledge production processes), what that means varies. They seem to require political notions and state capacities to deal with ‘the economy’, yet study of the economy alone actually gives very little guidance as to how that might happen. Scientific procedure does not guide decisions about who wins the argument, but simply says which arguments are valid (Fforde 2017a). This suggests, as I think all economists close to policy debates know, that what economists who are historically relevant actually do to secure influence over policy and politicians is about far more than economics. As Kuhn puts it, ‘if an anomaly is to evoke crisis, it must usually be more than just an anomaly’ (Kuhn 1970, p. 82). And for this, a tradition of critique may be very useful.

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