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Comments by John Kleinen, University of Amsterdam

This award-winning book about the multi-ethnic Mekong delta is a fine contribution to the development history and nation-state building literature. Praised by competent reviewers like James C. Scott and Pierre Brocheux, this monograph deserves not only serious reading by anyone interested in colonial and post-colonial Vietnam, but also by students of development issues.¹⁵

The book takes us, to borrow Pierre Brocheux's sentence, from "big aerial and amphibious operations to literally trudge into the quagmire, navigate canals and arroyos, and meet the people of Nam Bo."¹⁶

My contribution to this forum is not meant as an overall review of the book, which I read with great pleasure and growing enthusiasm. David Biggs grasps in essence an important aspect of the southern part of Vietnam and fills in a dearly missed gap in the new historiography of Vietnam, which is mainly oriented towards the cradle of the Viet/Kinh civilization located in the Red River Delta. Given the recent attention for the dynamics of the southern part of the Indochinese peninsula and its importance for a rewritten maritime history, Biggs' study is a much-welcomed contribution to a growing body of literature.

The ironic title *Quagmire* refers to David Halberstam's famous book *The Making of the Quagmire*, and both are taken, be it in different sense of the term, as a metaphor for what William Cronon described as "stories that the French and Americans told to explain their activities in Vietnam" with the exception that Biggs takes it further and adds to it more literally a physical underground upon which nation-building in the delta took place.

Instead of "Nation-building and nature in the Mekong Delta", another, more plain and sobering subtitle could have been *The engineers and the (post)-colonial system*,¹⁷ which I borrow from the Dutch sociologist J.A.A. van Doorn (1925-2008), who was one of the founding-fathers of Dutch sociology. He was also a widely acclaimed expert on the colonial history of the Dutch East Indies, including its bloody aftermath in the 1945—1949 period when the Dutch fought their own colonial war in the Indonesian Archipelago. Of course, dealing with Vietnam, Biggs goes much further beyond this. He shows how the restructuring of the Mekong Delta created a grid that enabled the pre- and the (post)-colonial state to see how local people and resources could be controlled and taxed. That the state's view was myopic and

¹⁵ Scott in the *Journal of Regional Science*, Vol.52, no 1, 2012, pp.155 -156; Brocheux in the *Journal of Environmental History* 17(1): 2012, pp.170-172.

¹⁶ Brocheux, 170.

¹⁷ J. van Doorn, *The engineers and the colonial system, Technocratic tendencies in the Dutch East Indies. Comparative Asian Studies Programme* (Rotterdam). paper presented to the "second Anglo-Dutch conference on comparative colonial history", 23 - 25 September 1981, Leiden.

sometimes as blind as a bat did not matter for the objects of this “social gardening” as Scott described it, because the effects for the local population had many, and sometimes unintended and serious consequences.

Historians of the Dutch colonial experience, including Van Doorn, often used instead of “system” the term “colonial project” in which a number of players tried zealously to make the colony “work” in terms of development. That is exactly what Biggs shows us eloquently in *Quagmire: French and the American social engineering* tried to transform the southern delta into a laboratory of a “highly modernist” agricultural economy which ironically was finished by their adversaries of the Vietnamese socialist regime. “‘Building the nation’ (...) has remained a central priority for the Vietnamese government in the delta since 1975. As with many new projects, however, older environmental and legal problems persist. Today, as in past eras, there is still one fundamental problem in the delta: finding solid ground” (227). The wobbling ground on which this all was projected, however, resisted literally and socially. The time span taken in this book brings us back to the frontier society the delta was before the French arrived, shows us the fierce resistance during French rule, makes us aware of the failed war that was fought between “Saigon” and the “VC” and ends with the nearly complete disaster of the collectivization policy that forced the peasants to vote with their feet.

What Biggs has in common with most of the authors who published about the (pre)-colonial period and its aftermath is the attention for production-factors like capital, labor, and water, but he, Biggs, adds institutions and institutional change to his economic and environmental history of the Mekong delta. Furthermore, he also shows that the peculiarities of the Vietnamese political economy are not assumed to derive from a particular period, in this case the French colonial one or the American interval. The land reform strategies after 1945 by “all groups struggled with the basic issue of rebuilding the agricultural economy to provide much needed revenues and they utilized either socialist or colonial legal precedents as well as existing, colonial-era maps and property records to govern parts of the water landscape” (141).

Turning a PhD into a book is not only Biggs’s great merit, but he made it also impressive and readable. Scott (2012) points to some missed opportunities like the comparative study of estuaries in other parts of Asia and the lack of “local voices”. I would add the absence of any reference to maritime fisheries. This is partly understandable due to the lack of clear policies of the French regarding this sector during the colonial period and the devastating effect of the war after shipping became a strategic target when the maritime Ho Chi Minh-route was cut in 1965. My own findings about the blue water fisheries in the southern parts of the Vietnamese peninsula, including the area’s III and IV, encompassing the harbors of Vung Tau and Rach Gia/Phu Quoc, showed a remarkable growth in fish landings between 1956

and 1975.¹⁸ This begs the question whether water management, fishing rights (as a variation of land rights) and political access was different from what Biggs' analyses for the agricultural sector.

That said, the only reservations one can have against the book, is that the reader has to take some statements or references to names or events for granted. Sometimes discussions about theoretical concepts are too short to understand the impact on what the author meant with it. Let me give an example of each.

An individual that figures prominently in *Quagmire* is the provincial (not district) mandarin Emmanuel Tran Ba Loc (Tổng đốc Trần Bá Lộc, 1839 -1899). This Catholic Vietnamese administrator acquired in 1892 a 2000-hectare concession in the Dong Thap region for his services to the French (2011: 72-73). The Tran Ba Loc estate, north of My Tho, was one of the first development areas acquired by a nationalized Vietnamese. Biggs qualifies correctly him as one of 'Vietnam's most infamous colonial collaborators' because of his role in the military campaigns against the Nguyen forces. The Vietnamese historian Son Nam describes him as the "most efficient" of those who help the French to "pacify" the country, a description that borders on irony. An often-cited non-communist nationalist historian labeled him anachronistically as "a Quisling" together with Huynh Cong Tan and Do Huu Phuong.¹⁹ Why and how he got this reputation remains unclear in Biggs's description of Loc. Loc's activities as a 'collaboré' are already described in Milton Osborne's 1967 book about the conquest of Cochinchina that curiously isn't mentioned in *Quagmire*, though it deals with Cochinchina and Cambodia (66-71).²⁰ Marr qualifies him in his *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (1971) as "an infamous pacification expert" (1971: 70). For my own dissertation on Central Vietnam (1988) I described his activities at length, based upon French archival documents, for his severe treatment of the Can Vuong movement in the three provinces Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. Loc headed a 700 strong militia that behaved like a Tiger Force *avant-la-lettre* in an area that later would be haunted by similar events during the Vietnam War. Even Loc's biographer George Dürwell had trouble to disguise his disgust about Loc's scorched earth policies.²¹ He received the degree of Provincial Governor or Tong Doc of Thuan Khanh (named after the twin provinces Binh Thuan and Khanh Hoa), a position that he never fulfilled, not even at the district level as Biggs suggests. In the local memory, it happens that the same man is still remembered as a wise administrator and as one of the worst traitors of the colonial

¹⁸ John Kleinen, 2007, "Stealing from the Gods", fisheries and local use of natural resources in Vietnam 1800-2000', in Greg Bankoff and Peter Boomgaard, *A history of natural resources in Asia: the wealth of nature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 244-263.

¹⁹ Nguyen Phut Tan, *A Modern History of Viet-Nam*. Saigon: Khai Tri, 1964.

²⁰ Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia. Rule and Response 1859 -1905*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969

²¹ G.Dürwell, Tran ba Loc. Tong Doc de Thuan-Khanh. Sa Vie et son oeuvre. Notice biographique d'après les documents de famille. *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon*, BSEI 60, 1900: 27-60. Reprinted in Dürwell, *Ma chère Cochinchine*, 1910. See also , R.B. Smith, The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, *Modern Asian Studies* (1972), 6 : pp 459-482.

contest, as Biggs remarks (2011: 73). Loc's recently restored tomb in Cai Be town at least doesn't make any reference to the dark side of his past.²²

More relevant for further discussion about the political ecology of the Mekong delta is Biggs' competent treatment of discourses behind the chosen development models even if one can disagree with every aspect. Biggs takes the polder or *casier* as an important representation of the change in policies in the 1930s to transform the southern delta into an ideal landscape for economic development. The Dutch word "polder" refers to an area surrounded by dikes, which is kept dry by way of a sluice and drainage canals. The 'casier' is technically the translation of this term in French, but its meanings include pigeonhole or a set of pigeonholes, a filing cabinet, a rack, a compartment, and a locker.²³ The Dutch polder derives his attractiveness from the existence of a water board, a regional organization that has very different functions, ranging from flood control, water resources management, water charging and financing, and bulk water supply. In addition to it, the existence of these functions ranges from one country to another. The larger question is whether there is a causal relationship between the struggle against water and the consensus model that is derived from it. In the Dutch case this is affirmative and Biggs seems to assume that this was the case in Vietnam when he refers to the *casier* that had his origins in the Ly dynasty whose cradle was in the Red River Delta (11th century). But does it mean that it survived "the tyranny of time"?

Biggs devotes a number of pages to a fascinating discussion about the role of French and Vietnamese social scientists in the colonial discourse of the transformation of the delta in the 1930s. According to him, the French geography professor Pierre Gourou played an important role in this discourse as a result of his influential study about the peasants of the Red River delta, which became the scientific foundation of a number of development schemes that French and (even later) American officials undertook in various parts of Vietnam. Though Biggs refers elsewhere to my article about Gourou, he doesn't mention the special issue the *Singaporean Journal of Tropical Geography* devoted to Gourou's role and influence upon generations of social scientists and planners. From this discussion by British, French and Dutch scholars arises a more sophisticated picture than Biggs paints in his book.²⁴

Although Gourou was working with Vietnamese assistants from the EFEO, he never became a permanent member, though the EFEO published his thesis. The institution's colonial and Orientalist worldview on Vietnamese society and economy was not wasted on him. His contemporaries like Robert Robequain, who was a personal friend, and of course the archeologist J.Y.Claes, whom Biggs quotes at length, can be taken more responsible than Gourou for the apprehension of the ideas of the current school of thought at the time headed by the geographer Paul

²² <http://wikimapia.org/6405923/Mộ-Tổng-Đốc-Trần-Bá-Lộc-Nằm-trong-đất-thánh-Cái-bè>.

²³ <http://dictionary.reverso.net/french-english/casier>.

²⁴ Gavin Bowd & Daniel Clayton, (eds.), (Special Issue) French tropical geographies. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 2005 (26)3, pp. 271–374.

Vidal de la Blache. Robequain and Gourou were his students, but they differentiated in many aspects among themselves, but also from their master. Gourou even dismissed another scholar and colonial planner, Yves Henry, right away for his belief in statistics. Neither *Les Paysans* nor his *Utilisation du sol en Indochine française*, published in 1940, were policy studies commissioned or explicitly used by the French administration, but the dividing line between these studies and those written on contract remained quite thin.

I am also not convinced that the *casier* or polder landscape was Gourou's pre-occupation in spite of the use in his (non-commissioned work) of aerial photographs which he extensively used, next to maps and documents from local archives (and not to forget his fieldwork that did not encompass the alienation that Malinowski felt when he studied the Trobrianders). Briggs is right when he asserts that Gourou believed in the human factor and that he admired the "Tonkinese peasant" for his human-made transformation of the soil of the Red River. To support his argument, he translates wrongly Gourou's expression of the delta as "*ce pays petri d'humanite*" as a "petri-dish-like landscape", suggesting the form instead of the process. This is based upon a misunderstanding of the term *pétrin* that means a trough in which a baker mixes the dough for his bread. Gourou meant "a landscape saturated with humanity" profoundly changed by man, irrelevant whether this became a rectangular ricefield or a *casier* surrounded by dikes. This is confirmed by the following statement of Gourou in *Les Paysans*:

*Through the work of thousands, the peasant has constructed this considerable network; he **has moulded the soil** with his hand; he has determined the relief of the country as we could see it nowadays; he has made productive a territory which given over to itself would only be swamps. In its actual aspect, the Delta is the work of Man. (pp.82-83).²⁵*

According to me Gourou reversed the logic of causal relationships between the natural and the social environment, distancing himself from Vidal de la Blache's 'possibilism', i.e. that humans (or "Man") can select from nature a number of possibilities. Gourou added to it a cultural dimension that surely was lost upon the policy makers that proposed a transplant of the Tonkinese *casier* to the Mekong delta. That doesn't mean that Gourou was not interested in "landscape moulding techniques and systems of spatial organization" (*techniques d'encadrement*) or in migration from Tonkin to Cochinchina to alleviate poverty, but his views and works, sometimes full of ambiguities, are too complex to reduce it to a nexus between population density and a petri dish.

²⁵ "Au cours d' un travail millénaire, le paysan a construit ce réseau considérable; **il a pétri le sol de ses mains**; il a déterminé le relief du pays tel que nous le voyons aujourd' hui; il a rendu productif un territoire qui livré à lui-même n' aurait été que marécages. Dans son aspect actuel, le delta est l' oeuvre de l' homme."

Author's Response by David Biggs, University of California, Riverside

I send sincere thanks to all four colleagues for their insightful reviews of the book. I take all of their critiques to heart. They point out most of the main questions I grappled with in writing it. I accept full responsibility for writing what, in the words of another pun-friendly reviewer, was at times a “slough.” Turning this dissertation into a book required a lot of cutting, rearranging, filling in and patching up of prose, and I’m afraid that despite heroic copyediting, some of the seams still show. I hope that my writing will improve in the next book. Also, I am not a native speaker of French, and I concede corrections raised by Kleinen and others such as my interpretation of “*ce pays petri d’humanite.*”

About the book’s treatment of people in the Mekong Delta, I chose as my subject of study a motley set of people, those most involved in designing the delta’s water infrastructure. This included engineers but also extended to Vietnamese insurgents, French civil servants, and wherever possible farmers. In carrying out interviews, I waited many months before finally receiving permission in 2002 to conduct a series of taped oral history interviews with octogenarians born and raised on the canals. Unfortunately, the regulations controlling how much foreigners could do with interviews in the countryside severely limited my ability to spend more intensive time with farmers. Were it possible, I would have spent months recording the stories of these old-timers. As I hope comes out in excerpts of interviews, their experiences and views more often than not contradicted or complicated common academic notions about peasant experiences. The context of the interviews was interesting, too. When conversations drifted to the devastating years of the “American War,” the elderly men and women for the most part used a pejorative term, “*thành Mỹ,*” (American guys/kids) and some referred to American soldiers and advisors simply as “they/it” (*nó*). Some even used the term “the American invaders” (*giặc Mỹ*) repeatedly. At times, they addressed me, too, as “*thành Mỹ.*” I was a 32-year-old westerner with short-cropped hair, a clipboard, a tape recorder, and speaking passable Vietnamese. So, I know that my identity was limiting, especially in the parts of the delta where I traveled. In those interviews, farmers talked about so many things –from different crops and soils to survival strategies such as using mouse-fat and resinous woods for lamp fuel at night or coconut juice in lieu of plasma at makeshift hospitals. Were I to start this project now, I would push to gather more of these stories, especially from the rapidly disappearing, elderly generation.

I became especially fascinated with colonial and post-colonial “experts,” individuals such as Pierre Gourou and the American architect of river basin management, David E. Lilienthal. John Kleinen knows far more than me about the life of this prolific French geographer. What I found interesting about Gourou and others was how they were situated within colonial or nation-building programs. There is often, I think, a tendency to see such individuals as cogs in the greater wheel, carrying out the

designs of empire. However, when one takes the time to read the notes and diaries of such individuals, one finds a far more nuanced, sensitive appraisal of intersections between problems of nature, technology and politics. Gourou may not have fully believed in the viability of the mechanistic approach to building *casiers* in the Mekong Delta; nevertheless, others, especially policymakers, took his ideas and ran with them – perhaps wrongly – to design vast, high modernist settlement schemes. Far less studied but perhaps more important in the long-term with regard to development politics in the Mekong Delta were the scores of Vietnamese engineers and experts trained alongside these foreigners. Were I to continue writing this book, I think I'd spend more time with such characters as surveyor and writer Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Vietnamese “experts” had the challenge of navigating between the worlds of foreign aid agencies and their own domestic societies. Another individual, rice scientist Dr. Vo Tong Xuan, journeyed for years outside Vietnam in foreign universities and international research institutes; however, when the war ended in 1975 he returned and worked in post-war Vietnam. Such individuals provided important links to western agencies after 1986 as Vietnamese universities and government agencies sought assistance to “continue the work of civilization” started by a generation earlier. (That term I quoted from a French hydrographer in 1879 who was referring to efforts to expand upon earlier, pre-colonial Vietnamese projects.)

If I could extend the quagmire metaphor further, it might be to theorize, per Holly High's advice, a different view about the social landscape of power in a development frontier. What I repeatedly found in my research was that understanding the actions and views of an individual such as the famous “traitor” Trần Ba Lộc required first knowing how such a person fit within various actor-networks or webs connecting them to place of origin, religious affiliation, educational training, childhood, political experiences, etc. Lộc as a young boy witnessed his father, a Catholic teacher, being imprisoned and pushed out of the school where he worked by Nguyen officials. This, perhaps more than anything, cemented the young man's opposition to the Vietnamese royal government. Were I to explore theory further, I might consider how such actor-networks informed the hydro-bureaucracies that persisted despite regime change. (I do address this more squarely in an essay in an edited volume by Nevins and Peluso, *Taking Southeast Asia to Market*.) That I did not take my theoretical questionings further, especially with respect to Deleuze and Guattari's ideas and another in a nod to Heidegger, was a stylistic decision given the audience that I wanted to reach. I am grateful to the theorists, philosophers, and others who produce such powerful analytical tools, however I think whether one chooses to make theory a central topic of a book or use it more suggestively is a choice that will vary from one person to another. I've always been a fan of trying tools before reading the manual, and my short allusions to theorists may reflect that sort of reckless abandon. I'd be delighted if others might someday take small threads intentionally left hanging in the notes and fashion new studies in the future.

Let me again thank the reviewers for their thoughtful treatment of the book. As colonial engineers were fond of discussing about their projects in the delta, I think they contribute to its "*mise en valeur*." Books, in the best cases, are claimed and reclaimed many times over. I think of *Quagmire* as an initial foray, transporting a set of ideas developed, as Greg Bankoff notes, in studies such as Worster's on the Dust Bowl of the American Midwest. I hope that the venture may pay off for readers and especially other scholars. There is so much more to learn about the Mekong Delta and Southeast Asia more broadly, so many books yet to be written. I look forward to future scholarship that might extend, revise, or otherwise move the thing we call environmental history in new directions, especially in Asian contexts.