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Haydon Cherry, *Down and Out in Saigon: Stories of the Poor in a Colonial City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. xviii + 259 pp. Notes and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-21825-1.

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Haydon Cherry's *Down and Out in Saigon* provides an essential analysis of poverty in French colonial Saigon. In elegant prose, Cherry introduces his readers to the lives of six indigent individuals attempting to subsist in the colonial city. The stories of these individuals unfold as Cherry lays out and analyzes the circumstances and the policies that led to each protagonist's economic dire straits. The lives of these six individuals and the factors that contributed to their difficult situations emerge thanks to Cherry's meticulous research in French, Vietnamese, and missionary archives. *Down and Out in Saigon* also makes use of a rich array of era publications, literature, and secondary sources. In the process the history of the poor in Saigon provided here is scholarly while also providing a vivid biographical glimpse into the lives of his six subjects.

Down and Out in Saigon makes an important contribution to the historiography of colonial Vietnam, particularly to that of Saigon, its largest urban space. Until recently much of the Western language historical literature on poverty in colonial Vietnam has focused predominantly on the rural areas and, more often than not, on the northern French protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. A significant number of these studies were conducted during the period of French colonial rule itself and reveal attempts to understand the levels of poverty present in the Red River Delta. One of the most famous studies from this period is *Les paysans du delta tonkinois*, written by geographer Pierre Gourou, an exhaustive study that continues to serve as a base for more recent works on the effects of colonial economic policies such as monopolies, taxation and land appropriation in the pauperisation of Vietnamese peasants.[1] More recently Christina Firpo's *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* examines the plight of mixed-race (*métis*) children who had been removed from the care of their Vietnamese, Lao and Khmer families.[2] While Firpo's work does principally address the economic situation of these children and the impact of the Great Depression on poverty in Vietnam, her book is focused mainly on the colonial policies and the racialized ideologies that prompted these measures. Her more recent work, *Black Market Business*, examines the phenomenon of the clandestine sex market in colonial Tonkin.[3] Prompted by poverty, clandestine prostitution was highly problematic for a colonial administration that sought to keep in check outbreaks of venereal disease while also preserving what it deemed its "imperial prestige." Van Nguyen Marshall's *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* examines poverty in rural northern Vietnam as well as the repercussions of the

famine of 1906, and the subsistence crisis of 1915.[4] Marshall also highlights the measures taken to attenuate the suffering of Vietnamese affected by these phenomena through famine relief, charity and philanthropy. Also concentrating on Hanoi, Shaun Kingsley Malarney's translation and analysis of Vietnamese writer Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Luc Xi* illustrates how a new literary form in Vietnam, *reportage*, could describe, explain, and condemn "social ills" such as prostitution.[5] Vũ Trọng Phụng's important publication nonetheless focused on prostitution in Hanoi. Notwithstanding the excellence and the contributions made in these studies, *Down and Out in Saigon* breaks ground by situating poverty in a city that was slated to be at the center of colonial economic development and success.

For this study Cherry recounts the stories of six subjects whose lives, despite their various backgrounds, reveal the coalescence of factors that contributed to their economic and legal vulnerability. In chapter two we are introduced to Lu'o'ng Thị Lắm, who was arrested for prostitution in Saigon in 1906. Originally from Biên Hòa, Lắm had made her way to Saigon where the prospects for a reasonable livelihood seemed more promising. She was but one of the thousands who held the same hopes. French settlers and plantation owners in Cochinchina were well aware of this phenomenon. Trying to understand why it was difficult for planters to find or to retain workers, a French journalist surmised, after interviewing a man who served as rickshaw puller, that the Vietnamese peasantry was collapsing under the weight of the colonial *corvée*, taxes paid for the administration of the village, the provinces, and the regions as well as their income taxes. In the city, the interviewee mentioned, a labourer, even a rickshaw puller, was free from these obligations.[6] With respect to Lắm, Cherry's contextualization of the situation in Biên Hòa, offers insight into the vicissitudes of geography ("swampy terrain" and "barren plateaux"), climate (typhoons), economics (the collapse of the rice trade) and administrative policies that undermined "communal solidarity" and eroded traditional Vietnamese authority (pp. 35-36). Lắm's attempt to survive by working as a clandestine prostitute allowed little freedom, however, as by then colonial surveillance of the Vietnamese was well organized. Identity cards were mandatory and those found without the required documentation were subject to imprisonment and to expulsion from Saigon. Lắm was also in constant danger of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. Cherry's research illustrates clearly the extent to which the odds were stacked against people such as Lắm.

In chapter three, through the story of Trần Du'ỡng, a Chinese Hakka who settled in Saigon with his wife and children, we are offered a glimpse of the ambivalent nature of French colonial relations and representations of China and the Chinese. Chinese migrations to what is today southern Vietnam had long preceded the arrival of the French in Cochinchina. New waves of Chinese migrations arrived at the turn of the century as rice then became the largest export commodity of colonial Vietnam. While planters, mine operators, and the colonial administration encouraged the migration of Chinese workers to meet their manpower needs, and while they often considered Chinese workers reliable, hardworking, and essential to the economic development of Indochina, there nonetheless existed resentment against those Chinese who had managed to elevate their socio-economic status by becoming brokers, merchants, and retailers. Such umbrage reflected the settlers' attempts to take over these economic roles, particularly those relative to opium distribution and rice exports. French settler press campaigns suggesting their expulsion from Indochina resorted to narratives of fear, reminding their readers of France's war with Nguyễn troops and with Chinese forces as they sought to conquer Tonkin. There had also been military actions undertaken by various Chinese secret societies whose aim had been to

expel foreigners from China and from Vietnam. As Haydon Cherry notes, the colonial administration had set in place methods of surveillance for those referred to as *les asiatiques étrangers*. The congregation system had built-in mechanisms to surveil Chinese migrants. Du'ông, who worked as a mason, had become embroiled in a dispute and ultimately the victim of retribution from the other party as he was then accused of being a member of a secret society. Within this context of anti-Chinese animus and with fears that the 1911 Chinese Revolution would spread, there was little room in Indochina for affording the benefit of the doubt to a Chinese migrant such as Du'ông as he was ultimately expelled from Cochinchina.

There are few symbols as powerful and as emblematic of colonialism as that of the rickshaw. Still, as we find in chapter four, titled "The Human Horse," it was possible for some to subsist, albeit narrowly, by becoming a puller. Cherry demonstrates in this chapter how difficult it was for poor Vietnamese to extricate themselves from the *rouages* of the surveillance and identity regulations in Indochina. Trần Văn Lang was born in Annam just as rebellions against French rule erupted. Eighteen years later, in Cochinchina, Lang was stopped and questioned by the French police. Possibly not wanting to trace his roots to his native village and to the armed insurrections that had taken place there when he was an infant, Lang stated that he had no idea who his parents were and that he had made his way to the Cochinchinese province of Vĩnh Long in search of work. Lang was subsequently arrested because he did not have in his possession his tax payment documentation and because, not having a fixed domicile, he was considered a vagrant. Here too the taxation policies were burdensome for individuals like Lang. As Cherry notes, taxes had traditionally been paid by the villages, a collective effort. In French Indochina, the responsibility for the payment of the head tax lay on the shoulders of individuals. Lang's lack of identity documentation, abode, and profession rendered him a criminal. He was then expelled from Cochinchina and returned to Annam. Another migrant from Annam reached Cochinchina and ultimately eked out an existence as a rickshaw puller. In search of stability and of permanent residency in Saigon, he applied for the certificate that would allow him to do so. In the process, Nguyễn Văn Thủ alleged that he had been born in Saigon. The surveillance mechanisms to establish identity (cards, photographs, fingerprints, place of birth, to name a few) demonstrated that this was not the case and that he had deserted a plantation in Cochinchina, a breach of contract that was considered a criminal offense according to the law in Indochina. He too was returned to Annam. The stories of Lang and Thủ reveal a surveillance system that deemed Vietnamese and migrants as potential criminals. While such surveillance existed also in metropolitan France, anthropometrics, fingerprinting, and surveillance there targeted convicted criminals as potential recidivists. The inherent contradictions between the concepts of republicanism and colonialism emerge as Cherry relates the fates of Thủ and Lang.

While Republican France, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, was promoting and enacting its policies of *laïcité* in the metropole, and while the colonial government kept a close administrative eye on religious institutions in French Indochina, Catholic orphanages continued to house and educate the most helpless among the poor in Indochina: its abandoned and orphaned children. Particularly vulnerable were *métis* children. As historian Christina Firpo has noted, many of these fatherless children were "uprooted from their families" in order that they be assimilated into French culture and bear loyalty to France rather than to Vietnam.[7] Regardless of the assimilationist nature of the orphanages, they nonetheless, to a large extent, shielded these children from abject poverty and homelessness and Cherry's account of Aimée Lahaye attests to this. Aimée had graduated from

one of the orphanage schools before metropolitan laws on secular education made their way in the colonies. While her situation was often difficult, she had nonetheless benefitted from skills taught her by Catholic nuns, at a time when poverty relief was part of missionary work in French Indochina.

In chapter six Cherry examines the ways in which tropicality and endemic diseases contributed to create or exacerbate poverty. Trần Văn Chinh, for example, contracted an illness as he worked as a labourer in Saigon. The debilitating disease rendered him unable to work and his subsistence now depended on his ability to beg for money. Such an existence was hardly sustainable, and he eventually ended up in a hospice. As Cherry notes, the first thirty years of the twentieth century were marked by “epidemiological change” and outbreaks of tuberculosis, cholera, plague, smallpox, and malaria were frequent and devastating (pp.137-138). While colonial institutes engaged in scientific research and while vaccinations and quinine were available, they were not distributed as widely as needed. As Michitake Aso has demonstrated in *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam*, planters in Cochinchina were inconsistent in their application of regulations concerning mosquito netting and quinine distribution for workers and regulatory inspections of plantations were toothless and woefully inadequate.[8] Trần Văn Chinh begged on the streets of Saigon but viruses made their way from the plantations to the city. Inadequate water treatment also contributed to outbreaks of cholera. This chapter illustrates that in colonial Saigon the benefits of science, technology, and medicine were often outpaced by economic exigencies that transformed the ecology of Vietnam.

Poverty in Saigon was not limited to the Vietnamese, the Chinese, or *métis* children. Particularly troublesome for French colonial administrators was the presence of destitute French men and women. The presence of an indigent population in Saigon undermined “French prestige.” Colonel Lyautey, who had been stationed in French Indochina, had overtly stated its nature and necessity: “the security of our colonies is based primarily on the prestige of our superiority over the indigenous populations who recognize this implicitly. Our security therefore relies on a fiction.”[9] The fates of Edouard Morin and Félix Colonna d’Istria, two indigent Frenchmen residing in Saigon, reveal the impact of the Great Depression in colonial Vietnam, when rice prices plummeted and when employment prospects collapsed. Colonna D’Istria, now jobless tried to traffic opium for a while and became addicted to a drug made legal in French Indochina and that represented a large proportion of colonial revenue by virtue of its status as a state monopoly along with alcohol and salt.

The impoverished subjects whose stories are told in *Down and Out in Saigon* serve as the leitmotif, the recurring refrain of situations, policies, and purposes relative to the colonial project in Vietnam. While the depth of the biographical information varies from one subject to the next, this is through no fault of Cherry’s but rather can be attributed to gaps in archival holdings. In any case, the strength of Cherry’s analysis lies in his ability to weave, from the strands of individual lives, the larger patchwork of colonial power and privilege, of changing ecologies, and of bad fortune. *Down and Out in Saigon* is complex, erudite, and well-written, thereby accessible to all levels of scholars and even to a more general audience. It also represents the first thorough examination of systemic poverty in colonial Saigon.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Gourou, *Les paysans du delta tonkinois. Etude de géographie humaine* (Paris: Les éditions d'art et d'histoire, 1936).

[2] Christina Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

[3] Christina Firpo, *Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

[4] Van Nguyen Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008)

[5] Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Luc Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi*, trans. and with introduction by Shaun Kingsley Malarney (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

[6] "Logiquement. A propos de la main-d'œuvre agricole," *La Cochinchine libérale*, December 14, 1915.

[7] Christina Firpo, *The Uprooted. Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

[8] Michitake Aso, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: A Ecological History, 1897-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), pp. 92-121.

[9] Congrès national de géographie économique et commerciale, *Rapports de l'envoi de main-d'œuvre militaire à la construction de voies de communications, le Colonel Lyautey*, Paris: Imprimerie Lahure (s.d.), p. 3.

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