



Duy Lap Nguyen. *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. 280 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5261-4396-9.

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Published on H-Asia (July, 2020)

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The military officers who murdered South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 and the Americans who urged them on subsequently propagated a view of this man that has become a cliché in virtually every book written about the Vietnam War: he was a tyrant with obscure and self-absorbed ideas whose autocratic and repressive policies provoked an insurgency against his own government—he was the architect of his own demise. This idea served the purposes of nearly everyone: the rulers of North Vietnam, the Americans, and the South Vietnamese who justified their rule by having overthrown him.

During the past twenty years, scholars have published studies that portray Ngô Đình Diệm in a somewhat less dismal light. But the thoughts and aims of both the man and his domestic critics have remained elusive—until now. In *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam*, Duy Lap Nguyen has dissolved the entrenched stereotype of Ngô Đình Diệm and developed an analysis of his thought, aims, policies, and opponents that is fresh and convincing, meanwhile subverting prevailing interpretations of modern Vietnamese history. He also develops a fresh analysis of American and South Vietnamese relations in the post-Diệm era.

This book will be disdained by those committed to the caricature of Ngô Đình Diệm that was re-

tailed by the military officers who overthrew him and that remains in fashion among people who write about the Vietnam War. This book's arguments, while grounded in historical evidence, are informed by philosophy and cultural criticism, which may deter some historians. Nevertheless, the importance of the book is bound to be increasingly understood as the encrusted stereotypes of the war gradually fade.

Americans who met with Ngô Đình Diệm typically reported that he talked endlessly, but they never reported what he said. They were not listening. By taking seriously what Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu actually said, Duy Lap Nguyen opens a new way to understand the Vietnam War.

Philip E. Catton's 2003 *Diem's Final Failure* reevaluated the much-reviled "strategic hamlet" program of Ngô Đình Diệm, and Edward Miller's 2013 *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* reevaluated the relationship between Ngô Đình Diệm and the United States. And while both of these authors gave the ideological orientation of the Ngô brothers more serious attention than others have done, Duy Lap Nguyen's mastery of modern philosophy has broken through the communist-capitalist binary of Cold War doctrines to reveal the significance and the implications of their commitment to what

is commonly called Personalism, a twentieth-century ideology that opposed both communism and capitalism. In doing so, he reveals the nature of the unbridgeable gulf that opened between Ngô Đình Diệm and both his urban Vietnamese critics and the Americans.

Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu were inspired by the early twentieth-century French thinker Emmanuel Mounier's Personalist critique of bourgeois democracy as serving "the mistaken concept of freedom" espoused in capitalism, which Mounier understood as "a non-Christian form of modernity" that replaces God with ownership and possession of wealth (p. 58). Personalism aimed for a "freedom" that was neither a Person detached from community, as with the alienating individualism of capitalism, nor a community detached from a Person, as with the collectivism of communist dictatorship (p. 80). For the Ngô brothers, according to Duy Lap Nguyen, "Personalism was not an anti-communist doctrine, but a communism that was more anti-capitalist than the vulgar Marxism adopted by the Communist Party" (p. 82). Nhu ridiculed the northern communists for not really understanding what communism was: they just waved slogans to seize power. For the Ngô brothers, the conflict was not between communism and democracy or between international proletarianism and nationalism; rather, it was a contest between two different visions of anticolonial communism: Stalinist and Marxist humanist (p. 83). It is often forgotten that, prior to his brother becoming prime minister, Nhu was a leader in the South Vietnamese labor union movement, not simply as an organizer but as a theorist.

This interpretation of the thought of the Ngô brothers runs counter to nearly everything that has been written about them, but it must be admitted that there has always been something missing in efforts to explain their aims. Even if some writers have acknowledged that the Vietnamese Personalism of the Ngô brothers represented some kind of middle way between communism and cap-

italism, no one has pursued the implications of this line of thought with the consistency and clarity of Duy Lap Nguyen's analysis, which, well documented, is developed in the contexts of the Strategic Hamlet Program, developed in 1960-62 to resist the Hanoi-directed rural insurgency in South Vietnam, and of the deterioration of the Ngô brothers' relationship with their urban Vietnamese critics and with the John Kennedy administration.

The supposed infamy of the Strategic Hamlet Program was one of the main accusations made against Ngô Đình Diệm by his urban critics, who simplistically equated it with the previously abandoned Agrovillage Program, a failed 1959-60 experiment to counter communist insurgency by concentrating rural populations into new towns. This accusation was also a major feature of the propaganda issued by Diệm's enemy based in Hanoi. And it was taken up by the Americans who were frustrated with Diệm's resistance to their advice.

On the other hand, the rural people whose lives were most directly affected by the Strategic Hamlet Program benefited from both an increase of physical security and by a revolutionary shift of local power from the "notables" of colonial times to a new generation of locally elected postcolonial leaders. Even American military officers reported that by 1962 the program was gaining ground against the insurgency, and North Vietnamese later admitted that it was choking their activities in the South. But the propaganda barrage from Diệm's enemies in Hanoi, from his American critics in the press and in the Department of State, and from the people who overthrew him and who abandoned the program eventually succeeded in erasing any memory of the program's success.

The connection between Personalism and the Strategic Hamlet Program was lost with the deaths of the Ngô brothers and the demonization of their regime. The Strategic Hamlet Program was designed not only as a response to the communist insurgency but also as a response to the threat of American interference in Vietnamese domestic af-

fairs. It was also a rejection of colonial politicians who had collected in Saigon and who were allied with American interests. The people who overthrew Diệm understood that the program was against their interests, whether would-be urban politicians who saw for themselves a role in a US-dominated government or military officers who realized that the program's success diminished their benefits from US military involvement.

The Ngô brothers, no less than the communist leaders in Hanoi, understood the importance of the rural population; but instead of terrorizing the peasantry into obedience as the North Vietnamese urban-based communist "land reform" of 1953-56 had done, they aimed to foster a nonviolent revolution in the southern countryside to create a modernized self-reliant rural society that could resist both the economic and political domination of both the Hanoi-based insurgency and the urban-based "free world" elite.

It's no mystery why the fiercest critics of the Ngô brothers were based in the cities: French-trained remnants of the colonial regime both civilian and military, the class of entrepreneurs allied with American economic interests, political Buddhist monks, and American reporters—for all of these, Personalism was an obstacle to their influence. From the perspective of the Ngô brothers, these people represented an urban minority whose interests were opposed to empowering the rural population and to decentralizing both the structure of government and the war against the Hanoi-directed insurgency. On the other hand, the American demand to "democratize" by bringing the urban elite into the central bureaucracy would crush the social revolution in the countryside that the Ngô brothers endeavored to implement as a way to create a more decentralized rural-based polity capable of resisting the insurgency directed from Hanoi.

According to Duy Lap Nguyen, the alliance between the United States and a burgeoning class of urban entrepreneurs and retailers was cemented

in the mid-1950s by the Commodity Import Program, the scheme by which American funds were channeled into the Saigon government while creating an urban society dependent upon American consumer goods. The Ngô brothers were caught in the contradiction of needing American assistance while believing that the long-term implications of doing so would create a colonial economic and a political structure that was against the interests of the great majority of South Vietnamese. Their only hope was to reorient the economic and political basis of government away from the cities and into the countryside before being overwhelmed by the rising American involvement in their country. This proved to be a vain hope.

Turning to the post-Ngô Đình Diệm era, the second major argument in Duy Lap Nguyen's book is about the economic, cultural, and strategic results of the ascendance of American tutelage over the Saigon government. The key insight here is related to Lyndon Johnson's "limited war" idea, how it reflected the growing importance of advertising strategies in American culture, and its effect on the economy and culture of South Vietnam as well as on American perceptions of the war. The limited war approach was based on "image-making as global strategy." The war of attrition that ensued was "a spectacular form of coercion devoid of real political power ... enormous superiority in the means of violence" was employed in the absence of a plan to actually prevail (p. 168).

The American strategy for intervening in the Vietnam War, to the extent that it can be called a strategy, was to persuade Hanoi's leaders to give up their effort to conquer South Vietnam by demoralizing them with a spectacle of bombs and air-mobile operations. There was never a strategy to actually win the war, only to make the enemy think that it could not win. American perceptions of the war were thoroughly shaped by this emphasis upon appearance over reality. Consequently, in 1968 the American people turned against the war because the spectacle of the Tet Offensive con-

vinced them that the United States could not win the war when in reality the Tet Offensive was a major defeat for Hanoi. Facts no longer mattered; it was the spectacle that counted.

Duy Lap Nguyen points out that this way of thinking had already led to the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 after the American press had demonized him. His overthrow was not related to the actual state of the insurgency but rather was to produce a desired public impression—an American ally had to be eliminated for his refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of American public opinion. The young activist Buddhists who sought his downfall had mastered the American susceptibility to spectacular persuasion. In 1968, the leaders in Hanoi inadvertently discovered this as well.

The second part of the book endeavors to bring literary criticism into an analysis of the Second Republic (1967-75) to suggest that the effect of American commodity capitalism was to subordinate South Vietnamese writers to a free market based on the mindless consumerism of acquiring ever more goods and services. Duy Lap Nguyen's reliance on Võ Phiến's view of South Vietnamese literature leads to a contradiction. He accepts Võ Phiến's elitist criticism of this literature as lacking literary value: authors were forced to write for a popular readership and "instead of educating the people through the creation of high works of culture ... had to mix with the masses" and to prostitute their artistic ability by creating popular cultural commodities for a mass audience that was too lazy to appreciate art (p. 197).

Duy Lap Nguyen cites Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on literature as "distraction" to develop Nguyễn Hiến Lê's observation of this literature as a "wasteful form of gratification ... entirely separate from the way that literary works had once been appreciated" (p. 201). This reinforces his citation of Võ Phiến's nostalgia for literature produced by premodern mandarins and colonial intellectuals, which led him to see the spread of works of art "to the masses" as a lowering of stan-

dards and to lament the absence of writers who could write pedagogically to elevate national consciousness.

But then as an example of this new literature with mass appeal, Duy Lap Nguyen analyzes the 28 novels of Bùi Anh Tuấn; he references the ideas of Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Carl Schmitt to explain that these novels were a critique of South Vietnamese urban society under American economic and cultural ascendancy. Furthermore, according to Duy Lap Nguyen, these novels portrayed the United States as a poisonous ally that held South Vietnam hostage to its spectacular "limited" style of warfare that ultimately made the continued existence of the country impossible (p. 216).

The question arises: how then do these novels relate to Võ Phiến's assertion that literature in South Vietnam had nothing important to say about the fate of the country? Duy Lap Nguyen argues that South Vietnamese literature reflected the mindlessness of commodity capitalism and at the same time argues that one of the most popular novelists critiqued the social effects of this mindlessness as well as the entire American project in his country.

This apparent analytical dead-end in the analysis of South Vietnamese literature may lack plausibility, but it nevertheless introduces a topic that deserves more attention: the literary freedom enjoyed by South Vietnamese writers, how it was exercised in the era of commodity capitalism, and what this can tell us about the urbanization of the country under wartime conditions that made rural life increasingly untenable.

Duy Lap Nguyen's insight into how "image-making as global policy" led American leaders to be deceived by their own strategy is particularly appropriate with regard to Lyndon Johnson, who gave up his political career in 1968 as a result of a purely spectacular victory of the enemy as portrayed by the US news media. This was a "turning point" that came not from a "decisive defeat on

the battlefield” but from “the failure of the planners, as specialists in the practice of global image-making, to sell the image of omnipotence to its intended audience” both in Hanoi and in American public opinion (p. 250).

I believe that Duy Lap Nguyen’s analysis is basically correct. As a consummate politician, Lyndon Johnson lived in the realm of spectacle and American public opinion, which ended his career. John Kennedy also lived in that realm, which ended the life of Ngô Đình Diệm. American public opinion and politics continue to flounder between reality and the spectacle.

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Citation: Keith Taylor. Review of Nguyen, Duy Lap. *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

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