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Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi + 621 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-1951-6076-5.

Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 2016. xiv + 553 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-4650-9436-3.

K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xv + 696 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$49.99 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-0-5216-9915-0.

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Those of us with an interest in the history of Vietnam should count ourselves lucky. In the space of just four years, three senior historians of Southeast Asia have produced comprehensive studies of Vietnam's history. After long decades where available surveys all traced their origins to the Cold War, readers are now spoiled for choice with three highly detailed studies based on decades of research by some of the most renowned scholars in their fields: Ben Kiernan's *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: A New History*, and Keith Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese*. Their appearance in such rapid succession reflects many things: the authors' personal and professional trajectories, the continued interest of publics and publishers for books on Vietnamese history, and important changes in the field of Vietnamese Studies since the 1990s. Placing these three works in conversation affords an opportunity to reflect on the state of the field of Vietnamese Studies and our evolving understanding of its colonial period. It also allows us to explore how these three works offer us important new perspectives not just on the period of colonial rule in Vietnam, but also on the complex relationship of colonialism to the nation's precolonial past and postcolonial future.

Vietnam "has always been much more than a war," Ben Kiernan reminds us (p. 2), and indeed the fact that the end of the Second Indochina War and overt American involvement in the region's struggles is more than forty-years distant helps explain the recent boom in publishing. As the wars recede in memory, it becomes easier to see them as part of a larger story rather than the story itself, as it unquestionably was for authors of classic surveys like Joseph Buttinger, Frances Fitzgerald, or Stanley Karnow. Each of the authors reviewed here de-centers the wars of the twentieth century in their own way: more obviously for Taylor and Kiernan, who devote the bulk of their accounts to the period before 1900; and more subtly for Goscha, who subsumes the wars within a story that might be labelled, for lack of a better term, "Vietnamese modernity" in its myriad forms.

There is, however, more than a little irony in reminding readers that Vietnam is more than a war. For better or for worse, the war remains the primary reason the country is present in readers' imaginary in ways that Thailand, for example, never will be. It is not by coincidence that Vietnam has become an important referent for every military intervention the U.S. has made since 1975. Thus, it is the Indochina

Wars' continued presence, rather than their absence, that explains the willingness of major presses like Cambridge, Basic, and Oxford to indulge in the publication of dense texts stretching to 600 or more pages.

Moreover, the Indochina wars have animated much of the scholarship on Vietnam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Scholars like Taylor and Kiernan, for example, can trace their early engagement with the region to the conflicts in very direct and personal ways. Yet even for younger scholars like Goscha, it would be impossible to write a history of Vietnam without engaging issues and debates that, while unfolding in pre-colonial or colonial contexts, are inextricably linked to the wars of the twentieth century: the origins of Vietnamese nationalism, regionalism, the nation's relationship to what we now call China, the development of reformist and anti-colonial movements, and the nature of Vietnamese communism.

While many of the issues and debates may have remained the same, how we approach them and the answers that emerge have changed dramatically in recent years. In part, this is thanks to new approaches coming out of such fields as Cultural, Postcolonial, and Gender Studies. It has also been driven by a new generation of scholars, both Vietnamese and Western, with greater facility with relevant languages and scripts. Most important, however, is source access. Scholars today enjoy access to primary sources unthinkable twenty years ago. Turning points include the opening of the Vietnamese National Archives 2 in Saigon, the release of the Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập (Complete Collection of Party Documents), and expanded access to Nguyễn-dynasty materials, to say nothing about the ongoing process of digitization that has already put a host of colonial-era newspapers, for example, just a few keystrokes away. At the same time, archives in Vietnam's former Eastern Bloc allies are providing fascinating new perspectives on Vietnam and its place in Communist geopolitics. And for many of us, a final factor has to be the experience of living in Vietnam through the "renovation" (đổi mới) and now "international integration" (hội nhập quốc tế) periods and reflecting on their implications for the nation's history.

Thus, the three works under review are able to engage with a body of new scholarship that, taken together, has effected real changes in how we think about Vietnamese history. One way of approaching these works is in terms of their narrative strategies. The most prominent advocate of the importance of narrative in historiography is of course the philosopher of history Hayden White.^[1] While White has enjoyed greater popularity among scholars of literature than of history, I would argue that his ideas are particularly useful for analyzing such long texts that represent the synthesis—that is, the narration—of such large amounts of data taken from both primary and secondary sources. And as the following discussion makes clear, it highlights the very different approaches that each author has taken and the very different "stories" of Vietnam that emerge. These three works are animated by three very different visions of the "plot" of Vietnamese history: as romance, as tragedy, and as satire.

Ben Kiernan is the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History and Professor of International and Area Studies at Yale University. After completing his Ph.D. in 1983 at Monash university under the supervision of David Chandler, Kiernan went on to become a leading scholar of Cambodia's Democratic Kampuchea period, writing the classic *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* and, in 1994, founding the Cambodian Genocide Program (since 1998 the Genocide Studies Program) at Yale.^[2] Kiernan has been teaching courses on Vietnamese history since the 1980s, and since joining Yale in 1990 has helped train a generation of younger scholars who have gone on to make important contributions to the field of Vietnamese Studies. *Vietnam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* is his first book-length publication on the topic and, as he explained in an email, the outcome of a decade of intensive research.

Unfortunately, Kiernan has not fully grasped the opportunity to engage with new currents in Vietnamese historiography. A reader examining the notes of *A History from Earliest Times*, will discover an unexpected reliance on works dating to the 1990s, 1980s, 1970s, and even 1960s. One key source for Kiernan's account of colonial rule, for example, is Trương Bửu Lâm's 1967 *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign*

Intervention.[3] Granted, many of these works have considerable value. Yet few of them can be used without taking account of newer scholarship and the way it revises, revises, or refutes work that has gone before.

The notes also make it clear that Kiernan has failed to consult sources in any of the local scripts or alphabets. This is not just unfortunate for a book that focuses on “narrating the experiences of the variety of peoples who have inhabited the country’s different regions” (p. 5). More importantly, it leaves Kiernan dependent on translations, most of them coming from what might be termed the Vietnamese “canon” and issuing from particular historical, scholarly, and political contexts. One important source of translations for the early colonial period, for example, is an undergraduate thesis by a certain Nguyễn Điền submitted at the Australian National University in 1971. Such translations are then taken up and refracted through ten enduring themes—three “perennial” and seven “transformative”—that Kiernan has discerned running through three-thousand years of history (p. 7). In his efforts to highlight these themes, however, Kiernan can take considerable liberties with evidence. Writing under the pen name Le Minh Khai, the historian Liam Kelley has highlighted problems of sources, translations, and method in Kiernan’s treatment of the precolonial period, such problems persist throughout the rest of the text.[4]

Such issues aside, it is important to evaluate *A History from Earliest Times* on its own terms. One of the book’s claims of originality is its attention to ecology, one of Kiernan’s three “perennial” themes. In turn, a core part of this theme is Kiernan’s contention that water is central to Vietnamese conceptions of self and nation. As he puts it, “the country has long possessed an aquatic culture” (p. 7). As proof of this assertion, Kiernan cites an article by the translator and scholar of Vietnamese literature, Huỳnh Sanh Thông, who “analyzed the frequent use, from earliest times to the present, of aquatic metaphors in poetry, writing, and folklore” (p. 7). Whether existing sources allow us to say anything about attitudes of “Proto-Vietic” people more than two millennia ago is an open question that Kiernan does not address. Instead, he proceeds to highlight water whenever and wherever it appears in the primary and secondary texts available to him.

In doing so, Kiernan is responding to what might be termed an “aquatic turn” in Southeast Asian scholarship that seeks to give water and seas a central place in our analysis of the region’s history.[5] Nevertheless, Kiernan’s engagement with this scholarship, much less with Vietnam as a real place, is limited. To take one example, a nineteenth-century description of a pagoda in Hanoi flanked by water on four sides is evidence of “the ritual importance of water” (p. 314). This may be true, but Kiernan leaves the meaning of this “ritual importance” to the reader’s imagination. At the same time, he misses an opportunity to explore how Hanoi is located in a very watery environment, which was crisscrossed with rivers and streams and dotted with lakes, ponds, and marshes well into the twentieth century. In his wide-ranging 2013 history of Hanoi, which Kiernan does not cite, the historian Philippe Papin has explored how this watery environment shaped life in nineteenth century Hanoi, and how its traces persist to this day despite an ongoing process of draining, filling, and remaking the urban environment.[6] If, as Kiernan contends, water is “the life blood of Việt Nam” (p. 19), then one has to wonder what, if any, life is left in the nation’s capital.

As his failure to explore the ecological implications of Hanoi’s hydrology implies, Kiernan’s treatment of the natural environment is superficial. Important processes are referenced cursorily, if at all. The dredging of canals and the transformation of the Mekong Delta gets a brief mention, if mainly in terms of growing populations and increasing rice production. The introduction of exotic species like rubber or coffee and the subsequent reordering of the ecologies of Southern and Central Vietnam, or the motorization of Vietnam’s fishing fleet and the progressive collapse of its fisheries do not figure, nor does important new work by scholars of the environment like Frédéric Thomas, Mitch Aso or Pam McElwee.[7] Instead, for Kiernan, environmental history consists primarily of a laundry list of floods, droughts, and famines, often of questionable relevance, typically inserted at the opening of chapters. As context for the imposition of French rule, for example, readers are informed that “in 1876-79 perhaps sixteen million people died in

famines in India, China, and Brazil, and as many again in 1896-1902" (p. 295). Isolated as these interjections are from the subsequent discussion, one is left wondering if climate and extreme-weather events are intended to explain everything or nothing.

Beneath these references to the environment and reminders of Vietnam's ethnic and regional diversity, at its base *A History from Earliest Times* provides readers with an account of Vietnamese history little different from the one taught in Vietnam's high schools. The usual suspects from the Vietnamese cultural and historical canon make their appearance and play their assigned roles. For the colonial era, those include: the Nguyễn dynasty (rigid, outdated "Confucian" orthodoxy); Cần Vương movement ("traditional" resistance); Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh ("transitional" resistance); Constitutionalist Party (futility of "collaboration"); print media (the growth of a literate, nationalistic populace waiting for the right leadership to throw off the yoke of colonial rule); Nationalist Party (romantic individualism and the failure to achieve mass mobilization).

The central character and the end point of the story should be clear: the communist party and Vietnamese independence. Already by 1937, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) "unquestionably controlled national opinion in Tonkin and Annam," (p. 372, quoting Brocheux and Hémery) and "other Vietnamese anticolonial movements were drifting toward the ICP" (p. 372). Kiernan quotes the future Communist leader, Phạm Tuấn Tài, who wrote that the ICP was "the only party capable of leading the masses in their efforts of liberation from the yoke of imperialists and capitalists" (p. 372). The reason for their success, of course, is their "nationalist appeal" (p. 380). The 1945 "August Revolution" was thus a popular uprising, organized and channeled by the ICP. Sadly, observers outside Vietnam failed to appreciate the nationalist nature of the Vietnamese revolution, and "Hồ's hopes for U.S. backing for Vietnamese independence were dashed" (p. 385). The unfortunate victim of Cold War geopolitics, the Vietnamese nation must endure another thirty years of anti-imperialist struggle before achieving its ultimate victory.

In terms of narrative, Kiernan has written a classic romance: celebrating the triumph of the good after trials and adventures. Granted, it is an eminently plausible, reassuringly linear narrative. In broad strokes, it was sketched out by Vietnamese communist historians after 1954 and then taken up by scholars in the West during the Second Indochina War.[8] For those opposed to U.S. intervention, it provided powerful support for arguments that the communist party was the only legitimate representative of a unitary Vietnamese nation, and that both the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) based in Saigon after 1955 and, by extension, U.S. intervention to support it was illegitimate. With both Vietnamese communist and much of Western scholarship locked in what was effectively a mutually supportive relationship, this narrative assumed such a dominant position that it has come to be called the "orthodox account" of modern Vietnamese history.

To be fair, there are frequent hints that the book may adopt a more novel stance. The introduction, for example, is full of references to the plurality and complexity of Vietnam's history, and the need to avoid writing teleologically. And indeed, Kiernan does sometimes cite more recent scholarship that might help him achieve his goals. Peter Zinoman's work on the journalist and novelist Vũ Trọng Phụng, Charles Keith's work on Catholicism, and Philippe Peycam's work on journalism in Saigon, for example, all merit inclusion.[9] It is also worth noting the pains Kiernan takes to document the role terror and assassination played in the communists' ascent to power. Yet despite these moments of promise, ultimately the account fails to escape the undeniable attraction of more orthodox narratives. In spite of Kiernan's impressive effort to tell a new history of Vietnam, in the end *A History from Earliest Times* helps to remind us why Goscha's and Taylor's works are so important.

After completing his undergraduate studies in the U.S., Christopher Goscha moved first to Australia where he studied under David Marr, and then to France, where he studied with Pierre Brocheux and Nguyễn Thế Anh. After completing his doctoral thesis, he held appointments at the Université de Lyon and the French Institut d'Asie Orientale before joining the Université de Québec à Montréal in 2005.

Perhaps it is what he describes as a “hybrid” educational and professional trajectory, or perhaps it is simply a reflection of a certain sort of intellectual curiosity, but Goscha’s body of work is difficult to characterize, ranging seemingly without effort across topics, approaches, and time frames. Two particularly influential works are his 1995 *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism* and his 2011 *Vietnam, un Etat né de la guerre*.^[10] They form just part of his contribution to the quiet revolution that has been unfolding in Vietnamese Studies. *Vietnam: A New History* is another major contribution.

In a sense, what Goscha has done with *Vietnam: A New History* is to switch ground and foreground. Rather than assume as previous narratives have done that the central problem of Vietnamese history in the twentieth century is the rise of communism, Goscha has recast the story of as one of the failure of non-revolutionary paths to independence, or in the case of the colonial movement, “The Failure of Colonial Republicanism” (the title of chapter five). To put it another way, Goscha has rejected the conventional emplotment of Vietnamese history as romance and instead has written it as tragedy. In place of the triumph of “the nation”/communism, Goscha has conceived Vietnamese history in terms of a clash of different values and visions of the nation, and the loss that necessarily results.

One might argue that this is nothing more or less than a political choice. But what makes Goscha’s new plot so convincing is the way it suddenly allows the inclusion of so many aspects of colonial history that had fit uneasily within earlier accounts. Instead of being the simple victim of French imperialism, “Vietnam” is revealed as itself the product of an imperial project that was then taken up by the French. Classically trained scholar-bureaucrats are transformed from obstacles to reform to the very people driving it through the 1910s and 1920s. The reformist scholar Phan Chu Trinh’s determination to work within the colonial system is no longer unfortunately misguided. Economic, social, and environmental change are not just simple exploitation by French colonialists, but rather the outcome of complex interactions of local and global forces, mediated by Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, Indians, and others. The vibrant press is more than just a “cultural” phenomenon, and hotly contested elections more than empty symbolism. Continuity becomes as important as rupture, and the debt of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to its colonial predecessor becomes clear.

Even if it lacked Goscha’s innovative analysis, *A New History* could justify its price of entry with its notes alone. Not only has Goscha compiled an admirably complete and current list of sources on Vietnamese history in English, French, and Vietnamese, but he’s also taken the time to contextualize and to comment on how, when, and why he used them. As a result, the notes form a sort of parallel conversation on Vietnamese historiography of genuine utility to students, scholars, and other interested readers. This distinguishes the book both from Kiernan’s, with its strangely dated notes, and from Taylor’s, who was limited by his publisher to including a bibliographic essay, rather than detailed notes.

Notes aside, Goscha is a master storyteller. He combines encyclopedic knowledge with an eye for the telling detail or the otherwise obscure figure perfectly suited to illustrate a point. And there is most definitely a point to his storytelling. For the colonial period, one major point is its complexity. In Goscha’s Indochina, Indians from Pondicherry, Corsicans, and French-nationality Vietnamese can all vie for civilizational precedence. Commerce is dominated by multilingual Sino-Vietnamese and Indians, who shift among French, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and native tongues as context demands. Vietnamese might just as easily conceive their *patrie* in terms of a Vietnamese nation, an Indochinese confederation, or a French empire. Increasing integration in imperial and global circuits bring exploitation and misery for some, but also education, literacy, consumer goods, mobility, and new opportunities for many. Goscha is no apologist for colonial rule. On the contrary, his account is genuinely post-colonial, neither lionizing French nor demonizing them. Instead, it embraces the social, racial, cultural, and political complexities of the colonial period and places them in the context of global processes of change.

Another crucial point is to reintegrate Vietnam’s south into the nation’s history. This is more than an issue of economic or demographic equity. Doing so is another way to avoid being captured by an orthodox

narrative centered on Hanoi. Nowhere is this clearer than in Goscha's decision to tell the story of the September 2 "Declaration of Independence" from the vantage point of Saigon instead of Hanoi. Rather than Hồ Chí Minh's address in front of carefully marshalled crowds at Hanoi's parc Puginier, we see instead the Việt Minh's tenuous and contested grip on power in Vietnam's South, symbolized by technical problems--a scheduled radio broadcast from Hanoi failed to take place--and the day's rapid descent into chaos, violence, and the murderous settling of scores. In Goscha's retelling, September 2, 1945 marks less the birth of the nation than the start of multiple intersecting wars. Instead of triumph, tragedy.

A New History isn't perfect. Goscha seems less at home in the post-colonial period. His treatment of the Republic of Vietnam seems tinged by a residual orthodoxy. His description of the so-called Battle of Ấp Bắc, for example, reproduces accounts by American journalists and communist propagandists, both of whom sought to portray the event as an unmitigated disaster for the RVN's armed forces. There are also structural issues. Some chapters, like chapter twelve ("Cultural Change in the Long Twentieth Century") and chapter fourteen ("Vietnam from Beyond the Red River") sit uneasily in the larger account. By separating these stories, Goscha no doubt intended to underline how they follow different rhythms and demand different periodizations. The story of the relations of Vietnam's highland peoples with central authorities, for example, cuts in fascinating ways across seeming ruptures like 1884, 1954, or 1975. Some may argue, however, that both cultural change and the histories of non-Kinh ethnic groups are inextricably bound up with political change in places like Saigon and Hanoi, and that separating these stories may obscure these connections. Yet in the end, issues like these serve mainly to remind us of the magnitude of the task Goscha set for himself, and the remarkable success he achieved in synthesizing a genuinely new account of the history of modern Vietnam.

Keith Taylor is a Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University. After serving in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, Taylor completed a Ph.D. in History at the University of Michigan in 1976, where he studied under John Whitmore. He joined Cornell University in 1989. Before the publication of *A History of the Vietnamese* in 2013, he was best known for his landmark *The Birth of Vietnam*, first published in 1983.^[11] Nevertheless, it was in a series of articles published subsequently that Taylor both charted an intellectual journey and made a seminal contribution to new currents of thought in Vietnamese historiography.^[12]

In 1998, Taylor published an article that summed up that intellectual journey, and which can be seen as a sort of historiographical manifesto. In it, Taylor called on historians of Vietnam to avoid assuming that people in the past were "oriented towards an imagined unifying depth," and instead embrace how they were "oriented toward the surfaces of their times and places."^[13] Doing so, would allow scholars to "shift the effects of our ideological intent" away from the "nation" and towards the past's "beautiful confusion." When history stops confusing us, he wrote, "we can be sure that we have understood it into something dangerous."^[14] *A History of the Vietnamese* is an ambitious attempt to tell the entire history of Vietnam in terms of these multiple and shifting "surface orientations." With few exceptions, it is a singular success. And whatever Taylor may have written in 1998, the result is something dangerous indeed to accounts of a single, enduring Vietnamese nation.

The brilliance of *A History of the Vietnamese* lies in its sustained attack on, well, pretty much everything we thought we knew about pre-modern and early-modern Vietnam. In a sharp break both with his own early work and with scholars like Kiernan who discern the existence of linguistically "Vietic" peoples as early as the first millennium BCE, Taylor begins his history of the Vietnamese much later, in the period when what is today northern Vietnam was administratively part of Chinese dynastic empires. It was during this period of sustained contact with Sinic culture when the features we now associate with the Vietnamese--language, literature, music, cuisine, dress, etc.--emerged. Not content just to situate the origins of the Vietnamese in their interaction with China, Taylor proceeds to turn a supposed history of resistance to foreign aggression and colonization on its head, instead underscoring the long periods of peaceful coexistence with Chinese and others. Along the way, he highlights how for most of history, the

spaces we now call Vietnam were governed by two or more political regimes and displayed multiple “ways of being Vietnamese,” seen most clearly in the persistent divergence of North and South. And according to Taylor, in the past as in the present, whatever autonomy Vietnam may exercise in its relations with Chinese regimes, “remains dependent upon a successful practice of mimicry” (p. 622).

As should be clear by now, Taylor sees Vietnamese history as a satire: an endless procession of meaningless events. For most of their history, there have only been “Vietnamese” times and places, reacting as best they can to the vicissitudes of existence. If there is such a thing as a single Vietnamese nation, it is a recent creation won at incredible human cost. If there is any pattern to Vietnamese history, it flows from its deep dependence—cultural, political, economic—on powerful dynasties to the north. This is strong stuff, and not everyone will be convinced. But at the very least, the weight of evidence Taylor marshals in support of his theses mean they must be taken seriously. And for those of us who find ourselves won over, Taylor provides powerful tools for rethinking the colonial period.

A History of the Vietnamese is dense, and readers hoping for overarching narrative threads may find it tough going. Taylor does relent in the end, and the final chapter provides what amounts to a sort of crib sheet in case we’re overwhelmed by an account intentionally composed of just “one damn thing after another.” Nevertheless, readers should resist the temptation to skip ahead. Not only is Taylor’s narrative strategy integral to his argument that there is no underlying (national) logic to Vietnamese history, but the result is also a rich tapestry of the past: characters both great and small come alive, and environment, economy, culture, and many other surfaces all shape and are shaped by events. And beneath this “beautiful confusion” lurks a sly humor as Taylor deconstructs the Vietnamese historical pantheon, one figure at a time. Lê Quý Đôn, an eighteenth-century scholar and statesman whose name graces schools across the country is revealed as a scheming, corrupt self-promoter (pp. 362-364). Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, whose poems form part of the nationalist canon, is simply “a blind scholar from the Saigon who settled in Ben Tre...where he wrote anti-French and anti-Christian poetry until his death” (pp. 461-462). As for Phan Đình Phùng, imagined leader of the Cần Vương resistance to the French, “In the early 1890s he organized a small army in Southern Ha Tinh. After many defeats, he was forced to take refuge in the mountains where he died in late 1895” (p. 479). Readers familiar enough with Vietnamese history to get the jokes will find *A History of the Vietnamese* as amusing as it is intellectually provocative. The general reader, though, may be left waiting for punch lines that never come.

Unfortunately for readers interested in the colonial period, it is precisely in the twentieth century that Taylor’s account loses some of its power. His treatment of the French conquest and early years of rule are subtle, capturing the complex interactions of local with imperial politics and the jumble of surfaces towards which Vietnamese, French, Chinese, and others found themselves oriented. Yet Taylor seems less interested in subsequent events. As he puts it, “Aside from a great surge of investment in the 1920s, French rule in Vietnam would thereafter be a holding operation as initiative for change shifted to the Vietnamese” (p. 445). The French were “mentally inert and could not relax from their policeman’s pose” (p. 523). A host of important surfaces—economic development, urbanization, ecological change, for example—are all absent from Taylor’s treatment of the later colonial period. As a result, after the tenure of Governor General Paul Doumer ends in 1902, Taylor’s narrative becomes less “beautifully confused,” more coherent, almost familiar.

This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, because it leaves unrealized much of the potential of Taylor’s provocative theses. Taylor hypothesizes, for example, that the colonial period can be seen less in terms of French rule per se, and more in terms of a process of bringing Vietnamese from a “mono-centric political and cultural focus upon China...and into a larger world of potentially multi-polar relationships” (p. 483). I would argue that this provides a powerful tool for reframing our history of the colonial period, one that Taylor, by ignoring many of the various economic, social, cultural, linguistic, and other vectors of this multi-polarity, fails to capitalize on.

The second result is to draw Taylor's narrative inexorably into alignment with narratives he otherwise takes such care to call into question. As suggested by the heading that begins chapter eleven—"Intellectuals respond to the colonial regime"—it is primarily an elite political narrative, where communists slowly but surely assume a central role. Granted, the opening line of the section headed "New Cultural Patterns" informs readers that "Vietnamese history in the 1930s is much more than the story of communist activists, and not all members of the new generation were absorbed by politics" (p. 517). Yet this section makes up only six of chapter eleven's thirty-nine pages. And it follows conventional accounts, for example, in placing the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (Self-Strengthening Literary Group) active in 1930s' Hanoi firmly in the category of "culture," explaining that their main contribution was to condemn some Confucian practices as cruel and unjust (p. 520). Thus, it is all the more surprising when the group's leading figure, Nguyễn Tường Tam, reappears in following chapters in an explicitly "political" role as the leader of the Đại Việt Dân Chính Đảng [Dai Viet True People's Party]. And it is telling when the section on culture ends with the story of the reformist monk Viên Chiếu, who in the late 1930s left Buddhism to join the communist movement (p. 522). Even for a determined iconoclast like Taylor, the weight of older scholarship on the colonial period and the narratives it supports still has a certain attraction.

Yet while Taylor may borrow elements of an orthodox narrative, he employs them for his own purposes. For Taylor, 1945 and the "August Revolution" is neither an end, as it is for Kiernan, nor a beginning, as it is for Goscha. Instead, for Taylor it is the mid-point of a war that begins in 1939 and ends, tellingly, in 1954 with the Geneva Accords and the appointment of Ngô Đình Diệm as Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam. Whether or not readers agree with the ideological thrust of his periodization, nevertheless it is yet another element of Taylor's project to frame Vietnamese history in different ways. Taken as a whole, *A History of the Vietnamese* is many things. It is a rich and satisfying account of pre-modern and early modern Vietnam. It is a brilliant deconstruction of ahistorical accounts of the Vietnamese "nation" and the historical pantheon on which they are based. And it is a source of powerful tools with which to think about long-term change and continuity in Vietnamese history and Vietnam's relationship with China and the world. It is, in other words, an important work that demands to be read.

Each of the works under review is an attempt to write the history of the Vietnamese in new ways. For Kiernan, it took the form of a new emphasis on the environment and issues of regional and ethnic diversity. For Goscha, it entailed framing modern Vietnamese history in terms of the nation's engagement with modernity and an ongoing struggle among advocates of more democratic and more authoritarian political forms. And Taylor produced a sort of anti-narrative that stressed the contingency of history, the fragility of Vietnam's never-ending experiments in social and political organization, and the durability of its close relationship with its northern neighbor. Although they may have employed different narrative strategies, each author sought to write a history of Vietnam that did not foreground the Indochina Wars, that integrated new issues, adopted novel periodizations, and that explored problems in longer time frames. And each succeeded in his own way.

Some may call me ungrateful, but despite their success, I still found myself wondering if the authors could have gone even further to escape the attraction of narratives that focus primarily on the political. In my own work on Vietnamese political economy, I have highlighted the surprising parallels in economic policy and outcomes across the colonial and post-colonial periods.[15] And having observed contemporary Vietnam for longer than I care to admit, I am more convinced than ever that supposed ruptures such as 1945, 1975, or 1986 or ideological labels such as colonialism, communism, capitalism may obscure more than they reveal.

Of the three works reviewed here, Goscha's *A New History* with its chapter "Vietnam from Beyond the Red River" points most explicitly in this direction. It left me wishing that he—or someone similarly talented—had used the same approach on a range of topics: economy, environment, ethnic relations, gender, diaspora, and others. In the resulting account, for example, the Vietnamese economy could

interact with the more explicitly “political” without being bound by it, free to move to its own rhythms and be animated by its own logics.

This sort of Braudelian undertaking is a daunting one. Yet the remarkable achievements of Kiernan, Goscha, and Taylor hint that it can be done. Whether the average reader—or academic press—would pay for it is another matter. I hope, perhaps unrealistically, that they would, because this sort of project has the potential to produce another genuinely innovative history of Vietnam with a host of original insights. The period of colonial rule, I suspect, would be revealed as transformative, but in different ways than we’ve acknowledged to date. How exactly one would narrate it remains to be seen. But given that we’ve already tried romance, tragedy, and satire, my vote is for comedy.

NOTES

[1] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). For his reception by historians, see Richard T. Vann, “The Reception of Hayden White,” *History and Theory*, 37:2 (1998), 143-161.

[2] Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

[3] Trương Bửu Lâm, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series, 1967).

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