THE PARTY AND THE PEOPLE: Revolutionary and Postrevolutionary Politics in China and Vietnam

By BRANTLY WOMACK*

The earlier fish-water relationship of cadres and masses was formed in the war years when they depended on each other for their lives. Revolutionary cadres sacrificed their lives to liberate the masses, while the masses supported and protected the revolutionary cadres while they waged their struggles. The role played by the masses under such circumstances was direct and clear-cut. If the cadres separated themselves from the masses they found it difficult to accomplish anything. Their very safety and livelihood were jeopardized. Things changed after the founding of New China. Our party became the ruling party and the cadres became leading personnel in the government at all levels. In this new context, it became possible for them to entertain the illusion that they had become government “officials” while the masses were the “common people” under their jurisdiction.

—“Do Not Forget the Fish-Water Relationship,” Special Commentator, Renmin Ribao, August 19, 1978

THIS essay starts from two premises: that, as far as the articulation and mobilization of popular interest in the countryside are concerned, the “best teams won” in the Chinese and the Vietnamese revolutions; but that, after the success of the revolution, the popularity and responsiveness of the regimes to the people became more problematic. Together, these premises imply a shift in the relationship of party to people between the revolutionary and postrevolutionary stages. That such a shift occurred in China and Vietnam is not obvious; there were significant continuities of personnel, policies, and ideology across the revolutionary divide. I shall argue that, despite the continuities, the rational basis of party-mass relations was deeply affected by victory. Indeed, the very continuities helped mask a structural flaw in the new regimes that has induced current political and economic reforms.

* This paper was originally presented at the Regional China Seminar of the University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful for valuable comments received from James Townsend, James Scott, William Turley, Dwight King, Tang Tsou, Ed Friedman, Gordon Bennett, Dan Kelliher, Susan Shirk, Edwin Moise, and David Marr. Research was facilitated by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and by travel support to China and Vietnam by Northern Illinois University.
The cases of China and Vietnam are considered together in order to focus attention on the underlying logic of political change rather than on the historical peculiarities of a single country. Despite their common East Asian heritage, the political cultures of China and Vietnam are quite different. Their communist parties, however, had comparable problems of waging a protracted, village-based revolutionary war, and evolved broadly similar ways of successfully coping with the situation. After victory, their parallel revolutionary experiences and shared Marxist-Leninist ideology led to postrevolutionary regimes with comparable capabilities and problems. It is surely not a case of Vietnam simply copying Chinese policies or vice versa, although each of the parties has been aware of what the other is doing.\(^1\) Proof that policy similarities are due primarily to independent responses to similar situations is provided by the astonishing convergence of Chinese and Vietnamese reform programs in the 1980s despite the active hostility between the two countries. In short, for the purposes of this essay, China and Vietnam constitute independent, “best case” instances. The analysis of these two cases should be useful, though perhaps somewhat less salient, for other rural revolutionary situations.

The general thesis of this paper is that the politically and militarily competitive environment of the revolutionary period in China and Vietnam constrained the communist parties to be “mass-regarding” in policy and behavior despite their authoritarian internal structures.\(^2\) I call the revolutionary parties “quasi-democratic systems” because of the role of the competitive environment in determining their democratic politics. Victory confirmed the policies, political style, and leadership of the revolutionary period and set the identity of the party. But it also inevitably established a monopoly of state power that changed the context of the party-mass relationship. Programmatically, the interests of the masses still provided policy goals, but in effect the masses lost the clout with the

---

1. The question of Chinese influence in Vietnam is an interesting and disputed one. The Vietnamese had extensive personal experience with Mao’s revolutionary methods. However, they also drew lessons from their own experience with failed peasant uprisings in 1930. For differing views, see the following in William Turley, ed., *Vietnamese Communism in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980): William Turley, “Introduction,” 1-10; William Duiker, “Vietnamese Revolutionary Doctrine in Comparative Perspective,” 45-73; and Georges Boudarel, “Influences and Idiosyncracies in the Line and Practice of the Vietnam Communist Party,” 137-70. The delicate complexities of the interrelationship are illustrated by the fact that Ho Chi Minh taught guerrilla warfare in China in the late 1930s—before the organization of the Viet Minh.

2. I use the term “mass-regarding” to refer to an attentiveness by the party leadership to the concrete situation of the population under their control, to the masses’ perceptions of their own interests, and to the actual reception and popularity of the policies. “Mass-oriented” would be too broad a term, because it could include policies that were programmatically assumed to be in the interests of the masses. I want to suggest a more active and responsive political style.
party as a whole and with the individual cadres that they had had during the Revolution.

The postrevolutionary degeneration of mass-regarding politics was neither an outcome desired by the regime nor an irremediable end situation for a successful revolution. It did, however, create a fundamental structural flaw, in that the victory of a popular revolution undermined the rationale of popular politics. Threats of sanctions against erring cadres, exhortation to revolutionary virtue, and increased ideological education are limited measures that do not address the root of the problem. If the masses are to be attended to, they must again be able to make decisions in some area that is vital to the regime and its cadres. To a certain extent they do have this control in their aggregate effect on the economy; the economic reforms adopted by China and Vietnam in the 1980s reflect an institutional adjustment that has significant political implications.

The methodological fulcrum of this study is an analytical model of the rural revolutionary party and its cadres as rational actors seeking to maximize their chances of survival and success. The general intellectual debt of the approach is broad; it is based on a number of recent studies of peasant revolution. The American frustration in Vietnam stimulated a finer understanding of the rationality of peasant unrest, whether the peasant cup is viewed as half-empty (in moral economy, risk-minimizing approaches) or as half-full (in political economy, advantage-maximizing approaches). This better understanding of the motivation for peasant participation has led, in turn, to a closer view of the linkage between party policy and mass mobilization. I will explore the organizational logic and environmental prerequisites of the revolutionary party in a world of reasonable peasants. Analysis of organizational rationality builds on peasant and policy rationality and permits a broader interpretation not only of the revolutionary situation, but also of the continuities and discontinuities of party-mass relations after victory.

The import of this interpretation will be clearer when it is compared with two common approaches to the shift in postrevolutionary regime politics. The first, which I will call the “organizational weapon model,” underlies the totalitarian interpretation of communist politics (or at least

3 For the sake of brevity, I will not digress on the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this model. The works of Brian Barry, Mancur Olson, Anthony Downs, Sam Popkin, James C. Scott, Russell Hardin, and Jon Elster provided my primary inspiration.


The oldest versions of this interpretation. The communist party is viewed as a disciplined, flexible organization totally dedicated to revolutionary success by means of mobilization and manipulation. Since there is only a tactical commitment to policies designed to win over the masses, it is to be expected that the policies will change after victory, and the party will pursue its aims more directly and more coercively. In the organizational weapon model, a change of context with victory explains the change in party-mass relations, but the party is seen as consciously (and thankfully) shedding earlier tactical constraints. The change in context does not of itself produce a change in the party-mass relationship; rather, it permits the party leadership to change its policy toward the masses.

There are many problems with the model, not the least of which is the diabolism still characteristic of American political and media stereotypes of communism. The major problem in applying the model to China and Vietnam is that it is contradicted by the paradigmatic role that the revolutionary experience continues to have after victory. The affirmation and even sanctification of the earlier party-mass relationship does not make sense because it implies that the party's identity is set as much by the revolutionary process as by the revolutionary goal.

The organizational weapon model falls apart completely when viewed as a micro explanation of revolution in China and Vietnam. Its triad of infinitely clever and manipulative leaders, infinitely submissive and dedicated cadres, and infinitely gullible and deployable masses makes heroic (or subhuman) assumptions concerning motivation and behavior. In China and Vietnam, where the revolutionary party was responsible for government in areas under its control, the strength of the party's organizational muscle depended on the congruity of the personal interests of masses and cadres. The organizational weapon model begins with the unquestioned assumption that the party is an alien manipulator of the masses; it is a political virus whose success is explained by organization. A protracted rural revolution in which the primary resource of the party is continued and increasing mass support might be explained by adding fresh epicycles to the paradigm of party manipulativeness, but a simpler explanation might be to entertain the notion of party-mass symbiosis and of the party's leadership of a popular revolution.

A second approach to the shift in postrevolutionary politics might be

---


7 It should be noted that Selznick is primarily concerned with the Soviet experience. The subtitle of his book is "A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics," and it fits Lenin's theory and practice better than it does China and Vietnam. However, the theory is advanced as a generic explanation of communist politics.
called the oligarchic bureaucratization approach. Its intellectual grandfathers are Max Weber and Robert Michels, and it is currently the most popular approach to the study of communist politics. In contrast to the diabolism of the organizational weapon approach, the bureaucratization approach assumes that communist regimes are "all too human," and therefore susceptible to the same social and organizational aging processes as noncommunist societies. Bureaucratic rationalization and institutionalization are to be expected after the revolutionary period, when the flux and accessibility of revolutionary leadership mature into an oligarchy based on seniority and position. Although the Cultural Revolution was taken by some to be Mao's challenge to Weber, Chinese institutionalization since 1978 is seen as the ultimate vindication of Weber. Bureaucratization is administrative rationality. The process can be slowed, but the only alternative is administrative irrationality.

Revolutionary victory is an important milestone from the bureaucratization perspective, but it is not a basic change of context. Since administrative rationality naturally gravitates toward bureaucratization, the main variables in the process are time and size, not political context. The continuity of bureaucratization is especially salient in China and Vietnam because of the importance of revolutionary administration in the base areas. Victory simply presents new vistas for bureaucratization, it does not present a constitutional choice.

The appeal of the bureaucratization model is strong because it predicts what in fact happened (namely, continuity plus bureaucratization), and predicts it on the basis of normal human and organizational behavior. Some phenomena, such as administrative growth in the base areas, are better explained by this model than by the quasi-democratic system model. Nevertheless, the model has some important flaws. First, its very universality limits its specific appropriateness for popular revolutionary regimes. What it explains best are the least characteristic aspects of Chinese and Vietnamese politics. While it is predictable that administrative growth would occur in the base areas, that fact is less interesting than the actual patterns of political control and decision making. Just as the common characteristics of the Prussian army and a guerrilla army do not provide an understanding of guerrilla warfare, so the commonalities of their civilian counterparts do not add up to an understanding of revolutionary politics.

---

8 One could argue that victory marks a contextual change from charismatic to bureaucratic leadership, but—at least as Weber presents it—charismatic leadership is very much a question of the person and personality of the leader; the replacement of the leader by bureaucratic followers would proceed whether the leader died before victory (Ho Chi Minh) or after (Mao Zedong).
Second, there was a non-Weberian political-administrative rationality in the base areas that opened every aspect of bureaucratic rationalization to question. Professional isolation from the people was a cardinal sin, delineated functions were ignored during campaigns, orders could be ignored if the situation warranted it, lines of authority were intentionally ambiguous, and so forth. Weberian rationality posits administrative autonomy; it optimizes the execution of a given task. In the primitive and risky situation of rural revolution, the current general situation took precedence over assigned tasks and made political effectiveness in mobilization more important than professional efficiency.

Third, the apolitical inevitability of the bureaucratization model suppresses the perception of political alternatives. There is much to be said for the objective reality of bureaucratization. Nevertheless, politics defines the context of bureaucracy. If serious attention had been given to the institutional guarantee of mass voice in China after 1949 and in Vietnam after 1975 in order to preserve and establish the democratic aspect of revolutionary politics, popular influence would have been greater in politics and administration.

In sum, the interpretation I present takes a position in between the voluntarism of the organizational weapon model and the determinism of the bureaucratization model. The party is shaped by the populist ideology and the policies that it adopts as well as by objective situational constraints; still, it is not pursuing an inevitable course of development, but one co-determined by its political decisions. I stress the connection between the macro and the micro explanations of revolutionary success because I take the interaction of context and policy seriously. The resulting quasi-democratic systems model pinpoints the significance of victory for party-mass relations and thus poses the question of the constitutional prerequisites of postrevolutionary, mass-regarding politics.

**Quasi-Democratic Systems**

In the short term, a revolutionary elite and its mass base need only agree on action against the established government. Behind this momentary common purpose there may be two wholly different sets of interests: a "great" revolutionary pattern of national revolutionary goals for the elite, and a more parochial, less articulated "little" revolutionary pattern for the masses. If, however, a revolutionary elite must build and maintain mass loyalty for a long period, in a variety of localities, and through un-

---

foreseeable situational changes, then the revolutionary organization must incorporate a responsiveness to mass interests into its normal operation. Ideological commitment and internal sanctions are essential to the revolutionary party, but the level of its popular support is based on the decisions of countless persons who are not part of the revolutionary group. By and large, the personal interests of these people will determine their attitude of support, apathy, or opposition toward the revolutionary party. Of course, a Marxist party always professes to represent the interests of the people; but the ideological commitment is a very abstract one, in which the popular interest is derived from the course of history and the interests of the proletariat. The personal interests to which I refer are concrete; they may be difficult to aggregate, and at times they may even contradict the ideological idealization of mass interests. It is these interests that determine whether there are more rather than fewer army volunteers, whether more rather than less grain is grown in liberated areas, and whether there are fewer rather than more spies, deserters, and informants. Revolutionary success—large and small, strategic and tactical—depends on the masses' identification with the party, and in the long term that depends on the party's identification with the masses. No one expressed this relationship more eloquently than Mao Zedong, and no one symbolized it more poetically than Ho Chi Minh.

**Definition**

A quasi-democratic system (QDS) is an authoritarian organizational system whose policies are constrained by the revolutionary environment to be responsive to popular interests and demands. It is a “system” because it predicts a pattern of rational behavior on the basis of fairly general premises. It is more than a heuristic model because it purports to describe a “real” pattern to the extent that reality fits its premises and follows a framework of rational self-interest.

The QDS logic has a peculiar relationship to the self-consciousness of the revolutionary party. On the one hand, the importance of responsiveness to the masses for party survival and success is understood and emphasized. On the other hand, it is assumed, in line with Marxism-Leninism, that the long-term interests of the party and the masses coincide. Hence, party leadership is alert to promote mass-regarding policies and a political style of service to the people, but it perceives this behavior as merely the duty of a good party member. Although the revolutionary party recognizes and responds to its competitive environment, it does not

---

realize how important the environment is for the democratic character of its politics.

A QDS is "democratic" in the general sense of encouraging an interactive popular influence on policy. Democracy involves more than just a propaganda appeal to general mass preferences. The party-mass relationship in China and Vietnam had to go beyond propaganda populism because the parties controlled territory and had to provide concrete political leadership. It is the interactive quality of the leadership of populations under party control that I call "democratic." However, in areas under revolutionary party control, effective procedural democracy did not exist. Electoral procedures, legal systems, and united front organizations existed, but they did not control policy. Nevertheless—and this is the essence of a quasi-democratic system—the content of party policy was systematically influenced by perceptions of mass interests; if these perceptions turned out to be mistaken, policy tended to change. If the masses appeared to be more cautious than party policy, it was in the party's interest to moderate its program; if mass behavior was more radical than currently condoned by the party, the latter had to reconsider its policies. If mass opinion in a particular locality made a certain general policy inappropriate, it was up to the local cadres to adjust the implementation of the policy. This type of politics can be called "mass-regarding" because it is responsive to the concrete interests and preferences of the masses without being organizationally accountable to them.

A QDS is "quasi" because the influence of the concrete interests of the masses on policy depends to a great extent on the revolutionary environment. Without mass support, the party loses and is destroyed, and individual cadres lose and are killed. Mass support is therefore vital. That may be a perfectly adequate motivation for mass-regarding politics, but it depends on the environment rather than on the system itself. Because victory eliminates competition, a QDS cannot last beyond victory. Upon victory, the environmental imperative for mass-regarding politics is lost, and the authoritarian internal structure of the party will tend to assert itself. The QDS is therefore a temporary, conditional political system, even though it may last for decades in a protracted rural revolution.

It should be noted that the QDS is proposed only as a rational substructure for revolutionary party behavior, not as the explanation for every action taken or for every cadre's behavior. There are innumerable instances of mass-disregarding behavior, many of them ideologically inspired. The

---

"Concrete cases of each of these problems are cited by Zhao Ziyang, "How Were the Masses in Hua County Mobilized," trans. in Issues and Studies 19 (June-July 1983), 101-114."
party's preference for proletarians led to some rather awkward policies in Chinese rural areas, and the overly harsh definition of class struggle in North Vietnamese land reform in the 1950s required major corrections. Although the situation of the party and of most cadres may be conducive to mass-regarding behavior, individual party leaders and local cadres may choose to act differently. For example, in the early 1930s the commander of a major Chinese base area supported his base by looting the gentry of surrounding areas. This action irritated even the poor peasants of those areas and created a hostile ring around the base, which led to its destruction.\(^{12}\)

Complaints about bureaucratism, laziness, and aloofness among local cadres are almost as old as rural revolution itself; Mao's first critique of bureaucratism dates from 1928.\(^{13}\) According to the QDS model, policies that alienate the masses reduce the chances of survival of the revolutionary party; they will therefore tend to be improved, avoided, or punished. Nevertheless, deviations caused by inexperience, dogmatism, or venality will occur.

**The Logic of Enticement**

The basic rationale of enticement is implicit in the definition of a QDS. Mass-regarding behavior is required because mass support is necessary for the party's survival and growth in the competitive revolutionary environment. The leadership will, of course, have its own ideological and group interests, and not all mass interests can be co-opted into revolutionary policy. (For instance, the masses might benefit from a government school, but the party would not.) But in general, the major resource of the revolutionary party is its capacity to mobilize mass support, and this support must be elicited before it can be led.

The logic of eliciting mass support can best be described by Albert O. Hirschman's seminal theory of loyalty.\(^{14}\) The concrete preferences of the masses are important to the party because the masses have the opportunity for "exit," if we use the term in a very broad sense to cover behavior ranging from apathy to counterrevolutionary activities. The political


\(^{13}\) See Mao (fn. 10), "Struggle in the Jinggang Mountains," 90-92.

\(^{14}\) Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Hirschman's scheme is not totally satisfactory for our purposes because the concepts of exit and voice are rather vague, there is no discussion of apathy, and there is no treatment of the dimension of personnel choice (elections). All of these problems derive from Hirschman's focus on the firm and its customers. A more general theory of loyalty would have to be much more complex.
clout of the masses depends on the opportunity for exit, not on procedural guarantees. As Hirschman puts it,

That even the most loyal member can exit is often an important part of his bargaining power vis-à-vis the organization. The chances for voice to function effectively as a recuperation mechanism [for the organization] are appreciably strengthened if voice is backed up by the threat of exit, whether it is made openly or whether the possibility of exit is merely well understood to be an element in the situation by all concerned.\textsuperscript{15}

This logic is directly applicable to the situation of revolutionary parties in China and Vietnam because the survival of the party and its cadres required resources that the masses could minimize or deny. If compliance is coerced from the masses by the party, the cost of policing will greatly reduce the benefit of mobilization. Even policies favorable to the masses are more expensive to implement if the masses remain passive. If the masses become hostile, the problem is much more serious because the individual or territory involved become scorched earth to the party. In either case, the party’s chances of victory over a better-supplied government in power are reduced. Not only does the threat of exit give the masses clout vis-à-vis the party as a whole, but, because of the dispersed nature of guerrilla war, regional and even local cadres might become the victims of mass exist on a small scale. Therefore, as the epigraph of this essay suggests, the logic of enticement works as a rationale for mass-regarding behavior not only for the party as a whole, but also for the individual cadre.

Such homogeneity of group and personal interests is an unusual and favorable situation for an organization. It reduces the need for organizational discipline in its broadest sense: sanctions, rewards, reports, commands. It avoids the entire domain of problems addressed by Mancur Olson: in this case, the common goal of survival and success does not diverge from the accumulated individual goals of survival and success, and there is thus little opportunity for free riders.\textsuperscript{16} Because the individual’s and the group’s involvement coincide in the logic of enticement, the revolutionary party acts like a small group of indefinite size rather than like an organization with differentiated interests.

The term “exit” may create an unrealistic image of the revolutionary situation. Generally speaking, a peasant is not faced with a choice of loyalties. He or she lives in an area that is under the control of either the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 82; emphasis in original. I use the term “clout” for concrete policy influence that is not based on formal democratic guarantees; I reserve the word “voice” for democratic influence within institutional guarantees. Hirschman does not make this distinction, and his usage of “voice” is broader.

government or the revolutionaries; except for unusually committed persons, that fact determines on whose side participation occurs. Most of the peasants can be mobilized only after the balance of power in the village favors the party. After the establishment of control, there are punishments for noncompliance and preemptive security measures against suspect groups such as landlords. The activists in a village, and to some extent the village as a whole, have a strong collective interest in preventing defections. The masses hear only the propaganda of the side in control, and affirmation of allegiance is required. In brief, the revolution may involve political competition, but there is no marketplace of regimes.

Nevertheless, the logic of enticement holds because there is a constantly shifting margin of control and because the effectiveness of mass mobilization within liberated areas depends upon it. Consolidation of new territory depends in part on the popular appeal of party policies, and the extent of damage to the revolutionary cause in lost territory depends on the lingering hold of the party. Moreover, many guerrilla tactics depend on "luring the enemy in deep" into liberated territory, thus exposing the peasants momentarily to a choice between regimes. What is just as important is that the effectiveness of mass mobilization depends on mass-regarding politics. If the party pushes rather than leads, it will exhaust its meager organized resources and leave undeveloped its unorganized resource of mass support. But, in order to lead, the party must begin with the masses’ interests. Thus, the clout of the masses derives in part from a continuing discretion concerning willingness to be mobilized and in part from the great fluidity and uncertainty of rural revolution which is accentuated by the "home court" character of guerrilla tactics.

At the same time, the logical strength of the leadership’s self-interest as an explanation of democratic behavior is a weakness for the realism of the model because, in fact, mass-regarding politics entails important ideological and organizational commitments. The organizational commitments involve maximizing contact with the masses, hierarchical flexibility, and promotion of mass-regarding subordinates. The ideological commitments include commitments to revolution of the masses, by the masses, and for the masses, and to a disciplined but popularly oriented party structure with recruitment primarily from the masses. It is especially clear in the case of China that Mao would not have attempted rural revolution if he had not been convinced of the necessity and legitimacy of a mass-mobilizing, peasant-based revolution. Mao’s commitment to mass revolution was clear in 1926 (if not in 1919), but his strategy of rural rev-

---

17 See Jeffrey Race (fn. 5), 178-92, for a detailed analysis of organizational policy in Vietnam in the 1960s.
olution took shape only in 1928-1930. Only a totally unitary, omniscient organization that remained unchanged over time could use the QDS simply as a tactical device, without a preexisting mass orientation and without causing the practice of mass-regarding politics to affect the goals and structure of the party. The organizational weapon model presumes something of this sort, but the realities of the Chinese and Vietnamese parties were certainly quite different.

It might appear that the land hunger of the poor peasants and their inevitable grievances against the established elite would provide a ready motivation, but in fact village mobilization is usually a slow process requiring great sensitivity and adaptability. The village world is one of personal relationships rather than media messages, and therefore the party cadres must first be accepted into the village network. The paradoxical process of being accepted by the villagers by becoming dependent on them is well described by Frances Fitzgerald as “the politics of the earth.” It requires, above all, a political style of closeness to the masses, a realization that the cadre and the revolution will survive only through mass support. In addition, the individual circumstances of each village require a constant concretion and adjustment of basic policies. This, in turn, requires flexibility and discretion on the part of the lower-level leadership and continuing investigation of grass-roots conditions by higher cadres. A criticism by Zhao Ziyang (now Premier of China, but in 1944 an intermediate-level cadre) illustrates this point:

In the Sixth District, individual cadres created some improperly radical forms of struggle. The masses disliked holding joint [multi-village] rallies. They were afraid that the people from other villages would share the fruits of their struggle and that the joint rallies would kill the diehards. But we neglected their wishes and continued to launch a joint struggle. Consequently, the masses who had originally wanted a struggle against the diehards changed their minds and asked leniency for them. They shouted out things contradicting the slogans that were uttered in the rallies; hence contradiction arose between the masses of one village and the masses of the other villages.

In this case, local cadres ignored the personal interests of the villagers in

---

20 Differences in party policy in the three regions of Vietnam during the war against the French are well described in Popkin (fn. 4), 223-42. The importance of personal investigations by cadres was constantly emphasized and exemplified by Mao. See *Mao Zedong Nongcun Diaocha Wenji* [Collected rural investigations of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), passim.
21 Zhao Ziyang (fn. 11), 113-14.
redistribution and did not trust the village to organize its own land reform. The result—land reform imposed on a “backward” village by surrounding villages—could appear to be successful. In fact, however, mobilizational potential was lost. Without investigation, the actual village situation remained opaque to higher cadres; without discretion, the local cadres could not adjust policy application to village conditions.

Besides the complexities of knowing the real needs of the masses, there was the difficult and sometimes shifting question of who the masses were—or, as Mao put it, “who are our friends and who are our enemies.” The problem faced by the party was not simply one of securing majority support, but of building, literally, an “overwhelming majority.” The realm of potential allies, the united front, had to be defined as broadly as possible; but, in order to maximize the alliance, the interests of the potential partners must not be harmed. In effect, then, the interests of the most marginal partner in the alliance determines policy. For instance, if there were a lot of Catholic opposition to the Viet Minh but the Viet Minh would still like to attract Catholics into their alliance, then Church property and freedom of religion had to be protected:

Help the religious to maintain their principles, repair pagodas, temples, and churches. Enable the people to carry on their prayers, attend mass and religious ceremonies. Absolutely do not use pagodas, temples and churches for meetings and do not post slogans, slips or banners inside or out of them.22

If the alliance is to include patriotic rich peasants and landlords, then land policy will be limited to reduction of rents and interest—regardless of the preferences of the large number of poor peasants. By this principle, mass-regarding policy is not majoritarian; it is determined by the interests of the marginal minority of the alliance. At the same time, the revolutionary coalition must be built up from the societal bottom; while party policy reaches for the marginal partner, it must take care not to alienate its base support.

Balancing these two principles was a serious policy problem. If the party had merely been a group of radical propagandists, it could have afforded to be contradictory; but it was in charge of policy in liberated areas, and the interests of various groups were in conflict. Peasants were irritated by the postponement or even rollback of land distribution, and marginal groups suspected that the commitments to them were temporary. Front organizations tended to have massive and well-distributed

memberships, with a token representative from every major group serving on the executive committee. But the party was in charge, and when conditions were ripe, policy would be radicalized. The revolution must be successful, but it must remain a revolution.

One last, politically ironic observation to be made about the QDS model is that it is a logical cousin to that cornerstone of capitalism, the competitive enterprise. To the extent that customers can exit and their purchases can determine the success or failure of the firm, it is rational for the firm to be customer-regarding in its decisions despite the non-democratic structure of the firm or its level of commitment to the public good. Even though the public has no “right” to influence the firm, the importance of its business makes customer preferences a vital concern. If the firm achieves a monopoly and customers have no alternative, customer-regarding behavior loses its rationale. Recourse must go to a larger system in which the public has citizen rights: state regulation.

The Environmental Prerequisites of a QDS

A quasi-democratic system requires a revolutionary party that is in policy-making control of a portion of the population and is directing its appeal to the overwhelming majority in a struggle against the established government. A QDS, in order to be a policy-making party rather than simply a propaganda party, must be in political and military control of a population. In order for it to appeal to the masses, there must be a considerable disaffection between the masses and the government. Finally, if the environment is to be competitive, the government must be hostile to the revolutionary forces.

The first and most restrictive environmental prerequisite for a QDS is that it must have policy control of a population: the state’s control over its territory and population must have broken down well before the revolution is successful. For such revolutions, Theda Skocpol’s emphasis on the disintegration of the old regime is undoubtedly well placed, although the disintegration should not be mistaken for the cause of revolutionary success.\(^{53}\) A QDS is a small counter-state within a state. It is a symptom of and a contributor to the further decline of a weak state.

In China, the central state had collapsed with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The politics of Republican China until 1927 consisted of shifting alliances and feuds between warlords whose strength depended on their army and the territory they controlled with it. The victory of the Guomindang (Kuomintang, KMT, Nationalist Party) in 1927 resulted in

\(^{53}\) Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
a stabilized government at the national level, but warlord power at the provincial and local levels was only gradually replaced with central administrative control. In any case, beginning in 1931, Japanese incursions increasingly challenged the effectiveness and credibility of the regime. The Chinese heartland was quickly conquered by the Japanese after war was declared in 1937, and the hostile counterpart regime to most communist base areas was the Japanese occupation force and its puppet Chinese government. By the end of World War II, the communists controlled territories with populations totaling a hundred million and were in a position to wage a civil war on the Guomindang regime.

The situation was far more complex in Vietnam. Before World War II, the French colonial regime may not have been strong enough to prevent revolutionary organizing and protests, but it was effective enough to forestall the long-term survival of a revolutionary base. During the war, however, French control over Vietnam was fundamentally weakened, first by Japan's suzerainty from 1941 and later by Japan's seizure of power from the French in early 1945. Just as important, Vietnam was bled dry by the French and the Japanese in order to support the war effort; the resulting massive famine in the northern part of Vietnam in 1944-1945 cost as many as two million lives. These problems weakened colonial rule sufficiently for the Vietnamese communists to begin operating base areas. The real opportunity, however, emerged with the defeat of Japan and the weakness and confusion of the colonial forces after the war. The Viet Minh (Viet Nam Lap Dong Minh Hoi, Vietnamese Independence League, the united front organization of the Indochinese Communist Party, founded in 1941) gained great prestige by declaring the independence of Vietnam in September 1945, and then led nine years of rural guerrilla warfare with the returning French.

The weakening of French colonial control and the emergence of the Viet Minh was made possible by the international disruptions caused by World War II. By contrast, the weakening of the South Vietnamese state and the emergence of the National Liberation Front in the early 1960s was due more to the domestic political mistakes of the Diem regime, especially the pro-landlord land reform and the overly zealous security sweeps of the 1950s. These actions created a political vacuum at the village level which the NLF, building on the experience of the Viet Minh, was able to fill. In addition, there was a significant international dimension. Even while the United States pressured the Saigon regime for pop-

---

ular reforms, American aid freed South Vietnam from dependence on indigenous political and economic resources, thus allowing it to become more distant from local concerns. Moreover, the obvious dependence of the government on the United States substantiated the NLF’s assertions that Saigon was a puppet government, and that the banner of national liberation should be raised once more. Ironically, the result of the international connection in this case was that aid intended to strengthen the regime had the ultimate effect of undermining it.

Between 1965 and 1975, the situation in South Vietnam departed so substantially from the “normal” rural revolutionary situation that the applicability of a QDS model might be questioned. It was no longer simply a contest between a weakened government and a rural revolutionary force in an agrarian country. The massive American presence had a variety of effects on the structure and morale of the Saigon government, and greatly increased the destructiveness of the war. Meanwhile, military personnel sent from North Vietnam played an increasingly important and eventually preponderant role in antigovernment military actions, and the efforts of the North were backed up by large amounts of Soviet and Chinese aid. The indigenous military strength of the NLF was dealt two severe blows in the late 1960s—first by the loss of many of their best fighting units in the Tet offensive of 1968, and second by Operation Phoenix, an American attempt to root out their rural infrastructure. Finally, through the combined effects of the war, American aid, and rural depopulation programs, South Vietnam ceased to be a predominantly agrarian society. The rural population dropped from 85 percent in 1960 to 35 percent in 1975, and the South changed from a major rice exporter (1,500,000 tons annually in the late 1930s) to a major rice importer (950,000 tons in 1967).

If the NLF had been victorious in 1964, the postrevolutionary situation would probably have been similar to that of China in 1949 or of the North in 1954. Reunification would have had to respect the contribution of the South to the revolutionary struggle, and the much greater development potential of the South might have given it a leading role in economic policies. However, with the introduction of massive external influences and enormous levels of physical, economic, and social destruction, the South temporarily lost control of its destiny. The rural support structure of the NLF remained an essential ingredient of victory, but in many places it

---

supported a Northern military force. The final campaign of 1975 appeared to result in a conventional military victory of the Northern forces over those of Saigon, and the immediate political effect of reunification was to replace the Saigon leadership with a revolutionary leadership composed primarily of cadres from the North.

Despite such major distortions, the QDS heritage of the NLF and the Viet Minh remains a major influence on post-1975 Vietnamese politics for a number of reasons. First, the North and South have the common political heritage of a rural revolutionary tradition. There is a great congruence between the experience of the North in 1941-1954 and that of the South in 1941-1965. Second, the increase in external pressures and destruction between 1965 and 1975 did not lead to the replacement of the QDS with a different revolutionary model, but to the weakening of village-based revolution in a situation of general societal chaos. The QDS remained the primary political form in the South, and it was essential to the logistical support of Northern troops. Third, the pressures put on the North during the last decade of the war moved the party closer to a QDS situation in the North. The war required a maximum effective effort from the masses in the North, and the party's dependence on mass performance caused it to retreat from some of its more unpopular policies. Between 1976 and 1979, the party returned to its leftist policies, leading to near-famine conditions by 1979. Subsequently the party began to adopt wide-ranging economic reforms.

The second environmental prerequisite is a profound alienation between the overwhelming majority of peasants and the government. This condition may be implicit in the first prerequisite, but it deserves separate treatment because it has distinctive implications for the QDS. In both China and Vietnam, the governments were compromised by foreign ties and pro-landlord policies, which provided the revolutionary parties with the potent rallying cries of national defense/liberation and anti-landlordism. In Vietnam national liberation was the chief emphasis, while in China class struggle was the principal means of popular mobilization; but both factors were important in each case.

The obvious significance of alienation between the peasants and the government is that it creates grounds for popular support of antigovernment activities. Almost as important is that the distance between the government and the peasantry enables the revolutionary party to hide among

---

[8] It should be noted that in some areas, for instance the Plain of Reeds, the topography was unsuited for concentrations of Northern soldiers, and the struggle remained a Southern guerilla affair until 1975.

the peasants, forcing the security policies of the government to be either too lax or too harsh. During the crucial early period when it is most vulnerable, the party is allowed to develop because the government is unaware of its activities. When the party consolidates its power and begins antigovernment activities, the government’s sanctions are often dealt out on a blanket, territorial basis. All residents are treated as if they were the enemy. The perverse effect of territorial sanctions is that they increase group pressure for support of the QDS and provide no grounds for individual exit. The scope of governmental sanctions will affect (though not control) the incidence of antigovernment activities, but any sanctions short of annihilation can be expected to have a counterproductive political effect. The distance between the government and the people leaves the government with no alternative. If it cannot tell the difference between a peasant rebel and an ordinary peasant, it must treat both as the enemy in areas of hostility. The government is thereby caught in a vicious circle, in which the partial success of the revolutionaries leads to antigovernment actions which evoke blanket sanctions that confirm the territorial control of the party. The risk of governmental sanctions is undesirable to the peasants, but it is related to symptoms of aggregate political change rather than to individual decisions of political support. There is no such thing as a politically smart bomb.

The third environmental prerequisite is the presence of active and threatening governmental hostility. Hostility is such a natural reaction to a revolutionary group that to speculate on its specific effects is largely hypothetical. In the QDS model, governmental hostility and the consequent fear and need for survival keeps the party’s nose to the populist grindstone. If the government had in effect ceded control of some territory to the party, the QDS would be free to behave like a postrevolutionary state. Policy would be determined more by party goals than by the party’s evaluation of mass interests, and the political structure would become more authoritarian. Party leadership might compete as a territorial elite within established national politics, or it might use the territory ceded to it as a base area for guerrilla operations in disputed territory. As a case in point, let us consider Mexico. After the defeat of the national ambitions of the Zapatistas, the state of Morelos was left under their control. Without the threat of governmental hostility, there was no need to sustain peasant mobilization, and the Zapatista government evolved into a somewhat more progressive version of normal Mexican politics.39

39 See John Womack, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (New York: Vintage, 1968); see Scott (fn. 9), 114-15, for other examples.
ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE QDS

Even if the QDS had initially been adopted as a tactical ploy by the party, the effect of its operation over the long term would be to reorient party values, style, and personnel toward mass-regarding behavior. This happened in the case of China, where the Rectification Campaign of 1942–1944 was essentially a political and ideological retooling of the CCP to be a rural, mass revolutionary party. The sincerity of the leadership’s commitment to QDS values can be seen in the many postrevolutionary attempts to preserve and revive them.

The logic of the QDS implies, however, that the system will be transformed by success. A strong state will have been created, and the party and its cadres are no longer bound to mass-regarding behavior by their interest in personal survival. In view of the postrevolutionary party’s monopoly of authority, the masses can be noncooperative only at their own risk, not at the party’s risk. Moreover, postrevolutionary policy goals are inevitably different and more complex than prerevolutionary ones. Although these transformations certainly did not escape the attention of the successful parties, the focus was not on the change in the political mechanism. Three aspects of environmental transformation deserve special attention: the confirmatory effect of victory, the replacement of the logic of enticement by the logic of authority, and the effect of new policy goals. The confirmatory effect of victory should be considered first because it is most often overlooked and because it impedes the other factors.

Since the QDS was the mechanism of victory, the confirmatory (and even sanctifying) effect of victory necessarily tended to preserve its influence. Concerning Vietnam, William Turley observes:

The principal legacy of the resistance for political participation in the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] was a vivid memory of when ideals seemed to work, of when Party, people, and state formed a monolithic unity based on common cause, cooperation, and zeal. This memory provided Party leaders their touchstone for judging the quite different realities faced during the construction of socialism.31

Mass-regarding leaders, policies, and political traditions have a place of honor in the new regime. It is possible that the old leaders may be incompetent for the tasks of socialist construction, the old policies may not reflect the current needs of the masses, and the old political traditions may not function effectively in their new context. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to interpret the political changes in the postrevolutionary regime

31 Turley (fn. 29), 183.
as a cynical casting away of the ladder of mass-regarding politics. The organizational weapon model simply does not fit the self-consciousness of the postrevolutionary leadership in China and Vietnam, and, since it is an intentional model rather than a latent function model, it is therefore invalidated.

But there are basic structural changes in the postrevolutionary situation regardless of the respect paid to the revolutionary tradition. Most importantly, the environment of competitive state authorities has been replaced by a monopoly of state power in the hands of the party. Because the party and its cadres are no longer vulnerable to defeat, the masses are more vulnerable to party sanctions. Mass compliance or noncompliance is of course still very important for party policies, in part because human resources remain the chief strength of the regime. Although the prestige, authority, and power of the party can on occasion push the masses to the verge of the humanly possible, the limits of policy are still set by what the masses will do. The residual clout of the masses as producers, consumers, and even resisters cannot be eliminated. If the masses produce more under one policy than under another, stand in line for some goods but ignore others, collude to hide production, or complain about particular policies or officials, they create a presumption in favor of their preferences. The problem of opposition becomes marginal, however, and that of apathy is responsive to threats and rewards as well as to the popularity of policy. Basically, victory allows the party to pursue a program that it assumes to be popular rather than a program that must be popular.

For the masses, victory means a change from an environment of chaos and unstable, conflicting authority to one of clear and unquestionable authority in society, politics, and economics. The postrevolutionary society is necessarily “authoritarian” because the only hierarchy left intact is in the service of the revolution, and its core is the party. The polyarchal clutter of traditional society—landlords, lineages, religion, secret societies, and so forth—is replaced by a unified, active hierarchy that directly links the life of the village with that of the state. There is no legitimate opposition; there is hardly any legitimate interest articulation. It is a society in which disagreement is usually measured in subtle shades of compliance. The masses must rely on the party and its cadres, but the party and its cadres are no longer in a position of direct, reciprocal dependence and vulnerability. The remaining clout of the masses is reduced to their dis-

---

32 The forms and importance of such behavior are detailed in James C. Scott, The Weapons of the Weak (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
cretion as producers, consumers, and risk-taking resisters. The masses have become the fish, and the party controls the water.

Perhaps the most basic situational shift affects the local and intermediate cadres, despite the continuity of personal and party standards. The most obvious change is from the risky and vulnerable position of revolutionary cadre to the low-risk and powerful one of state cadre. Far more than a change of title is involved. In the QDS, the cadre was responsible for generating the popular support that he or she directed. The cadre was thus more dependent on the masses and less dependent on the party hierarchy. After the revolution, the cadre's prestige, power, and responsibilities derive from his position in the hierarchy. This change encourages alterations in cadre behavior and personnel composition that are seen as a deterioration of revolutionary virtue. Since the party has become the only status game in town, and a very secure and powerful one to boot, it attracts opportunists. Even among revolutionary cadres, the role of administering state authority encourages bureaucratism. Moreover, the situation of relatively unchecked power allows corruption. Although all these problems certainly existed before victory, the general conditions for their development are more favorable afterwards.

Despite the effort put into fighting opportunism, bureaucratism, and corruption, the party does not usually face the fundamental problem. Victory has introduced a split between moral cadre behavior and self-interested cadre behavior. As a recent Vietnamese editorial put it,

Each stage of the revolution has its specific trials and requirements regarding the ethics and qualities of party cadres and members. In the current stage of the revolution, the most important trial for all party members and cadres is whether they can uphold revolutionary qualities and adopt a revolutionary lifestyle in the struggle between the two roads and the struggle between ourselves and the enemy.

Temptations to which it would have been imprudent to yield before victory are now merely immoral, and the scope of possible temptations has broadened considerably. Of course, there are models for venal, elitist behavior in the old regime, and these provide much of the content and color for enjoying the fruits of victory. But it would be hopelessly idealistic (in the Marxist sense) to consider "feudal" influences to be the cause of the problem. The actual cause is that now the communist cadre, like his feu-

---

33 See, for example, Ho Chi Minh, _Selected Works_ (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 143.
dal predecessor, is no longer subject to the control of popular influence. If he is a good cadre, it is because he is either moral or disciplined. Before victory, it was heroic to be a cadre; after victory, it is heroic to be a good cadre.

The problem of the good cadre is further complicated by the third major environmental transformation—namely, the new policy goals of the victorious party. Although the confirmatory effect of victory tends to preserve the revolutionary heritage, the revolution is not viewed as an end in itself but as the opportunity to move the nation more rapidly from bourgeois revolution to socialism and eventually to communism. The party’s role as the vanguard of the proletariat is precisely formulated by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*: “They have over the masses of the proletariat the advantage of insight into the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” The party is dedicated to the interests of the masses, but not to their preferences. As adapted by Lenin and Stalin to the postrevolutionary situation of less developed countries, the party’s tasks are to consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat and to lead socialist construction.

Neither political consolidation nor centralized economic construction have the close, mass-regarding dimension that characterized revolutionary policy. Programmatically, policy is still debated and justified in terms of mass interests, but the perception of mass interests is heavily influenced by the Leninist paradigm, and policy-shaping interaction with the masses now takes place on much more unequal terms. In any case, postrevolutionary policy would not evoke mass solidarity in the same manner as base-area policies. Policy is no longer characterized by measures against urgent, common threats. An increase in steel production may be for the common good, but it has less of an immediate mass appeal than defense against air attacks. The remoteness and complexity of new policies require a heavier reliance on specific recompense and sanction, as well as on expertise. In turn, these create a new policy establishment that is functional for regime goals but separated from the masses. The new official circles are urban-based and structured in a centralized hierarchy. The tasks and resources of the cadre are defined by his or her authoritative position rather than by command of mass support.

These new conditions tend to transform the operative value system of the party. In the QDS model, a good cadre was one who was effective

---

35 Karl Marx, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (1848), Section II, “Proletarier und Kommunisten” (author’s translation).
because he was close to the masses. In the environment of postrevolutionary authoritarianism, the practical meaning of a "good cadre" is one who fulfills his tasks. The situation is well described by the author of the "Fish-Water Relationship":

In handing down a task, some organs fail to make clear to the lower levels the bounds of a given policy and the work methods and work style required. They do not understand the situation at lower levels and do not concern themselves with the well-being of the masses. They demand that the task be accomplished "at all costs." Whoever accomplishes the task, no matter what methods they use, are considered "capable." They are commended and promoted.\(^6\)

The same point is made in the Vietnamese press.\(^7\) As the standards of cadre behavior shift away from mass mobilization and toward the fulfillment of assigned tasks, the definition of the good cadre becomes different from that of the good bureaucrat. Not only is the postrevolutionary cadre free from personal dependence on the masses, but the organizational rules of the game direct his attention upward toward his superiors.

The slide of the revolutionary party into bureaucratic-authoritarian behavior is not simply human nature, nor is it a Weberian routinization of charisma. It is a gradual, cumulative response to a shift in organizational context. To some extent, greater differentiation and institutionalization is inevitable in the more complex postrevolutionary situation. The drastic reduction in the political clout of the masses is inevitable if we assume that no constitutional measures are taken by the new regime to transform mass clout into institutionally guaranteed mass voice. The party sees its new powers as tools on behalf of the masses and overlooks the change that they introduce in the party-mass relationship. Emerging bureaucratic tendencies are viewed either as individual deviations or as a new bourgeois threat. The old revolutionaries find them deeply repugnant and a danger to the historic significance of their accomplishment, but they tend to ignore the importance of the change in context and to insist on a continuity or revivification of revolutionary behavior. The unacknowledged structural watershed—in which the masses have lost the power given to them by the exit option and it has not been replaced by new rights—shifts the basis of each individual decision by separating rationality and mass-regarding behavior.


Conclusion:
Democratic Institutionalization in China and Vietnam

Although within the confines of this paper it is impossible to analyze the policy histories of China and Vietnam in detail, I would suggest that the very strength of the victorious party-state in these countries led to a crisis in its effectiveness. In turn, the crisis has induced economic and political reforms that go beyond the Leninist paradigm and allow some institutionalization of mass voice. Inevitably, China and Vietnam remain one-party states, but with policy and institutional precommitments that acknowledge and to some extent institutionalize mass discretion.

The combination of popular mobilization and Marxist-Leninist ideology gave a unique strength to the post-QDS states. On the one hand, they came to power with an experienced and extensive leadership structure well-integrated into vast areas of society. (By contrast, the Bolsheviks in 1917 were a tiny minority with no practical political experience, and the native cadres of East European communist parties in the late 1940s were persecuted by leaders returning from exile in Moscow.) China and Vietnam were therefore able to implement difficult policies relatively quickly and effectively.8 On the other hand, Marxism-Leninism freed the victorious regimes from continuing concerns about their popular legitimacy. The ideology assumed the correctness of the party, played down the importance of political institutions, interpreted opposition as class struggle, and instituted state economic policy that pushed decision making up and towards the center. All of these factors worked against a significant voice for the masses in either politics or economics, and encouraged unlimited party penetration and control of society, overly ambitious programs, neglect of individual interests, and centralization and bureaucratization of the economy.

In China, the combination of a deeply rooted political structure and an ideology with no hesitations about using public power produced policy disasters of gigantic proportions. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were remarkable for the extent of self-destructive power of the state that they exhibited. The state required society to attempt the impossible and then led in picking up the pieces. In Vietnam, the bureaucratic leftism of Truong Chinh led to rations below subsistence level by 1979, a situation complicated by the invasion and occupation of Kampuchea and by the exodus of Vietnam’s largest ethnic minority, the Chinese.

8 Contrast, for instance, the progress of rural restructuring in China as reported by Vivienne Shue, Peasant China in Transition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and in Europe as analyzed by Karl-Eugen Wadkin, Agrarian Policies in Communist Europe (Totowa, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1982).
As a Vietnamese cabinet minister said in 1980, “In another country, the
government would have changed.”

The leftist of Mao Zedong was intended to democratize the Chinese political economy by returning to the political style of the revolutionary bases, irrespective of its destructive effect on the concrete interests of the masses. The Great Leap Forward was a popular mobilization that decreased bureaucratic central control while it communalized the countryside. The Cultural Revolution was supposed to be the exposure of the party to mass criticism similar to the process of “passing the gate” in land reform. But revolutionary politics turned out to be Procrustean measures for postrevolutionary policy. The recommitment of the party-state to revolutionary goals and to maximum mobilization produced destructive and terrifying results.

Vietnamese leftism has been less destructive and more bureaucratic than Mao’s dramatic interventions into Chinese politics. “Uncle Ho” gave a less ideological, less threatening, and more inclusive air to Vietnamese politics, and the collegiality of the top leadership has been stronger than in China. Class labels, a major poison of Chinese politics until 1979, were dropped in Vietnam in the late 1950s. On the other hand, bureaucratic tendencies had been encouraged in the North by decades of free supplies from China and the Soviet Union. Bureaucratic habits of centrally controlled, inefficient production were inadequate to the task of transforming and integrating the war-ravaged, subsidy-dependent economies of both North and South after 1975. In late 1979, emergency policies were adopted that allowed peasants greater discretion in production and the right to sell above-quota produce on the free market. These proved to be popular and effective remedies, which were supplemented with experiments in the decontrol of industrial management and incentives in the South. The general direction of economic reform was confirmed by Le Duan’s speech of 1984 emphasizing collective mastery of the state by the people. More importantly, these policies have been successful in raising agricultural and industrial production and in improving

---


material conditions in Vietnam. Although there has not been a general public critique of leftist policies in Vietnam, the forces for market-oriented, incentive-based reform have grown stronger since 1979.

Because the government changed in China with the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four, the critique of leftist policies is more explicit there than it is in Vietnam. The increasingly bold economic reforms that have been adopted since Deng Xiaoping’s access to power at the end of 1978 are credited with awe-inspiring increases in production and personal income. Moreover, the open critique of leftist policies has induced major political reforms intended to promote democratic and legal institutionalization. The People’s Congress and legal systems have been greatly strengthened, electoral procedures are now generally based on more candidates than positions, and the liberties of individual citizens have been expanded. In mid-1986, the call for reform in the political structure (zhengzhi tizhi gaige) corresponding to the 1984 reforms in the economic structure suggested a new wave of democratic activity. In Vietnam, the National Assembly and mass organizations have also become more lively, with the former bitterly criticizing state and party leadership for having bungled currency reform in 1985. It is possible that the major leadership changes faced by both the Chinese and the Vietnamese in 1987 will be accompanied by institutional reforms of comparable long-term significance.

The fundamental problem of post-QDS leftist theories has not been the vol-

---


43 Vietnam’s alliance with the Soviet Union and its hostility to China are factors inhibiting the articulation of reform. Moreover, the VCP is more Europeanized than the CCP, and probably less inclined to leap about ideologically.


46 Nayam Chanda, “The New Revolution,” Far Eastern Economic Review, April 10, 1986, pp. 24-28. See also Murray Hiebert, “Vietnam Begins Leadership Transition,” Indochina Issues, No. 67 (July 1986), 1-5. My impression from talks with assembly officials in both countries is that, while political reforms in China have been more striking, political opinions are expressed more freely in Vietnam—possibly because Vietnam has never had an Anti-Rightist Campaign or a Cultural Revolution.
untarism and one-man dictatorship associated with Mao, but rather a
deeper failure that can be traced to Lenin. Lenin postulated that the
party-state was democratic. Therefore no private interest should stand
against the party’s manifestation of the public interest, and mass institu-
tions were to amplify party decisions. The view of socialist democracy as
a fact rather than a problem may serve simply as a convenient ideology of
the political class where the party has come to power without a mass rev-
olution, but it poses a contradiction in China and Vietnam. On the one
hand, both have seen that the Leninist paradigm of an authoritarian dem-
ocratic party worked during the revolution. On the other hand, because
they have seen it work then, it is obvious that something went wrong
after victory. Mao tried to return the party to mass revolutionary virtue
and enthusiasm, but he remained within the assumption that there was
no institutional problem. The target was “party persons in power going
the capitalist road.” Essentially, the “struggle between two lines” in
China in the 1960s was between two leftist, Leninist lines. One threat-
ened society with the breakdown of order; the other, similar to Truong
Chinh’s in Vietnam, enervated it through bureaucratic control.

The current reforms in China and Vietnam depart from the Leninist
paradigm in that they tend to control the excessive reach of the state in
economics and to strengthen mass input into policy. Of course, they are
presented as Leninist, and the example of Lenin’s New Economic Policy
(NEP) is often cited. At the time, however, the NEP was viewed as a tac-
tical retreat in the face of a severe crisis on the economic front, and the
leadership tightened political control while making economic conces-
sions.47 When China and Vietnam undertook structural reforms, they
had had longer experience with and better control of the discarded poli-
cies, and the reforms have been expanded as they have proved successful.
Moreover, the reforms guarantee private incentive and discretion within
a structure of collective ownership, so the contradiction between private
production and public accumulation that led to Stalinist collectivization
is not likely to occur. The combination of political and economic reform
strengthens both states and distinguishes China and Vietnam from Len-
in’s political consolidation and from the Hungarian model of depoliti-
cized economic reform. Parties with a QDS heritage seem more willing
and more able to take the lead in structural reform.48

47 Alec Nove, Economic History of the USSR (New York: Penguin, 1982), 75-86. For the
political impact of the NEP, see Roy Medvedev, Leninism and Western Socialism (London:
48 For contrast, see Andrew Arato, “Democratization in East Central Europe,” Journal of
International Affairs 38 (Winter 1985), 321-35.
For the purposes of this essay, the most important consequence of eco-
nomic reform is the acknowledgement of a legitimate scope for decen-
tralized discretion. At the individual level, the private sphere of activity
is increased and guaranteed—surely a major factor in the quality of po-
litical and social life. The retrenchment of state control in production and
consumption relieves many of the daily frustrations of mass impotence
vis-à-vis the state. At the local level, the balance of political and economic
power has been improved, leading to a greater diversity of policy influ-
ences. At the leadership level, the question of determining the will of the
party is now complicated by precommitments to nonauthoritarian means
(market forces, incentives, etc.) and by the increasingly important role
played by nonbureaucratic forces. Although decentralizing reforms do
not limit the economic power of the party-state in an effective legal sense,
they do put its practical decision making in an environment that high-
lights and amplifies the negative consequences of simple authoritar-
ianism. In the context of party-mass relations in China and Vietnam, such
reforms condition the party’s control over uncertainty and increase the
masses’ capacity to pursue preferences, thus enlarging popular power in
public affairs.

The directly political reforms that were adopted at the party’s initiative
do not establish effective parliamentary control over the party-state, but
they are important contributions to democratic institutionalization. First,
the strengthening of the constitutional and legal systems is democratic.
Legal institutionalization strengthens state organs vis-à-vis the party, and
rules hamper the arbitrary behavior of officials. Rules operate to the ad-
vantage of weaker players. Second, the strengthening of mass organiza-
tions is an important increase in mass political clout, if not in mass polit-
ical voice. Although such institutions cannot normally act as interest
groups in a Western sense and do not provide open arenas for policy de-
bate, they are significant as organized access to party leadership. At its
best, the situation of mass organizations approximates that of the masses
before the revolution. The party’s recognition of their importance insu-
lates them from oppression, and they represent societal interests whose
satisfaction is important to the effectiveness of the regime. Third, an in-
crease in the importance of popular representative systems creates a po-
tential constituency for further parliamentarizing reforms. Formal sov-

49 The considerable literature on the question of interest groups in communist countries is
summarized in H. Gordon Skilling, “Interest Groups and Communist Politics Revisited,”
World Politics 36 (October 1983), 1-27. In my opinion, the best article on the subject is Robert
Furtak, “Interessenpluralismus in den politischen Systemen Osteuropas,” Osteuropa 24
ereignty in both countries rests with the national assembly, and there has been some progress in expanding the assembly's legal control over policy. Although China and Vietnam are still far from being citizen-based parliamentary states, the mass base of their party-states has made significant progress.

In the long view, current reforms in the political economics of China and Vietnam are a movement in the direction of coping with and correcting a structural flaw in the postrevolutionary party-state. They are a delayed response—made possible by the popular identity of the party—to residual mass clout. The structural response gives greater recognition to the power of producers and consumers, and increases the potential for mass initiative in other areas, including politics. The reforms are truly innovative; unlike Mao's disastrous policies in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, they are in no respect a nostalgic return to the revolutionary period. These clearly postrevolutionary policies, by providing institutional protection and recognition of mass interests, have introduced a more mass-regarding political climate in which the party-mass relationship can begin to approximate the fish-water relationship of earlier times.