



Vietnam: Water Policy Dynamics under a Post-Cold War Communism

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ABSTRACT: Vietnam is widely seen as a development success, with rather rapid economic growth and a reported reduced role of the state, yet presents many paradoxes to conventional analytical frameworks. Two of relevance are accounts that stress a combination of a strongly hegemonic regime with weak internal sovereignty in terms of both the internal coherence of the apparatus and its interactions with the rest of Vietnamese society, and also associated accounts that deny much role to intentionality in explaining apparent development success. This article will contextualise accounts of political intention and policy development towards water issues in Vietnam through an examination of two main empirics: the evolution of formal policy, understood as documents of the state, as well as of political intention, understood as documents of the ruling Party; and the by now extensive series of 'active' case studies that have examined donor as well as other projects in the sector. It will examine the notion, in the contexts suggested by the Vietnamese experience, that attempts to explain Vietnamese water policy, which have shown a tendency to shift away from assumptions that an analytical framework's categories may easily and without too much risk be extended across different contexts. Rather, comparisons of Vietnamese experience across contexts will tend, if they are to be persuasive, to shift to the use of languages that reflect ontological fluidity, in that what things mean is expected to change over time, without reference to an imagined transcendental and universal 'real'. In this sense, Vietnamese water policy may be usefully understood as an example of how 'success gives voice to the local'.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam, water policy, scepticism, (semi-)authoritarianism, governance, governance, participation, development rationalities, change processes

THREE POLICY LANGUAGES

This paper discusses various aspects of Vietnamese experiences with water. As the introductory article shows, it was part of a workshop brought together to discuss issues to do with conceptualisations of social action and change processes associated with debates about 'the state'. Writing it has convinced me that the labelling of regimes as 'state centric' is dangerously seductive in that they appear to offer 'ideology-based policy' *where that ideology may be said to be 'correct', endorsed by the observer*. I therefore start the article with a discussion of matters of language, since this shows very clearly the pitfalls of any argument that asserts its own correctness and uses this as a basis for asserting that 'what works there will work here'. The evidence is that this is unwise and probably untrue, as we remain, in matters of knowing 'what works', profoundly ignorant.

Marxism-Leninism

At the risk of over-simplification, three sets of terminologies to do with change rationalities co-exist in Vietnam that are relevant to discussing water policy dynamics since the emergence of a market economy about the time of the end of the Cold War in 1989-91.

First, there is the language of Marxism-Leninism. This is one where there is said to be a known and true ideology that underpins the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party's 'leadership role' as enshrined in the country's Constitution. This assigns developmental agency to the Party which is manifest in various forms, such as its 'Line', 'Point of View' or the untranslatable and very important '*chu truong*'. These may be accessed through Party documents and have (in principle) a high normative status. The state, and the Party-led Mass Organisations, should then 'implement' these ideas that are concretised in documents issued by authorities such as the central government or local government. This hierarchy naturally appears as an implementation process that manifests the Party's leading role.

But things are not quite so simple.

First, this language often appears as one where causes and effects are not clearly differentiated: its most basic logic is the implementation of a model that covers all aspects of social change. In this Marxist-Leninist world, consciousness is said simply to reflect material existence. It is the Party that 'knows' what is to be done. This leads to certain difficulties in imagining a realm 'outside' the imagined reality, from which intentionality may emerge and be projected into policy. Another way of putting this is that 'agency is determined by structure' and so change is also structurally determined. This produces a logic that may be experienced by many readers of journals such as this one as strange, for the common tendency is to assume that policy can be known to be correct *from a standpoint outside that which policy is meant to operate upon*. For example, we tend to assume that we can know what a correct water policy is, given the parameters that we think are important. We offer these judgements to policy makers, and they decide what to do. As we shall see, once it is assumed, to the contrary that such policy advice includes things labelled in suitable ways (for example, the advocate's 'class position'), this presents the analyst's position as part of the overall historical process (such as the 'construction of socialism'), the conceptualisation of the position of policy and its relationship to what it is meant to be about.

Second, in contemporary Vietnam this language has to carry the considerable burden of the perceived failure of traditional Marxism-Leninism to reconstruct the country successfully after reunification in 1975-76. In addition, the problems in the north before that date had also questioned the rationality of Soviet-derived development rationalities (Fforde and Paine, 1987).

Third, this language must cope with annoying experiences, for example that development of policy *qua* documentation within central government Ministries may well suggest that the Party got it wrong. That is, because it is the Party that 'knows' what is to be done, 'policy' as state documents is no more than the written expression of this intention. Other documents, derived from the Party, are more important (Fforde, forthcoming_a). The familiar *ex cathedra* pronouncements of senior Party leaders, perhaps to do with the value of a particular large-scale irrigation strategy, run up against the sort of negative responses on the part of 'local notables' (provincial Party Secretaries... canvassed farmers...) that Benedict (1946) refers to below in a somewhat different context.

In this language the word usually translated as 'policy' (*chinh sach*) rather means 'a document of a state authority' and is conceptually different from the Party's expressions of intentionality, for which different words are used, such as 'Line' (*duong loi*) or 'Point of View' (*quan diem*). Policy, in this conceptualisation, simply 'concretises' Party thinking.¹ It is, however, a moot point as to whether this is usefully described as 'ideologically based' policy. One issue is that 'ideologically based policy' may be interpreted to refer to a situation where ideas derived from outside (such as reformist economists) *drive* state actions, and failure may be seen (perhaps) as one of implementation. Application of this concept, as I will argue, would probably make it hard to understand the rationality here, where, to what I may call 'our normal perspectives', there are no clear 'causes'. I will discuss this further below.

¹ Fforde (forthcoming_a) discusses these issues in greater detail. For a discussion of the 1980s policy rationality see Fforde, 2009b.

Mainstream developmentalism

The second language is that of modern mainstream developmentalism. This assumes that correct policy 'leads' to change, but adds the view that such policy should be based upon awareness of *known* cause-effect relations that are to be researched and, 'evidentially based', leading to predictable outcomes (Fforde, 2009a, 2010). This familiar language may be found (for example) in documents that refer to solutions to developmental problems, such as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), the importance of avoiding import-substitution policies and other policy concepts that are 'known' to be wrong. Due to the influence of contemporary neoclassical economics, this language frequently entails the use of terms such as 'market failure', externalities, trade-offs and other reflections of this rationality, above all a belief in a naïve application of natural science methodology (Fforde, forthcoming_b).

In this language, the word 'policy' refers to political expressions of intentionality close to the sovereign power. These are to be guided, or at least should be, by awareness of known cause-effect relations (as succinctly summarised in the notion 'evidence-based policy' for instance). Policy is seen as separate from the observer/practitioner, neatly put in terms of belief in the validity of assumptions of 'instrumental rationality' – that the subjectivity of the people studied or modelled is not important (Fforde, forthcoming_b). The 'political expressions of intentionality' are often expressed in terms of behaviour, such as, for mainstream economists, specific patterns of behaviour believed to amount to optimisation of agents' autonomous interests given an informational environment.

Emerging contemporary Vietnamese notions of policy and state action

The third language is what could be called 'post-Communist' Vietnamese. It is far more powerful in rhetorical use in political and social debate and draws upon Vietnamese cultural roots. It is rather recent and is evolving fast. It may also be understood as drawing upon a sense that the promises of both classical developmentalism and traditional Marxist-Leninism are somewhat reckless. This sense arguably derives from experience with these models, the former due to exposure to Western ideas since the opening-up of the early 1990s, the latter due to experience with traditional socialism in north Vietnam from around 1957, and then in the united country up until around the mid-1980s (de Vylder and Fforde, 1996; Fforde and Paine, 1987).

This third language has various intriguing aspects. First, it tends to avoid notions that policy as an expression of intention is worth much discussion *ex ante*, that is, around a table. This is not always the case, of course, but in discussing change this emerging language often shows an awareness of the potential unreliability of links made between concepts and their referents. It has been argued that Vietnamese, like others enjoying a cultural background in 'East Asia', may rather easily refer to a 'bureaucratic scepticism' that draws upon deep 'East Asian' cultural histories and that would stress the risks involved in imagining too reliable a link between 'words and realities' (Woodside, 2006). Woodside stresses the long history of 'East Asian' experience with bureaucracy and argues that this has supported a deep current of scepticism about relations between words and realities. A simple English for this is that this historical experience, mediated through language and local meanings, facilitates in a strong preference on the part of many Vietnamese from these cultural origins of a pragmatism, a tendency to avoid abstract discussion in preference to discussion of trials, experiments and so on – to 'suck it and see'. There is a preference for change processes that may be thought of as piecemeal, so that things may be examined and discussed concretely, rather than in the abstract. Such discussions may be resourced and their outcomes seen as useful.² It points to cultural proclivities that avoid 'blueprinting' change processes, and therefore an antipathy towards change rationalities that seek to establish correct policies by the construction of belief in known, *ex ante*, cause-effect relations.

² Vietnamese change processes thus often rely upon very varied deployment of change ideas across locations that may be SOEs (State Owned Enterprises) (Fforde, 2007), or geographical localities (such as local administrative bodies); if things are 'going well'; one observes calls for 'stock-taking' that may be partial (*so ket*) or general (*tong ket*).

Second, a given policy *qua* document may thus be 'deployed' (*trien khai*) rather than 'implemented' (*thuc hien*). This linguistic distinction is that between the implementation – the realisation – of some external set of norms and the initiation of a set of changes that are understood to be diverse and unpredictable. English allows for the making of this distinction, though this may not be how everybody sees it, by the use of the term 'deploy'. For me, the fundamental issue here is whether change processes are thought to be known and, if so, just how. This is then directly relevant to the broader issues brought up in the introductory paper by Mollinga in this issue. This view, which is 'sceptical', treats change as best treated as largely unknowable, and organises in ways that take this very much into account. This then avoids the complications that seem to arise in the big debates about what is known to work at the level of global discourse, but by doing so renders itself somewhat invisible, Cheshire Cat-like, to those seeking for 'lessons' to be applied elsewhere. Just as the main lesson from economics is that its theory is predictively a failure – that is, it fails to predict outcomes – (Fforde, forthcoming_b), so this tends to suggest that the main lesson is that 'it really does depend upon local conditions, and people do seem likely to stop arguing about them'.

Third, this Vietnamese language is not one that appears too much to fear confusion. In this sense, the underlying political logic is *not* one of a closed policy regime, resonant of both the rationalities of many economists with their focus upon models and division of factors into exogenous and endogenous, and many Marxist-Leninists where 'agency is dissolved in structure'. Rather, it is one where scepticisms combine with the evident hegemonic position of the ruling Party in a political order of considerable vigour and transformative capacity; things often do not tend to stay in a mess for too long. This suggests that the dichotomy of society-centred vs. state-centred requires further thought, or, that one person's apparent chaos is another person's acceptable reality. Both of these perspectives adopt an instrumentality notion of policy, and thus breaking your head about which of these two characterises Vietnam best is asking the wrong question, unless you are sitting within a discursive order that sees you sacked or sidelined if you fail to create evidence that justifies your mob's choice of instruments...

Unpacking a narrative

The relevance and value of distinguishing the three languages, and their assumed 'policy logics', can be shown by confronting them with the common, shared story on water policy and Vietnamese development that is found in much of the literature. Four central ideas are contained in most of these accounts.

First, that the historical origins of the Vietnamese culture are to be found in the practice of wet-rice growing in the Red river delta of the north over at least the past two millennia (Smith, 2002; Rambo, 1973). The geography of the delta means that the area suffers from floods, and the biological characteristics of rice means that the plant dies fast if inundated, so there was a strong incentive to organise the construction and upkeep of dykes from the highlands at the upstream edge of the delta down to the sea. This done, rain and minor rivers and streams then determined water supply to wet rice with, until the advent of modern technology – rather little scope for drainage in areas far from the sea.

Second, that this culture supported a centralised nation-state that drew heavily upon Chinese imported ideas and which then, as population pressure grew, in turn supported out-migration southwards and the historical expansion of the Vietnamese state. In central Vietnam a range of minor rivers and streams supported rice cultivation. By the early 19th century this process of expansion had reached the Mekong delta in the south, where until recently land was, as in some other parts of Southeast Asia, plentiful.

Third, that climatic risk tends to fall as one moves south, so that from around Hue the risks of typhoons are far less. The same boundary marks a shift from a four-season climate to a two-season one.

Fourth, that for reasons of demographic history, easily available rice surpluses come from the south. During the period of national division (ca 1954 to 1975-76) this meant that the ruling Communist

Party's developmentalism had to cope with a need to generate food surpluses from scratch in the north. Given the Cold War and access to large volumes of overseas assistance (from both the Soviet bloc and China) this in turn meant that aid could finance rather large investments in agriculture, which largely took the form of investments in water works.

This may be taken to mean that the 'policy problem' before 1975-76 was to secure, through state investments, an adequate increase in food supply. After 1975-76 this was to change. But these basic ideas pose subtle problems, for they contain strong concepts – that of a 'state', of population expansion and dynamism, and of regional variation – that require thought. As we have already seen, the presence of a number of different 'languages' suggests that the outcome of such ponderings is likely to be contested and related to the language in which it is conducted. Let us now look at the empirics of policy – how it appears to have changed.

Water policy in classical Marxist-Leninist developmentalism – up to the end of the 1970s

The institutions of Marxist-Leninist development are well known, and most commonly experienced as neo-Soviet: that is, they maintain a notional separation of Party and state whilst presenting common institutional forms: central planning, an 'advanced' economy dominated by State Owned Enterprises (SOEs),³ collectivised agriculture and a basic understanding of economic growth that understands backwardness in terms of the physical absence of industry and urbanisation. Neo-Soviet institutions then see planners mobilise resources through the accounting prices of the plan in the form of high profits in SOEs, which are used to match very high levels of investment in priority sectors. The change rationality manifests as highly ideological in the 'holistic' sense discussed above. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) appeared to follow this by imposing these idealised institutions – modern industry was brought into SOEs, farmers collectivised, and trade greatly limited. Water was no exception and activities were shared between SOEs and the agricultural cooperatives. The basic metaphor is that of the input-output table – 'Leontievan' – so that allocated inputs are expected to lead to certain outputs. In this framework the 'objects' of planning – entities such as SOEs, farmers' cooperatives, etc – are treated as having only limited autonomy. Rather than entering into negotiated relations with suppliers, the structures of Soviet socialism placed them into a planning matrix of inputs and outputs, and expected to exert efforts to meet plan targets. Interestingly, however, and quite in keeping with neo-Soviet doctrine, farming families were allowed to keep 5% of the land and sell output from it freely to local markets. This grew to generate perhaps half of farmers' incomes and of course offered opportunities for farming families to seek to distance themselves from Soviet structures and, in a modern language, retain some agency.⁴

The collectivised farmers in the Red river delta of north Vietnam enjoyed large allocations of resources to finance investments intended to increase food production. These included major investments in water works that often platformed on similar activities that had taken place during the French period. Such projects, in varying states of repair, provide interesting parts of the local 'developmental archaeology' of the region. But, there were perceptions of 'problems'. It is the nature of these perceptions that illuminates the changing nature of water policy dynamics.

A good introduction to the thinking of the time can be found in Nguyen Huy, 1983 (the author was in his own context a liberal). Nguyen Huy is writing about a *response* to the problems encountered with the application of neo-Soviet methods from the late 1950s. This response was a combination of

³ North Vietnam (the 'Democratic Republic of Vietnam') presented institutional forms familiar to students of the Soviet Union, where farmers occupied collectives and state workers worked either in administration or services, or in SOEs. SOEs were 'balanced' by planners, or meant to be, and the Plan purported to deliver them the physical inputs they needed to produce outputs for the plan (Fforde and Paine, 1987). After the emergence of a market economy through the 1980s (de Vylder and Fforde, 1996), familiarity with these institutions became increasingly worthless as other forms emerged. I argue elsewhere that Vietnam's SOEs, and their commercialisation, are central to the history of the shift 'from plan to market' (Fforde, 2007).

⁴ Thus, humans sharing often a liking for wry humour, many farmers I interviewed in the late 1980s would reply that in their location the '5%' land had indeed been, perhaps, 15% of the land...

wartime *laissez-faire* with policy shifts that sought institutional and managerial changes that would make the system work better. Fforde (1989) reports Vietnamese studies showing how, with high free market prices tolerated by the security forces, the relative lack of incentives to participation in collective production had seen the cultivated rice area fall in the late 1960s (Dinh Thu Cuc, 1977) and develops a thesis that most collectivised farmers successfully avoided, from the mid-1960s, compliance with Party norms. Still committed to traditional Marxism-Leninism, the policy response was to seek to strengthen management at various levels, under the slogan of 'towards large-scale socialist agricultural production'.

Nguyen Huy accepts that without proper development of water in agriculture development will be very limited. But the causality of his argument is revealing:

From a social point of view, *thuy loi*⁵ is a defining factor in reinforcing socialist relations of production in agriculture. This is because, in reality, the problem of *thuy loi* 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 *thuy loi* projects requires a high degree of socialisation. An integrated *thuy loi* project constructed from the efforts of members of cooperatives, close to the linking projects of the large-scale projects equipped with modern machines and equipment, constructed by the State, serving fields that improved and rebuilt for intensive cultivation, will truly become a factor binding farmers to their cooperatives, binding agriculture to industry, and binding the collective economy with the state economy (Nguyen Huy, 1983).

These conceptualisations may too readily be dismissed. They were placed within the arch of a so-called 'Scientific and Technical Revolution', stressing the importance of technical expertise vis-à-vis political cadres (itself important to maintaining a divorce between Party and State). They also justified, and were used to justify, very large diversions of State resources from direct investments in industry and towards material support for the rural areas. Nguyen Huy outlines these activities, stressing that water was the sector that received high levels of investment prior to 1975 (*ibid*). These tendencies continued after 1975, and were extended to the South. At the time of his writing, however, as I will discuss in the next section, the neo-Soviet 'policy logic' was under great stress. The Vth Party Congress of 1982 (delayed – it was meant to be in 1980) showed this in its shift of emphasis *away* from large-scale projects and towards a mixture of completing existing ones and shifting investments towards medium and small-sized projects (*ibid*).

But, consistent with the overall policy logic, it was through greater discipline and efforts that better results were to be attained (*ibid*). Both problem and solution surely have to be understood in terms of the specific change rationality, which as I have tried to explain, treats change as the construction of socialism, a holistic process without clear distinction between 'policy' as cause and outcomes as effect. Since this is essentially different from most modern conceptualisations, it naturally appears to most contemporary audiences as 'illogical' and 'wrong'. 'Strange' would be perhaps more useful a description.

Before looking at the 1980s, though, it is useful to examine other characterisations of 'the problem', here conceptualised as the far more familiar (compared with Vietnamese use of Soviet norms) issue of under-performing agricultural water control systems. In many ways these come down to ideas of efficiency in the utilisation of the considerable investments, and these naturally enough resonate strongly with the shift 'from plan to market' of the 1980s, with the associated notion that a central element of that shift was improved economic efficiency. This therefore shows us rather clearly aspects of this set of change rationalities.

To quote two French experts:

⁵ Frequently Vietnamese is more accurate in its terminology than English. For example, '*thuy loi*' – literally 'water // benefit' refers to both irrigation (*tuoi*) and drainage (*tieu*). The word is Chinese in origin. At times I find it extremely hard to translate Vietnamese into English as I lack a suitable term, and I have sometimes simply left in the original Vietnamese.

The food crisis faced by the RRD [Red river delta] at the end of the 1970s was not the result of a lack of production capacity or funds, since water-control infrastructures had never been so developed in the past. This crisis appeared to be due to an excess of State interventionism, which undermined in particular the capacity of innovation of the farmers and their interest in production. This was a political rather than a technical crisis... (Fontenelle and Molle, 2002).

Here we see, and many other examples can be given, how the 'lock in' of most observers in one or the other version of an instrumentality perspective on policy, leads to the observation of the problem as being one of the under-performance of these water systems. The analysis then leaps to the view that the serious issue at hand was political, for change in the nature of the regime appears to be required to improve things. The political problem, as Fontenelle and Molle (2002) suggest, is that the political conditions for 'good policy' are absent. One problem with this analysis is the meaning of 'political' for the 1980s were increasingly to show just how flexible the Vietnamese polity could be.

The 1980s: From plan to market

Dominant ideas of the transition of the 1980s 'From plan to market' included the emergence of terms to refer to relationships between relatively autonomous entities. SOEs were allowed to enter into non-plan transactions for all outputs from January 1981, well before equivalent policy change in China. A Party Order announced a shift to family-based production for many 'links' in collective agriculture at the same time. Given the doctrinal support for market-based disposal of such products (Stalin, 1952) this was perhaps easier to integrate into ideological theatre than would be at first imagined. Such rhetoric can also be found in the specificities of the policy permitting SOEs to engage in markets, which defined such activities as part of their plan (Fforde, 2009b). Thus the crucial decree 25-CP of January 1981 laid down that an SOE was to have a single Plan of three parts, the second and third of which were to involve it freely trading on markets... (Fforde, 2007). Since pumping stations and other state investments in water were placed in SOEs, this included them. The terminology of formal documents changed rapidly to reflect this. By 1984, well before the VIth Party of Congress of 1986 that is cited by mainstream writers as the observable 'policy-change' of the Party towards support for a market economy, the important arena of 'water policy' was already showing intriguing change.

Parenthetically, it would perhaps appear obvious to many that farmers' increased freedoms (in certain areas) would push for change in relations with those in a position to influence supplies of water and drainage. Further, the common idea is that central planning creates considerable economic inefficiencies, so, under suitable conditions, the establishment of direct 'marketed' relations *should* lead to relatively low-cost increases in output, and so *should*, as social institutions, be profitable to set up and to manage (Hussain, 2004). They should generate high profits to pay off those obstructing change, and to finance the ongoing costs of running new institutions (such as paying for accountants). In many ways what makes water policy in this Vietnamese historical context interesting is the relative early failure of such 'spontaneous' change processes to work compared with other situations. Other SOEs, involved in production of goods that were easily marketed (such as soap) rapidly learnt to operate commercially. Water, as many would argue, is not like soap. Just how, of course, they differ is a matter of interpretation, and such analyses, for those trying to understand them, may be situated in a local change rationality. Such narratives can be very interesting (Fforde, 2009b).

In August of 1984 the Council of Ministers issued a Decree (#122-HDBT) that changed ways in which *thuy loi* fees were to be (in a normative sense) collected. These applied to both water supply and drainage. As was common, this decree was later 'guided' by a so-called Circular Letter (*Thong tu*) issued by the Ministries of Water and of Finance. Here again we see the notion of a hierarchy of 'policies', for almost certainly 122-HDBT itself was a concretisation of a Party Resolution. This Circular Letter 1984 (#47-TT/LB 2/11/84) discussed what was meant to happen and so reveals the changing policy rationality.

Central here was the definition of the *entities* that were to pay fees. These were broadly defined:

Any organisation and individual including cooperatives, agricultural production groups,⁶ state economic units, state organs and private farming families... that benefit from the use of water and other services provided from water projects managed by the state must pay fees from the moment they start to benefit.

Entities benefiting from water projects carried out by the people or carried out by the people and the state but managed by the state must pay 50-70% of the rates fixed below... If the fees are not sufficient to pay for management costs and ongoing operations then the province People's Committee will consider and set a higher level. Areas benefiting from water projects that the unit itself manages (including those financed by the state within the area managed by a cooperative and managed by the cooperative) that do not receive water from the state-managed system will not pay fees.

For mountainous areas, regions of recently sedentarised minorities, communes on the Chinese border will temporarily not pay fees. The period will be fixed by the Provincial People's Committee (*Cong Bao* (Official Gazette) # 20 15/11/1984).

The system was apparently simple. The nominally state-run water companies originally set up under neo-Soviet norms were to sign contracts with farming families, using the rates set by the local state (*ibid*). These companies were allowed to set up 'precautionary funds' by making deductions from their existing bonus and other funds allowed them as part of the formal accounting system.

It appears that these mechanisms, when and if circumstances changed (especially the very different opportunities of a market economy), were capable of being used with great flexibility. As is well documented, through the 1980s the Vietnamese economy strongly commercialised as 'insider' groups (especially in SOEs) grew business activities (Fforde, 2007). Thus by the mid-1980s many SOEs (and the water companies here are SOEs) had built up considerable levels of 'own capital', and indeed use of these funds as part of the macro-political story that saw a 'state business interest' allying with reformists at the 1986 VIth Party Congress (Fforde, 1993). State controls on prices were often a dead letter and, if the potential was there for mutually beneficial exchange, such 'funds' could be hidden and manipulated. Water companies would be expected, with equally active behaviour from farmers, to find ways of profitably supplying and using water.

Yet the evidence suggests that this did not happen. Finance for water investments and maintenance of investments continued largely to come from the budget. It was at the 'local' level that investments were made: "such requirements [for better water supply and drainage] were satisfied by cooperatives by increasing the number of local pumping stations in order to get more autonomy and flexibility in water supply" (Fontenelle and Molle, 2002).

Now, price experts had long been aware that state prices were, under conditions of central planning, full of shortcomings. One central issue was that they were set at levels that made it impossible for depreciation payments to cover estimates of the declining real value of assets. Efforts were thus made to revise water fees and resolve the situation (Prices Commission and Ministry of Water, 1985). But the apparently powerful dynamic of SOE-based commercialisation visible in many parts of Vietnam in the 1980s appears largely to have passed the water sector by. In a simplistic sense, the 'self-transformation' of the economy driven by SOEs of course varied between sectors and regions, being largely independent of policy. This process appears to have been absent at this time from the water sector. One implication is the interesting things that might happen as this apparent failure was discussed and problematised, as Fontenelle and Molle (2002) did in the quote above, in ways that 'require proper policy and its political prerequisites'. We turn now to see how such issues are manifest after the emergence of a market economy in 1989-91.

⁶ The distinction refers to the different terminologies used in the north and centre of the country, which by this period were collectivised, and the Mekong, which was not.

Post 1990: Conservatism and new opportunities

Stage 1 – Conservatism?

After 1989-91, we find further changes in policy thinking. We also find the start of projects financed by organisations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It is worth recalling that the hyper-inflation of the late 1980s, associated with severe fiscal problems as the price system shifted towards that of a market economy, severely eroding state revenues that had been based upon SOE profits, ended in 1989-90. After that date, much to the surprise of many, SOE cash flow recovered despite extreme levels of foreign competition (an opening of the borders had been part of the anti-inflationary measures), and the tax base was quickly restored.

In looking at policy documents of this period we find the beginnings of what appears as policy-driven reform. Thus we read in a contemporary document – Chairman of the Council of Ministers (CCM) (1991a) – an attempt to initiate change. It argues clearly that there had been a severe decline in the water management infrastructure, "because of bad management, protection and maintenance" (ibid). The measures to be taken reflected the ideas of the time, and were:

1. A general stock-taking of the infrastructure available.
2. A rationalisation of the state water companies. All had to implement economic accounting. There was no mention of privatisation – the issue here, as outlined already, was that the spontaneous commercialisation in water management had lagged that in most of the rest of the state economy (Fforde, 2007).
3. Close guidance of the levying and use of water fees. The stress was on payment, which could be made in cash but was to be based upon paddy rice.

Only a few weeks later, CCM (1991b) tried to address the question of how foreign debts incurred in the sector would be repaid – a related issue. Such debts were to be part of the state budget (this was an innovation). The basic distinction was made between projects that 'could not directly repay' (weirs, channels, culverts, pumping stations, etc) where the Ministry of Finance would receive the capital and be responsible for paying off the debt. For those that could 'directly repay', funds would be transferred through a specified state commercial bank that would arrange for repayments (ibid). For the first category, the Ministry was to secure water fees, and then, if these were inadequate, top it up from the water investment budget, and a similar solution was envisaged for the second. An element of this was that the Ministry of Water was not placed centrally in discussions. Rather, it was still marginalised. Relationships between projects and water fee payers were assumed to be dealt with through the system of water fees based upon state-set charges, as had been laid out by the earlier 1991 Decree. This was soon to be felt to be inadequate.

By 1994, tensions were mounting, which would eventually lead to the Water Ministry being amalgamated into a new Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. This can be at once seen in the limited scope of the Ministry, made responsible for water, without wider overt responsibilities for development. This meant that the Ministry had the relevant normative powers to issue permits for water projects (GoV, 1994). By 1995, we see GoV decisions about large-scale water projects in Central Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City (GoV, 1995).

The second half of the 1990s saw the Vietnamese development pattern under some challenge, with concerns about the 'quality of growth'. As yet there was not very much growth of a corporate private sector, and the basic development stance was still largely focussed upon commercialised SOEs (Fforde, 1997). Further, in 1997 there were overt signs of rural unrest. This was in part caused by corruption on the part of rural officials as development efforts sought to maintain rural incomes growth. As such, this threw in great doubt the ability of local formal political structures to operate as effective agents of the central state. The rural unrest was taken by many in the Party to mean that there was a need for

greater democracy at the grass-roots level. Arguably, from these events stemmed various important changes, such as the rise of a dynamic structure of informal farmers' groups (Fforde, 2008) as well as increasingly democratic elections at village level (the level below the commune which was traditionally the lowest level of formal Party-State structures) (Fforde, forthcoming_a).

Amidst this flow of events can be seen a crucial tension, created arguably by the lack of political re-conceptualisation. For example, despite the apparent presence of powerful forces encouraging farmers to act cooperatively on their own account, easily explainable in terms of 'market failure' (Fforde, 2008), at this stage these forces had not yet generated a policy language that could easily refer to such 'autonomous social groupings' in the rural areas. This contrasts with the powerful development of terms to explain SOE commercialisation in the 1980s, and suggests that water policy statements referring to the 1996-2000 Plan were still 'in transition'. Further research is needed, but it is perhaps notable that Premier of GoV (1996a) looked for an integrated approach, linking various investments of different scales in water infrastructure to investments in transport and housing. For me, this is reminiscent of the 'holistic' stance of traditional thinking, discussed above. Implementation of the plan was allocated to a combination of central Ministries and provinces. Later in the year, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development was set up. Premier of GoV (1996b) tried to lay down the position of the new Water Department in the Ministry. High up in the list of its responsibilities was now 'policy', understood as the development of the relevant documents (laws, legal documents, policies, etc).

The policy picture of the 1990s thus shows here a rather conservative trajectory compared with that of the 1980s. Whilst in the 1980s major steps were taken to attempt an accommodation with the activities of farmers, from the 1990s until the early 2000s the position remains passive and bureaucratic. It is easy to suggest that this reflected important differences in the underlying historical processes: in the 1980s, these were a commercialisation of SOEs; in the 1990s, especially towards the end of the decade, the emergence of relatively autonomous social activities that could provide a platform for a host of solutions to 'market failure'. This was arguably a central aspect of water issues, and manifest by the mid-2000s in a plethora of informal farmers' groups and more political issues at 'village' level. In other words, officials had to wait for farmers to organise, and let them do so. Clearly, this is my analysis, and further research is needed. But what does seem to be plausible here is that the strong 'process-orientation' implicit in the third Vietnamese language outlined above may be at play: change processes at state level were limited in scope so long as they lacked pressure 'from below'.

Stage II – Responding to new opportunities?

From the early years of the first decade of the 2000s evidence starts to mount of important changes that echo Benedict's (1946) remarks below about 'local notables'. As already mentioned, often such accounts in a Vietnamese context are officially expressed in terms of the 'democratisation' of the so-called 'grass-roots' (see below). Just as obviously, this can be seen as an attempt, like 25-CP in 1981 (see above), to clothe in some acceptable way powerful change forces that may as equally be said to violate important norms. SOEs' 'three part Plans' that allowed them to engage in markets were anathema to traditional Soviet definitions of socialism. As equally, any failure to control elections was anathema to traditional Leninist political principles (but see below). Clearly, the rural unrest of 1997 could easily be interpreted as the failure of the existing rural institutional set-up to be able to exert suitable pressures upon the bureaucracy, and to institutionalise these links in some way or another. It is the *absence* of such links that is most striking from the review of the 1990s policy documentation in the previous section. Farmers are absent from these accounts. As early as the second half of the 1990s aid projects had trialled measures that went in this direction, stressing contemporary developmentalist notions such as decentralisation and participation.⁷ There is little question for me that many such donor

⁷ A good example was the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDEF) implemented in the Dai Loc region of Quang Nam province in Central Vietnam with support from the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) (see Fforde, 2009a and various project documents available on the web).

projects (both official and INGO), had firmly asserted the value of such ideas to Vietnamese officials and politicians at central and local levels. At the time of writing the position remains somewhat unclear. It is possible to point to three areas where important changes were occurring.

First, a range of relatively autonomous informal farmers' groups (IFGs) became increasingly evident. To quote from Fforde, 2008:

Our fieldwork suggests that one should expect, in areas such as those surveyed, the majority of families to belong to at least one FG. In a village of around 100 families, one could expect easily to find 6 or 8 credit IFGs with 10 members each, perhaps as much as dozen labour IFGs of various types, 2 or 3 artisanal IFGs and, depending on the situation, 'quasi-public asset' IFGs. This suggests that there are at least a dozen people acting as IFG leaders, soundly entrenched in these local informal organisations, negotiating, convincing, winning and losing arguments. This is rather a lot of activity in a situation where, a generation ago (before Decree 10),⁸ there would perhaps have been simply a cooperative brigade, operating mechanically and inefficiently (Fforde, 2008).

This points to the identification of a significant cadre of 'local notables', not only in the persons of the IFG leaders themselves, but also amongst other local personalities, as authority increasingly became less dependent upon apparat politics and so, if higher levels wished to see it that way, a platform upon which local interests could sit in various negotiations and fora.

Second, the position of village leader was increasingly reported as possessing greater authority in that more 'active' elections were ensuring that incumbents had local authority. Do Duy Thuong offers an account of recent history in the election of village leaders.⁹

Duong reports that organisation of direct elections of village leaders throughout the country started in 1998, after Order # 30 of the Politburo on 'enhancing democracy at the base'. This followed the considerable rural unrest in 1997. What was meant to happen?

First of all, the Work Group of the VFF [Vietnam Fatherland Front – AF] put forward their list of candidates, whilst asking for the opinion of the Party Cell. The next step was to call the people to a meeting to discuss standards/criteria (*tieu chuan*) and introduce the list for election. Finally the VFF Work Group met again to certify (*an dinh*) those elected (Le Kien, 2008).

But things immediately became complicated. The legal position formally allowed for additions to the VFF Work Group list, so, whilst it was initially intended for the Group to choose one and then add one more... but if the popular additions were suitable (*xung dang*) then use of the Group's right to exclude them could be risky:

If the VFF was not skilful in resolving these issues then they could be accused of being 'partial', with bad effects on public opinion (Le Kien, 2008).

Duong then points out that, especially in so-called *diem nong* ('hot spots'),¹⁰ the population simply refused to accept village leaders chosen in this way by the VFF Work Group. The compromise was to let them elect their own leaders, and then the population would be peaceful (*yen dan*).

This compromise appears to have been politically feasible from the start of the introduction of Order # 30, and to have increased in extent. Thus, if the VFF Work Group was successful in getting its candidate elected, then if they did not do their job well they would fail to be re-elected.

⁸ This was the second of the major liberalising decrees of the 1980s, after which the number of cadre positions in the rural areas fell sharply but, as we have seen, by far the great majority of cooperatives were not dissolved (de Vylder and Fforde, 1996).

⁹ Le Kien, Pháp Luật TPHCM Online. Thu ba, 06/01/2009. Thí diem dân bầu trực tiếp chủ tịch xã: Trước đây dân bầu trưởng thôn ra sao? 04-10-2008.

¹⁰ This term, I think, first came into relatively public use after the 1997 rural troubles, and referred to troubled places.

It is the development of popular democratic rights that is the biggest thing. The people feel that through a direct selection of the village leader like this they come to believe that the position is very important. They see the village leader as somebody of the people, who works for the people, and they monitor them directly, so if he is not 'their's' (*vi dan*) then they will remove (*mien nhiem, bai nhiem*). If he works well then he will be re-elected at the next elections, if he does not work well he will be struck out (*gat ra*) (Le Kien, 2008).

The core elements of the picture seem rather clear. In consequence, in some aid projects decentralisation to the village level was increasingly possible. Experience could suggest that such decentralisation *increased* the prestige and authority both of village leaders and members of the apparatus at commune levels above them.¹¹

Third, notions of participation became increasingly valorised within official discourse. Thus Pham Thi Bich Ngoc and Hiort-af-Ornas (2008) show clearly the views of a Vietnamese within the state Vietnam Institute for Water Resources Research. They argue in ways that may appear to be squarely set within the IWRM agenda:

Stakeholder involvement was highlighted in the study by a combination of two processes: from the province level upward initially, and then from the province level downward into local community involvement. First, the stakeholder involvement process was used to successfully set up a procedure for consensus-building in provincial workshops, followed by clustering into five sub-basin workshops and finally by stakeholder interaction with the national-level administration to identify priorities and possible solutions for IWRM in the whole basin. The highest priority issues identified by stakeholders were irrigation agriculture, water supply and sanitation, flood control, and environment/biodiversity. Second, from the first stakeholder process, stakeholders were deeply involved in the process of water-sector planning in the priority water sub-sectors. This process was developed and successfully implemented beyond the expectation of most, given the scale. The facilitation process allowed stakeholders to interact in a transparent way, by building capacity and awareness and by setting up a rigid interaction process, with decisions taken stepwise. This method proved very empowering for participants because it even allowed consensus to be reached in highly resource-competitive situations... (ibid).

A number of elements of their account are instructive.

First, the stress upon *procedure*. This is open-ended and so a major shift away from previous conceptualisations of a directive and ideologically based intervention. Thus Phase 1 is said to be "putting interactive before integrated" [ibid]: "by the end of Phase 1, when all 31 stakeholder workshops at the various levels were finished it seemed clear to participants that the I in IWRM could be spelled Interactive" (sic - ibid).

Second, the stress upon, not *individual* participation, but activities understood as 'community based'. This appears to match IWRM orthodox support for 'community' activities, but here they use nuances of great interest, for the category of 'stakeholders' refers to the *village* level, not the commune.¹² Reliance upon this level is clear:

¹¹ The reader should be aware that, for perhaps obvious reasons, research here is limited. Experiences of some rural development programmes (such as the Sida-supported *Chia se*) can be taken to argue that empowerment (*trao quyen*) was not necessarily viewed as a loss of power by superiors. Rather, by increasing prestige and so authority, this was an appositively-sum experience (*trao quyen, nhan uy*). Arguments that it is risky to view power as analogous to a physical quantity, and so a guide to who will prevail, can be found in Fforde, 2009a drawing upon Hindess, 1996.

¹² 'Commune' here is a term specific to Vietnamese practices. Nowadays, the 'commune' (*xa*) is the lowest level of state administration, the site of a People's Committee responsible for various tasks and indirectly elected by a People's Council that is directly elected, in principle in a Leninist fashion. The commune, thus, has a Party Committee (*dang uy*). There are some two dozen paid positions at the commune level, including the mass organisations. It is the lowest of the four tiers of Vietnamese practice. The village, already mentioned, usually called *thon* (but there are many other words for it), has only a village leader and usually does not have a Party Committee to guide him, and Party presence within the village is in a series of party cells.

A water-sector planning process in the pilot sub-basins was thus developed step-by-step in response to the villagers' viewpoints. Local authorities and experts became partners with the villagers and provided advice on specific technical and administrative issues. Joint knowledge build-up emerged over half a year... (ibid).

Third, there is no evidence as yet that such methods had become formal 'policy' (*chinh sach*), and there is no reference in such a text to the position of the Party. See also Ritzema et al., 2008:

Only close cooperation between all stakeholders can improve the drainage in such complex systems as the polders in the Red river delta. Furthermore, a combination of technical and institutional measures is required to improve the functioning of the drainage systems (ibid).

It is clear that how local expressions of practices labelled as IWRM create tensions for global references. It is quite obvious that any simple application of IWRM concepts is fraught with difficulties. One reason is that it supposes an existing policy rationality with certain characteristics, and there are good reasons to question this. Another is that whilst practitioners holding to (or thinking that they hold to) IWRM norms can be placed within a plausible account of what has been happening, this requires a certain effort. As is normally the case in development cooperation, we are in a world where failure to take account of multiple interpretations, not least in the presence of at least two jurisdictions (since donor legality is with reference to one sovereign power and recipient legality with reference to another), is almost bound to produce fragile arguments.

We turn now to examine these issues in further detail, summarising the Vietnamese policy record and looking at some external interventions.

The 'policy' record – An assessment

Examination of the policy record suggests the following story.

The historical effects of colonialism, war and the experiment with neo-Soviet institutions were a considerable shock to rural institutions. Within the overall cultural framework, autonomous activities could grow relatively easily so long as the overall political authority of the regime was respected. But this was easier in some areas than others and, as I have suggested, matters to do with water, where outputs are frequently not 'simple commodities', were a good example of a situation where markets did, indeed, fail, and so, if the change process relied upon them, little would happen. The lag of some 15 years after the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a market economy before local sentiments started to feel comfortable with the results of policy dynamics is food for thought and requires further research. Whilst the standard 'cognitive change' view would be that 'officials have to be shown what correct policy is', I have suggested that, given the local conditions, an alternative explanation would be that, just as the 1980s saw SOEs require a decade to push a commercial transition (marked in 1986 by the famous '*doi moi*' VIth Congress that saw the Party endorse these processes), so the period from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s saw similar processes push farmers and others into a position where they could, and did, start to act as a platform for 'water policy' as we easily understand it – the formation of local community organisations familiar with measures to deal with 'market failure' and capable of forming institutional links to the local state.¹³ The crucial ingredient was not cognitive change at policy level, as economists might dream of. Rather, it was the emergence, initially opposed but then tolerated by the Party, of 'local notables' and leadership capacity with whom officials could engage in interactive negotiations to perceived local benefit.

In a language of neo-institutional economics, non-market institutions were required to manage the transactions needed to cope with the market failures associated with water. These could not be supplied by the state, nor could policy in terms of state actions create them. Rather, it was through the

¹³ An interesting comparison may be made with electricity, which was connected from state-financed district sub-stations to communes through local resource mobilisation. Here it is likely that the differences between electricity and water made this easier to organise than water supply and drainage.

construction of their premises by the population (informal farmers' groups, village leaders...) – often in processes of local political struggle – that this could happen. And this is a, by now, familiar part of Vietnamese change processes, within which state/Party activities appear conservative rather than progressive, yet are part of an overall trajectory that many (eventually) gauge positive.

But, such approaches can be and are also interpreted as part of the overall development 'project', with terms such as 'participatory' gaining increasing currency and value (Tran Chi Trung et al., 2005). So things start to come together and wider agreement on meanings appears possible. Donors may start to feel more comfortable. Yet activities remain sited within Vietnam, highly dependent upon Vietnamese interpretations, which fit more easily into some frameworks than into others. These do not seem to require 'liberal individual rights', nor do they require us to pay very much importance to the 'state' as 'an independent variable in explaining political and social events'. What appears to have happened is that notions of 'rights' have been developed, stretched and increased, including perhaps most fundamentally the business of defining locally to what groups they pertain. What emerges is a highly textured and concrete set of accounts, rather than some thematic Declaration, which perhaps expands the scope for common ground between donors, VCP and others who have often very different perceptions and interests. At the same time the 'state', however understood, has had to create space, often rather willingly.

These tensions come out clearly in experiences with projects.

Project case studies

Reports of foreign/Western project case studies in Vietnam are interesting to examine. The ADB was closely involved through project activities in the developments discussed above by Pham Thi Ngoc Bich and Hiort-af-Ornas (2008). I take Australia as an accessible example of a Western bilateral and the World Bank for a multilateral.

Harriss (2006) reports on Australian support to water policy reform in Vietnam. The paper pays little heed to interactive issues. In a study entitled *Water Management in Public Irrigation Schemes in Vietnam*, the focus is normative.

The overall objective of the projects was to improve the operational efficiency and economic sustainability of publicly managed irrigation schemes in Vietnam. The expected outcome was to recommend changes in operating procedures to achieve a more reliable, timely and equitable supply of irrigation water to farmers. The projects involved several research activities with specific objectives. The main research activities were to evaluate system performance and develop hydraulic models to assist company management in water-scheduling decisions (ibid).

As is common, such studies assert the value of a rationality that is external to the object they examine, so that gauges such as time discount rates, prices, labour costs and so on are imposed. In the same vein Davidson (2005), after a technical analysis of the profitability of a state water company, simply argue that water prices should be raised. This contrasts starkly with the quite different change rationality outlined in Pham Thi Bich Ngoc and Hiort-af-Ornas, 2008 above. What I see here is the difference between belief in policy logics that may be deemed 'correct' in isolation from local change rationalities, and those that work to and with such rationalities. I discuss this further below.

Examination of a large World Bank loan (IDA-2711) to the sector shows scant interest in the issues discussed above. Only one component is interested in institutional matters and these are (to quote):

Component 2. Institutional Development. ...

- (i) the transfer of technology for engineering design, procurement and construction of irrigation works through technical assistance and job training;
- (ii) the improvement of operation and maintenance practices and cost-recovery mechanism;

- (iii) the strengthening of the delivery services through irrigation management companies (IMCs) and farmer user groups through training; and
- (iv) support for accounting and auditing. This component focussed on strengthening the capacity of the MWR [Ministry of Water Resources] and MARD [Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development] at the central and provincial levels (US\$4.6 million) (World Bank, 2003).

Given this position and the discussion above perhaps it is not surprising that the Bank encounters criticisms for its professional shortcomings.

Both these examples show rather clearly familiar policy logics located in shared views of change – change rationalities. Development is viewed, metaphorically, as 'a river without a bridge'. It is assumed that this is a correct view, and that it is the function of development cooperation to generate, through delivery of certain resources, certain predictable outcomes that will constitute positive development. It is also assumed that the relationship between these inputs and outputs is both knowable *and known*, so that by 'building the bridge, the river may be crossed'. There is no scepticism, either about the relationships between the terms used and 'reality' (recall my reference to Woodside above, and the idea that East Asian cultures may draw upon long histories of bureaucratic practice), or about the relationships between these categories.

Let me now examine the implications of the discussion so far.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE 'VIETNAM CASE STUDY'

Perspectives

The core of this paper has so far been a detailed presentation and discussion, 'close to data', of 'policy' dynamics in the water sector in Vietnam. In fact, I have located this theoretically in a discussion of various tensions in classical discussions of 'policy', which I will now address.

The central issue, in terms of conceptualisation and language, may be the tendency to attribute possibilities of clear intentionality to regimes labelled as 'semi-authoritarian', opening the door to the seductive playground of 'autonomous technocratic elites' and hopes that without political difficulties 'correct' policies may be implemented (see introductory article). There are surely a host of examples of situations where such situations well remind us of adages such as the 'road to hell being paved with good intentions'. These come up in intriguing places – for example Rodrik (1996), arguing for the value of crises, since they allow reforms to be 'pushed through'. Here, having watched both Soviet and World Bank practice, to exploit two 'straw men' (for it was the VCP not the CPSU that ruled over north Vietnam after 1954 and then the reunited country after 1975, and the World Bank has a Board), I issue a warning. It appears that when strong intentionality and instrumentality are assumed to exist in (semi-)authoritarian regimes, or 'high implementation capacity' in other words, calls for (semi-)authoritarian approaches to development become attractive because there appears some promise to 'clean up the mess' quickly, which 'finally' solve some vexing issues. Vietnamese experience, and indeed World Bank experience with conditionality, is that 'power' – the political preconditions to such happy imposition of 'policies known to be correct', may actually not exist.

To a major degree, as I think we have seen, this risk turns on the observer or participant believing that 'state centric' change cannot exist *without* some intentionality, that is, some 'social engineering', expressed in terms of ideas and articulated intentions that are known to be 'correct' at the end of the day in a *predictive* sense. This is the most common policy logic, and a familiar way in which many seek to 'do' development. Thus those who employ a 'state centric' analysis may (or may not) choose to attribute some directing dynamic to a 'state' (viewed as a category of analysis), and it is not necessary that this concept mean anything much to the people we study. But the issue is important, as it raises the profound question of just how analysis and/or accounts of change – here 'water policy' – relate to the subjectivities of those studied. What we find in the Vietnamese account is driven by the powerful

presence of non-Vietnamese policy logics combined with local change processes that can be argued to deny the 'top-down' thrusts of those logics. It is the *failure* of those external logics, *and so the absence of empirics that supports accounts of their presence in Vietnam*, that is central. And, since these policy logics are supported by knowledge production (whether from Moscow or Washington) it is vital to show how to cope with these accounts, to show how *not* to think about 'Vietnam'.¹⁴

At one extreme we find much modern economics, in which these relationships are denied by the assumption of 'instrumental rationality' – namely, that the subjectivities of those being studied do not and should not influence analysts' choices (Simon, 1986; Fforde, 2009a). Such issues may also be brought to readers' attention by noting that something is *done* when it is assumed that analytical categories refer to stable contents that are assumed to be the same across different contexts – thus, to assume that Newton's Laws of Motions work on Mars as they work on Earth is to assume that rocks are the same, and that they interact in the same way. This alerts – hopefully – the reader to the idea that there are questions to be asked if we decide to use terms like 'semi-authoritarian' or 'water policy', or indeed 'policy' in different contexts. The paper in this collection on China raises similar issues. In a simpler language – are we talking about the same things? Thus it is important to pose the question – are we discussing '(semi-)authoritarianism' or 'ideology-based policy', and what do we mean here? The Vietnam case study highlights these issues.

The discussion appears in part to turn on an old question of relationships between intentionality, its embodiment in 'policy', and notions that relate these issues to concepts of sovereignty. But for some people reflection on these puzzles is something to be resisted. It 'gets in the way of working out what works'. Thus, consider the situation if the observer or analyst assumes or believes that change is something that is 'done', based upon a robust predictive knowledge of change. There may then be a strong tendency to seek to locate agency at some 'state', and to, in effect, develop an analytical position in terms of whether this agency has a 'correct' or 'true' view of reality. This is familiar, and we meet it embodied in its ideology, so that, it would be said, as has been so common in dreams of 'insulated elites', that things are good when (semi-)authoritarian and 'ideology-based policy' coincide in a true understanding of what needs to be done. Thus liberal economists such as Rodrik will argue, apparently assuming that they have access to some true and predictive picture of the world, that what is needed to secure progress is an effective distancing of policy from society through its positioning, perhaps 'at a time of crisis', in secure control of levers of state power (Rodrik, 1996).

It is thus obvious, not only that we need to conceive of the state in some way or other, but that, as we make this choice, we are also making choices and assumptions about how change should and does take place.

Issues of language here are slippery and may be hard to manage. For example, as I say what I have to say about 'policy' in Vietnam, can this – should this – be taken to mean that the VCP has tried to 'socially engineer' Vietnamese society? Note that such language may lead the reader to assume (though it may not) that the VCP should be treated as an 'agent' – does this mean that 'it' exists and 'it' is usefully thought of as 'trying' to produce certain forms of change, above all *when it is precisely core members of the Party who seem to have played central roles in not implementing the Party's documented prescription*? Such issues, if placed central, contrast with many accounts of what policy is and should be.

Classical policy logics and 'the problem of development'

A large part of the existing literature on matters of 'water policy' in Vietnam has to do with discussions on 'development', which may be said to be a complicated and, in many ways, 'global' set of discourses. In my opinion, much of the tensions that we are confronting in trying to fit accounts of water policy in

¹⁴ In passing, it is striking how so many overseas PhD students lack persuasive power in Vietnamese contexts.

Vietnam into wider frameworks may be attributed to deep-rooted – and fragile – assumptions in much thinking about 'development'. At the root, these are that it is 'knowable'.

If we consider the wide range of issues to do with debates on 'development' as with a sub-set of issues to do with 'change rationalities', then a useful entry point comprises the issues raised by scepticism – that is, those views that stress the lack of reliable relations between what may be imagined (or said or written) and that which may come about. In my opinion, such issues are fundamental, since they deal with meanings of what is done when policy is in motion.

For example, recent contributions to the self-reflection of economists have argued that, in terms of mainstream ideas about 'what should be done and why', the past couple of generations have seen a shift *from* certainty that markets on their own should not be trusted (a view driven home by experiences of the 1930s), *via* views that governments (the polar opposite of markets) on their own should not be trusted, to a current sense that little is reliably known in terms of the categories of mainstream economics (Lindauer and Pritchett, 2002). Such scepticism is matched by current doctrinal views of organisations such as the IMF on important matters such as the liberalisation of the capital account of the balance of payments (Prasad et al., 2003; Prasad and Rogoff, 2003):

Economic theory leaves a number of complex and crucial questions unanswered. For instance, in order to control the risks associated with opening up to capital inflows, it seems necessary for countries to have strong institutions. On the other hand, inflows of capital, especially foreign direct investment, may bring technological know-how and knowledge of best practices in other countries that can improve domestic institutions. So should a country postpone opening its capital markets until it has good institutions? Or should it use financial integration as a tool to improve its institutions? Unfortunately, there are *no definitive answers to these issues, which are best approached by each country depending upon its circumstances* (Prasad and Rogoff, 2003, emphasis added).

It may be argued that such views in the mainstream (which of course do not translate in any neat way into actual practice) reflect a range of powerful intellectual currents. These include evidence that, in terms of the standard development policy categories, there are almost *no* robust relationships globally between policy and outcomes (Levine and Zervos, 1993). Not unexpectedly, this result failed to make much impression upon mainstream economists' beliefs (Fforde, 2005). One might hazard that the global financial crisis has both added to the power of sceptical views in this area and yet attacked them as politicians seek to justify interventions by pointing to their alleged consequences.

Contributors to discussions on development have focused upon the argument that many ideas and practices in 'development' reflect a need to manage the combination of the inherent unpredictability of the future with belief sets that integrate contrary beliefs into practices (as any aid practitioners will know from their experiences with 'log frames'). Cowen and Shenton (1996) thus argued that the normal response was to valorise belief sets through reference to authority. Fforde (2009a) pushes the scepticism argument further, arguing that, under these conditions, we are set for fundamental changes in the ways in which social action is perceived and organised.

If scepticism is of gathering power in the Western mainstream, how does this relate to the concerns here?

One issue is whether and how 'society-centric' approaches *necessarily* accept or propose the use of instrumental rationalities. My view here is that they tend to encourage such views, not least in that, as practitioners often experience in their interactions with the academe, when asked for advice scholars often present it in terms of known cause-effect relations. A striking example of this, from a contemporary anthropologist, is Mosse (2005). Whilst one would expect such an academic to be strongly in favour of scepticism, his policy advice was 'certain' that the introduction of participatory methods would lead to better development outcomes, and was also 'certain' that his particular portrayal of the political-economy of the situation was 'right' (see his chapter 2). Be this as it may, the current paper attempts to navigate between avoidance of certainty and the presentation of an 'open' account of Vietnamese water policy that is persuasive.

How, we can expect it to be asked, can a (semi-)authoritarian regime be expected to respond to situations where outcomes are not reliably linked to actions? Traditionally, one might argue that the state is indeed an 'ideological project', with *implementation* of the implications of that ideology construed as central. I remind the reader of the issue I raised at the start – what is implied by making a distinction between '(semi-)authoritarianism' and 'ideology-based policy'?

Yet scepticism has other traditions to support it. Perhaps here we may find ways of appreciating the distinction between 'semi-authoritarianism' and 'ideology-based policy'. Consider Benedict, writing in 1945-46 about Japan, in a style that now fails fully to meet academic criteria but, for all that, is useful.

The State agricultural extension agent can act with about as little authoritarianism in improving old methods of agriculture as his counterpart in Idaho. The State official advocating State-guaranteed farmers' credit associations or farmers' cooperatives for buying and selling must hold long-drawn-out round-tables with the local notables and must then abide by their decision. Local affairs require local management (Benedict, 1946).

Further, the Meiji reformers, who modernised Japan in the late 19th century: "... did not take their task to be an ideological revolution at all. They treated it as a job..." (ibid).

There is much that is thought-provoking in trying to understand Vietnam. The Vietnamese transition from plan to market, which mainly took place in the 1980s, for example, was fundamentally understood by local thinkers as a *process* (Fforde, 2009b). It contained, after a while, clearly transitional institutions (such as the 'Three Plan' system), which had formal legal and Party-ideological backing, but it was not understood by local 'reformers' as a blueprint-based change rationality (de Vylder and Fforde, 1996). Rather, it drew heavily upon linguistic and cultural resources within which a wide range of concepts and practices counselled avoidance of belief that there was any clear relationship between signifier and 'reality'. In this world, people are meant to be sceptical about whether words have clear meanings – just because a decree says that farmers 'will' do something that does not tell you anything, necessarily, about what they actually do. This, in the terms used by Woodside, could be put as a local cultural awareness of "bureaucratic subjectivism" (Woodside, 1971, 1976, and especially 2006) common throughout those countries of the 'East Asian mandarin tradition'.

The certainties and somewhat untroubled nature of many accounts of Vietnam's development success throw these issues into clearer relief. It would seem obvious that those whose cultural legacies encourage scepticism will feel uncomfortable with certainty about the future and alleged knowledge of cause-effect relationships, and vice versa. Since it appears that the future is, largely, unknown, such tensions will be apparent in accounts of change in Vietnam that assume knowability, and attribute success to policy that is founded 'evidentially' upon knowledge of such relationships, *when, as we have seen, there is little evidence that the local culture works that way.*

Mainstream accounts of Vietnam's developmental success present a story in which the ruling Party learnt through failure, specifically the failure of traditional socialism to cause economic growth, and then shifted its policies to correct policies that then caused rapid economic growth. In this account there is a clear intentionality and the state acts coherently to express that intentionality (examples include Sachs and Woo, 1994;¹⁵ Dollar, 1994; Leipziger, 1992). Success or failure is largely construed in terms of the combination of the ability to devise correct policies with the political conditions to implement them. '(Semi-)authoritarian' regimes are thus, as I remarked earlier, seductive in that they appear to offer 'ideology-based policy' *where that ideology may be said to be 'correct', endorsed by the observer.* But this is not to say that '(semi-)authoritarian' regimes have to be conceptualised in this way, for clearly that is not the case.

The main alternative to these views in the Western literature originally viewed the situation in Vietnam largely as a 'realisation' problem. This stems historically from work in the early 1980s on agrarian change (Vickerman, 1986; Fforde, 1982, 1989) and argued, drawing upon work such as that of

¹⁵ But see Nazrul, 2008 for a demolition of Sachs and Woo, 1994.

Hyden referring to Tanzania, that observable realities in north Vietnam showed systematic patterns of deviation from neo-Soviet norms. The Soviet 'model' could not, in these analyses, be implemented. But discussion of this failure (for many, to be welcomed) view contained within it a model of endogenous change that was at root economic. This view argued that in north Vietnam before 1975 and in the reunited country thereafter until the late 1980s could be found a variable equilibrium between 'plan' and 'market'. In that this equilibrium could then change, and amount to a shift 'from plan to market' if parameters suited this, these ideas could then be projected into a characterisation of the transition to the market. Policy history could then be said to reveal ways in which formal policy adapted to manage this situation. 'Politics' was made into a 'black box' that responded to economic change. This line of argument had powerful effects. It strongly attacked the idea that policy was driving change and by doing so opened the door for other approaches to explore the consequences, whether politically, socially or culturally. This therefore allows for the development of the account here of water policy dynamics in ways that are open to a range of explanatory frameworks, yet hostile to the idea that what I call classic policy logics, reliant upon the idea of knowable cause-effect intervention logics, will make much sense locally. In my view both state and society-centric perspectives share this same problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The account above suggests that what is meant by the dynamics of water policy in Vietnam is explicable, but ends up with a sense that it refers to something *sui generis*. It is of course possible to fit this into some wider comparative framework, but this conclusion counsels caution and wariness of over-rapid comparisons.

The evidence clearly negates various opinions, such as, most importantly, ideas that in a 'country like Vietnam', with a clearly authoritarian and undemocratic regime, persuasive accounts of water and its supply and use should assume either that 'the state' is the main agent of development, or that 'society' is passive, or even incapable of playing a leading role in change. The account above shows how it is important to avoid such assumptions, using local language and accounts as the main entry point, rather than standard categories and arguments about 'correct' policy.

From a mainstream perspective, Vietnamese 'water policy' should clearly have the following characteristics: first, clearly conceived policies based upon sound and rigorous analysis. These should reflect the perceived interests of important social groups, articulated in some way into political processes and manifest in state policy; second, effective mechanisms for implementing such policies; third, clear *ex post* accounts of how all this happened.

None of these seem, according to the evidence I have presented, to be evident in Vietnam, although a number of accounts attempt to argue that they are. What instead we find is an account viewed through the lens of local language and culture that makes sense as such, rather than in the above terms. It stands. But what does this tell us about differences between '(semi-)authoritarian' and other '(semi-)democratic' regimes?

First, and this is the easy bit, the Vietnam case study seems to suggest that care is needed in categorising regimes, *qua* sociological facts, in terms such as '(semi)authoritarian' and 'liberal democratic'. After all, it may be argued that these very terms, in that they are as much political propositions as they are about sociological facts, need to make sense to the people they seek to describe (and if not to them, then to whom?). This, then, is the first conclusion of this paper – it offers an answer to the question of a distinction between '(semi-)authoritarian' and 'ideology-based policy' by presenting to the reader a discussion of local ideas. Notions of the 'state' are then located in ways that give a far better set of links to local data and evidence. What is interesting is that this seems to suggest that if we ask whether policy 'does something', we must expect an instability of answers that reflects the very different ways in which such questions are framed and answered in different contexts. So all this pushes students, readers and analysts to understand statements about what policy does as not at all the same as statements about what gravity does – such statements are not experienced as linked to

robust predictive empirics, despite being based upon the assumption that these can be attained. One way of understanding this is that what the terms refer to are usefully thought of as referring to quite different things in different places. This is why 'what works there, usually appears not to work here'. There are other explanations, perhaps the most common of which is that 'more research is needed to establish 'what works''.

Clearly, sceptical views are not dominant – mainstream policy advice, as any examination of donor documents will show, very often argues that certain interventions are *known* to produce certain results. Indeed, the standard element of aid projects, the so-called 'log frame', may be read to express the belief that certain inputs *will* result in certain consequences. In this way certain change rationalities link to certain conceptualisations of the state. But the Vietnamese case study suggests that such beliefs are what they are – challengeable and contingent. For some, indeed, they are 'incredible', but for others they are all too believable. This suggests that the Vietnamese experience, for various reasons, projects into the 'state-centric' vs. 'society-centric' debate profound challenge. Just what the responses to these challenges are and will be are a matter for reflection and research.

If we are to attempt to get something of value from these categories, to assume that they pose questions that are valid across a range of contexts, then Vietnamese practices are suggestive. One entry point would be to refocus these conceptualisations upon practice – upon action. Thus, a 'state-centred' practice looks to attribute 'state'-like qualities to actions that drive change, and a 'society-centred' one seeks to attribute those deemed 'social' to actions that drive change. Viewed in this way, rather than in terms that seek entry-points to 'policies known to work there that will now be implemented here', the picture is clearer. 'State-centric' approaches seek to link change to 'what the state does'; it is more interesting, and the Vietnamese case shows this, to focus upon change itself, and then examine how different accounts deal with subjectivity – views of what different people and groups thought, wanted and did.

This is made far easier if the limits of knowability are stressed, for then it is far harder to leap into the depoliticised world of 'correct' policy (Rodrik, 1996).

A 'sceptical' view – mediated through and supported by language, of the meaning of 'policy' and the viability of ideologically based change, whether neo-liberal or neo-Soviet – thus seems to have had profound implications in the way it opens up analyses to sensitivity to local accounts. Not least, we may perhaps understand better how easy it was to adopt, to adapt, and then to abandon, 'traditional socialism' – after all, only an idea... A large part of these implications seem to be the willingness of rulers and ruled to negotiate their ways through processes that appear to key stakeholders to lead subsequently to situations satisfactory enough for the process to appear valuable and worthwhile. In such processes there is no *necessary* need either for agreement *ex ante* on what will be done, or on what actually happened *ex post*.

In this sense, the 'water policy dynamic' in Vietnam is, for many using classical or mainstream terms, not a policy dynamic at all. 'Policy' in a strict sense refers simply to policy documents of the State. Glossing the English into something that can be handled, such as 'the dynamics of intentionality and actions related to water carried out by rulers', it is clear that there is analytical value to arguing that shifts of ideas and practices before and after the end of the Cold War drew upon deep East Asian cultural legacies (Woodside, 2006), which is perhaps one reason why it was relatively easy and far more successful than in the Soviet Union (Fforde, 2009b). Central to these legacies, such accounts argue, are deep scepticisms, which may encourage, so long as there are 'local notables' to negotiate with, something that some see as authoritarianism but would perhaps better be referred to in some other way. This would then make it obvious that the term 'reform' is far too closely linked to certain specific change rationalities, to which much Vietnamese practice does not easily belong, and which obscures much. In this sense, Vietnamese experiences help us understand what we are doing when we term something '(semi-)authoritarian' and when we argue that change relies heavily upon 'ideology-based policy'. Though whether this helps is perhaps quite another matter. What it does do for us is make it far easier, given Vietnam's reputation for development success and clearly unconventional approach, to

take other unconventional approaches more seriously, in the spirit that 'there are many ways to skin a cat', and thus avoid being tangled up in arguments that assume far more commonality in the world than appears to be the case. This of course suggests that any simple emulation of Vietnam would be unwise.

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