The production of the city: reshaping state-society relation

The Vietnamese Party-State, characterised by its communist affiliation, enduring centralisation and lasting authoritarianism is nevertheless evolving. The city production and reproduction mechanisms actively contribute to reshaping State-Society relations and local political structures.

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URBANISATION IN VIETNAM, both in its nature and modalities, can be seen as 'colonising' peri-urban and rural areas, as local stakeholders (from the public authorities to the inhabitants) are excluded from the planning and decision-making processes. This sprawl takes place without fully considering the existing situation, by dismantling territories and progressively imposing a new political and administrative order.

Urbanisation is presented as an inevitable step for the modernisation and the industrialisation of the country. The urban forms produced reflect urban utopia mainstreamed in many official discourses: cities have to be modern [hiện đại] and have to symbolise the power of the Nation. Unplanned and endogenous urbanisation doesn't fit these categories whereas international 'products', from shopping malls to condominiums, are desirable emblems of Vietnam's worldwide integration.

More pragmatically, the dynamics and ways of extension allow both personal and structural accumulation of wealth for the established powers as well as for the nouveaux riches. Considering the 'land fever' and on-going speculation, public-private growth coalitions are progressively shaped, between public authorities and private (domestic or foreign) entrepreneurs.

The scale and pace of projects have increased tremendously in certain regions, as in the Red River Delta,[1] bringing urbanisation on an all new level, especially since infrastructures have been developed and migration rules loosened, allowing people to move more easily. For instance, both urban-dwellers and rural migrants resettle in peri-urban areas, the latter to fill unqualified and low-paid positions in industrial zones or to work in the construction sector. Urban fringes are thus profoundly transformed by these material, demographic and social evolutions, which hybridise territories and communities.

But the situation is not that one dimensional, and the city production or reproduction mechanisms actually contribute to reshaping State-Society relations and local political structures. Dynamics of urbanisation renew tensions, create new tensions or even cause uproars. The popular resistance is multi-shaped and has various roots: it goes from protecting cultural heritage or natural resources at the provincial-scale, to defending a few hectares of agricultural land in a village.

Resisting the exogenous nature of urbanisation

In numerous villages surrounding Hanoi, local resistance to recovery of lands for urbanisation purposes is triggered by several grievances: the protection of local livelihoods that rely either on pluriactivity or on agriculture, the defence of the community 'threatened' by the arrival of a non-native population, the feeling of injustice and the perception that projects are harming the common good, the uncertainty and privation of reliable information, the precluding decision-making processes and, prosaically, the insufficient amount of compensation.[2] Some arguments can be stronger in some villages than others, but generally speaking, all resistance encompasses these elements one way or another.

The imposition of a project or unfavourable policy contributes to ad hoc coalitions of opposition that can bring together various stakeholders: the village as a whole, only a few households, the hamlets adjacent to the future project, local authorities, mass organisations, head of hamlet, local communist party members, etc. Of course, on the decision makers' and promoters' side the goal is to prevent the formation of these collectives and to fragment the front, using threats, and moral or financial incentives to 'surrender' first.

Local authorities, torn by their dual mandate and account-ability – as representatives of their constituencies and as the agents of the State – flip from one side to the other depending on leaders' personality, situation, grading of the project on the injustice scale or pressure put on them. Whereas in some villages they can be the 'intermediary' negotiating and even promoting a project, in others they can lead the opposition or advocate for adjustments. The palette of resistance 'tools' also varies from one conflict to another; similar to Scott's "everyday forms of resistance", it ranges from propagating rumours to lodging a formal complaint to the higher levels of authorities.[3] The last resort is to physically and vocally confront a project, with very strong risks of being beaten or jailed.

These actions need to be contextualised in a movement of the liberalisation of association rights, as long as they are not subversive of or challenging to the Party's interests. Far from democracy, freedom of speech and association, this nevertheless opens new ways of creating groups that fall outside the traditional mobilisation structures, i.e., mass organisations.[4] Both NGOs and leisure associations, which can be spaces of exchange, debate and awareness raising, are multiplying in size and number. Some of these groups actually advocate for change, in policies or practices, while others are much more local, yet still in favour of helping to build a community.

The Regime pragmatism: containing the crises

The Regime, while powerful and authoritarian, is also well aware of people's opinions and is careful to use the proper amount of repression on the one hand and leniency on the other, to take divergences of opinion into account or to limit their expression.[5] The production of the city and planning regulations are good examples of the iterative process, between State and Society, of designing and adapting the law and even institutions, so that the Party-State is not threatened. Adjustment to reality and pragmatism are key, and in that sense the Regime and its powers are well suited to quickly reacting and adapting.

For instance, while division and coercion manoeuvres can sometimes succeed, especially when public forces are involved, villagers' coalitions can also manage to halt a project, challenge it and, in any case, participate in a larger movement that influences law-making, rules, procedures. Bypassing traditional structures of 'representation', their arguments emerge in the public realm. Newspapers, blogs or oral transmission contribute to raising awareness on planning and land-related conflicts: people know what happened in other villages and methods of resisting are spreading through the peri-urban areas. At the same time, people are better informed

Above: Area of Nam Trung Yen, a new urban zone on the outskirts of Hanoi (Courtesy of François Carlet-Soulages/NOI Pictures).

of rules and rights; in some urban districts citizens have utilised the justice department and have started legal trials. Nevertheless, even if there is a clear accumulation of resistance and 'hot-spots', it would be misleading to interpret this as the creation of a common front or a wider social and political movement.[6] Conflicts are predominantly local, contingent with local affairs and rarely go beyond that.

However, in recent years in the Red River Delta, for instance, examples of shifts in public policies or implementation decisions have been numerous. Following the 2008 change of administrative and territorial boundaries of the capital, the city's authorities – under central government – decided to suspend most investment and construction licences, officially in order to check their relevance for the Master Plan. But it was also a way to benefit more directly from the extension of Hanoi, both politically and economically, and to 'freeze' and then cancel some projects that triggered popular resistance.[7] This cut-down reflected the multiplication of projects that didn't respond to any needs and which only revealed district /province entrepreneurial positioning or speculation.

Nowadays, reconversion of uses and revocation of licences for industrial parks that have been announced by the Prime Minister show the central authority's pragmatism: withdraw support to projects, sometimes locally selected, that are neither justifiable nor efficient and that may or have caused local resistance. Institutional and legal frameworks are also evolving by partly taking into account citizens' claims, nationwide. For instance, following the 1997 rural uprisings in Thái Bình, Thanh Hóa and Đồng Nai, which were linked to corruption and collusion, the Grassroots Democracy Decree was adopted, introducing new information, control and participation procedures to take local decisions. More recently, the revised Land Law was adopted and entered into force in 2014. Some articles clearly address opacity and haziness of procedures; e.g., while the payment of compensation is set to take place 30 days after the recovery of land, councils need to be implemented by the president of the People's Committee at the provincial and communal levels, in order to evaluate the local circumstances and suggest compensations accordingly.

Obviously, there is a major disconnect between the legislative framework and its implementation on the ground, and these laws are issued to a great extent in order to present a more democratic and voluntaristic face to the public opinion, but also to the international community and the private sector, even if it is not backed by strict enforcement. Nevertheless, the legislation and the administration evolve, so does the Regime, and citizens sometimes actively contribute to these dynamics.

Control over natural resources and urban planning question both structures and individuals, public authorities and citizens: how they position themselves, what to protect, which limits to impose, what matters. Production or renovation of cities challenge power and in Vietnam's case it actually contributes to 'negotiating' the Regime's authoritarianism, as a growing number of citizens rally to defend either their livelihoods and interests, or the common good.[8]

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References

1 According to the Statistical Yearbooks of Vietnam by the General Statistics Office, from 2009 to 2014 the Red River Delta Region saw a decrease of 25.400 hectares of agricultural land, while residential land increased by 8.100 hectares and office/commercial/infrastructures by 27.900 hectares.
2 This paper is based on a doctoral research carried out (2008-2014) especially in four periurban craft villages of the Red River Delta. More than 100 interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, ranging from inhabitants to national authorities. The dissertation is entitled: "From Rural to Urban in Hà Nội's Fringes: Craft Villages, Power and Territory", and was defended by the author in 2014.
3 See Scott, J. 1985. Weapons of the Weak: the Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. Yale University.
4 See Hannah, J. 2007. "Local Non-government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society, and State-Society Relations", PhD in Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.
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